

B. N. Oakman

Postcards from Dien Bien Phu

for Don Ross and Michele Swanborough, who sent them.

On May 7, 1954 French colonial rule in Vietnam collapsed after the French garrison defending its fortress at Dien Bien Phu surrendered to the Viet Minh.

'Historical Photos', grainy, fuzzy, black and white:
Uncle Ho of course; a youthful General Vo Nguyen Giap,
student of Sun Tzu's arts, nemesis of imperial armies;
smashed aircraft; corpses wearing French uniforms;
Viet Minh pedalling bicycles; General de Castries
and his staff standing bareheaded, sheepish in surrender,
one officer gripping his shooting-stick as if expecting
unfurnished captivity; there's Nixon, Eisenhower's VP
visiting Ninh Binh before the fortress fell, neat in shirt
and tie, grinning, 'bell-cheeked' (as Lowell might say)
sent to 'Nam to check bankrolled puppets and proxies;
near him there's a smiling man, perhaps an 'advisor',
buttoned-up in defiance of swelter in a dark DB suit.

Scribbled across the other side – *Wish you were here.*

Soon, broken boys wing home mad or zipped in bags,
napalm sears the promise of morning, Johnson
conspires to capture hearts and minds, conscription
raffles the manhood of the young. Bitter is defeat,
spurned is surrender for flight across the seas,
deafening the clatter of dominos, pliant the spines
of reluctant allies – those designated better dead than red.