

1973

## Professional Reading

Bernard D. Cole  
*U.S. Navy*

Frances FitzGerald

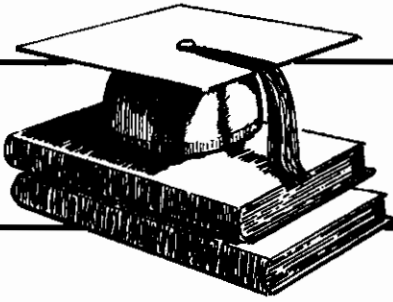
Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Cole, Bernard D. and FitzGerald, Frances (1973) "Professional Reading," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 26 : No. 3 , Article 23.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol26/iss3/23>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).



## PROFESSIONAL READING

FitzGerald, Frances. *Fire in the Lake*. Boston: Little, Brown. 442p.

This is the most interesting book about United States-Vietnamese relations that has been written by an American. The author believes American efforts to sustain a South Vietnamese Government were foredoomed and have been worse than a failure; they have desolated the Vietnamese people and their country.

Ms. FitzGerald cites the lack of a common cultural, political, and moral context between the two countries as the basic cause of this perceived failure. The author believes it was a "meeting of two different dimensions, two different epochs of history," and that the United States was "entering a world qualitatively different from its [Vietnam's] own."

The first part of the book is devoted to laying the foundation of this argument. In it Ms. FitzGerald investigates the development and parameters of Vietnamese culture. She relies heavily on her own experience as student and reporter in Vietnam, the *I Ching*, or Chinese "book of changes," and the works of the French sociologist Paul Mus.

The author's arguments occasionally are tenuous, but her conclusion seems reasonable: there are essential and vital differences between American and Vietnamese ways of life. One result of this was that the Vietnamese, not supporting the same ideals as the Americans, did not place equivalent value on such

beliefs as individual freedom or democratic government. The author avers that the United States and South Vietnam simply were not fighting for the same things. American-style governmental institutions—both administrative and procedural—did not work because they evolved from and operated in a Western, individualistic, nation-oriented context but were injected into an oriental, village-oriented, Confucian society.

The second portion of *Fire in the Lake* is the book's strongest section. Ms. FitzGerald presents an excellent history of Vietnamese Government, principally from the 1940's to the present. U.S. policies during the 1950's and 1960's are described and reasons offered for their failure, as perceived by the author. These chapters tie together the succession of Vietnamese Governments, particularly during the period of coups from the fall of Diem in 1963 to the emergence of President Thieu in 1966. The 1967 elections are also well covered.

Ms. FitzGerald believes the practical cause of the United States low success rate during this 10-year period (1963-1972) was lack of perception that "military victories were not only less important than political victories, but... meaningless except as reflections of the political realities." In a more debatable vein, the author argues that the National Liberation Front has been more successful at winning the allegiance of the peasantry because of similarities between the Confucian way

of life of traditional Vietnam and that proffered by Ho Chi Minh's version of Marxism-Leninism.

A serious weakness of *Fire in the Lake* is the lack of sufficient documentation as extensive use is made of the *Pentagon Papers* and other secondary sources. Some of the latter are well-known: works by Paul Mus, Jean Lacouture, and Bernard Fall, for example. Others are more questionable, such as the book by Kahin and Lewis or the "evidence" provided by a 1971 investigation by a Harvard University group. The work by Kahin and Lewis is cited as support for the claim that "by 1954 United States military aid covered eighty percent of French war expenditures." This is a belief dear to the hearts of revisionist historians, but it is inaccurate, as straightforward analysis of the aid figures for the early 1950's demonstrates.

There are other instances where documentation clearly is called for. One instance is the author's contention that the 1954 Geneva settlement was "more favorable to France than many French officials had expected." The easily obtainable sources which support this statement are not cited. No sources are cited to support such claims that there were 5 million refugees out of a Vietnamese population of 17 million or that "it was a white man's war being fought by blacks," a demonstrably false statement. These and other contentions by the author lack adequate documentation and therefore cast doubt on their validity and weaken the entire book.

Part Three of *Fire in the Lake* is unfortunate. After establishing a cogent premise and following with a generally well-written and perceptive narrative, Ms. FitzGerald deteriorates to the level of emotional political rhetoric. The chapter entitled "Nixon's War" describes a President continuing and even escalating destructive policies without any justification. The statement that "Nixon may well succeed in compelling

Vietnamese to kill each other for some time to come" is quite simply a distortion of the facts.

The author's conclusion is that the United States—in a misguided effort to halt the spread of monolithic communism—descended upon and desolated Vietnam and the Indochinese peninsula. The shades of truth in this argument must be discussed in the real political world. Ms. FitzGerald does not adequately deal with the domestic and international factors which influenced American policy in Southeast Asia.

U.S. efforts in Vietnam too often may have been tactically irrelevant and American policies repetitively inappropriate—that is, heedless of the effective political-military-cultural continuum. However, proper historical understanding of this period must develop with an objective view of the times. Ms. FitzGerald's generally excellent cultural and sociological work is limited by her closeness to the events.

BERNARD D. COLE  
Lieutenant, U.S. Navy

Rostow, W.W. *The Diffusion of Power*.  
New York: Macmillan, 1972. 739p.

It is difficult to characterize both the scope and the method of W.W. Rostow's latest and longest book. As indicated by the title, *The Diffusion of Power*, Rostow describes the transformation of the international system from a condition of bipolar dominance by the United States and the Soviet Union to a state in which there are multiple power centers. However, this book is more than just international in scope. The author also includes excellent analyses of such domestic issues as the race question. Moreover, Rostow analyzes the men, events, and decisions that shaped America's role in the world not only from the viewpoint of a research scholar, but also from the perspective of a policy adviser to three Presidents. Methodologically, *Diffusion of Power* is