Bernard Fall (1926-1967) cuts an intriguing figure in the annals of American history. He produced an extraordinary volume of writing – seven books and 200 articles – over the course of a life cut tragically, prematurely short while on patrol with U.S. Marines in South Vietnam. Fall’s books, notably *Street Without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina* (1961) and *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (1966) were instant classics and influenced generations of American soldiers and policymakers. In the 1960s, they read Fall to understand the French experience in Indochina and prepare for their own. A generation later, they read his books again to understand the things both countries had done, right and wrong, in Southeast Asia, and yet again, after 9-11, for what the lessons of the past might teach them about war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

As an intellectual he was the world’s leading authority on the Indochina region and on French and American experiences there, making singular contributions to the study of Vietnam and revolutionary warfare. As a literary figure his books and frontline war correspondence enjoyed a wide audience, highlighting the enduring resonance and value of his work. Despite this, Fall has also been quietly neglected as a subject of serious historical and intellectual inquiry. There are questions surrounding his contentious relationship with official Washington, his influence as an academic at Howard University in the 1960s on the domestic civil rights movement, and contemporary appreciation of his contribution to theories of revolutionary warfare vis-à-vis more prominent and widely recognized thinkers of his generation. Scholars have only recently begun to investigate these issues.

It should come as no surprise then that multigenerational invocations of Fall and of his most famous works, in the absence of deep historical understanding of the man, his ideas or indeed the context that produced both, have failed to appreciate a key characteristic of his work. Policymakers, for example, filtered their later recollections of war in Vietnam through the prism of Fall’s *Street Without Joy*. The lessons they championed, however, had little to do with what they recalled of the book or of Southeast Asia. Scholarship after 9-11, similarly, appropriated terminology Fall first used in his depiction of Viet Minh “active sanctuaries” to confidently frame Al Qaeda territorial control in Afghanistan and Iraq – with little appreciation of the origins of Fall’s terminology, his own questions about it or of its many meanings in the vernacular of the time.

This paper paints a detailed portrait of the intellectual, literary and historical equivocations embedded in the works and intellectual bequests of Bernard Fall. The sources available for such inquiry are robust. They include the corpus of publications Fall generated in his own lifetime, and the wealth of documentary source material he left behind, the most significant collection of which, the Bernard B. Fall Personal Papers, is currently held in the archives of the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum in Boston, Massachusetts. This paper draws on both, supplementing a critical reading of the former with recent archival investigation of the latter. In doing so, the intent is to shed new light on the full meaning of Fall’s original contributions to the study of revolutionary warfare, and on the ways in which those contributions were invoked in more recent years.

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1. Michael A.K.G. Innes, *Streets Without Joy: A Political History of Sanctuary and War, 1959-2009* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2020). URL: <https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/streets-without-joy/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)