



*In the Year of the Tiger: The War for Cochinchina, 1945–1951* by William M. Waddell III.

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The First Indochina War (1946–54) has long been neglected by historians. In the United States, it is seen as a prologue or first act in the wider drama that eventually involved America much more directly. In France, it is eclipsed by the Algerian war of independence, which immediately followed it and weighs more heavily on the French collective memory. Even the existing literature on the conflict usually concentrates on Tonkin, the northern part of Vietnam, where most of the combat occurred.

In his new book, historian and former US Army officer William Waddell (Air War College) has produced a long overdue study of a “sideshow of a sideshow” in southernmost Vietnam (Cochinchina) during the Indochina War. Besides a sound military narrative of the six first years of the war in the South, Waddell tries to answer a disturbing question prompted by the commonly accepted narrative of the conflict: why did the French do much better—with fewer resources—against the Vietminh in the South than they did in the North? Waddell’s intriguing answer is that “this salutary neglect forced the French in Cochinchina to look for and adopt creative short-term solutions, often against their inclinations” (28). The French high command in the South had to pursue “less than optimal solutions” (100), such as using local militias instead of regular troops, economically blockading the enemy rather than destroying it, and focusing on pacifying “usable land” rather than controlling the whole country. These seemingly unsatisfactory options ultimately yielded more sustainable solutions than the more straightforward strategy pursued in Tonkin.

The author begins with a summary of the war for Tonkin, from the Haiphong bombing in 1946 to the battle of Dien Bien Phu (13 Mar.–7 May 1954), as contrast to what would transpire in the South. Turning to Cochinchina, he sets the historical and cultural scene of that peculiar area first colonized by the French in the mid-nineteenth century. It enjoyed the rich yield of the Mekong Delta rice paddies, but was fragmented by religious allegiances (Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Catholics, Buddhists, etc.), and beset by organized crime (Binh Xuyen) and political factions (communists, nationalists, etc.). As a consequence, the Vietminh could not unite all the opponents of the French as it did in Tonkin and Annam.

The heart of the book, beginning in chapter 3, centers on French “Reconquista” operations from fall 1945 to mid-1947. After being wiped out by the brutal Japanese coup of March 1945, French colonial rule was progressively reinstated (thanks to British connivance) following the old “oil spot” strategy of expansion outward from the capital city of Saigon. In the process, the French entered territory plunged in chaos, where unruly Vietminh forces, allied with the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects, as well as the Binh Xuyen organization, had taken over much of Cochinchina. The French expeditionary corps commanded by Philippe Leclerc—the liberator of Paris, and France’s most acclaimed general—and then his successor in the South (from Feb. 1946), Gen. Georges Nyo,

combined old colonial tactics with World War II-style commando raids and riverine battalions dubbed “Dinassaut.”<sup>1</sup>

To face them, the Vietminh general staff sent Nguyen Binh, a legendary one-eyed and tough-minded character, to take the reins of the insurgency and rid it of its “warlord mentality” (68). But Binh’s dictatorial style alienated first the Cao Dai (June 1946), then the Hoa Hao (Apr. 1947), and finally the Binh Xuyen (May 1948), ending their alliance with the communists. The French wisely seized upon this godsend to rally blocks of Cochinchinese society to their side, for example, by granting sect leaders official rank and insignia. More generally, they enrolled local “partisans” to make up for their shortage of boots on the ground.

Chapter 4 introduces Gen. Boyer de Latour, who replaced Nyo as regional commander in July 1947. An old colonial hand and a protégé of Hubert Lyautey in Morocco, this skillful tactician applied himself to pacifying Cochinchina precinct by precinct. But he had to abandon this incremental approach when the Expeditionary Corps high command (generals Jean Etienne Valluy and Raoul Salan) ordered him adopt a more offensive agenda aimed at capturing or killing Nguyen Binh and destroying his logistic base in the Plain of Reeds: Operation Vega was set in motion in February 1948, mobilizing five thousand infantrymen, as well as paratroopers, artillery, and aviation and riverine assets. Like Operation Lea, which aimed at a similar objective against Vietminh central command in Tonkin, Vega proved another failure, as Binh and his staff eventually managed to escape. After this setback, the vindictive Vietminh mounted the “Dalat Ambush,” which killed over a hundred men, including Lt. Col. Gabriel Brunet de Sairigné, one of Boyer’s closest friends.

These abject failures forced Boyer to embark on a campaign of fortification aimed at turning Cochinchina into “an artificial forest of watchtowers” (105). The close-knit network of small “posts” secured the main lines of communication, but also offered some easy targets for Vietminh attacks.

In 1949, Boyer imposed an economic blockade on areas under Vietminh control. This attempt to starve the insurgency—which later proved so effective in Malaya—was made possible by the Binh Xuyen, the organized crime network in the Saigon area, which was adept at smuggling and trafficking of all kinds. As long as the Binh Xuyen were working hand-in-hand with the Vietminh, any blockade was doomed to failure. When Nguyen Binh made an attempt on the life of Bay Vien—the Binh Xuyen boss—the insurgency lost most of the contacts with the underworld that were so vital to its finances and supplies.

In an innovative discussion (chap. 5), Waddell turns to the Vietminh. He questions the Vietnamese understanding of the Maoist doctrine of a people’s war, featuring three successive phases: strategic retreat, stalemate, and general counteroffensive. He methodically lays out the Vietminh force structure: at the bottom of the pyramid were popular forces (*dan quan*) divided into part-time self-defense units (*dan quan tu ve*) and full-time guerrillas (*dan quan du kich*); regional forces (*bod doi*); and, finally, regular forces or main units (*chu luc*), conventionally divided into companies (*dai doi*), battalions (*tieu doan*) and regiments (*trung doan*). Only regular forces, Binh and the communist hierarchy believed, could mount a general counteroffensive.

While not an “area studies” specialist, Waddell makes extensive use of published Vietnamese primary sources such as the *Van Kien Dang* series, which lists Communist Party Central Committee directives, as well as Vietminh documents captured and translated by French military intelli-

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1. I.e., Division Navale d’Assaut, “Naval Assault Division.”

gence bureaus, an exceptionally valuable, unredacted source revealing the insurgency's own reading of the conflict.

In his sixth and final chapter, Waddell appraises the record of Gen. Charles Chanson as head of French forces in Cochinchina from October 1949, when he succeeded Boyer de Latour, to July 1951, when he was killed by a lone attacker using a hand grenade. A colonial artilleryman, Chanson had to face Nguyen Binh's attempt to emulate in the South the general offensive Vo Nguyen Giap was about to launch in the North. With far fewer means, Binh struck the French fortification system in the fiercely fought battles of Cau Ke (Dec. 1949) and Soc Trang (Mar. 1950), while fomenting popular uprisings in Saigon. Chanson managed to counter both operations: in the countryside by an effective fire-support system to assist isolated posts under attack; in the city by empowering a tough, frighteningly efficient Vietnamese-manned special police force.

Nonetheless, the Central Committee ordered Nguyen Binh to launch still another series of attacks, the so-called "High Waters Offensive," in fall 1950. These were designed less to tip the power balance in Cochinchina than to divert as many French troops as possible from the strategic battle of the "RC4" (the colonial route commanding the access to China from Tonkin). But Binh missed his chance and became little more than an accessory to Vietminh northern strategy. Moreover, the French did not take the bait, and kept most of their troops in the North—for all the good it did them. Recalled to report on his results, Binh was killed in September 1951, in an ambush mounted by French forces from Cambodia, who thus avenged Chanson's assassination—some say they were tipped off by Binh's communist rivals.

This lucid, thoroughly researched, and discerning study is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the First Indochina War in Cochinchina as something more than a prelude to what happened next in South Vietnam. It is a cautionary tale (with clear relevance to twenty-first century conflicts) of commanders attempting to reconcile political hesitancy and tactical realities in the context of a "limited war."