"If those responsible for what's happening decide to kill themselves," a young French officer wrote in 1954, after he learned of the suicide of Col. Charles Piroth, "it's going to be quite a crowd in Paris as well as Dien Bien Phu."

The plan of French military commanders to smoke out Ho Chi Minh's insurgent army by building a base in the mountains at Dien Bien Phu protected from the air led to a devastating defeat for France that reverberated for decades.

Drawing on an avalanche of regimental memoirs, letters from the field and personal reminiscences, journalist Ted Morgan takes you into the bunkers, trenches and surrounding hills of the outpost in a riveting, richly detailed, "you are there" account of the battle that ended French rule in Vietnam.

Mr. Morgan sets the diplomatic context as well, with an astute analysis of the feckless French government of Joseph Laniel; the divisions over intervention in the Eisenhower administration; and the Geneva Convention of 1954, where, he argues, China's Chou En-lai engineered the partition of Vietnam.

At times, Mr. Morgan suggests that since the French were colonialists and the Vietminh had won the loyalty of peasants the outcome was inevitable. Reviewing arguments that more tanks might have allowed the French to hold out until a cease-fire was negotiated, he asks, with an almost audible sigh, "in the final analysis, what is a conjecture but an attempt to make history more palatable?"

Perhaps. But the "what ifs" in "Valley of Death" just keep on coming. What if French commanders, from their "air-conditioned offices," had reinforced the garrison, ordered counterattacks, and kept an escape route open?

What if the United States had sent aircraft to protect the airstrip and disrupt and destroy enemy positions around Dien Bien Phu, as U.S. Navy Adm. Arthur Radford recommended? What if Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had succeeded in persuading his English counterpart, Anthony Eden, to act jointly with the United States?

Mr. Morgan, it's clear, believes that American intervention, unilateral or united, would have been unwise, giving President Eisenhower high marks for keeping ground troops out of Indochina.

Although he sometimes endorsed the domino theory and seemed to promise aid to the French, the president understood the limits of U.S. power. The president viewed the recommendations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff "with a pinch of skepticism," took nuclear weapons off the table and allowed Democrats in Congress to block military action.

According to the author, Ike "remains America's wisest post-World War II president."

Along with Homer, Mr. Morgan recognizes that "after the event, even a fool is wise." And so, in addition to indictments of officers and politicians who fought the last war or the wrong war, "The Valley of Death" tells tales of heroism and endurance. Of Vietnamese bicyclists risking their lives to bring rice to the troops of Viet Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, the master of guerilla
warfare, who planned the assault on Dien Bien Phu from his one-room hut on the side of a hill.

"No one wants to be stuck in a place where they don't belong," Mr. Morgan reminds us, accurately, if ungrammatically. In the final analysis, that is why the French lost and left.

And why hundreds of thousands of American troops, put in harm's way by presidents who should have known better, were forced to feel the same "insurmountable dread of entrapment."

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