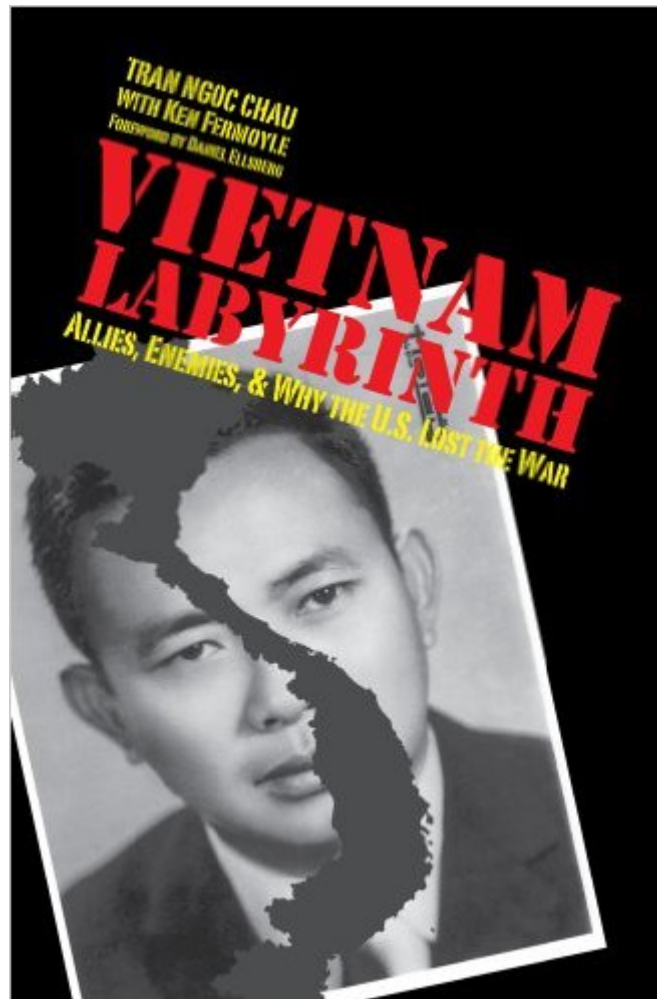


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Vietnam Labyrinth: Allies, Enemies, And Why The U.S. Lost The War (Modern Southeast Asia Series)



Synopsis

One of the few Vietnamese Army officers who also saw substantial service in Ho Chi Minh's National Liberation Army against the French, Tran Ngoc Chau made a momentous and difficult decision after five years with the Viet Minh: he changed sides. Although his brother Tran Ngoc Hien remained loyal to the North, Chau's Buddhist training and his disillusionment with aspects of the communists' philosophies led him to throw his support to the nationalists and assist the Americans. It was a decision that would cost him dearly when former military school colleague Nguyen Van Thieu, fearing a political rivalry, imprisoned Chau; by then a lieutenant colonel and the Secretary General of the National Assembly's Lower House; despite popular sentiment and the support of Americans like John Paul Vann and Daniel Ellsberg. At every turn Chau stood on principle, however, opposing government corruption, refusing favoritism, and remaining steadfast in his dedication to democracy. His principles would cost him again when, after the fall of Saigon, he was imprisoned in a North Vietnamese re-education camp and even after release kept under continuous surveillance. His detailed memoir reveals an astute understanding of the Vietnamese political situation and national culture that failed to register with U.S. leaders; and offers valuable insights into how to cope with similar conflicts in the future. As Ellsberg has put it, 'Vietnam Labyrinth is unmatched, both for its narrative and for lessons to be learned for our current interventions.'

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book offers a perspective on the Vietnam War that is somewhat different than the so-called conventional wisdom on the topic. However, that does not make it any more enlightened than what other authors, American or Vietnamese, have tried to convey in similar writings. It is an interesting read, especially when Tran Ngoc Chau recounts the few years starting in 1945 when he joined the ranks of the communist-led insurgency against the French. Chau left the communists to join the nationalist cause, rising as high as province chief in the Mekong delta and then becoming an elected representative in the National Assembly, before being arrested and accused of dealing with the enemy via his brother who was a high-ranking communist officer. Throughout the rest of the book, Chau likes to remind us of his few years fighting on the side of the communists against the French, while denigrating others of his generation who joined the nationalist side and fought against communism. To him, they were French trained NCOs or low-ranking officers who rose to become generals and leaders of South Vietnam through favoritism and corruption. He mentions a few that were capable and incorruptible, but dismisses them as inconsequential. All along, he likes to repeat that if only his own ideas of fighting communist insurgency had been more widely adopted, the Viet Cong would have long been subdued and brought over to the South's side. No mention is made of the fact that after the 1968 Tet offensive, the Viet Cong was practically eliminated from the battlefield and that all fighting was undertaken by North Vietnamese regiments and divisions.

Tran Ngoc Chau's Vietnam Labyrinth has to be ranked among the top three to four 'must read' book on the Vietnam. The few works on Vietnam authored by persons with his background, experience and qualifications tend to be limited to bookstores catering to the Vietnamese diaspora press. Chau's is unique, first because it is written in English, and second because its author incarnates the opinions and outlook of a lifelong Vietnamese nationalist. Like the great majority of leaders from all sides, he was the educated son of a traditional mandarin family: The very class that colonialism and its attendant modernity rendered redundant, replaced by a newer class of middle managers seen by the nationalists as venal lackeys. A Buddhist from a distinguished Hue family, Chau's goal of entering the Buddhist monkhood was upended by the 1945 revolution. What followed were five years of valor and sacrifice fighting in the Viet Minh ranks, seeing the best and worst of the revolution. Though inclined to the Dai Viet Party, he was invited to join the Communists. His readings of what that Party stood, and was preparing, for opened his eyes. He defected to the newly created State of Vietnam, later serving under Ngo Dien Diem when the Republic was declared. To find the reasons why a former Viet Minh unit commander and political officer would defect is worth

the read alone. But equally sharp are Chau's honestly expressed reservations of how the Americans were pursuing the war, and clear-eyed glimpses into the machinations of the various anti-Diem, anti-Ky, and anti-Thieu factions.

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