



Maxwell Taylor's Cold War: From Berlin to Vietnam by Ingo Tauschweizer.

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In *Thirteen Days*,¹ the historical film about the Cuban Missile Crisis, the US military leaders argued for aggressive action. Gen. Maxwell Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, provided President John F. Kennedy a range of options, including an invasion of Cuba and the obliteration of Soviet-supplied missile sites there through an aerial first strike. The film's writers, historians Philip Zelikow and Ernest May, took pains to ensure the historical accuracy of events depicted. Their script certainly demonstrates just how close the world came to nuclear conflict. In his new book, *Maxwell Taylor's Cold War*, historian Ingo Tauschweizer (Ohio Univ.) shows the one-sided nature of the film's (and history's) portrayal of Maxwell Taylor.

More than any other US service chief in 1962-64, Taylor offered professional and carefully measured advice to the nation's political leaders; his voice of restraint contrasted sharply with Air Force Gen. Curtis LeMay's eagerness to pulverize Cuba. He "signaled support for Kennedy's course, a naval quarantine and pressure on Khrushchev as necessary" (127). Despite his intelligence, astute assessments of world events, and broad range of experience, Taylor invariably comes across as out of step with the times in Tauschweizer's commendable account. Aside from the Cuban Missile Crisis, he was rarely ahead of the curve in evaluating US foreign policy, especially concerning Vietnam after 1965.

This engaging and well-paced biography of an American soldier-diplomat begins by recounting Taylor's background as a young cadet and then a faculty member at the US Military Academy, where he taught Japanese, French, and Spanish until 1932. We also learn of his World War II service as an artillery commander with the 82nd Airborne and then as Commanding General of the 101st Airborne Division (1944-45), as well as his postwar stint as commandant at West Point (1945-49).

Tauschweizer next turns to Taylor's time as Chief of Staff for US European Command and US Commander in Berlin, and his Korean War service as Commanding General of the 8th Army, among other postings. But the most intriguing part of the book concerns Taylor's civilian role as US Ambassador to South Vietnam and advisor with the Kennedy administration after being recalled to military service after his retirement in July 1959.

Taylor's career is interesting because of his vantage point on critical moments in the Cold War, especially during the early stages of American escalation in Vietnam. Unfortunately, Taylor mistook Vietnam for Korea and expected a reprise of the mostly conventional war on the Korean Peninsula. Hence, he failed to accurately anticipate the character of the conflict into which the United States was slowly immersing itself in the early 1960s. In one case, Tauschweizer writes,

Taylor had learned from South Vietnamese Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho and General Duong Van Minh that the government had little reach into provinces and lacked qualified administrators who could connect hamlets and municipalities to the capital. Military success could alleviate the crisis in confidence, but South Vietnam's politics would remain frayed. (121)

1. Dir. Roger Donaldson (2000).

Taylor, like most Americans, did not know that the Republic of Vietnam's administration of rural Vietnam failed to gain legitimacy among the South Vietnamese because in 1956 Ngo Dinh Diem had removed rural Vietnamese elected officials and village councils and replaced them with administrators chosen by himself and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. This, in turn, created the conditions for formation of the National Liberation Front and fueled rural antipathy toward the Republic of Vietnam's administration.

As a key advisor to Kennedy and other policy-makers, Taylor ignored the assessment of outside authorities who dismantled the Domino Theory well before US intervention. The early scholarship of experts on Indochina like Bernard Fall was widely available at the time.² In short, there was no dearth of accurate reporting on problematic issues of governance in Vietnam.

Trauschweizer perceptively lays out Taylor's conflicted position that bridged military service and diplomacy as American escalation skyrocketed after 1965. To begin with, he feared the Joint Chiefs' argument for reinforcements "could be adduced to justify almost unlimited additional deployments of U.S. forces" (161). Modeling initial restraint as one of President Lyndon Johnson's high-level advisors, Taylor argued that "for both military and political reasons we should all be most reluctant to tie down Army/Marine units in ... [Vietnam] and would do so only after the presentation of the most convincing evidence of the necessity" (161).

Taylor's critical change of heart over escalating in Vietnam came at the Honolulu Conference (20 Apr. 1965), where American leaders decided that "the United States was about to take over the ground war" (162). Although this overruled Taylor's recommendation to restrict US actions primarily to aerial bombing, he

fell in line because he had read a recent cable from [National Security Advisor] McGeorge Bundy as evidence that LBJ had decided on Americanization of the land war.... Once [he] had accepted the ground force deployment, Taylor displayed surprising optimism. Where McNamara estimated a war of one or two years, Taylor hoped "a favorable settlement should be possible from a combination of continued air attacks and by introduction of sufficient U.S. and third country forces to demonstrate to Hanoi that the Viet Cong have no ultimate chance of success. This process will probably take months; how many months it is impossible to estimate." (162-63)

Trauschweizer does not delve deeply into the causes of Taylor's radical change of heart. Did he submit to group-think and peer pressure? Was he sincerely convinced that other advisors presented more plausible arguments and evidence supporting an American-led land war in Vietnam? Readers familiar with the course of American decision-making and the events leading to escalation in spring 1965 will miss a fuller discussion of Taylor's volte-face after Honolulu. It was, after all, a deeply consequential moment when the United States took responsibility for the war in Vietnam. Trauschweizer does, however, make it clear that "After the Honolulu conference, Taylor ... lost influence in the remaining debates on troop deployments" (164). Taylor's equivocal position may well have caused his declining influence. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's influence with Johnson also declined significantly even though his private doubts were obscured by public optimism.

Trauschweizer does suggest that Taylor's "shift partly stemmed from an instinct to follow orders once the president had determined a strategy, but Taylor also had come to agree with [Commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, William] Westmoreland's readings of

2. See, e.g., *Street without Joy* (NY: Shocken, 1961).

the crisis” (164–65). As H.R. McMaster has shown,³ a key problematic issue in America’s embroilment in Vietnam was the failure of leaders like Taylor to stand their ground or resign when they knew the war was lost and recognized the limits of military power.

The tragedy here is that Taylor did spend considerable time studying and trying to implement US policies in Southeast Asia with an awareness of “the war as a layered structure of air war, ground war, counterinsurgency, and pacification” (170). But he was too sanguine about the chances that US power could adequately address the challenges posed by Vietnamese revolutionary warfare. In the end, Americans no more effectively set or helped to achieve Vietnamese goals than could Soviet or Chinese leaders, as the 1979 outbreak of the Third Indochina War between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Peoples’ Republic of China clearly demonstrated. The war in Vietnam was more comprehensive than Taylor and many others realized. It was not the type of conflict that pacification or counterinsurgency efforts, let alone conventional air or ground warfare, could resolve,.

In February 1966, Taylor appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings led by Sen. J. William Fulbright, where

Wayne Morse (D, Oregon), one of just two dissenters in the vote on the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in August 1964, attacked Taylor as the embodiment of a misguided war effort and of American militarism. The exchange grew sharper as Taylor objected to Morse’s conclusion that the American people were sure to tire of the war. This, Taylor shot back, “was good news to Hanoi.” (178)

As Ingo Truschweizer shows so convincingly in *Maxwell Taylor’s Cold War*, both Morse and Taylor were, unfortunately, correct in their remarks.

3. In *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, The Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (NY: Harper, 1997).