



Vietnam Labyrinth: Allies, Enemies, and Why the U.S. Lost the War

By Tran Ngoc Chau with Ken Fermoyale. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-89672-771-7. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp.xi, 439. \$35.99.

V*ietnam Labyrinth*, by Tran Ngoc Chau, is one of the most recent titles in the “Modern Southeast Asia Series” published by Texas Tech University Press. Mr. Chau’s effort is a notable and worthy addition to other work by members of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese military, especially Bui Tin’s *Following Ho Chi Minh* and Truong Nhu Tang’s *A Viet-Cong Memoir*.

Mr. Chau’s efforts are singular because he not only served in both the Viet Minh and, later, South Vietnamese Army, but he was also a governor of Kien Hoa Province and a member of the South Vietnamese National Assembly. More tragically, he was imprisoned by the Thieu government for more than four years because of his efforts to find a settlement that countered the Thieu administration’s policies. Then, upon the North Vietnamese victory in 1975, he was imprisoned by the Communists for more than two years. What might have evolved into a tale of woe is, instead, a tremendous account of both Vietnam from 1945 to 1975 and a gripping personal journey.

The son of a Mandarin, Mr. Chau sought to become a Buddhist monk early in life but decided to take a different path by joining the Viet Minh. Initially a squad leader, he would later become a Viet Minh battalion commander. Chau’s attention to the operational level of Viet Minh organization and its approach to operations is fascinating. The Viet Minh unit staff structure, for example, was or-

ganized with a political commissar and military commander sharing overall responsibility for the unit in tandem. While emphasis on the military and political effort would fluctuate depending on the stage of operations, Chau’s work is informative regarding how the Viet Minh stressed the political nature of warfare. Particularly revealing is the Viet Minh emphasis on “After-Action-Reviews” at the unit level (a process called *Kiem Thao*) and its stress on the political ramifications of military operations.

Chapters 8 and 9 “Change of Heart” and “Changing Uniforms,” respectively, are arguably the lynchpins of the book. While detailing how the Viet Minh operated and organized its staff, Chau additionally presents an in-depth portrait of his thoughts towards North Vietnamese leadership and his antipathy towards communism. The chapter thus sets a trajectory for the remaining chapters.

The next chapters examine the burgeoning insurgency against the South Vietnamese government and detail Chau’s transition to serving in the South Vietnamese Army. Interestingly, many positive reflections on the person of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem recur through the book. Diem, in Chau’s view, remained a fierce nationalist but allowed himself to become isolated from a majority of Vietnamese, especially the majority Buddhist population. An additional and often documented failing was his caving to poor counsel, particularly from his brothers Ngo Dinh Nhu and

Catholic Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc.

Chapters 9 through 21 move at a dizzying but chronological pace and detail the variety of government positions in which Chau served. These include Provincial Governor of Kien Hoa Province, director of the National Pacification Cadre Program, and Representative of Kien Hoa Province in the South Vietnamese National Assembly. Numerous sub-narratives and other interesting anecdotal material illuminate these chapters especially.

The stories of Chau’s imprisonment by both sides is complex but also reflective of the greater tragedy in Vietnam. In the case of Chau, his story culminates in his family’s arduous ordeal as “boat people,” escaping from Vietnam in 1979 and fortunately ending up in California. This was assisted by American friends, particularly journalist Keyes Beech who, like Chau, shared his goal of achieving an independent, non-communist Vietnam. Other notable Americans who appear often in *Vietnam Labyrinth* include John Paul Vann and Daniel Ellsberg.

At over 400 pages, *Vietnam Labyrinth* is an investment of time but it is highly rewarding. The book certainly touches all levels of the war but its primary value is in the aggregate. In this regard, it is a valuable portrait of a tragic war as well as a riveting story of a remarkable life.

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