

A BERNARD FALL RETROSPECTIVE

On February 21, 1967, while on patrol with U. S. Marines north of Hue, in South Vietnam, Bernard Fall, distinguished French-born expert on Vietnam and a professor at Howard University, was killed by a land-mine. Left and Right here presents reviews of Fall's last two works, recently published, on Vietnam.

Bernard B. Fall, Viet-Nam Witness 1953-66, New York, Praeger, 1966, 363 pages, \$6.95.

BY LEONARD P. LIGGIO

Bernard Fall has been the principal source for the American public of detailed information and analysis of the political and social developments in South-East Asia and the United States' reaction to them. Time and again, Professor Fall has demonstrated that the facts have been the reverse of the 'official history' presented through the newspapers and magazines by the State Department and the Pentagon. Yet, despite the personal courage which this consistency has required, it is less a compliment to him than a condemnation of the academic and journalistic institutions in this country. That the United States government controls and manipulates information, using it as an instrument of the Administration's policy objectives, and seeks to defame, harass and punish those who seek out and report the actual facts, is well-known to any realistic observer. But, that the academic and journalistic institutions, and thus almost all scholars and journalists, cooperate in the objectives and methods of the government

in foreign policy matters, remains one of the unrecognized facts of contemporary America. As Fall expresses it in his introduction to Viet-Nam Witness:

When social-science research has reasons-of-state limitations placed upon its conclusions, it runs into heavy risks of losing its validity . . . In the case of Viet-Nam, that situation was finally pushed to a tragic extreme in which practically all specialists dealing with the country were operating under contract either with the Saigon government or with one of the American aid programs . . . University and foundation reports indicate only too clearly and too often that scholarship has in many cases become a new kind of "big business." In the long run, this may well stifle the yearning for the unexplored paths and for dissent of a higher level and greater import than a medieval theologians' debate around safely established basic verities.

Nevertheless, Fall himself established his role with greater sophistication "around safely established basic verities." He expresses the view that the role of the independent scholar or journalist is not to change the direction and objectives of the country's foreign policy but to influence, benefit, or improve the methods of achieving the direction and objectives, the "safely established basic verities," of United States foreign policy. In his Epilogue to Viet-Nam Witness, and despite the evidence he has marshalled over many years, Fall affirms the purpose of aiding the United States to achieve its ends and to work its will in South-East Asia behind the ever-present facade of anti-communism. His subtle recommendation to divide the National Liberation Front from solidarity with North Vietnam, to turn the NLF into an instrument of United States policy, forgets the ultimate fact of contemporary Vietnamese history--popular hostility to Western influence and rejection of any government which may cooperate with the United States. Unable to suffer military defeat, the role of either the NLF or North Vietnam with regard to the South Vietnamese would be totally reversed if either undertook cooperation with the United States, a policy incompatible with national popularity.

Fall's major contributions have been analyses of the military and the social-political aspects of the quarter century of conflict that has centered around the Vietnamese people; many of these analyses, drawn from the New Republic, Nation, New York Times Magazine, Foreign Affairs, Viet-Report among others, have been collected

to form Viet-Nam Witness. The major themes of Fall's analyses are United States policy, the limits of military power in the Vietnam conflict, and the social foundations and political methods of the Vietnamese guerrillas. The theme of United States policy, real and ideal, is generally considered indirectly by Fall. Just as he projects for the future the achieving of continued "American control" in South-East Asia, and thereby in all Asia beyond China's borders, by gaining NLF cooperation with the United States, so Fall projected a similar means for a similar objective in discussing the advantages to the West of the Geneva agreement of July, 1954. In March, 1954 Fall suggested that should a demarcation line be drawn between the Vietminh strongholds of Ho Chi-minh in northern Vietnam and the southern provinces, there would be a "great opportunity" for the application of American foreign aid -- the vanguard of American political objectives since Fall speaks of "political successes almost entirely due to the intelligent dispensation of economic aid." Ho's government, according to Fall, would have had to depend upon the West, essentially the United States, given the economic weakness of the Soviet Union and China in 1954, if the Geneva conference could deprive Ho of the rice-surplus Mekong delta. "Therein lies the great opportunity for the West; massive economic aid might swing the balance." Although United States policy was being implemented by different alternatives (as Fall intimated: "it is certainly not by sheer coincidence that General Donovan, wartime OSS chief, is now Ambassador to Thailand"), it is clear that Ho's government could not have counted on its popular support had it cooperated in these United States designs. The same may be said for Fall's alternative of United States aid and influence on Ho Chi-minh in 1946 to create a center of Western policy against the Soviet Union and China; and again, despite Fall's ambivalence, post-war United States policy was evident from USA markings on the armed vehicles and bombers with which the French returned to Vietnam and from the agreement to sell the French one hundred and sixty million dollars of U. S. military equipment.

"The French, thanks to their U. S. -donated air force, had destroyed every visible target in the Communist-held areas for eight long years." Repeatedly, with reference to the French war against the Vietnamese as well as the American war, Fall emphasizes that faith in the value of air power is an illusion. "The Indochina War had confirmed once more--the Korean conflict being, by and large, another example--the limited usefulness of air

superiority in wars involving underdeveloped areas." (Italics Fall's.) "Perhaps it may be useful to stress here again the overwhelming ineffectualness of combat airpower in that type of operation (jungle warfare)." (Fall, of course, is referring to the military ineffectiveness and not to the results of such bombing upon the civilian population.) The same limitations apply to the effectiveness of other heavy weapons and to advanced delivery vehicles. In the final article in Viet-Nam Witness, dated a year ago, Fall compares the airborne operations of the French and the Americans:

At least four offensives, with airborne and armoured "pincers," and supplemented by navy landing craft, involved more than 20,000 troops. (The largest offensive thus far undertaken by U. S. forces in Viet-Nam involved a total of 12,000 troops.) Yet in every case the enemy refused to fight except on his own terms. The French armored pincers would close on a melee of frightened peasants . . . Americans have encountered similar frustration.

For those who are impressed by the firepower and transportation superiority of the United States forces in Viet-Nam, Fall warns: "the technological differences, for all their magnitude and importance, are thus far more superficial than is often realized."

Fall's final comparison between the French war which ended at Geneva in 1954 and the present United States War concerns the State Department-Pentagon claim that the French effort was defeated by the "collapse" of public support in France. Fall answers that it was the military defeat of the French forces (for which the United States paid 80% of the costs) which caused the French public to demand an end of the war in Vietnam.

It was not civilian morale at home that placed 16,000 troops at Dien Bien Phu and allowed them to be defeated there. Noisy students on U. S. college campuses cannot be held responsible because 96,000 South Vietnamese troops left their units at one time or another this year . . .

When the French war in Vietnam ended at Geneva in 1954 the United States was already a major participant, paying almost the entire cost of the war and already committing U. S. Air Force units to the effort. Bernard Fall has been the major source for information on the early United States involvement in domestic Vietnamese politics

beginning with the end of the Second World War. Much of this was involvement in the hands of the OSS (of which the CIA is the successor). In The Two Viet-Nams (New York: Praeger, 1963) Fall notes that there was a belief in 1946 that the United States was preparing the former emperor Bao Dai, who remained as an adviser to President Ho Chi-minh, as an alternative to Ho; when Bao-Dai abandoned his office in Ho's government for exile in Hong Kong in March, 1946 he left Hanoi on a United States military plane. A year later, after the French had decided to overthrow Ho's elected government, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and had driven it from its capital, Hanoi, into the jungle, Bao-Dai was asked by Ho to act as mediator. Bao-Dai rejected this on the advice of "Dr. Phan Quang Dan, American-trained and an OSS operative during World War II." (Dr. Dan, after two decades of involvement in Vietnamese politics and residence in the United States, was currently a vice-presidential candidate in the newest of many attempts to create a "constitutional" government as rival to the popularity of Ho Chi-minh and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam.)

Later in 1947 Bao-Dai agreed to the French offer that he become the "constitutional" chief of state of an "independent" Vietnam regime supported by the French army and the American Treasury, following discussions in Hong Kong with former Ambassador William C. Bullitt. Through United States foreign aid, especially the Marshall Plan, France was able to offset the costs of the war in Vietnam. The United States advanced formal recognition to the Saigon regime of Bao-Dai in February, 1950 to repay the French, who had joined the United States in January, 1950 in vetoing the U. N. membership of the People's Republic of China. China responded within a month by recognizing Ho Chi-minh's Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam. American economic and military aid for the Saigon regime was announced in May, 1950 and as it became dominant in the war so did the United States' political influence. The most significant aspect of Fall's account of the municipal and provincial elections of 1953, held under restricted suffrage in safe districts, is the role of the United States. In Hanoi, where the United States Information Service supported a Vietnamese newspaper, American sympathizers were elected over the official candidates. When the United States arranged the appointment of Diem as Premier of the Saigon regime in 1954, United States control became complete.

Fall's Viet-Nam Witness analyzes the situation in Vietnam at the time that Diem came to power in 1954-55, during the Diem regime, and in the most recent period. The Geneva Agreement of 1954 provided for a temporary line to permit the evacuation of foreign (French) forces -- "the military demarcation line is provisional and should not in any way be considered as constituting a political or territorial boundary" -- and for general elections to be held in July, 1956. At that time Fall felt that the Diem regime had several advantages for building itself into a successful rival for national leadership with Ho Chi-minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam. South Vietnam, little damaged by war, and enriched by the refugees from the North and American aid, was the rice-surplus region. Furthermore, the Geneva Agreement gave Diem's regime larger population and territory than the Saigon regime had controlled before the Agreement and gave it a better chance of governing by the completed withdrawal of Vietminh guerrillas to the north under the Agreement. "In other words," Fall concluded, "with an even moderately intelligent policy, southern Viet-Nam should be able to turn the tables on the Viet-Minh and carry out the promises which the Viet-Minh has made during the past seven years, and will find difficult to fulfill in the now greatly impoverished and war-ragged North." Fall was disappointed with the early policy of Diem, especially his failure to exercise the power of the central government in the localities, which merely continued the methods of the past administrations. Soon, Diem did make a complete break with the past by turning upon and destroying the political and military power of the armed Buddhist sects: Cao Dai, Hoa-Hao and Binh Xuyen. Southern Vietnam was little damaged by war because very early after the return of the French these three armed politico-religious sects of the Mekong region, which had been allied against the French with Ho's Vietminh, entered into a benevolent neutrality with the French. The sects had turned against the Vietminh, whose leadership in southern Vietnam had attempted to fight both the French and the sects. The autonomous political and military power which the sects exercised in the regions inhabited by their adherents made them both "a solid barrier against Viet-Minh infiltration" and "an element of instability" in a Westernized, bureaucratic state. The destruction of the political and military power of the sects by Diem in the spring of 1955, however, merely transformed the struggle to the swamps, jungles, and rice fields of the Mekong Delta where the sects' adherents lived. "The armed remnants of the sects are still able to carry on extensive harassing operations," Fall said in

July, 1955," . . . but it is unlikely that they will ever regain even part of their erstwhile political strength." Yet, the sects had "3,000 or more officers" whose political and military training formed a reservoir of leadership should full-scale popular opposition develop against the Saigon regime.

Previous to the Geneva Agreement Fall had written of the importance of the traditional autonomy of the Vietnamese peasants' village; although under Ho Chi-minh's leadership the old village notables were replaced by the "armed adolescents" who had joined the Vietminh,

the very fact that village autonomy was so deeply rooted made an ideal breeding ground for the type of local administration found in the early postrevolutionary years in the Soviet Union. Indeed, the decentralizing policy practiced by the revolutionary government presented great analogies with that applied by the Communist government of Soviet Russia.

Following upon the defeat of the sect armies the Diem regime struck at this village autonomy; according to Fall, "South Viet-Nam had been converted into a full-fledged dictatorship at the village level -- where it is most keenly felt in that kind of society -- as early as 1956, when Diem abolished elected village government." Besides the maintenance of feudal taxes and the failure to introduce land reform, a series of presidential decrees threatened large numbers of people in the Vietnamese villages: January, 1956, indefinite detention in concentration camps; June, 1956, abolition of the elected village councils (both of these were preliminary to Diem's refusal to hold reunification elections as provided by the Geneva Agreement); and March, 1957, reprisals against "former resistance members" (former Vietminh guerrillas) contrary to the provisions of the Geneva Agreement. Thus, "faced with physical extermination along with the sect units, some of the former Viet-Minh guerrillas simply banded together for survival." In 1958 the U. S. Ambassador to Vietnam declared that "the Communists and sect remnants have regrouped" in the Mekong Delta. At that time Fall described the resurgence of guerrilla activity:

Guerrilla activities in South Viet-Nam during 1957 and 1958 no longer represent a last-ditch fight of dispersed sect or Communist rebel remnants. On the contrary, they have taken on a pattern of their own which is

quite different from that followed by the Viet-Minh during the struggle against the French.

This unique pattern of operations and organization culminated in the formation of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam on December 20, 1960. With understandable pride Bernard Fall notes that he was the first person to establish "the fact of the resurgence of revolutionary war in South Viet-Nam in 1957." With such credentials Fall is well-qualified to determine the real origins of the National Liberation Front. In 1965 he stated:

It is, therefore, highly immaterial to attempt to trace back Communist intentions at subverting South Viet-Nam to a particular meeting of the North Vietnamese Communist Party Central Committee in May, 1959, or to a particular resolution of the same party's Third National Congress, held in Hanoi in September, 1960. Long before those dates the Second Indochina War had assumed its basic pattern . . .

On his return from a visit to Hanoi in 1962 Fall noted the absence of any popular support for the Saigon regime: "Without that support, American helicopters and modern weapons cannot do very much." At the same time, on the basis of statements by administration spokesmen such as Walt W. Rostow, Fall concluded that "the present trend is to go so far as to say that popular support is not particularly relevant to the outcome of a guerrilla war." This attitude explains the United States military's carelessness about civilians in Vietnam, as well as the conscious implementation of a policy of genocide against the Vietnamese people. Fall's expert conclusion that popular support is vital and that modern military power is inadequate does not reduce or eliminate the responsibility of Americans for confronting the destruction of the Vietnamese people sanctioned in their name.