

These concerns aside, Scanlon's book is essential reading to historians of recent American politics and to scholars interested in learning more about the domestic ramifications of the Vietnam War long after 1975.

*Michael Brenes, Hunter College, City University of New York*

FREDRIK LOGEVALL

*Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*

New York: Random House, 2012. 842 Pp. \$40.00 (Cloth)

Fredrik Logevall's grand narrative of the First Indochina War declares its argument in the title. The course of America's Vietnam War is not just linked, but foretold in this earlier conflict. In tracing the interaction between America, France, and Vietnam the author argues that Washington chose not to learn the lessons that France had: the limits of counterinsurgency, military power, and a weak host government. *Embers of War* cautions that the United States is still struggling with them. The author expects the reader to experience "feelings of déjà vu," arguing that these problems plagued Indochina in the 1940s before re-appearing in 1960s Vietnam and more recently in Iraq (xiv-xx, 714). According to Logevall, in failing to apply its anti-imperial principles abroad Washington helped create its own Vietnam ordeal. While its arguments are not new, *Embers* sets itself apart through smooth prose and suspenseful storytelling. Certainly this book represents the kind of timely, popular historical scholarship that many have encouraged the field to publish.

The six-part narrative begins with the 1919 Treaty of Versailles and concludes with growing U.S. involvement in the 1960s. *Embers* tells that story by examining the diplomatic history of the Indochina War's great men and the military history of its grandest events. Parts III and IV are the heart of the book, its longest and most thorough sections, covering 1950-54 with emphasis on Điện Biên Phủ. Little new information is presented, but the story is told elegantly. Logevall does offer his interpretation of several debates in the diplomatic history field, particularly the disputed sagacity

of President Dwight Eisenhower's Indochina strategy. A recurrent theme is that politicians let their fear of electoral defeat unduly influence foreign policy. French and American decisions on Indochina, the author argues, "cannot be understood apart from the charged domestic political atmosphere in which they were made" (710).

Yet *Embers* does not examine the ways this charged domestic atmosphere shaped portrayals of the Indochina War in the "orthodox" histories of the Vietnam War that it relies upon. First writing in the 1970s, these scholars believed they could mobilize history to oppose an immoral and misguided war in Vietnam. Washington was fighting not an enemy, but the inexorable march of history: an innate Vietnamese resistance to foreign occupation embodied in Hồ Chí Minh. His Confucian-nationalism was the sole authentic authority in Vietnam. Communism was simply a vehicle to reach independence. Frances FitzGerald's *Fire in the Lake* – which, like *Embers*, won the Pulitzer Prize in a time of U.S. military action abroad – gave voice to these ideas, establishing an orthodox interpretation that has dominated scholarly and popular literature on the war. For others, the orthodox interpretation lent itself to ideas of an "unwinnable war" or an "invented" South Vietnam. In time, a "revisionist" rebuttal emerged that rehabilitated U.S. policy through an equally troublesome reading of Vietnamese history. More recently, partisans of both schools have impressed the history of Vietnam into rhetorical battles for or against American intervention in the Middle East.

Though at moments *Embers* breaks from the Orthodox narrative, it never escapes that problematic framework. The Indochina War is less the subject of study than the setting for an American tragedy. A multiplicity of actors and events in Vietnam are ignored to better put in relief French and American misdeeds, "missed opportunities", and their refusal to learn the supposedly objective "lessons" of the past. In supporting roles for a story not their own, the Vietnamese can appear inert or simplistic.

Rather than exploring Hồ Chí Minh's dualism – at once a nationalist and committed communist internationalist – *Embers* imagines him as someone who believed "fervently" in the United States and only regretfully entered the communist world (xxii, 83). Following Ezra Manela, the author argues for a missed "Wilsonian moment" in 1919–20 when the American president's

ideals captivated a young Hồ Chí Minh. *Embers* proposes a “straight line between the failure of the great powers” and Woodrow Wilson to promote colonial reform and Hồ Chí Minh’s turn toward communism in 1921 (14). Yet this contradicts what we know. When the Versailles conference concluded in early 1920, Hồ Chí Minh was already giving speeches on Bolshevism and fiercely critical of capitalism. In his writings and public statements he never invoked Wilson’s name. Instead he was imploring French socialists in Paris’ 13th arrondissement to join Vladimir Lenin’s Third International. It was Lenin’s path, he emphasized, that Vietnam should take out of colonialism.<sup>1</sup>

To construct these lost moments, *Embers* tells a familiar story that diminishes the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)’s communism while emphasizing discord within the Sino-Soviet-Vietnamese relationship. The Vietnamese revolution is construed as a lost “Rooseveltian moment” where Hồ Chí Minh’s diplomatic courting of America is cited as proof that he and the Vietnamese adored the United States as their foremost ally (99, 229). We should remember that Mao Zedong was also appealing to Americans for support in 1945, downplaying his connections with Moscow while comparing himself to Abraham Lincoln and promising to establish a Chinese democracy. Yet to claim Mao Zedong was not a committed communist, that his embrace of illiberal policies was the result of Washington pushing him into the Soviets’ arms would inspire disdain if not derision among historians. That it can still be done for Hồ Chí Minh and Vietnam indicates the skill with which the DRV crafted its public face, but more so how the orthodox and revisionist politicizations of Vietnamese history continue to weaken the quality of scholarship on Vietnam.

Nevertheless *Embers* reasons that a wiser Washington could have made the DRV an ally, or at least turned its president into a Vietnamese Tito. Instead the French and Americans are credited with transforming “a localized and strictly Franco-Vietnamese conflict” into a Cold War battlefield (107, 185). This argument rests on a select few quotes, in particular Phạm Ngọc Thạch’s assurance to American officials in 1947 that the DRV leadership was non-communist (196). The reader is never told of Phạm Ngọc Thạch’s subsequent meeting with Soviet officials. There he pledged the DRV’s commitment to communism. Phạm Ngọc Thạch explained that the DRV must conceal their communism for now to “avoid provoking a negative

American reaction,” but assured him that Vietnamese and “all Asians hate” America.<sup>ii</sup>

The point is that a similarly deliberate reading of the DRV’s opportunistic diplomacy could just as easily reveal a Stalinian, Sukarnoian, or Chiang Kai-shekian moment. None would help us understand the Vietnamese and a moment that surely was their own. *Embers* can only make Vietnam’s turn toward the communist world appear contingent upon the failure of Americans by omitting the Indochinese Communist Party’s belief in internationalism and Soviet modernity. The author should agree that understanding the DRV requires attention to its own charged domestic political atmosphere. Indeed it cannot be understood apart from the pressures exerted by Trần Ngọc Danh and Indochinese Communist Party members committed to socialist revolution. *Embers* is unfortunately rarely willing to examine its Vietnamese protagonists as critically as its western antagonists.

While this tragic narrative may prove cathartic for certain audiences, it undermines the author’s promised critical international history. If Logevall wisely jettisons some Orientalist aspects of the orthodox scholarship, he substitutes them for an equally problematic nationalist mythos. *Embers* starts from an ahistorical premise that the DRV and Hồ Chí Minh possessed a “nationalist legitimacy that was, in a fundamental way, fixed for all time” (xxii). At points that contradict such triumphant maxims, *Embers* once again tailors the story. The DRV land reform campaign is described simply as an initiative to end hunger and tenancy. Hồ Chí Minh is a distraught spectator who bemoans the execution of Nguyễn Thị Năm, a prominent revolutionary. Not mentioned are the DRV leadership’s ideological motivations, political aims, and the instrumental role of Chinese advisors. Hồ Chí Minh’s vitriolic public endorsement of Nguyễn Thị Năm’s execution is not included, nor is his continued defense of the program. Other troublesome events are hurdled with euphemistic language. Executions and fighting between the Việt Minh and its southern opponents is “grumbling” on the part of the latter, while intellectuals in Hanoi simply “chafed under what they saw as authoritarian state cultural policies” after 1954. And the migration of a million refugees out of the DRV is attributed to Edward Lansdale’s peripheral propaganda campaign. Though acknowledging some resistance, the author nevertheless concludes the DRV’s authority and “Ho Chi Minh’s

stature remained unchallenged; more than ever he was, for a great many of his compatriots, the embodiment of Vietnamese nationalism” (632–638).

This framework necessitates a dim view of Vietnamese opposed to the DRV. Among the non-communists only one, Ngô Đình Diệm, was “even remotely able to think disinterestedly of his country’s future” according to the author (xxii). This absolves *Embers* from taking seriously the French-sponsored State of Vietnam (SVN) and its successor the Republic of Vietnam. As in the orthodox literature, here Bảo Đại appears as an Orientalist caricature that is “lazy” and “a pleasure seeker of the first order” with a “bland, expressionless face” masking his political sensibility (200). The description of another prominent SVN official, Nguyễn Văn Xuân, is emblematic of the book’s problematic representation of non-communist Vietnamese: “charming and articulate, he devoted most of his time to scheming and conniving” and “developed a reputation for utter untrustworthiness” (206). No supporting evidence is provided. It’s possible this description comes from the author’s reading of official opinion. The French had long mistrusted their Vietnamese partners as opportunists, ready to throw France out of Indochina once self-government was in reach. Their fears were confirmed when Nguyễn Văn Xuân tried to establish an independent, unified Vietnamese state under Bảo Đại. For Frenchmen coveting colonial privilege, Nguyễn Văn Xuân and other nationalists were indeed untrustworthy schemers. We should perhaps think more critically. Paris could not in 1949, as *Embers* says, “opt simply to back Xuan and start a new Cochín China experiment with a puppet government run from Paris” (211). No puppet, the general had spoken in favor of unification since 1946. Had *Embers* dealt more critically with its topic, it would have found a Franco-Vietnamese “misalliance” as troubled as the later one between Ngô Đình Diệm and Washington.

As it is, the book says little of competing nationalisms and ideological opposition to the DRV. Having imported its themes from journalists Neil Sheehan and David Halberstam, *Embers* takes on an outdated determinism that leaves us with a simplistic view of Vietnam’s complex decolonization. Sheehan’s description of the South Vietnamese as “a mere residue” of Vietnamese talent is approvingly quoted, as is his description of the Republic of Vietnam as “the creation of Edward Lansdale” (xix, 657). Those words may

say a great deal about how Americans rationalized their ordeal in Vietnam, but little that helps us understand the Vietnamese themselves.

As *Embers* tries to emphasize old mischaracterizations of the Indochina War, it finds itself implicated in similar factual lapses. In several cases there are inconsistencies in evidence and sources. For example, on page 160, French General Jean Étienne Valluy is quoted as saying, “If those gooks want a fight, they’ll get it.” Valluy’s actual statement: “The *Nhacs* want a brawl. They’ll get it.” (Vietnamese used *nhà quê* to patronizingly refer to peasant “yokels,” and the French derisively referred to Vietnamese with its corruption, *nhac*.) The author’s attributed source, Stein Tønnesson’s *Vietnam 1946*, contains the accurate quotation. Later on, Dr. Tom Dooley is prominently featured and described as the most important person shaping American views of Vietnam. To support that claim the author writes a 1961 “Gallup poll ranked him third among the world’s ‘most esteemed men,’ right behind Dwight Eisenhower and the Pope” (666). Those words were taken verbatim without attribution from another author’s work. More importantly they are incorrect. Dr. Dooley did not even appear in Gallup’s ten names for 1960 or 1961, nor the thirty honorably mentioned.<sup>iii</sup>

When describing Vietnamese subjects, the author also struggles with errors. The hagiographic story of Hồ Chí Minh’s expulsion from the Quốc Học academy for supporting the 1908 tax revolts is prominently featured (10). However the story is false. He only enrolled months after the revolts.<sup>iv</sup> Similarly, Võ Nguyên Giáp’s fated rise is noted in “the name Giap meant ‘armor,’” but Nguyễn Giáp translates to “he who ranks first in the imperial examinations” (147). Contrary to his description of the August Revolution, there was no “mass rally in Hanoi” that demanded Bảo Đại abdicate (94). SVN Prime Minister Nguyễn Văn Tâm is someone who “seemed a pawn in French hands” in part because he “had been educated in France,” but he was schooled in Vietnam and was middle-aged when traveled to France for the first time (370). Nguyễn Văn Thỉnh was a technocrat silent on communism, not an “avowedly anti-Communist president” of the Republic of Cochinchina (154). The southern National United Front did not reflect the strength of Nguyễn Bình and the resistance (152). Just the opposite, it foreshadowed the coming break between the DRV leadership and these southern groups. This seminal event is not detailed in *Embers*. Lansdale did not design the

ballots for the 1955 election, nor is green “the color of a cuckold” in Vietnam (657). Though Bảo Đại had his fair share of mistresses, he was not “procur-ing legions of expensive prostitutes” (348). Finally, in trying to emphasize French and Catholic influences the author makes mistakes in descriptions of Hanoi and Saigon. For example, a statue of the Virgin Mary featured in his description of colonial Saigon was erected years after the First Indochina War ended (92). These and other errors unduly narrow possibilities and usher the reader toward conclusions that should perhaps be reconsidered.

Undoubtedly *Embers* was a monumental task, made all the more difficult by the author’s commitment to produce an accessible and engrossing story. For readers hoping to understand the First Indochina War and the origin of American involvement, the author’s study is a good, if problematic, point of entry that can be supplemented with recent scholarship. For specialists of Vietnam and its wars, *Embers* should prompt useful debates about how we approach the history of the Indochina Wars.

*Brett Reilly, University of Wisconsin-Madison*

#### Notes

- i. Note [un-numbered], January 30, 1920, Archives Nationales (France), F/7/13405; Note [un-numbered], 27 March 1920, Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Paris, 1W1142, n. 59497.
- ii. “Report of Pham No Mach [Phạm Ngọc Thạch] to the Soviet Envoy in Switzerland, A. G. Kulazhenkov,” September 20, 1947, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, The Wilson Center, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114524> (accessed October 21, 2015).
- iii. “Gallup Poll: Kennedy Heads List as ‘Most Admired,’” *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 1961. The unattributed text comes from Seth Jacobs, “Fighting Words,” *Boston College Magazine* (Summer 2002). Jacobs seems to have misunderstood an obituary of Tom Dooley. In fact, Dooley only appeared once in the Gallup poll – seventh in the 1959 poll that coincided with his televised cancer treatment on CBS, not his 1956 book *Deliver Us From Evil* that dealt with Vietnam.
- iv. Hồ Chí Minh’s acceptance letter can be found in: Directeur du College Quôchoc, letter n. 41, August 7, 1908, Archives Nationale d’Outre-Mer, Résidence supérieure d’Annam files, R1.