



WELCOME TO THE MAY MEETING, HISTORIANS!

Our next meeting will be on Tuesday, May 7 at 6:30 to discuss *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* by Frances FitzGerald published in 1972. Frances FitzGerald as a young woman was a free-lance writer in South Vietnam during the height of the Vietnam War. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the Bancroft Prize for History, this is the story of two societies—American and Vietnamese—who never understood each other. The title comes from the image for revolution—Fire in the Lake—in the Chinese Book of Changes, *the I Ching*. This book is the story of the changes and the revolution they unleashed. FitzGerald uses descriptive scenes to show the emotional devastation on both sides

as Americans unknowingly disrupt Vietnamese society to such an extent that we opened the door for the very revolution we were fighting to avoid. As you read, keep in mind that the book was written in 1972 as the final days of the war dragged on. Some critics at the time accused FitzGerald of being too sympathetic to the North Vietnamese side. Later critics have said that her central analysis is correct. The North Vietnamese succeeded in tying the Marxist-Leninist ideology to traditional Vietnamese values while the US came across as yet another colonial power tying Vietnam into yet another colonial relationship. It will take another thirty years for the US and Vietnam to forge our own relationship outside the dictates of the Cold War. *Fire in the Lake* is a timely analysis of the post-colonial world that continues to affect us in the 21st century.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part looks at the success of the National Liberation Front, the Viet Cong, in adapting their propaganda to the unique culture and traditions of Vietnam. Far from being yet another Chinese influenced country likely to fall as part of the “domino theory” in Asia, Vietnam had its own proud history. For many, this is the most controversial part of the book as it paints the NFL in a favorable light. At the same time, FitzGerald aptly explains the disconnect between US ideas of democracy and the ways the Vietnamese understood governments to work. American democracy did not match up with a world in which only a fall from heaven’s favor could lead to regime change.

The second half of *Fire in the Lake* focuses on the authoritarian South Vietnamese governments and the increasing difficulties in the US support for these regimes. FitzGerald shows why there is increasing resentment among American troops and the people back home for the Vietnamese who, they believed, did not show sufficient gratitude toward the Americans. Fundamentally, says FitzGerald, these two societies never understood each other. And the need to keep up support for the war meant that Americans were forced into “self-deception through self-interest.”

As you read, keep in mind that this is history that many of us remember. Does FitzGerald answer questions that you have had about Vietnam? Does she change your mind in any way? Is she right to argue that Americans created a new kind of colonial relationship in Vietnam? How and why does she argue that American benevolence became destruction? You may have your own stories about Vietnam. Perhaps you fought there or had family who did. Perhaps you have visited there. Perhaps you have done business in Vietnam. Please bring your own personal stories to deepen our understanding of this pivotal time in American history, a time which truly shaped a generation. For our discussion, we will focus on the book. So think about what surprised you, what you disagreed with, and how well *Fire in the Lake* has stood the test of time. I look forward to a fascinating discussion of change in our time when we talk through *Fire in the Lake* by Frances FitzGerald on Tuesday, May 7 at 6:30. See you there for our last meeting this spring.

Donna McBride