

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

fighting to preserve colonialism. A fact that was especially relevant to the Indochinese, giving them only something to fight against, and never anything to fight for. Repeated western prodding established a timeline for the independence of Vietnam resulted in very little until the Geneva talks of 1954, after the fall of Dien Bien Phu.

Besides Dien Bien Phu, *Valley of Death* addresses French, British, Vietnamese, Chinese, Russian, and American political machinations in the region, against a backdrop of byzantine intrigues, duplicity, lies, absurd expectations, and incompetence. Morgan is never boring. He enlivens his narrative with quotes, perspectives, and conclusions that are usually on the mark. Many of his vignettes describe an unspeakable lack of French earnestness regarding the battle. In April 1954, a plan to have French pilots fly American aircraft to Dien Bien Phu was postponed because it interfered with vacation schedules. Another plan, contemplated but never carried out, called for seeding clouds to hasten monsoon rains. A French noncommissioned officer complains of running out of wine; the garrison commander grouches about being out of whiskey and cognac. One French officer parachuted in Dien Bien Phu with his glass eye in a pocket; another tucked his empty sleeve into his belt. Nor is it only the French that the author takes to task. One British commentator said of hawkish US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, “There is no situation so bad that Mr. Dulles cannot make it worse.”

Many of the American anecdotes have a disquieting ring, such as widespread congressional opposition to creeping US involvement and the fear of a major land war. In Geneva in 1954, Walter Bedell Smith, as head of President Eisenhower’s special committee on Indochina, declared, “American ground forces will go into Indochina over my dead body.” At the same time French memoirs claim, over American denials, that Secretary Dulles asked the French, “Would you like two bombs?” meaning two atomic bombs with which to break the siege.

A reader that is only superficially aware of the French and American Indochina experiences during this period may be confused by the similarities with America’s later experiences in Vietnam: weak Vietnamese leader, Emperor Bao Dai for the French, then later Ngo Dinh Diem (and his successors) for the Americans; the Central Intelligence Agency-owned Civil Air Transport Company during the French period, Air America during the American conflict; lack of a French timetable for Indochinese independence, similar lack of genuine reforms during the American intrusion; divisions at home regarding the wars (in February 1954, only eight percent of the French population supported the war); and torturous negotiations designed to end each of the conflicts “with honor.”

Valley of Death is exhaustively researched and splendidly written, suffering mainly from photographs many readers will consider inappropriate and inadequate. It only has four maps, insufficient for keeping up with the narrative. These shortcomings aside, *Valley of Death* is a most welcome addition to the literature and a splendid read.