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# #Reviewing In the Year of the Tiger

Nathaniel L. Moir (/the-bridge?author=5d33603388e42e0001f3047d) · July 25, 2019 (/the-bridge/2019/7/25/reviewing-in-the-year-of-the-tiger)

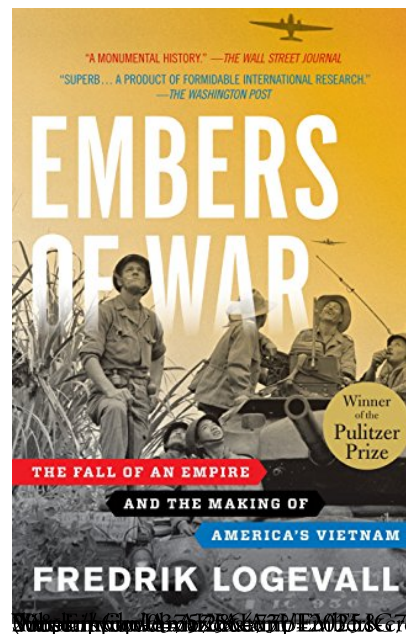
*In the Year of the Tiger: The War for Cochinchina, 1945–1951* (<https://smile.amazon.com/Year-Tiger-Cochinchina-1945-1951-Commanders/dp/0806160276>). William M. Waddell III. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018.

The First Indochina War (1946-1954) appears to be an especially perplexing conflict. This was apparent after sitting through a pre-screening of episode 1 of Ken Burns's documentary *The Vietnam War* (<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-vietnam-war/home/>) at the Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Texas in 2017. During the subsequent question and answer session with Burns, it was alarming to hear members of the audience express surprise concerning France's role and defeat prior to American full-scale intervention in 1965. It was especially disappointing, since the audience consisted of mostly baby-boomers who lived through the Vietnam War-era. Professionally, it clearly demonstrated how much work historians have ahead of them despite the many outstanding books on the earliest stages of American involvement in Vietnam and the war between France and the Viet Minh that preceded American intervention. The historical background of the United States "Assuming the Burden" against communism, as historian Mark Atwood Lawrence (<https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/history/faculty/profile.php?id=ut1markl>) described it, is certainly challenging. Not only does it demand an understanding of World War II in the Pacific and Europe, but it also entails understanding of French colonialism's long shadow that extends well into the mid-nineteenth century.

In a sense, the First Indochina War may appear neglected by historians and political scientists when compared to the far greater amount of studies devoted to the Second Indochina War (1955-1975). Despite these perceptions and the region's complicated history, the First Indochina War, and anti-French colonial agitation by many Vietnamese before it, is thoroughly studied and represented in work by Vietnamese studies scholars and a small number of American historians. As a result, scholarly interest in the war between 1946 and 1954 in Indochina is not only established, but is growing at a healthy pace. In addition to the work of historians such as Lawrence, Christopher Goscha (<https://cgoscha.uqam.ca/>), and David Marr (<https://researchers.anu.edu.au/researchers/marr-dg>), among others, the First Indochina War's prominence in scholarship was made clear with the publication of Fredrik Logevall's *Embers of War* ([https://smile.amazon.com/Embers-War-Empire-Americas-Vietnam/dp/0375756477/ref=sr\\_1\\_1](https://smile.amazon.com/Embers-War-Empire-Americas-Vietnam/dp/0375756477/ref=sr_1_1)), which won the Pulitzer Prize for History in 2013. The problem, unfortunately, is that much work remains to be done to explain the importance of the First Indochina War to the average American. Even though established scholars raise key issues and questions concerning conflict in Indochina, there are still several reasons why younger scholars may find gaps to investigate.

First, the First Indochina War occurred at the intersection of multiple conflicts. As a war of decolonization, it was extraordinarily complex, because of historical roots that extended to 1858 when France began to integrate Indochina into its empire. Additionally, the historical context of World War II in Southeast Asia, through which France lost its empire to Japanese aggression in 1941, rightly deserves the increased attention of scholars, demonstrated most recently by Jeremy Yellen (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvdtpgzj>). The First Indochina War was also critically important because of its relevance as a war against Viet Minh-led communism after World War II as the Cold War emerged after Chinese Communist victory in 1949. Within Vietnam itself, the decades of colonial exploitation and influence shaping Vietnamese nationalism and radicalism, from the Russian-Japanese War in 1905 onwards, further complicated conflict in the region.[1] The First Indochina War also had an important series of consequences for France's later defeat in the Algerian Civil War (1954-1962). A myriad of developments from that war, such as insurgent network analysis and the development of counterinsurgency doctrine by the likes of Roger Trinquier (<https://smile.amazon.com/Modern-Warfare-French-Counterinsurgency-Classics/dp/0275992683>), Charles Lacheroy, and others became prevalent and influenced American operations in Vietnam. But so did controversial debates surrounding torture and other matters that not only affected debates surrounding the Vietnam War but also continue to appear as subjects of scrutiny in popular media and in academic and military analysis.

The First Indochina War is also difficult to study because of the diversity of Indochina's populations. Political interests ranged extensively in the region, especially in the French colony of Cochinchina, but also in the French protectorates in north and central Vietnam and in the separate protectorates,



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a form of patron-client relationship similar to a colony, found in Laos and Cambodia. The formal French colony of Cochinchina, established in 1862, formed the southern-most part of Vietnam and, along with Annam, a protectorate in central Vietnam, later constituted a large portion most Americans know from history books as “South Vietnam.” This was the informal term used for the government called the Republic of Vietnam (1955-1975) that was initially administered by Ngo Dinh Diem until his murder in a U.S.-supported coup in 1963.

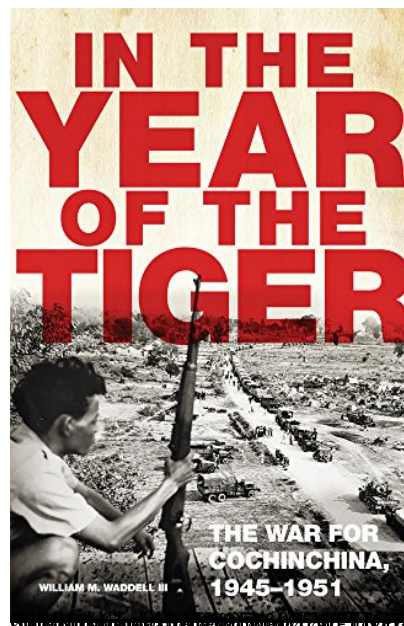
To add further complexity, scholars must account for the diversity of populations between north and south regions of Vietnam. These include ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh), Nung Chinese, a constellation of Ethnic Highlanders, and religious groups, such as the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao. These factors demonstrate how Indochina is a rich but formidable subject of study. Last, authors cannot overlook geographic differences. Environmentally, Indochina varied immensely across the protectorates of Cambodia, Laos, Tonkin in North Vietnam, Annam in central Vietnam, and the French colony of Cochinchina in South Vietnam.

Air War College Professor William Waddell's *In the Year of the Tiger* (<https://smile.amazon.com/Year-Tiger-Cochinchina-1945-1951-Commanders/dp/0806160276>) focuses on the period

between 1945-1951 and attempts to fill a distinct gap in literature on Indochina. Framed as an “explicitly military history of the war for Cochinchina,” it is a commendable study even if several issues exist.[2]

Waddell's central argument is that the Viet Minh lost the war in the south of Vietnam and that, had France lost instead, “the American war for South Vietnam might not have occurred at all.”[3] The difficulty with this basic argument is that France lost the war, so claiming French success in the south, even if in a limited way, is problematic.

Historical dates matter and it is unclear why Waddell chose 1951 as the concluding year to periodize his study. Operation Lorraine in 1952, a consequential disaster for the French, is only minimally discussed, but it was a critical operation that led to the creation of the Navarre Plan in 1953. This is significant because the idea that France succeeded in the south, especially since they lost the overall war, is thin ice on which to base an argument. At its core, what does it matter if individual battles or even campaigns are won if the larger war is lost? Even casual readers of twentieth-century history may recognize the Navarre Plan as the strategic framework that eventually placed a large French garrison in the valley at Dien Bien Phu. This decision led to disaster in April and May 1954 when the Viet Minh defeated French forces there, effectively ending the First Indochina War. It is a wonder, therefore, that Waddell did not extend his analysis further, at least into 1954. Waddell's argument, in effect, is undermined by a failure to extend the study to 1951-1954, because events occurring in those years complicate and subvert his overall claim.



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As pointed out, the First Indochina War is an intricate subject. As a work of history, it is difficult to criticize Waddell's effort because scholars of this war are required to address more than operational plans, task organization, or conventional military history. The numerous intersections of colonialism, the Cold War, and other factors stymie a single-lens approach. Just in the south, the legacy of colonialism and important and powerful religious organizations, such as the syncretic Cao Dai and millenarian Hoa Hoa Buddhist movements, compel historians of Indochina to transcend academic disciplines and demand they incorporate an interdisciplinary approach. The Cao Dai organization, for example, was not just a religious movement, it also possessed powerful militias, formidable political power, and it continues to wield multiple Vietnamese traditions that preclude easy categorization. The prevalence of the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and other political factions make Cochinchina/South Vietnam especially formidable in ways that Waddell's "strictly military history" approach cannot hope to accommodate sufficiently. The legacy of colonialism in the region further complicates the task, so readers should recognize that Waddell took on an arduous challenge with this work. However, none of this changes the questions readers should ask of any scholarship: Why does this book matter? Will it merit the investment?

It is worthwhile to revisit Waddell's central argument in which he claims the French succeeded regionally in the south. The suggestion that France, despite losing the war, created the conditions for the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam in 1955, is a mighty stretch that is not convincingly supported by the evidence presented. Due to the Waddell's decision to limit his historical periodization to 1945-1951, major portions of the big picture are simply omitted. As a result, it is not entirely clear why readers should care whether the French were successful in the south before 1951. In the end, French success to that point did not matter anyway.

The French themselves did not prioritize operations in the south; they, and even their opponents the Viet Minh, knew the north was more important. One could argue that even if France had no troops in the south an anti-communist state might have emerged below the 17th parallel after the 1954 Geneva Accords. However, this possibility is not considered in Waddell's work, and America's assumption of France's position in South Vietnam after 1954 remains outside the scope of the overall study. Does it really matter whether or not the French defeated the Viet Minh in the south, given that the French still lost the war? That, more than Waddell's argument, seems the more provocative question.

It is important to point out that Waddell does succeed in clarifying France's military priorities and limitations in Indochina. Due to insufficient troop strength, because of operations elsewhere that included deployment of troops planned for Indochina to Madagascar instead to suppress the Malagasy Uprising in the late 1940s, French forces were compelled to adopt an economy-of-force approach against the Viet Minh in the south. Critically, the Viet Minh were weaker in the south, because they faced a legion of anti-communist Vietnamese adversaries, including the Cao Dai, Hoa Hoa, Nationalists, and other Vietnamese factions. In contrast, the Viet Minh had a greater presence in the north, so the French directed greater effort there. Yet, if the French accorded such a weak economy of force to the south, demonstrating its secondary importance to war in the north, a reader may wonder why they should care about the French effort in a theater they themselves saw as less important?


Raising this question partially explains why there is a gap in the literature on French operations in the south. Academics have focused on the north, because it is where the French and the Viet Minh focused the majority of their resources and effort. In any case, it is worth considering: would the French have won the war if they had all the troops and material support they required in the south? Absolutely not. Even cursory readings of primary literature, such as sources like French Legionnaire

Henry Ainley's memoir ([https://books.google.com/books/about/In\\_Order\\_to\\_Die.html?id=E-SMPQAACAAJ](https://books.google.com/books/about/In_Order_to_Die.html?id=E-SMPQAACAAJ)), suggest French troops knew they had little chance of succeeding. Ainley, in fact, goes far to demonstrate how French arrogance and cruelty towards Vietnamese allies and the civilian populace perhaps contributed more to French defeat than Viet Minh operations, outside large scale battles such as Operation Lorraine and Dien Bien Phu. Additionally, anti-French sentiment among founders of the Republic of Vietnam, which succeeded the Associated State of Vietnam in 1955, further undermines any sustainable notion that France succeeded in the south.

The Viet Minh had their own problems in the south, and it is unlikely they would have succeeded in the south before 1952, regardless of France's position there. Domestically, groups like the Hoa Hao were notorious for anti-Viet Minh violence that exploded after the Viet Minh assassinated the Hoa Hao leader, Huynh Phu So, in 1947. In the most infamous cases, the Hoa Hao bundled Viet Minh prisoners together to throw them into the Mekong River, or whatever drown-worthy water source was available. Hoa Hao believers, today, are still discriminated against for the historical antipathy their forebears held against the Viet Minh. Secondly, U.S. foreign assistance was the only thing keeping France afloat in any region of Indochina after 1948. The Military Advisory Assistance Group (MAAG)—an organization Waddell mentions only once—coordinated more aid in support of anti-communism in Indochina than the United States provided to the entire country of France during the Marshall Plan from 1948-1952. The United States provided \$4.169 billion for operations in Indochina between 1946 and 1954 while, according to economist Benn Steil, the United States contributed \$2.706 billion to France in Marshall Aid funding between 1948 and 1952. For even more perspective, total expenditures by anti-communist governments during the First Indochina War reached almost \$12 billion while the total amount of U.S. Marshall Plan financial assistance for all sixteen recipients in Europe (including the bizonas in West Germany) totaled \$13.211 billion.[4]

These numbers indicate how seriously the United States perceived France's success in its war against the Viet Minh. If French success in the south was so important, why is the period of Waddell's study limited to 1945-1951? If France's limited success in the south mattered so much, why does this book not examine the years 1953-1955, when such dynamic transitions occurred in Indochina? These latter two years were the critical ones in which the United States assumed the burden of anti-communism in Southeast Asia, as Mark Lawrence so aptly described it. The relevance of the Viet Minh's defeat of France at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, in any case, should figure prominently in this book which purports to demonstrate how, despite overall failure, France still achieved success in Southern Vietnam.



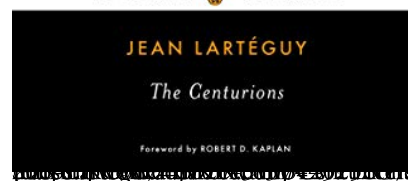
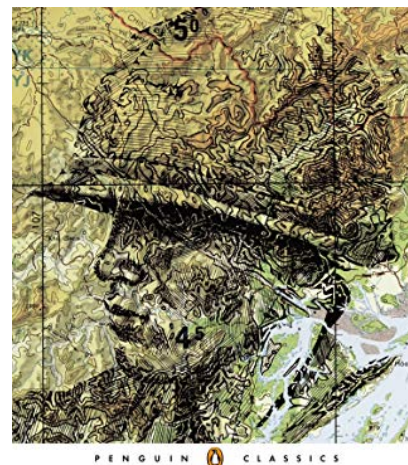


*Viet Minh troops plant their flag over the captured French headquarters at Dien Bien Phu (Wikimedia)*

It is more reasonable, in any case, to argue that the Republic of Vietnam's emergence as a non-communist state was not due to the prowess of France's military in the south. Undeniably, France would have folded up its colonial shop in Indochina before 1948 without U.S. support. Moreover, it is unlikely that France would have even returned to Indochina in late 1945 had President Truman not been pressed by French politicians who manipulated fear of communist expansion in Europe and in Southeast Asia. Earlier, Franklin D. Roosevelt argued vehemently against France's return to Indochina after World War II. His vision for an International Trusteeship overseeing post-World War II Indochina suggests that he saw, correctly as it turned out, a better future for Indochina than that envisioned by a France determined on a reconquest of Indochina after Japan eliminated French political control between 1941-1945.[5]

Despite the incitation of the Domino Theory—a ploy used to rally domestic votes by generating fear of communism—Vietnam's geopolitical importance was always marginal and, in fact, Vietnam's geopolitical insignificance was seriously questioned in the early 1950s, even after communist victory in China in 1949. Scholars such as Amry Vandenbosch and journalists ranging from Bernard Fall to Saville R. Davis publicly scorned U.S. government pronouncements that a communist controlled Indochina posed a credible national security threat to the United States.[6] For perspective regarding a country far closer to U.S. interests in Europe, the United States did not go to war after losing Czechoslovakia to Communism in 1948. Forsaking Czechoslovakia clearly demonstrated that giving up a central European country did not mean losing the rest of Europe. In Indochina, France's ability to hold on by its fingernails was admirable in terms of the sacrifice made by French and African colonial troops—along with its Vietnamese allies—but those forces were only able to survive because of American financial support. In any case, most of the population in France was either against the war or simply did not care. That much we know for certain as confirmed in Jean Lartéguy's book, *The Centurions* (<https://smile.amazon.com/Centurions-Jean-Larteguy/dp/0143107445>).

Generally, *In The Year Of The Tiger* does not explore these broader consequences of France's limited success in the south sufficiently. Waddell is more interested in a conventional military history of the war, but tying it to the big picture more explicitly would be helpful. Organizationally, Waddell's chronology may also be confusing for readers unfamiliar with war in Indochina after 1945. Instead of beginning with Japanese occupation of Indochina, Waddell's first chapter jumps ahead to France's war against the Viet Minh in Tonkin (North Vietnam) after World War II. Chapter two moves forward in time, delving into the diversity of South Vietnam with an emphasis on the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and the Binh Xuyen crime syndicate. Chapter three, however, bounces back in time to discuss Japan's occupation and then the narrative progresses again to the early stages of the First Indochina War. It is not clear why a progressive chronological approach was not



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adopted. It is certainly difficult to recount multiple events at the same time, but the book's organization muddles Waddell's narrative. This is especially important to point out because of his emphasis on military operations when so many other factors, including cultural and especially religious motivations, figured so prominently in South Vietnam.

Jean-Larteguy/dp/0143107445?  
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Additionally, Waddell often digresses within chapters. In one case, a few pages into chapter five, the reader is taken on a journey through Viet Minh strategy in the south in 1950 only to be propelled into the Tet Offensive in early 1968. The apparent reason for Waddell's jump was to demonstrate how Tet confirmed the success of the South First faction that finally dominated decision-making in the Vietnamese communist politburo. It is not clear why a concise footnote with this information, or even an appendix with these details, would not suffice to get the same point across.



Waddell's best work is found in chapter five, "*La Geste de Chanson: The Battles of 1950.*" His narrative in this chapter is especially compelling, because it centers on *Général de Brigade* Charles-Marie Ferréol Chanson, the commander of French forces in Cochinchina in late 1949 and his opponent, the Southern Viet Minh leader, Nguyen Binh. Binh appears in many places earlier in the book, but, as Waddell demonstrates with tact, Binh was a great foil for Chanson. The chapter is engaging and left this reader wondering why Waddell did not develop the book's entire narrative around these more interesting stories and the approaches Chanson and Binh brought to the war and how they overcame respective challenges. The vehicle for telling a broader story of the First Indochina War in South Vietnam is latent in these two individuals' professional and personal lives. Chanson and Binh's backgrounds and their different challenges—including lack of access to military support and other resources—could have been constructed into an interesting back-and-forth narrative. This approach might have explained Chanson and Binh's respective sides and how their war against each other was so different than that taking place elsewhere in Indochina.

The political-hierarchical tensions Chanson and Binh each endured, for example, explain much and in illuminating ways. Chanson's bureaucratic conflicts with French leaders close to the flagpole in Saigon are especially interesting and revealing. More broadly, Waddell's analysis of their respective careers goes far to expose bureaucratic problems, in terms of command and control, for example, that armies invariably encounter in conflicts ranging from the imperial-colonial era to interventions abroad in the present. In the case of Nguyen Binh, political differences Binh may have shared with other communist leaders, at bases in the U Minh forest, the Plain of Reeds, or other places, could have been explored further to enrich our understanding of the Viet Minh. It is clear by chapter five that Waddell has his finger on an important potential narrative trajectory in the form of Chanson and Binh. Alas, it is a missed opportunity that becomes manifest due to the success of chapter five as a stand-alone piece of analysis.

Yet, *In the Year of the Tiger* still deserves serious consideration by scholars as a worthwhile book in the growing field of academic investigation into the First Indochina War. Despite shortfalls in commission and omission at points, Waddell provides a cogent and useful analysis on which others may usefully build. That should, after all, be the goal among those who seek to understand how the First Indochina War conditioned the disaster the United States chose to pursue after final French defeat in 1954.

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*Header Image: Bruno Cremer, right, plays the adjutant Willsdorf in Pierre Schoendoerffer's "The 317th Platoon," a novel and film of the First Indochina War (Rialto Pictures)*

#### NOTES:

[1] For further reference, see Hue Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[2] William M. Waddell III, *In The Year Of The Tiger: The War for Cochinchina, 1945-1951* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018).

[3] *Ibid.*, 18, 5.

[4] See Allan B. Cole, (Ed.), *Conflict in Indo-China and International Repercussion: A Documentary History, 1945-1955* (Ithaca: The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University and the Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University Press, 1956), 259. Also, see Irwin Wall, "The Marshall Plan and French Politics," in Martin A. Schain (Editor), *The Marshall Plan Fifty Years Later* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001), 177. For Steil's statistics, see Benn Steil, *The Marshall Plan: Dawn of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 450.

[5] For discussion of the trusteeship concept, see Dixee R. Bartholomew-Feis, *The O.S.S. and Ho Chi Minh: Unexpected Allies in the War against Japan* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006), 40-48.

[6] In addition to Vandenbosch, Fall and Davis are quoted in Amry Vandenbosch and Richard A. Butwell, *Southeast Asia Among the World Powers* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1957), 123-126.

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