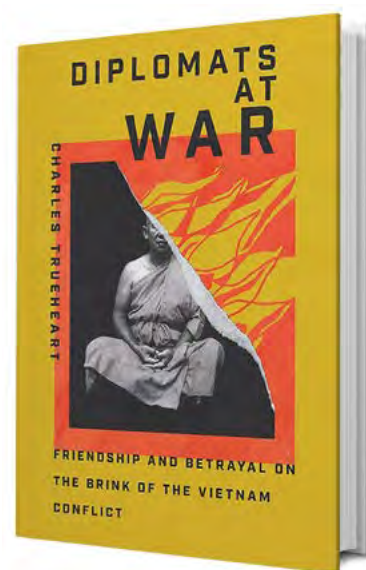


intelligence in public media

Diplomats at War: Friendship and Betrayal on the Brink of the Vietnam Conflict

Reviewed by J. Daniel Moore

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Reviewer: Daniel Moore is a retired CIA historian.



Author Charles Trueheart writes in the Prologue to *Diplomats at War*: “The origin of war, like the origin of a personal conflict, is almost always murky.” He eloquently proves the point in this winner of the 2024 Douglas Dillon Award from the American Academy of Diplomacy. This important book is rich in insights and analysis. It details the critical events and decisions in the months leading up to the Vietnam War, especially with respect to US policy and among key diplomatic actors and journalists in Vietnam and Washington. The author demonstrates the refined research and analytical skills one expects from an accomplished historian: a mastery of primary and secondary sources—various archives, state department records, oral histories, personal interviews, and letters written by his mother, to name just a few. He throws in ample doses of effective humor as well.

A distinguished former correspondent of *The Washington Post* and former associate director of the Institute of Politics at Harvard, Trueheart calls *Diplomats at War* a “work of memory hiding inside a work of history.” (11) The son of William Trueheart, the US Embassy’s deputy chief of mission in South Vietnam in the early 1960s, Charles was a young witness to the crucial events that led to the US-engineered downfall of Republic of South Vietnam President Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963.

On the personal side, he observed the crumbling of his father’s longtime personal friendship and close professional association with his boss in Saigon, Ambassador Frederick “Fritz” Nolting. The two families had been close for years—Nolting was Charles’s godfather. William Trueheart and Nolting attended the University of Virginia together before World War II. They had planned

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for academic careers but served in the military during the war and later joined the foreign service.

But Trueheart and Nolting came to bitter loggerheads over whether the United States should stand by Diem or encourage Diem's generals to do the dirty work of removing him from power. Sixty years on, the author's quest to understand how and why their relationship fractured to the point that they never spoke again after leaving Saigon—other than during a brief, chance meeting years later at the Metropolitan Club in Washington, DC—constitutes the backstory that propels this powerful narrative.

Charles Trueheart makes America's drift toward a decade of war seem almost inevitable. He details how Washington policymakers turned against Diem in favor of a military junta more favorable to US geostrategic policy aims. Importantly, the "hawks," who included key presidential adviser and Undersecretary of State Averell Harriman, NSC staff member Michael V. Forrestal, and Bureau of Intelligence and Research Director Roger Hilsman at State, had the ear of President Kennedy.

Collectively, they gradually persuaded an indecisive and hesitant Kennedy that regime change was necessary. The president had had a keen interest in South Vietnam since the partition of 1954. In a 1956 speech to the Conference on Vietnam in Washington, then-Senator Kennedy said, "If we are not parents of little Vietnam, we are the godparents. We presided at its birth, we gave assistance to its life, we helped shape its future." Indeed, South Vietnam had been a dependent client of the United States from its very beginning.

Throughout 1963, US journalists David Halberstam of the *New York Times*, *The Associated Press*' Malcolm Browne and Peter Arnett, and *Time* correspondent Stanley Karnow exposed the failures of South Vietnam's military to stop communist insurgent gains and highlighted the US Embassy's unsuccessful efforts to paint more positive pictures of events. Press reports followed closely by the president contradicted and undermined more optimistic narratives from Nolting and US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) Gen. Paul Harkins. Trueheart similarly

describes CIA intelligence as too optimistic, offering an overly optimistic view of the situation in the countryside. Collectively, the journalists corroborated the hawks' view that the Diem regime would be unable to contain the growing insurgency in the countryside.

The Buddhist uprising against Diem in the summer of 1963 and the resultant harsh government crackdown was the last straw for Diem's detractors in Washington. They argued that Diem's removal—and that of Nolting—was necessary for the success of US objectives in Vietnam and, more importantly, to stop the spread of communism in southeast Asia. In the end, after some handwringing, Kennedy acceded to regime change, and Nolting was replaced by hawk Henry Cabot Lodge.

Nolting left his post in mid-August 1963, leaving Trueheart as charge d'affaires. He departed still believing in supporting Diem and vainly argued his case in Washington. In his absence, Trueheart joined the chorus of the hawks in Washington, which led Nolting to view his former deputy as a traitor to their shared mission and friendship.

President Kennedy was assassinated three weeks after the coup in Saigon and Lyndon Johnson, who had supported Diem, found himself steering the deepening US involvement in Vietnam. Diem's replacement by a South Vietnamese military junta, beholden entirely to US support, set the stage for the introduction of US military forces in early 1965.

Looking back years later, Nolting observed: "We do not overthrow governments. We keep our word to our allies. We are loyal to our friends." In an interview later in life, William Trueheart agreed with Nolting in principle, with one exception, Vietnam in 1963: "We [the United States] felt we had a broader commitment than just Diem. We had a commitment ... to the Vietnamese people. To do anything to perpetuate the Diem regime was not in the interests of the United States." (360) His son, the author, takes exception. Overthrowing governments, he concludes, is not worth the cost. On that principle, he concludes, William Trueheart and Fritz Nolting would likely agree. ■