

Dien Bien Phu : The Epic Battle America Forgot

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is not strictly in the realm of civilian leadership, or so those might claim who misread what American civil-military relations are about. To quote Bernard Brodie, "there also has to be at the top, certainly in the civilian and preferably also in the military departments of the government, the basic and prevailing conception of what any war existing or impending is really about and what it is attempting to accomplish. This attitude includes necessarily a readiness to reexamine whether under the circumstances existing it is right to continue it or whether it is better to seek some solution or termination other than victory."

These are the kinds of questions a biography of Westmoreland needs to address. The book being reviewed here does not meet the standards required for a serious or definitive biography of William Westmoreland.

DOUGLAS KINNARD
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Simpson, Howard R. *Dien Bien Phu: The Epic Battle America Forgot*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1994. 193pp. \$24

Dien Bien Phu ranks as one of history's great battles, both in decisiveness and drama. In 1954, in a remote valley in upper Tonkin, a handful of French imperial soldiers bore the future of French Indochina on their shoulders for fifty-six days, as they struggled to defend their ill fated fortress against a Viet Minh enemy equally determined to exterminate them.

Few authors are more qualified than Howard Simpson to write an account

of that battle. His *Tiger in the Barbed Wire* (1992) supplied a lively firsthand account of his experiences as a United States Information Agency war correspondent assigned to cover the Indochina War. Simpson not only visited Dien Bien Phu prior to the attack, but he knew well many of the French officers whose personalities and heroic acts he describes with deft prose. Although there is no shortage of accounts of the battle, this one is unsurpassed. It is a real page-turner, as the author shifts from the feuding French commanders in Hanoi (Generals Henri Navarre and Rene Cogny), to the paras and Legionnaires grappling to retain a few meters of blasted mud, to the almost superhuman manhandling of huge artillery pieces over roads cut by coolies through nearly impenetrable jungle.

The idea for Operation Castor, for instance, is traced to Navarre's wish to block a Viet Minh invasion of Laos. That is true as far as it goes, but the immediate objective was to save a special operations (GCMA) initiative among T'ai partisans loyal to the French. For this reason, the author's praise for Major Roger Trinquier's GCMA appears excessive and misplaced; special operations gobbled up a disproportionate share of scarce French resources to no apparent benefit and ultimately exercised a fatal influence upon French strategy.

The book also appears to have gone to press before recent revelations of the extent of the influence of the Chinese Military Advisory Group on the strategy, operations, and even tactics of the Viet Minh. For the purposes of Dien Bien Phu, new evidence suggests three things. First, it was the Chinese, not

Giap, who had the major hand in directing the battle. Second, the French came closer to victory than they imagined; had U.S. airpower been used, it might have been the critical event that forced the badly mauled and demoralized Viet Minh to break off the siege. As it was, Chinese intervention was an important, perhaps critical, factor in keeping the Viet Minh in the fight despite horrendous losses. Last, it was the Chinese who emerged the real victors of Dien Bien Phu. Ho Chi Minh had sought a unified Vietnam under the control of the Viet Minh, but in May 1954 the Chinese forced him to agree to a partition at the Geneva Conference, thus achieving their war aim of clearing the French from Tonkin.

Given the contingent nature of the battle, some of the "lessons" of Dien Bien Phu that Simpson believes were ignored by the U.S. at its own peril in Vietnam were hastily drawn. Without a doubt, the French underestimated the Viet Minh. However, what they encountered at Dien Bien Phu was far from "non-conventional units . . . a guerrilla enemy"—few guerrilla armies are armed with Katyusha multitube rocket launchers! While Simpson extols the "flexibility of a guerrilla foe," there are many examples, including Vietnamese, of insurgencies demonstrating a desperate lack of flexibility, an excessive faith in the revolutionary potential of "the people," and a lemming-like eagerness to rush to some Maoist "third phase." No doubt Simpson is correct to point out that airpower offers a talisman in which many are ready to place too much trust. Yet the lack of it constituted a debilitating French weakness at Dien

Bien Phu, as it did for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in 1975. Also, perhaps the author is too ready to see the ARVN's ultimate defeat as foreordained by its origins as a French colonial force, when the greater problem was the inability of the government of South Vietnam to establish its legitimacy in the eyes of its own people.

Finally, the lack of a bibliography and footnotes is especially unfortunate, inasmuch as Simpson has salted his text with extensive quotations from top secret documents, both American and French.

DOUGLAS PORCH
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James, D. Clayton. *Refighting the Last War: Command and Crisis in Korea 1950–1953*. New York: The Free Press, 1992. 282pp. \$24.95

This is a first-rate history of U.S. decision making during the Korean War, by D. Clayton James with Anne Sharp Wells, his primary research assistant. James is a military historian and instructor at the Virginia Military Institute. He has written, among other works, a three-volume history of General Douglas MacArthur's career, *The Years of MacArthur*.

In the years following World War II, it was important to President Harry S. Truman that his domestic reforms not be hampered by the military burdens imposed by the new global threat of communist expansion. His alternative to military spending was to supply security and economic aid to postwar Europe. While he focused on the Fair Deal at home, the signs of trouble in