

Alps. It is the feeling we get when standing on the Plain of Marathon, or looking at the beaches at Normandy, or visiting the Somme, once so violent, now so peaceful.

This sense of distant thunder is the way people with more sedentary lives are going to see the chaos of battle. For the man in the arena, it is a false perspective. But in fact, the man in the arena has no better alternative to offer. As Tim O'Brien and other modern writers on war have pointed out, there may be no "there there" with respect to war. Nobody, certainly not those involved in it, who see only intense fragments and never the whole picture, has an objective or correct view of war.

Favret's book is largely readable, and the academic jargon is kept to a minimum (though sentences sometimes go on and on). To be sure, the now-tired scholarly mantras of the 1990s (she tells us she spent a decade writing this book) are once again evoked, especially the conviction that what appears to be one thing is actually its opposite. This overused perception is central to the thought of Derrida and Foucault, and here it is used to suggest that the boring at-home experience of the Romantic poets is actually fraught with the faraway violence to which common sense would suggest is an alternative.

But such lapses aside, this book is something those in the military would do well to meditate on: What does war look like to those not in it? Since there are more people not in wars than in them (and it is for them the war is ostensibly fought), perhaps their perspective merits consideration.

The Sunni-Shia Conflict: Understanding Sectarian Violence in the Middle East. By Nathan Gonzalez. Mission Viejo, Calif.: Nortia Press, 2009. 199 pages. \$22.95. **Reviewed by Major Christopher Danbeck**, former Assistant Professor of International Relations and Middle East Politics at the US Military Academy.

Through the ages religion has been used for political gains. Today is no different. In *The Sunni-Shia Conflict* Nathan Gonzalez, Truman National Security Project Fellow and author of *Engaging Iran*, attempts to remove religion from what he argues is an essentially political struggle for power in the Middle East. Iraq, according to Mr. Gonzalez, is the nexus of this political struggle between nations who are using that state as a "battleground for proxy conflicts they dare not launch on a level of total war." This insightful examination of an issue at the crux of many of the issues facing the United States today, especially as we consider continued involvement in Iraq, is certainly of value to strategic leaders in both the civilian and defense communities.

Central to Gonzalez's argument is what he refers to as the three catalysts: charismatic leaders, a breakdown in state authority, and geopolitical battles. After a brief discussion of the basic tenets of Islam in the Prologue he spends the first chapter outlining these catalysts. The author then builds the argument that through the centuries Iraq has been at the center of each of these catalysts and therefore must be seen as key to stability in the Middle East. In the second chapter Gonzalez examines the long and storied history of the Middle East, particularly the development of monotheistic religions in Anatolia (Judaism), the Roman Empire (Christianity), and in Iran (Zoroastrianism). These empires were defined by their acceptance of a singular religion and could therefore distinguish themselves from other empires, frequently exploiting that difference in order to gain territory and power.

Gonzalez thereafter introduces the reader to the birth of the Islamic religion and the rupture that occurred shortly. This scism between the party of Ali, or Shia, and the party of Uthman, later known as Sunni, was a defining moment for Islam and set the stage for generations of conflict. The impetus for this divide was the death of the third caliph, Uthman, whose political decisions were not amenable to all of the followers of Islam. “The death of Uthman marked the hardening of two camps in early Islam—a polarization of tribal and political affiliation, but not yet representing a religious divide.” The author makes clear Iraq’s central role in the continuing divide between Shia and Sunni. Saddam Hussein’s removal allowed Muqtada al-Sadr to call for the renewal of the pilgrimages to Karbala to commemorate the death of the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson in 680 A.D., an event that had not occurred in decades.

The middle chapters offer a succinct description of two divisions; the first between those Muslims who believed in the succession of the Prophet and those who followed Ali, and the second between great nations as they adopted these narratives to suit their political goals. Central to this second, greater divide was Iraq as the eastern nations of the Middle East, primarily Sunni, were in conflict with their western, Shia neighbors. Gonzalez argues that since the tenth century the competition for regional power between the Fatamids and the Seljuks is equivalent to today’s continuing competition between the Arab states and Persian Iran, with the religious narrative changed little. While it can be argued that covering 1,000 years of intricate history in one chapter is not possible, the power in that particular chapter, and indeed throughout the book, is the continued focus on Iraq’s central role and the author’s analysis of the effects of his three catalysts.

In order for the reader to accept his argument, Gonzalez dedicates Chapter Six to bringing the imagined land of Iraq to life. Starting with the British occupation and ending with Saddam’s era, he examines all the important players, in particular the great Shia families (Sadr and Hakim) that since 2003, have become familiar to many in the United States. But the author does not contend that the current situation in Iraq has not been replicated in the region previously, and returns to where the book opened, Lebanon. It is here that Gonzalez describes the sectarian conflicts that have torn that nation apart over in the past decades. The final two chapters return to the book’s main character, Iraq. Of most interest to defense policy-makers is the review of the charismatic leaders who fought for power in the new Iraq: the Badr Organization, the Sadrists, Sunni insurgents, al Qaeda, and the Iranian security services. The nature of these contenders, argues Gonzalez, is central to his focus on the three catalysts. While the US surge clearly resulted in decreased levels of violence, the author questions if these gains are sustainable given the realities of Iraq’s location and the geopolitical forces that have influenced it for generations. In particular, the continued struggle between the Persian, Shia Iranians, and the Sunni Arab states.

Gonzalez claims his book is for the general public, and admittedly, there may be times when a more experienced Middle East student may feel the book is not rich enough. At its heart, however, *The Sunni-Shia Conflict* holds a powerful message for senior members of the defense community. While the reader may be taken on a wide-ranging tour of the history of Islamic political development, the author always leads you back to Iraq, reinforcing his central argument that it is the nation that has been

and will be the center of gravity in the Middle East. As long as there are those in our community who cannot communicate intelligently regarding the differences between Shia and Sunni Islam, there is clearly a need for a book such as this one.

Valley of Death: The Tragedy at Dien Bien Phu That Led America into the Vietnam War. By Ted Morgan. New York: Random House, 2010. 722 pages. \$35.00. **Reviewed by Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Wayne A. Silkett**, former instructor in the Department of Military Strategy, Planning, and Operations and Department of Distance Education, US Army War College.

How and why the United States got involved in Southeast Asia in general and Vietnam in particular is only one of several stages of post-World War II action and intrigue in Indo-China magnificently detailed in Ted Morgan's *Valley of Death*. Partly about the epic 1954 French Vietminh battle of Dien Bien Phu, the book is also the history of the decline of one great power, the rise of China in the aftermath of its civil war, the success of a war of national liberation, and the subsequent replacement of French influence in Southeast Asia by America. Morgan addresses one of the pivotal issues of the last 60 years: How did the United States, once a visceral opponent of the continuation of British and French colonialism, get so involved in Southeast Asia with the resulting predictable consequences?

Valley of Death begins with Franklin D. Roosevelt's outspoken opposition to British and French expectations to recover their empires following the defeat of Germany and Japan. Unfortunately, this philosophy lost its principal spokesman upon the President's death. Very early the reader is reminded of George Santayana's abiding caution, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Later, while immersed in France's eight-year Indo-China war, readers will hearten Barbara Tuchman's accompanying caution, "There is no more entangling alliance than aid to indigent friends."

The Dien Bien Phu outpost, ostensibly designed to draw in the Vietminh for a decisive battle, ranks as one of the great political and military self-delusions and blunders of the twentieth century. Quickly cut off by road, the outpost could only be resupplied by air, from airfields 185 miles away, with inadequate numbers of aircraft, despite the borrowing of US Air Force C-119 transports and B-26 bombers. The French completely misjudged matters by dismissing the possibility that the Vietminh could transport artillery, ammunition, manpower, and materiel to support a 56-day siege that the French could neither counter or withdraw from.

The battle itself receives detailed attention, with haunting images of high-level incompetence and indifference. Morgan contrasts this malfeasance with examples of spectacular heroism and astonishing suffering. It was not unusual late in the siege to see French amputees manning machine guns fed ammunition by other amputees. By the time monsoon rains began, the multitude of shallow graves give up their dead and the French, as well as the attacking Vietminh, were "up to their knees in blood and corpses."

While only 25 soldiers of the garrison were actually of French citizenry (French conscripts by law could not serve outside France), the remainder of the force was Algerian, Moroccan, Thai, Vietnamese, and members of the Foreign Legion. The French never seemed to be bothered by the incongruity of a largely colonial force