ROUTLEDGE

VIETNAM
An American Ordeal

7TH EDITION

GEORGE DONELSON MOSS

Vietnam

Now in its 7th edition, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal* continues to provide a thorough account of the failed American effort to create a viable, non-Communist state in Southern Vietnam.

Unlike most general histories of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, which are either conventional diplomatic or military histories, this volume synthesizes the perspectives to explore both dimensions of the struggle in greater depth, elucidating more of the complexities of the U.S.-Vietnam entanglement. It explains why Americans tried so hard for so long to stop the spread of Communism into Indochina and why they failed. In this new edition, George Donelson Moss expands and refines key moments of the Vietnam War and its aftermath, including the strategic and diplomatic background for United States' involvement in Indochina during World War II; how the French, with British and American support, regained control in southern Vietnam, Saigon, and the vicinity, in the fall, 1945; the account for the formation of SEATO; and the account of the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979. The text has also been revised and updated to align with recently published monographic literature on the time period. The accessible writing will enable students to gain a solid understanding of how and why the United States went to war against The Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and why it lost the long, bitter conflict.

This book will be of interest to students and scholars of American history, the history of foreign relations, and the Vietnam War itself.

George Donelson Moss is Professor Emeritus of Social Sciences at the City College of San Francisco, USA. His research interests include recent U.S. political, diplomatic, and strategic history. He is also the author of *America Since 1900, 7th edition* and *Moving On: The American People Since 1945, 5th edition.*

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George Donelson Moss

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Preface

It has been almost 50 years since the fall of Saigon brutally terminated America's mission to create a non-Communist state in southern Vietnam in order to block the further expansion of Communism into Southeast Asia. But the U.S. Vietnam War refuses to retreat into the misty realms of forgotten history. Vivid memories of that long-ago war continue to shape foreign policy debates in this country whenever those policies include military interventions or the possibility of military interventions.

The specter of Vietnam haunted the Obama administration as it struggled to develop effective policies in a world of terrorist threats and guerrilla warfare. President Obama's two most important foreign policy advisers, Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Charles Hagel, were both combat veterans of the Vietnam War. Both officials came to regard that war as unwinnable and a colossal waste of lives and resources. Both men strongly supported President Obama's cautious responses to a series of violent events occurring in the Middle East, including revolutions that toppled military dictatorships in Libya and Egypt and plunged Syria into civil war.

President Donald Trump and his senior foreign policy advisers inherited the challenges the outgoing Obama administration had been confronting. During his campaign for the presidency, Trump had repeatedly attacked the wasteful and ineffective interventionist foreign policies of his liberal predecessor. He appeared determined to reverse or nullify all of Obama's foreign policy achievements. Once in office, despite erratic actions and self-contradictory pronouncements, the main thrust of the new president's foreign policy appeared to be neo-isolationist. He would extricate the United States from entangling alliances such as the agreement forged with Iran and major European powers to slow Iranian efforts to develop a nuclear weapon. Trump once cited the Vietnam War as a failed policy that was enormously costly in lives and dollars. He pledged to employ economic sanctions as coercive instruments of statecraft.

No matter the presidential administration that comes to office, always the chief lesson of Vietnam looms: beware of placing the U.S. ground combat forces in complex and chaotic environments lest they get trapped in another Vietnam-like quagmire.

Vietnam is the war that won't go away. As historian Robert Schulzinger has suggested, these troubling memories may not disappear until the last public official involved with setting Vietnam policy, the last Vietnam combat veteran, and the last antiwar protester have died.

When the combined People's Army of Vietnam (NVA) and People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) overwhelmed the last South Vietnamese government at the end of April 1975 and one year later unified the country under the control of the Vietnamese Communist Party, it was undeniably obvious that the American mission to build a non-communist nation state in southern Vietnam had failed.

Within the United States, a curious calm set in. No one wanted to think about or talk about Vietnam for years, much less argue about it. As the Seventies were ending, there began a revival of interest in all issues connected to the Vietnam War. Journalists who had covered the Vietnam beat, officials involved with making and implementing policy during the Vietnam era, and concerned scholars from various disciplines began meeting in conferences held around the country to examine the Vietnam War. Books about the war poured from the academic and mainstream presses. Hollywood discovered Vietnam, and a rash of films, many of them quite good, made their appearance in movie theaters around the country. The major television networks, led by CBS, produced fine documentaries about the Vietnam War. Popular TV programs flourished. *M*A*S*H**, ostensibly about the Korean War, was a long-running implicit indictment of the senseless brutality of the Vietnam War.

Remembering and reliving the Vietnam War became something of a national obsession during the early and mid-1980s. It was within the context of this intense revived concern with Vietnam that I, a former naval aviator who had become a historian who was one of those engaged scholars caught up in the ongoing 1980s national conversation about the American Vietnam War, conceived the project that eventuated in the publication of *Vietnam: An American Ordeal* in 1989.

I wanted to write a book that attempted to answer the two fundamental questions everyone who has ever thought about the Vietnam War, even for a moment, inevitably asked:

1 Why? Why Vietnam? Why did the United States ever become involved in the internal affairs of this small, comparatively insignificant nation with which Americans had no history of relations? Why did the United States fight a long, hard, and bitter war in a country that, prior to 1950, most Americans had never heard of nor could they find it on a map?
2 Why did the United States and its allies in Southeast Asia lose the war? How could the United States, the world's richest and most powerful nation state, which fielded the best-educated, best-trained, best-supported, and best-armed military forces any nation had ever sent to war, lose a war to a small, poor Third World country?

While doing research for the book, I came to understand that before I could answer the second question, another question had to be addressed. Why did the Communist Tet-68 offensive, which resulted in a series of military defeats for the PLAF and NVA, defeats that decimated the PLAF, and cost them much of their political infrastructure, become the turning point of the war? Why, after Tet-68, was a U.S. military victory in Vietnam not a realistic possibility?

Chapter 3, *America's Experiment in Nation Building,* Chapter 4, *America Raises the Stakes in Vietnam, 1961–63*, and Chapter 5, *America Goes to War, 1964–65*, collectively offer an answer to the first question: Why did the United States go to war in Vietnam? Chapter 5 is the key chapter. During the summer of 1965, President Lyndon Johnson confronted a crisis in South Vietnam: the impending defeat of South Vietnam's military forces and the probable collapse of its government. Johnson, after consultations with his senior civilian and military advisers, made a series of fateful decisions that Americanized what had previously been a civil war between Vietnamese factions. By late summer 1965, the U.S. ground combat forces were fighting the VietCong (the nickname U.S. troops gave PLAF fighters) in the jungles, swamps, and rice paddies of South Vietnam, while simultaneously the U.S. Naval and Air Force bombers waged an expanding air war against North Vietnam.

Chapter 8, *The Tet Offensive, January 30 to March 31, 1968*, and Chapter 9, *After the Tet Offensive, April–December, 1968*, provide answers to the paradoxical questions: How could a military victory by the U.S. and South Vietnamese armies result in a resounding political defeat for the United States? How could a failed communist offensive convince American leaders that the U.S. strategy of limited attrition warfare was not only not achieving victory, but appeared increasingly unlikely to ever achieve victory?

Answering these questions necessarily challenges two myths that have endured about the Tet-68 Offensive. The first of these myths is that the U.S. and ARVN forces inflicted a devastating defeat on the PLAF/NVA forces. True, it was a military victory, but the allies won a victory only in the narrow military sense that used conventional metrics to measure progress in a war of attrition—the number of enemy soldiers killed (KIAs), the number wounded (WIAs), total amount of supplies destroyed, and other quantitative measures. These allied victories amounted to tactical defeats of their enemies. While exceedingly painful and costly to the enemy, they had no long-term strategic significance. After Tet-68, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) gave no indication that it was ceasing or scaling back its support of the southern insurgency. Nor did it give any indication that it was about to negotiate a cease fire or peace accord on terms that the United States could accept. The PLAF retained its ability to recruit troops and disrupt Republic of Vietnam (RVN) pacification efforts. The VietCong infrastructure, although badly damaged, continued to operate effectively in the countryside and infiltrate the cities of South Vietnam. The stalemated war went on.

The second of these myths concerns the way the media, particularly television news, reported the battles of the Tet-68 Offensive. According to this view,

biased and distorted coverage of the offensive turned Americans against the war and prevented the U.S. government from pursuing victory in Vietnam in the wake of the Communist debacle.

Virtually, all historians of the Vietnam War and media scholars who have analyzed the way the media reported the Tet-68 campaigns reject the notion that media coverage of the war turned Americans against it. Instead, they contend that powerful political, strategic, and economic forces shaped the decision of U.S. officials to abandon the strategy of limited attrition warfare. They perceived that it was futile. It was not going to produce victory within the foreseeable future if ever, and it was dangerous. It threatened to do irreparable harm to important national economic and strategic interests. What television news reporters or anchors had to say about the war or what images of war were portrayed on America's television screens were peripheral or irrelevant.

Chapter 11, *A War for Peace 1971–73*, and Chapter 12, *The Decline and Fall of South Vietnam, 1973–75*, provide an answer to the most troubling question: Why did the United States lose the Vietnam War? At its outset, the war looked like an obvious mismatch—a mighty superpower taking on a nation that President Johnson characterized as a "4th-rate raggedy-ass" power. All the American military had to do, it appeared, was flex its powerful high-tech muscles and a quick, easy victory would inevitably be theirs.

Seven and one-half years later, Americans sorrowfully acknowledged that they had fought a war that they could not win. See the section in Chapter 12, "Why We Lost and Why They Won." I also suggest that a broader perspective involves not merely focusing on why the United States and its allies lost, but also focusing on why the North Vietnamese and the PRG (the governing arm of the NLF) ultimately prevailed. We need to look at their strategies and tactics, their political operations, their diplomacy, and, above all, their vision and determination in order to understand fully the outcome of that long, bitter conflict.

The United States was fighting a limited defensive war to stop the spread of Communism in a particular locale that did not threaten directly any U.S. vital national interests. The DRV and the NLF were fighting an all-out offensive war to achieve national independence and a unified country.

New to the Seventh Edition

For more than 30 years, I have been writing and rewriting a history of the American War in Vietnam. This new edition has been extensively redesigned, reorganized, and restructured. However, it remains what it has always been, a thorough account of the failed American effort to create a viable non-communist state in southern Vietnam.

This revision seeks to achieve two major goals. The first is to improve readability. The second is to update the book, aligning it with recent monographic literature and newly available archival sources. The Vietnam War is the second most studied American war, after the Civil War. Vietnam War studies continue to be one of the most dynamic fields of historical scholarship.

Acknowledgments

Many scholars, journalists, and Vietnam veterans have read all or parts of this book at one time or another during its thirty-year multi-edition existence. (Some folks have read more than one of its editions.) All have been both generous in their praise and extremely helpful with their constructive criticisms. They have called my attention to archival sources, primary source documents, and a myriad of monographic materials that I might otherwise never have read. To mention just a few of those special people who have helped the most: the late Stephen Ambrose, in my view the outstanding historian of his generation, who, after critiquing a couple of articles I had done on the war, encouraged me to undertake the project. He also appended a foreword to the first edition. Two other outstanding scholars, the late George McT. Kahin and the late Robin Winks, helped me in various ways during the early stages of my Vietnam project. Professor Kahin was especially helpful in steering me to studies of Vietnamese history and culture in order that I not embarrass myself when writing about the American Vietnam War. Professor Weeks was both gentle therapist and mentor. He helped me work through some angers and confusions, and, by example, showed me how a determined scholar finds his voice and develops strategies for research and writing.

As I was gearing up to work on what I hoped would someday become a book about the American Vietnam War, I had the good fortune to meet the late Douglas Pike, Director of the Indochina Archive then housed at the University of California, Berkeley. His wise counsel enabled me both to perceive the complexities of this uniquely difficult war and not be overwhelmed by them. Jeffrey Kimball, whose books, *Nixon's Vietnam War* and *The Vietnam War Files*, are the finest studies yet done of the years that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were conducting diplomacy and waging war in Southeast Asia, read and critiqued an entire draft of the book. Michael Schudson and Daniel Hallin, both accomplished media scholars, provided invaluable guidance.

Many others have contributed to my writing about the American War in Vietnam and deserve mention. They include former colleagues from two Naval air squadrons, VAW-11 and VAW-13, with whom it was my privilege to serve. Because of the kind of air operations we were involved with, they prefer to remain anonymous. So too do the many Vietnam veterans I came to know over the years who have shared their experiences of war. The final chapter of

the book concerning the legacies of the American Vietnam War owes much to these courageous men.

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1 Origins of American Interventions in Southeast Asia

The Japanese Occupy Indochina

World War II marked a rapid expansion of the power and influence of the United States everywhere in the world, including Southeast Asia. Long before the 1940s, the United States had acquired major economic, political, and strategic interests in Southeast Asia. The United States became an imperial power with important colonial possessions in that region when it wrested the Philippine archipelago and the island of Guam from the Spanish following the Spanish-American War. During the first few decades of the twentieth century, the United States developed a thriving trade with the Southeast Asian colonies of Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands. From Malaya came tin and rubber, from the Dutch East Indies came rubber and oil, and from Vietnam came rubber. During the early 1940s, the exigencies of world war thrust America into more prominent roles in the political affairs of this vital region. These wartime experiences confirmed the American sense of Vietnam's significance as a source of foodstuffs and raw materials and as a strategic location astride major shipping lanes linking India, China, Japan, and the islands of Southeast Asia.

The fall of France in June 1940 created serious diplomatic problems for the United States. President Franklin Roosevelt despised the collaborationist government the Germans allowed the French to establish at Vichy. However, he granted it diplomatic recognition to forestall German occupation of the French colonies in North Africa and—unsuccessfully—the Japanese occupation of Indochina. The U.S. officials were angered by French acquiescence in the Japanese penetration of Vietnam. From their perspective, it appeared that French officials made little effort to resist Japanese demands and settled rather comfortably into a joint occupation with them. The U.S. officials also perceived that possession of Indochina gave the Japanese strategic leverage in Southeast Asia for its continuing war with China. They later attributed many of the Japanese successes in conquering Southeast Asian territories, including the Philippines during 1941–42, to their use of Indochina as a base of operations.

It was the Japanese move into all of Indochina in the summer of 1941 that probably made war between the United States and Japan inevitable. Roosevelt viewed Japanese entry into that strategic region as a clear sign that the Japanese

planned further moves into the southeast Pacific region. The U.S. response to Japan's takeover of Indochina was to cut off Japan's supply of oil. The oil cutoff created a crisis for the Japanese leaders. With only six weeks of oil reserves on hand, the Japanese would have to get the oil embargo rescinded quickly or find a new source of supply to prevent their war machine and industrial economy from grinding to a halt. The U.S. and Japanese negotiators met through the summer and fall of 1941 to try to resolve their conflicts. As the price for restoring Japan's oil supplies and other trade goods that had been embargoed, Washington demanded that the Japanese get out of China and Indochina. These terms proved unacceptable to Japan, who would not consider abandoning their expansionist ambitions. They opted for war with the United States rather than surrender their imperial ambitions. The Japanese response came on December 7, 1941, at Pearl Harbor, which brought the United States into the Asian war. Soon afterward, the Japanese, using Vietnam as a staging area, occupied the East Indies and began extracting oil from the former Dutch colony. The Japanese also made use of Vietnamese ports as depots for the resources they were getting from their newly conquered empire in Southeast Asia.

The Japanese move into Indochina brought the first U.S. military intervention into Vietnam in early 1942, about a month after America had entered the war. Cutting the Japanese lifeline from Southeast Asia and denying the Japanese use of air bases in Vietnam for continuing attacks on China became major objectives of the American Volunteer Group, famed as the "Flying Tigers," under the command of General Claire L. Chennault. Flying out of bases in southern China, the Flying Tigers, in early 1942, began attacking Japanese airfields in northern Vietnam.[1]

As the war progressed, the wartime allies understood that they had to be concerned about the future political status of Indochina, which connected with a larger issue, the postwar fate of the European Asian empires. On the one hand, the U.S. officials, faithful to Atlantic Charter war aims, firmly opposed the restoration of colonial imperialism in Asia. Roosevelt understood that the collapse of European colonial authority in Southeast Asia had created a power vacuum, and he was openly hostile to British, Dutch, and French colonialism returning to those regions. He also sensed that the days of Western imperialism in Asia were ending. He wanted to make use of a historic opportunity to liquidate French imperialism in Southeast Asia and align the U.S. foreign policy with the forces of Asian nationalism.

The end of colonialism in Asia would liberate subject peoples, open markets to the U.S. exports, and bring stability to turbulent regions. At an inter-Allied meeting at Tehran in November 1943, Roosevelt told Joseph Stalin that he wanted to prevent a French return to Indochina. The Soviet leader heartily concurred. In early 1944, in a private conversation with Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Roosevelt described the kind of future he envisioned for Indochina:

> France has had the country—30 million inhabitants—for nearly one hundred years, and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning.

> . . . France has milked it for one hundred years. The people of Indochina are entitled to something better than that.[2]

On the other hand, President Roosevelt had an understanding with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill that the Atlantic Charter did not apply to British colonial possessions, particularly India. Charles De Gaulle, the leader of the Free French government-in-exile, joined with Churchill in an effort to thwart Roosevelt and forestall the loss of Indochina after the war. Churchill, linking De Gaulle's attempts to retain France's Asian colonies with his own efforts to cling to empire, supported De Gaulle.

The colonial issue created fissures in the wartime alliance's conduct of the war in Southeast Asia. The British tried to claim wartime jurisdiction of Indochina, which the Americans had assigned to the China Theater. Roosevelt, perceiving Churchill's strategy, forbade the British to conduct military operations in the region without clearance from the U.S.-China command.[3]

Pursuing efforts to prevent a return of French colonialism in Vietnam, Roosevelt asked Jiang Jieshi, the nationalist leader of China, if he wanted to govern Indochina. The answer he received was an emphatic, "No!" Jiang, aware of Vietnam's long history of resistance to Chinese colonialism, told Roosevelt that the Vietnamese were not Chinese. They would not assimilate into the Chinese people.[4] Following Jiang's rejection, Roosevelt proposed the creation of an international trusteeship for Indochina until the people were ready for a restoration of sovereignty.[5]

Although Roosevelt sympathized with the plight of Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese, the war took a course that made French cooperation increasingly important. As the Allies invaded northwestern Europe and restored a French government under De Gaulle in August 1944, their resources were stretched thin. The reconstituted French army suddenly became the largest untapped pool of Allied manpower. Looming ahead was an invasion of Japan and De Gaulle committed an expeditionary force to the war against Japan.

The Vietminh Revolution, August 1945

For decades, various nationalistic groups had actively resisted French colonial domination and exploitation. The Indochinese Communist Party, founded in 1929, led several revolts during the 1930s, all of which were suppressed by French security forces. After the Japanese moved into Southeast Asia in 1941, they pursued a policy of encouraging selected Asian nationalists to offset the European colonialists. The French also granted concessions to some of the Vietnamese nationalist groups in order to preserve influence in the face of the Japanese occupation.

Taking advantage of the French concessions, the Indochinese Communist Party, led by Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap, emerged as the leader of the rising forces of Vietnamese nationalism. Moving back and forth across the Chinese border, they established bases in the northern Vietnamese mountains

and built networks throughout the country. In 1941, they created the Vietminh (*Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi)*, a united front group, which disguised Communist Party dominance and appealed broadly to all Vietnamese nationalists seeking independence from France and ridding their country of the Japanese.

In December 1944, in the Cao Bang province, Ho Chi Minh ordered the creation of a military division of the Vietminh, the Vietnamese Liberation Army. During the winter of 1944–45, under the leadership of Vo Nguyen Giap, Vietminh guerrillas gained control of three northern provinces and engaged Japanese forces in sporadic combat.[6]

Beginning in the spring of 1945, the Vietminh received support from an **Office of Strategic Services (OSS)** contingent operating out of the U.S. China Mission at Kunming. The Americans entered northern Vietnam to gather intelligence on the Japanese, make contact with French officials, and set up rescue operations for downed pilots.

The Vietminh and OSS units collaborated to hasten the defeat of the Japanese. The Vietminh helped OSS commandos rescue downed U.S. pilots and escaped prisoners, accompanied them on sabotage missions, and provided them with information on Japanese troop movements in Vietnam. The OSS in return provided the Vietminh with radios, small arms, and ammunition.

The American OSS officers came to know many of the Vietminh leaders and assisted them in their struggle for national independence. For their part, the Vietminh leaders viewed this small group of Americans working with them to defeat the Japanese as a symbol of liberation, not only from the Japanese occupation but also from 80 years of French colonial rule.

The OSS officers who knew Ho Chi Minh viewed him as a Vietnamese patriot who would subordinate his Leninist revolutionary principles to the larger cause of national liberation. At one point, the Vietnamese leader became seriously ill. An OSS medic, PFC Paul Hoagland, probably saved Ho Chi Minh's life.[7]

By early 1945, the U.S. and British forces had reclaimed many of Japan's wartime Southeast Asian conquests. They had liberated important territories, including the Dutch East Indies, Malaya, and the Philippine archipelago. Confronted with their rapidly shrinking assets in Southeast Asia, Japan made a determined effort to hold its vital Indochina positions. Aircraft operating from carriers of the U.S. Third Fleet, including the famed Task Force 38 under the command of Admiral William F. "Bull" Halsey, in the Gulf of Tonkin began attacking Japanese shipping. Army Air Corps bombers from Clark Field in the Philippines carried out raids on Saigon and Da Nang, destroying Japanese warships and freighters. Within a few months, American planes had closed Japanese supply lines from Vietnam to China and their home islands. The U.S. bombers knocked out all railway linkages between Vietnam and China. Indochina was cut off from the remaining Japanese theaters of war.

These U.S. air raids signaled that the end of the Japanese presence in Indochina was fast approaching. Many of the French in Vietnam, who had

collaborated with the Axis for years, prepared to join the fight for Vietnam's liberation from Japan. Sensing the changed French attitudes, the Japanese moved to prevent French action against them. On March 9, 1945, the Japanese abruptly brought the 80-year-old French rule over the Indochinese people to an end. In a series of lightning raids that took the French by surprise, many officials were arrested. Most French soldiers were disarmed and interned. Thousands of French nationals were also interned. Only a few hundred managed to escape to the hills. Some joined the Vietminh guerrillas; others fled to China. Japanese officials seized control of the Indochina government.[8]

In their efforts to retain control of Vietnam, the Japanese also installed a Vietnamese government headed by Emperor Bao Dai, who for ten years prior to the war had been the French-controlled ruler of Annam from his palace in Hue.[9] Japanese officials informed Bao Dai that he was the ruler of an "independent" nation that had been "liberated" from the French imperialists. In reality, the Japanese were going through a desperate charade. The new government had neither the resources nor the power to command. Japanese Army officers remained in control of Vietnamese affairs. Bao Dai also understood that Japan would soon be defeated, and his shadow government would be discredited because of its association with the Japanese, who were no more loved by the Vietnamese people than the French.

Ho Chi Minh understood that the Japanese *coup de main* created a political vacuum in Indochina, and he moved quickly to exploit this development. He also understood that the Japanese defeat of the French, as well as their conquest of former British and Dutch colonies in Southeast Asia, had destroyed the lingering myth of European invincibility that had previously restrained Asian nationalists.

With the French removed from power and the Japanese on the verge of defeat, the Vietminh positioned themselves to take control of their country. General Giap took command of the Vietnamese Liberation Army. Vietminh forces now controlled most of Tonkin, and their influence was spreading rapidly over the country, reaching from the villages into the cities.[10] Within the provinces they controlled, the Vietminh installed revolutionary regimes, recruited guerrillas, abolished taxes, reduced land rents, and redistributed land taken from French landlords to poor peasants.[11] The Vietminh were rapidly harnessing the vast energies of people who sensed that their moment of liberation from both Japanese and French dominion was fast approaching. Where positive appeals to patriotism and economic self-interest failed, the Vietminh relied on terror to intimidate opponents. Known collaborators with the French or Japanese were eliminated.

The Vietminh also gained followers during the summer of 1945, because they responded effectively to a famine that was especially acute in the northern provinces. The famine had been caused by the Japanese, who in 1943 had ordered French soldiers to seize the entire rice harvest for shipment to Japan. Peasants went bankrupt in 1943 and starved in 1944. Severe drought aggravated the famine, during which an estimated 500,000 to 1 million Vietnamese

perished. French and Japanese officials appeared to be indifferent to the plight of the starving Vietnamese, but the Vietminh confiscated rice from landlords and raided granaries containing rice stored for export. The Vietminh turned these precious rice stores over to the people to alleviate some of the misery.

The Vietminh got their opportunity to seize power when the Japanese forces in Vietnam surrendered to them a few days after the U.S. planes had dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, abruptly ending World War II. On August 12, the Vietminh leaders called for a national uprising to begin. Political cadres and military forces sprang into action. Local committees organized peasants throughout Vietnam.[12] Vietminh associations took control of some 60 district and provincial governments all over the country.[13] A provisional council in Saigon, comprising religious sectarians, various Communist splinter groups, and several non-Communist nationalist groups, declared their support for the Vietminh. Within 10 days, from August 18 to 28, the revolutionaries took over virtually the entire country. Within a stunningly short time of three weeks in August 1945, Vietnam had undergone a nationalist revolution.

The Vietminh supplanted the deposed French and the beaten Japanese and took power without any significant opposition. The political maneuvering of other Vietnamese nationalists posed no threat to the Vietminh. On August 16, Ho declared himself the president of a provisional government of an independent Vietnam.[14] Vietminh cadres marched into Hanoi August 19 and quickly created the administrative infrastructure of government. On August 23, the Vietminh claimed Hue, the seat of government of the Nguyen dynasty. On August 29, the Vietminh formed a national government called the **Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)**, with its capital in Hanoi. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh publicly declared Vietnamese independence before 500,000 people assembled in Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square.[15]

Ho admired the United States because it had defeated the Japanese and because of its official commitment to self-determination for Asian peoples following the war. Ho, who also hoped that Vietminh cooperation with the United States during the war against the Japanese would bring American support of Vietnamese independence, began his speech with words taken from the American Declaration of Independence: "We hold truths that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" (see Figure 1.1).[16]

Later in the day, Americans joined the festivities that celebrated Vietnam's independence. A flight of U.S. aircraft flew over the city. The U.S. Army officers stood with Giap and other Vietminh leaders on the reviewing stand as Vietminh forces passed in review. A Vietnamese band played "The Star-Spangled Banner."[17] Later, a Vietnam-American Friendship Association was formed in Hanoi. Ho Chi Minh, hoping for the U.S. support for Vietnam's independence and for economic development, cultivated the friendship of the small American contingent in Hanoi and repeatedly appealed to the

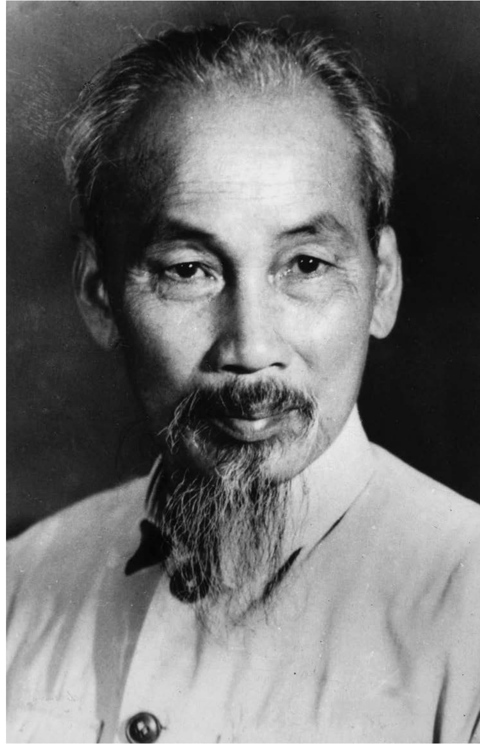

Figure 1.1 Vietnamese revolutionary nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh (1892–1969), born Nguyen Sing Cung. *World History Archive/Alamy Stock Photo.*

U.S. government for diplomatic recognition. The U.S. officials in Washington did not respond to Ho's requests. No other nation in the world officially recognized Ho's government.

The Vietnamese people had reclaimed their national identity that had been submerged for 80 years under French colonialism and Japanese military occupation. For the first time in 80 years, Vietnam was united and independent under a Vietnamese government controlled by the Communist-led Vietminh. Its revolution represented a remarkable merging of people and a movement that gave expression to the deep yearning of nearly all Vietnamese citizens to be rid of foreign control.

In the rush to achieve national independence, factional conflicts and ideological differences among Vietnamese political parties, which were sharpest in southern cities, were temporarily submerged. On August 30, responding to the patriotic fervor, Emperor Bao Dai presented the imperial seal and sword, the twin symbols of Vietnamese sovereignty, to the Vietminh leaders and then abdicated.[18] Bao Dai promised to support the new provisional government,

conferring legitimacy upon it and linking it to Vietnamese political traditions. In return, Ho named him "Supreme Adviser" to the new government. Most Vietnamese, Communist and non-Communist alike, accepted Ho Chi Minh as the leader of the revolution that had retrieved Vietnamese independence.

America Supports the French Return to Vietnam

But the August revolution was not destined to endure peacefully. As the U.S. Army officers joined with Vietminh leaders in Hanoi to celebrate the rebirth of Vietnamese independence, American leaders in Washington were clearing the way for the return of the French to Vietnam. The U.S. military personnel serving in Vietnam who supported Ho's revolutionary nationalism had no political clout in Washington.

Even before he died, Roosevelt had retreated from his support of Vietnamese nationalism. His top priority always was an orderly and stable world controlled by a concert of the great powers. Concerned with maintaining good relations with important European allies at Yalta, FDR did not actively oppose France's announced intention to return to Indochina.[19] Secretary of State Edward Stettinius told the French foreign minister that the United States had never questioned "French sovereignty over Indochina."[20]

Roosevelt's successor, Harry Truman, was initially overwhelmed by the vast economic, political, and strategic problems resulting from the upheavals of World War II and the emerging Cold War with the Soviet Union. From Truman's vantage point in August 1945, Vietnam was a diplomatic backwater, and Ho Chi Minh was an obscure leader for whom he had no time.

If ever there was a time when Washington could have aligned itself with the forces of Vietnamese nationalism, it failed to grasp it. Truman and other senior U.S. officials, struggling with the vast array of postwar issues cascading down upon them, knew very little about the political realities of Vietnam, and they were not listening to the officials on the ground in China and Southeast Asia who did. Washington would allow the French to resume their control of Indochina if that made France a stronger and more compliant ally in the emerging Cold War with the Soviet Union.[21] Truman supported the French goal of reimposing colonialism on the Vietnamese people.[22] He made a point of telling Charles de Gaulle that the United States would not try to undermine the French position in Indochina.

Truman and other Allied leaders, meeting at Potsdam a few weeks before Ho Chi Minh made his declaration of independence, had determined that Vietnam would be divided temporarily at the 16th Parallel of North Latitude at the war's end. North of that boundary, Chinese Nationalist troops were to handle the surrender of Japanese forces, arrange for their repatriation to Japan, and obtain the release of all prisoners of war and Allied internees. South of that line, British troops would take charge of these matters. As the Potsdam conferees made these secret agreements, they did not specify the shape that the political future of Vietnam would take, but, in effect, they granted the

French a free hand to return to Indochina and reimpose colonialism on the Vietnamese people.[23]

At the historic moment that the Vietnamese nation reappeared, French forces, supported by London, were planning their re-entry into Vietnam in order to re-establish a colonial *status quo ante bellum.* During that fateful summer of 1945, no one could have foreseen it, but consolidating the Vietnamese national revolution would take 30 years and exact a horrific toll in blood and treasure from those who made the revolution and from those who tried and failed to defeat it.

Notes

1 Edward Doyle, Samuel Lipsman, and the editors of Boston Publishing, *Setting the Stage* (Boston, MA: Boston Publishing, 1981), 176.
2 Quoted in Ibid., 177.
3 Walter LaFeber, "Roosevelt, Churchill, and Indochina, 1942–1945," *American Historical Review* (December 1975): 1277–95.
4 Quoted in Clyde Edwin Pettit, *The Experts* (Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart, 1975), 13.
5 Gary R. Hess, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and Indochina," *Journal of American History* (September 1972): 353–68.
6 Archimedes L. Patti, *Why Vietnam? Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 55–56. The Office of Strategic Services was a wartime intelligence agency whose agents also engaged in commando operations behind enemy lines. They committed sabotage and aided resistance forces, which often included Communists within their ranks, in both the European and Asian theaters of war. See "Instructions by Ho Chi Minh for Setting Up of the Armed Propaganda Brigade for the Liberation of Vietnam, December 1944," printed in Gareth Porter, ed., *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions* (Stanfordville, NY: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, 1979), vol. 1, 14.
7 Philippe Devillers, *Histoire du Vietnam de* 1940 a 1952 (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952), 152; King C. Chen, *Vietnam and China, 1938–1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 113–14. Chen finds no evidence that the Vietminh received any help from the Chinese Communists. The Soviets displayed no interest in the Vietminh revolution. The Vietminh were on their own except for the help they received from the American in the OSS. Gary Hess, *Vietnam and the United States*, rev. ed. (New York: Twayne, 1998), 31. John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2009), 15–17.
8 Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1954), 36–45.
9 Ibid., 46–47; Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam*, 1941–1975 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 17.
10 Joseph Buttinger, *A Dragon Embattled*, vol. 1 (New York, Praeger, 1967), 292–95; William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 94–100.
11 Alexander B. Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 225–40.
12 Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States* (Boston, MA: Twayne, 1990), 20; Prados, *Vietnam*, 16.

13 Buttinger, *Dragon*, 296–98; Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 94–100; Gareth Porter and Gloria Emerson, eds., *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, vol. 1 (New York: New American Library, 1981); *Resolutions of the Vietminh Conference to Establish a Free Zone*, June 4, 1945, 47–49.
14 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 98–99; Chen, *Vietnam and China*, 102–14 is a good brief account of the Vietminh August Revolution; Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 1, *Appeal by Ho Chi Minh for General Insurrection, August* 1945, 60–61.
15 Chen, *Vietnam and China*, 111–12; Prados, *Vietnam*, 17.
16 R. Harris Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency* (New York: Delta Books, 1973), 351–55; Ho's Declaration is printed in Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 1, 64–66.
17 George C. Herring, *America's Longest War*: *The United States and Vietnam*, 1950–1975, rev. ed. (New York: Knopf, 1986), 3; quoted in George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 14–15.
18 Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 10.
19 John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 58; Scott L. Bills, *Empire and Cold War: The Roots of U.S.-Third World Antagonism*, 1945–1947 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 204; Hess, *Vietnam*, 29–30; Kahin, *Intervention*, 5.
20 Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 46–63; Lafeber, "Roosevelt, Churchill, and Indochina," 1289.
21 Logevall, Fredrik, *Embers of War: The Fall of An Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), 106; Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 21–22.
22 Kahin, *Intervention*, 19–20; Arnold A. Offner, "The Truman Myth Revealed: From Parochial Nationalist to Cold Warrior," March 1988. Unpublished paper presented at the Organization of American Historians Convention; George Herring, *The Truman Administration and the Restoration of French Sovereignty in Indochina, Diplomatic History*, vol. 1 (Spring 1977): 97–117.
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2 The French Indochina War, 1946–54

The French Return to Indochina

The end of World War II presaged the end of Western imperialism in Southeast Asia. Emergent nationalist leaders took advantage of the sudden surrender of the Japanese and the evident strategic weakness of the European powers to demand independence. The August Revolution of the Vietminh paralleled nationalist revolutions in the Dutch East Indies, Burma, and India.[1] In the Philippines, nationalists urged the United States to fulfill its prewar pledge to grant their country independence. In China, the defeat of the Japanese ended the wartime collaboration of the Koumingtang and the Maoists, and they resumed their civil war.

The French dismissed the Vietnamese claim of independence and maneuvered to reestablish their Indochina colony. They did not take seriously the claims of a fragile government struggling to feed its starving people, lacking a powerful army, possessing limited financial resources, and having no standing or support in the international community. French officials also claimed that the Vietnamese people wanted them to return. British and Chinese troops entered Vietnam in September 1945 to carry out the Potsdam directives issued the previous month by the victorious Allied powers. In the train of the British troops entering southern Vietnam came French forces. Insertion of these outside military forces triggered a series of conflicts that engulfed Vietnam for decades and deferred the emergence of an independent, unified Vietnamese state for 30 years.

In the aftermath of World War II, the French instinct was to hang on to all of their overseas possessions and privileges, and they were willing to use military force if necessary to preserve them in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. Because they were determined to cling to their empire, the French fought a series of colonial wars from the 1940s to the 1960s. All to no avail; they eventually lost all their colonies.

The first of these colonial wars occurred in Indochina. The French were driven by a mix of motives to try to reimpose their rule on the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian peoples. Economic considerations were important, especially in Cochin China, where French financial and commercial interests were concentrated. The French also had a politico-psychological motive for

returning to Indochina. The quick Nazi conquest of France in 1940, followed by the rigors and humiliations of the German occupation, had dealt French national esteem serious blows, as had Japanese occupation of Indochina and other French possessions in the South Pacific.

According to historian George Kahin, the most important reason for the French drive to regain control of their former Southeast Asian possessions transcended Indochina and concerned the political cohesion of France's entire overseas empire. French officials had a view of decolonization resembling the subsequent American domino theory: if one colony won its independence, others would then be tempted to stage similar breakaways from French control. If the Vietnam domino fell, not only would the Cambodian and Laotian dominoes follow quickly, but also, and far worse in the French view, their more valuable North African possessions—Morocco, Tunisia, and the most valuable of all French overseas territories, Algeria—would rise in rebellion against French colonialism. To safeguard the interests of their 1 million Algerian *colons*, the French prepared to reconquer 24 million Vietnamese.[2]

Under the Potsdam agreements, the **British Southeast Asia Command (SEAC)** was assigned the mission of disarming the Japanese in southern Vietnam. The advance wave of 2,000 British and Indian troops, most of them famed Gurkhas, marched into Saigon on September 13, 1945, under the command of General Douglas D. Gracey. Eighteen thousand additional troops soon joined them. General Gracey did not acknowledge the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's claim of sovereignty. He favored the French return to Indochina, and he reacted to the political disorder he encountered within a country in the throes of revolution after a disruptive war by declaring martial law. He also gave orders to disarm all Vietnamese forces, but he released and rearmed about 1,400 French colonial troops that the Japanese had interned.

These French forces, armed with the U.S. weapons, and joined by newly arriving French troops carried to Indochina in British ships, overthrew the Vietminh government in Saigon on September 23, 1945. The French had forced their way back into Vietnam. The Tricolor once again flew over public buildings in the "Paris of the Orient." At the time of the French reentry into Vietnam, Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrote the American *chargé d'affaires* in China that the "U.S. has no thought of opposing the re-establishment of French control in Indochina."[3]

The Vietminh leader in Saigon, Tran Van Giau, ordered a general strike and also ordered counterattacks against the French. Determined to prevent a return of the French, nearly all Vietnamese, joined the resistance, including the religious sectarians and a criminal organization, the Binh Xuyen, or Cochin China "Mafia." In one neighborhood in Saigon, the Vietnamese killed hundreds of French hostages.

General Gracey responded to these actions by releasing and rearming 4,000 Japanese troops stationed in the area that he had been directed to disarm and using them to enforce security. Multinational British, Indian, French, and

Japanese forces, many armed with American weapons, undertook the pacification of southern Vietnam in the fall of 1945. For the British, what has been called the First Indochina War[4] proved to be short. On October 9, 1945, Paris and London agreed that the French forces would take over from SEAC and the British formally recognized French sovereignty in Vietnam. As more French troops arrived, the British forces departed.

Most Americans knew nothing of the complex political developments taking place in a remote corner of the world at the end of World War II. American media gave little attention to these events or to the role Americans played in helping the French return to Vietnam. But an American who was following events in Vietnam knew what the Americans were doing, and he denounced their actions. General Douglas MacArthur, the preeminent hero of the Pacific war and newly appointed American proconsul in Japan, passionately denounced the Allied intervention in southern Vietnam:

> If there is anything that makes my blood boil, it is to see our allies in Indochina deploying Japanese troops to reconquer the little people we promised to liberate.[5]

By February 1, 1946, French forces, under the command of General Jacques-Phillipe Leclerc,[6] had brought Cochin China under their control. But Leclerc's troops controlled only the cities, towns, and main roads. Vietminh forces effectively contested French authority in the countryside, where most Vietnamese lived. Ho Chi Minh and his Vietminh associates in Hanoi supported these resistance efforts, but they could not control events in the south. While concerned about the French presence in southern Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh remained focused on the Tonkin region because once again Chinese forces had invaded northern Vietnam.[7]

To carry out his part of the Potsdam bargain, Jiang Jieshi sent an army of 180,000 troops, commanded by General Lu Han, into Tonkin. The Chinese generals did not recognize Ho Chi Minh's government. They also brought along some non-Communist Vietnamese nationalist politicians, remnants of the VNQDD, the Dong Minh Hoi, and other groups who had been living in exile in China since the 1930s. As the Chinese troops marched through hamlets and villages, Ho implemented a range of democratic reforms that brought Vietnamese Catholic and other non-Communist groups over to his government. Most importantly, he called for elections to select delegates to the National Assembly to draft a constitution and establish a permanent government for Vietnam. Endeavoring to save his socialist revolution, Ho Chi Minh was forced to soft pedal it.

The first national elections in Vietnamese history took place on January 6, 1946. Over 90 percent of eligible voters participated, and Vietminh candidates scored an overwhelming victory, winning 206 of the 254 seats.[8] But Vietminh leaders allowed nationalist delegates 70 slots to guarantee them an important role in the new government. Ho's deft maneuvering had bought

off the Chinese generals, co-opted the political threat posed by the Vietnamese nationalists who the Chinese had brought with them, and broadened the popular base of support for his Vietminh-controlled government among the non-Communist elements who made up the large majority of the Vietnamese population.

The Chinese Nationalists, resuming their civil war with the Maoists in the aftermath of the Japanese defeat, were less interested in taking control of northern Vietnam or in restoring Vietnamese nationalist political groups to power than in using their temporary occupation of the country to wrest concessions from the French. The U.S. officials, committed to the restoration of French sovereignty in Indochina, also pressured the Chinese to "facilitate the recovery of power by the French."[9] However, the Chinese refused to permit French troops to enter northern Vietnam until they had extracted major concessions from France.

French and Chinese negotiators concluded a series of important agreements in February and March 1946. The French agreed to give up all of their prewar trading rights and concessions in China in exchange for China's acquiescence in French reentry into northern Vietnam. Under the terms of the Sino-French accord, French forces could start landing at Haiphong on March 6, 1946. But the return of French troops to the north would require Vietminh permission in the spring of 1946 because the French were not strong enough at the time to simply walk in and overpower Ho Chi Minh's forces without absorbing considerable casualties if the Vietminh chose to resist them. There was also the possibility of the Chinese backing the Vietminh to keep the French out if the Vietminh leaders refused to accept the return of the French.

Franco-Vietminh Non-Negotiations

Vietminh officials were willing to seek a compromise with the French in order to rid their country of the rapacious Chinese whom they believed posed a greater long-range threat to Vietnamese sovereignty than the French.[10] Delicate negotiations between the French and Vietminh officials took place at the same time as the French-Chinese talks. Ho Chi Minh headed the Vietminh team of negotiators dealing with the French. Jean Sainteny, the commissioner-delegate for Tonkin, headed the French delegation. Sainteny offered many concessions to obtain Vietminh acceptance of their reoccupation of northern Vietnam.

The two sides reached a preliminary understanding signed on March 6, 1946. By its terms, France appeared to be taking its first steps toward decolonizing Indochina. The DRV was declared to be "a free state within the French Union," with its own government and army. France also agreed to hold a national referendum to determine whether the colony of Cochin China would rejoin Annam and Tonkin in a reunited Vietnam or would remain a separate French territory. In return, the Vietminh agreed that 25,000 French troops would replace Chinese forces north of the 16th Parallel, and they could

remain until 1951. Both sides also agreed that a Vietminh delegation would travel to Paris later in the year to work out the details of the agreement that had been deliberately left vague. The Chinese accepted these arrangements, agreeing to withdraw all of their troops by June 16, 1946. For a hopeful moment, it appeared that moderation and statesmanship had averted both a war and a reversion to colonialism in Vietnam.[11]

But the Ho-Sainteny agreement of March 6 soon proved a sham. French officials refused to hold the promised plebiscite in Cochin China and construed the new status of Vietnam as a "free state within the French Union" as being only a facade for continuing French domination of the country. After the signing of the accord, with Chinese and U.S. acceptance, 15,000 French troops entered Hanoi on March 18.

While these crucial events that set the stage for the subsequent French and U.S. interventions in Vietnam were taking place, the Soviet Union ignored Vietnam. In the early postwar period, the Soviet Union was not a player in Southeast Asia. It confined its actions to anti-imperialist propaganda, meanwhile conceding Western hegemony in the Third World. The Soviets had no choice. At the time, their reach was limited, and they were preoccupied with consolidating their sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, rebuilding their shattered economy, and attempting to increase their influence in Central and Western Europe. Even though the Communist revolutionaries in Vietnam were fighting for their lives in 1945 and 1946, Soviet aid to the Vietminh did not begin until the 1950s.

Ironically, in 1946, the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin favored French Communist officials over a minor Communist leader in Southeast Asia, who appeared from Moscow's perspective to be a Vietnamese nationalist first and a Communist second. Stalin hoped that the French Communist Party, the largest political party in France, might win the 1946 elections and legally take control of the French government. Although the French Communists did not win that election, they came out of it with several cabinet positions and their leader, Maurice Thorez, became the deputy premier. Fearful that they would lose electoral appeal if they supported decolonization, Communist leaders serving in the government supported the French drive to reimpose colonialism on Indochina, which was a popular cause in France in 1946 and 1947. Stalin backed the French Communists, leaving Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh to fend for themselves.

From his vantage point in Hanoi in the spring of 1946, Ho Chi Minh felt isolated and vulnerable. He headed a struggling revolutionary regime within a country that had almost no financial resources and a poorly equipped army. All the major powers were either backing or accepting French efforts to reimpose colonialism in Indochina. The Vietminh had no allies in either the Communist or Western camps as they prepared to face the powerful French alone.[12]

The Vietminh leaders tried hard to negotiate agreements with the French to avoid a war and to preserve a measure of autonomy. French and Vietminh officials met at Dalat, a mountain resort in the central highlands, to try to

define the Ho-Sainteny agreement. The French representatives made clear that their interpretation of the phrase "free state within the French Union" meant continuing French colonial domination of Vietnam. The Vietminh refused to accept the outcome of the Dalat conference as final, and they prepared for further negotiations to be held later in France.

In the summer of 1946, French and Vietnamese delegates met for a series of talks at Fontainebleau Palace near Paris. Ho Chi Minh headed the Vietminh contingent. For eight weeks, he endeavored to achieve the substance of independence for his country and to avoid war. But these talks were also doomed to fail because the French refused to budge from their Dalat interpretation of the Ho-Sainteny agreement. At the same time that they refused all of Ho's overtures, the French also reestablished their control over Laos and Cambodia. These developments ensured that the fledgling Democratic Republic of Vietnam would henceforth face three hostile French-controlled governments within the Indochina Union.

Seeking help from any quarter, Ho Chi Minh contacted the American embassy in Paris. He promised the U.S. officials that he would open up Vietnam to the U.S. investment, and he offered to lease Cam Ranh Bay to the U.S. Navy in exchange for help in keeping the French out. Ho was rebuffed by a low-level State Department functionary. He then met with French Prime Minister Georges Bidault and other top French officials. He pleaded with them to make some concessions that he could take back to his people. On September 14, 1946, Ho Chi Minh warned Bidault:

> If we must fight, we will fight. You will kill ten of our
> men and we will kill one of yours. Yet, in the end,
> it is you who will tire.[13]

Despite all of his pleading and threats, all that Ho Chi Minh could extract from the determined French was a promise to hold the Cochin China referendum and agree to more negotiations at a later date. They never made good on either commitment. Sick at heart, Ho Chi Minh had to return to Hanoi in October 1946, bringing only a flimsy *modus vivendi* to show for his efforts.[14]

The First Indochina War Begins

The fragile peace in Tonkin was shattered the following month. On November 20, French and Vietminh customs collectors quarreled over who had the right to collect customs duties at the port of Haiphong. That night, squads of French and Vietminh soldiers exchanged fire in the city's streets. "These were the opening shots in the eight-year war between the French and the Vietminh."[15]

In the aftermath of these skirmishes, French officials decided to teach a hard lesson to the Vietnamese. On November 23, after giving the Vietminh only two hours to vacate the Chinese Quarter of Haiphong, the French attacked

guerrilla hideouts in that sector. French infantry and armored units swept through the city. French aircraft provided tactical air support for the ground forces. The French cruiser *Suffren* bombarded the city for hours. When the day ended, much of Haiphong lay in rubble; 6,000 people were dead and another 25,000 were wounded, mostly civilians. On November 28, the French commander General Louis-Constant Morliere issued an ultimatum demanding that the Vietminh yield control of the city, its suburbs, and the main highway between Haiphong and Hanoi to the French military forces. The Vietminh refused General Morliere's demands. On December 18, the French moved troops into Hanoi and occupied several government buildings. On December 19, General Morliere ordered General Giap to disarm his forces.[16] Giap refused to obey his command.

That night the Vietminh leaders held a plenary meeting. General Giap ordered that a war of national resistance begin. Later that same evening, Vietminh guerrillas destroyed the Hanoi power plant, plunging the city into darkness. Other guerrilla units planted mines in the streets of Hanoi and assassinated several French officials. All over northern Vietnam, Vietminh guerrillas attacked French installations. As the attacks were taking place, Ho Chi Minh left Hanoi and set up a temporary government at Ha Dong, six miles to the south.[17]

By the end of 1946, the war that had begun in Saigon in September 1945 had spread north, engulfing all of Vietnam. In retrospect, the conflict that Ho Chi Minh had tried hard to avoid appears inevitable because the French were determined to reimpose colonialism on people who refused to accept it and who were ready to fight to preserve their revolution if they must.

When the war began, the Vietminh could field about 60,000 troops. In addition to these main force units, they had large peasant and youth militia forces. Altogether, there were about 150,000 soldiers available to the Vietminh. But only one-third of these troops were equipped with even small arms. The Vietminh possessed neither a navy nor an air force. However, the French could field a modern well-equipped and well-trained army of 150,000 fighters, including French soldiers, Legionnaires, and colonial troops. The Vietminh soldiers could not hope to defeat "a serious French effort to restore colonial rule in Vietnam."[18]

Ho Chi Minh, who had continued to seek a negotiated settlement until French military actions forced him to accept war rather than capitulate to French colonialism, now called his people to arms:

> Those who have rifles will use their rifles; those who have swords will use their swords; those who have no swords will use spades, hoes or sticks. Long live an independent and unified Vietnam! Long live the resistance![19]

The Vietminh looked to Maoist doctrines of guerrilla warfare for strategic guidance as they planned their campaigns against the French forces. On December 22, 1946, the revolutionary government announced that the

struggle against the French imperialists would advance through three stages. The first stage of the war would be defensive, during which the Vietminh guerrillas would abandon the urban areas if they had to and retreat into the countryside and to the mountains of northern Vietnam. During this stage, they would avoid major battles with the French forces, concentrate on building up their own main force units, and continue political organization in the villages. The second stage would be one of equilibrium, in which the revolutionary forces would be growing in strength and the imperialist forces would be declining. The third stage would feature a general offensive by the revolutionary forces, stronger than their enemies, that would defeat the imperialist armies and drive them from the country.[20]

No specific time frames were mentioned in the December 22 announcement; there were no indications how long they expected each phase to last. But it was clear that the Vietminh planned for a protracted war against the French, a war that could go on for years, and one that they were confident they would ultimately win. Protracted warfare had defeated Chinese invaders over the centuries. The Vietminh, serenely patient, believed that it would also beat the French.

Already controlling Cochin China, the French forces in the early months of 1947 occupied the major cities and towns of Annam and Tonkin. The outgunned Vietminh main force units avoided combat with the more powerful invaders, and what resistance the French encountered in these early campaigns came mostly from local guerrillas. The Vietminh put up their stiffest resistance in Hanoi. It took the French forces three months to take the city. Beyond the cities, the Vietminh remained in control of much of the countryside, where they retained the loyalty of most of the population. Viet Bac, the mountainous northern provinces, remained a revolutionary stronghold and haven. Near the remote mountain village of Bac Can, 50 miles from the Chinese border, Ho Chi Minh established his headquarters.[21]

In October 1947, the French launched a major offensive designed to destroy the Vietminh main forces and capture the revolutionary leaders in their Viet Bac sanctuaries. The French sent a powerful force of 12 infantry battalions, reinforced by armored units and air support, deep into the northern countryside. French paratroopers staged a surprise raid on Vietminh headquarters in a cave near Bac Can. They missed capturing Ho Chi Minh and other Vietminh leaders by less than one hour![22] Although they failed to capture the revolutionary leaders, the French military forces scored major successes. They killed an estimated 9,500 Vietminh fighters and forced the rebels to abandon large areas of Viet Bac.

At the same time they launched their military offensive in the north, the French, convinced that they could not defeat the Vietminh by force alone, moved to undercut the Vietminh politically by forming alliances with Vietnamese groups that would cooperate with them against the revolutionaries. The heart of the French political strategy involved forming a Vietnamese government in Saigon and persuading former emperor Bao Dai to head it. The

French plan was to create a non-Communist Vietnamese state that would offer a political alternative to the Vietminh revolutionary regime and provide a rallying point for non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists. If Bao Dai succeeded in uniting the various non-Communist political factions into a cohesive force, he could create "a serious alternative to the Vietminh Front for the loyalty of the Vietnamese people."[23]

The French political strategy in 1947 failed for two main reasons. The first, a perennial problem of Vietnamese politics, especially southern urban Vietnamese politics, was the inability of various non-Communist nationalist factions to overcome chronic political fragmentation and form a stable coalition government. The second was the French refusal to grant the proposed government anything resembling sovereignty. The French would promise only a puppet regime that most Vietnamese regarded as a cover for French colonialism, and the people of Vietnam made a point of shunning it.

Although the French had seized both the military and political initiatives in the fall of 1947, they had failed to either destroy the Vietminh army or create a viable political alternative to Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary nationalism. French leaders did not realize it at the time, but their effort to reimpose colonialism on the Vietnamese had reached its high water mark. Given Vietminh control of most of the countryside and given the fact that it had the support of most of the people, neither a French military victory nor the restoration of an Indochinese colonial regime were ever realistic possibilities.

Vietminh prospects improved markedly in 1948. In China, the Communists were fast gaining the upper hand against Jiang Jieshi's deteriorating nationalist armies. Mao's victory, which now appeared to Ho Chi Minh and his associates to be only a matter of time, offered the promise of significant economic and military assistance, as well as political support for the struggling Vietnamese revolutionaries.

Emboldened by developments in China and by a sense that the French campaign to destroy their revolution had already reached its limits, General Giap announced that the Vietnamese struggle against the French had progressed to its second stage, the stage of equilibrium. No longer would the rebels be content to remain on the defensive; they would henceforth move to expand both the geographic area under their control and to wear down the French main forces. During the second phase of their struggle, they relied mostly upon guerrilla tactics, but occasionally deployed main force units in swift mobile assaults on French forces when they knew they could win.[24] During 1948, both the Vietminh military forces and their political apparatus doubled in size. They regained most of the territory they had lost the previous year and expanded the area in Cochin China under their control. As the year ended, the Vietminh controlled about 55 percent of all Vietnamese villages, north and south. The French found themselves bogged down in what one writer called a quicksand war.[25]

French officials in Vietnam, having failed to defeat the rebels militarily, tried again to outmaneuver them politically. The French also sought to attract

direct U.S. military support for their increasingly expensive efforts in Indochina that were quickly losing favor with the French public. After a series of negotiations, the French finally persuaded Bao Dai to head a new government that was given the status of "an associated state within the French Union." According to the Elysee Agreement, signed March 8, 1949, the French granted "independence" to the "State of Vietnam," Laos, and Cambodia, all of which became "associated states" within the French Union. The French claimed that Vietnamese nationalists and Communists were fighting a civil war for control of Indochina, and they were fighting for the nationalist cause.

But all the new states that comprised the French Union lacked most of the attributes of sovereignty. The French retained control over the new Vietnamese government's foreign affairs, defense forces, and taxes levied on French properties. The new political order failed to attract the support of most prominent Vietnamese nationalists.[26] However, many Vietnamese, either because they embraced traditional values or collaborated with the French, supported the State of Vietnam. Other Vietnamese rejected any association with either side. Although there is no way to precisely estimate the number of Vietnamese who supported the Vietminh, supported Bao Dai's new government, or tried to avoid both, most historians of the First Indochina War believe that the large majority of Vietnamese cast their lot with the Vietminh.

The Vietminh forces located in the south escalated their revolutionary activity in Saigon and its vicinity. They also infiltrated the new government's police force and its civil service bureaucracies. Vietminh military forces launched a series of assaults on provincial capitals in the Mekong River Delta. But French troops routed the guerrillas in the delta, and they were forced to seek refuge in the Plain of Reeds, a huge area of swamps, waterways, and rice paddies 50 miles southwest of Saigon.[27]

The success of the Maoist revolution in China, one of the most significant events of modern history, transformed the First Indochina War. The People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in October 1949, as the Chinese Nationalist regime fled the Chinese mainland for the island of Formosa (Taiwan). The arrival of the Chinese Communists on the borders of North Vietnam one month later altered the war's equilibrium. From then on, the Vietminh had access to cross-border sanctuaries where they could refit and retrain their troops. Within months, Vietminh battalions began to appear on the battlefields equipped with modern weapons, including heavy mortars, recoiless rifles, and 105mm howitzers. In January 1950, the new Chinese government extended diplomatic recognition to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Moscow soon followed suit, formally recognizing the DRV.[28]

The new relations between China and the Vietminh significantly altered the political context of the Franco-Vietminh conflict. Previously, Ho Chi Minh had waged his battles with France alone. He now had a powerful friend and ideological soul brother next door. Responding to the more favorable political situation they found themselves inhabiting, Ho's government also threw off its Patriotic Front trappings. It became openly Communist, and many

non-Communist elements were purged from the ranks of the Vietminh. The ICP, which had been dissolved in 1945, reappeared in 1950 as the Dang Lao Dong Viet Nam (the Vietnamese Worker's Party, or VWP, aka the Lao Dong).

For the first time since the formation of the Vietminh in 1941, the Vietnamese revolution was cast within a Marxist-Leninist framework.[29] The revolutionaries also made it clear that the socialist revolution, which they had played down for so long for the sake of national unity, would begin as soon as the French were driven out of Vietnam. The social revolution actually began even before the French were expelled. In 1951, Lao Dong cadres began land reform in various districts in the countryside. Land rents were reduced, and rice lands were confiscated from landlords and given to poor peasants who had previously owned no land. Land reform both restructured rural class relations and strengthened popular support in the countryside for the ongoing war against the French.[30]

Although the political consequences of the new alliance with China were significant, a more important immediate result of the new relationship was to strengthen the Vietminh military forces and give them the option of moving to the general counteroffensive, the projected third stage of their protracted struggle against the French.[31] In April 1950, Ho Chi Minh journeyed to Beijing, where he concluded a lend-lease arrangement with the Chinese and much more.[32] In addition to "lending" them modern weapons, the Chinese sent instructors and technicians to Viet Bac to train the Vietnamese in the use of their new weapons and tactics. By the fall of 1950, General Giap had 60,000 regulars organized into five infantry divisions. All of his soldiers were indoctrinated, disciplined, well-trained, and armed with modern weapons. The Vietminh Army had been transformed. The army that French professional soldiers once dismissed had become a formidable modern fighting force.

While Chinese assistance had strengthened the Vietnamese immensely, the French war effort sagged. It was further hampered by declining popular support at home. In the eyes of many French citizens, the Indochina War had become too expensive. They did not support it or want it to continue. Responding to the war's growing unpopularity, the French government refused to send conscripts to fight in the war and also reduced the number of French troops in Vietnam by nearly 10,000. When Giap took the offensive in 1950, French forces had to face vastly enhanced Vietminh units with fewer troops.

Giap's objectives were to clear out a string of French garrisons that reached into the northern countryside along the Chinese frontier. The principal garrison was at Dong Khe, which fell to the Vietminh on September 16, 1950.[33] The loss of Dong Khe exposed all the other French outposts to attack. Giap's forces attacked them one by one using fourteen infantry and three artillery battalions. Within three weeks, they were all either overrun or evacuated. The French lost over 6,000 men and they abandoned huge stockpiles of weapons, ammunition, medical supplies, and foodstuffs. Vietminh forces drove the French out of northern Tonkin and pushed them back into the coastal enclaves. "The French had suffered their greatest colonial defeat since Montcalm had died at Quebec."[34]

Giap's border offensive during the fall of 1950 represented a major turning point in the First Indochina War. For the first time, the Vietminh had attacked and defeated sizable units of a modern European army. Vietminh troops were now positioned to invade the strategic Red River Delta with its large population and rich rice harvests. They also had unrestricted access to China and its resources, and growing prospects for aid from the Soviet Union. Most of all, the Vietminh had seized the tactical initiative in the war.[35] Worried French officials had to confront the possibility that they could be beaten militarily by their former colonial subjects.

A Developing French-American Partnership

Because the Indochina conflict was only one of several national revolutions occurring simultaneously in Southeast Asia, from Washington's vantage point, that economically and strategically significant region appeared to be one of the globe's most volatile areas.[36] In 1946, Washington supported some Asian nationalists.

The U.S. officials pressured the British to grant India independence and leaned even harder on the Dutch to get out of Indonesia.

However, the Cold War imperatives increasingly drove Truman's approach to Southeast Asia. Whatever remained of Washington's enthusiasm for self-determination in Indochina quickly evaporated in the wake of the emergence of an avowed Communist revolutionary leading the Vietnamese effort to drive out the French. When the French rejected Ho Chi Minh's efforts to achieve a settlement that would permit his government to retain at least some autonomy and war erupted, it was the First Indochina War that impelled the United States toward its initial political commitments in Indochina.

Although the Truman administration had supported the return of the French to Indochina following the defeat of the Japanese, Washington was nevertheless alarmed by the outbreak of war in 1946. Although pro-French, Washington sent representatives to Vietnam who met with Ho Chi Minh and French officials in an effort to avert an all-out war. The Americans made at best a halfhearted effort because Ho's Communist credentials and the U.S. concern for French sensibilities precluded a genuine effort at mediation. But their failed efforts to avert a war in Vietnam more deeply involved the Americans in that turbulent region.

Initially, the U.S. officials were skeptical of French efforts to retrieve their Indochinese empire. They did not believe that a return to colonialism was feasible or desirable. However, the Secretary of State Dean Acheson was appalled at the prospect of an independent Vietnamese nation under the control of Communist revolutionaries led by Ho Chi Minh.

The U.S. officials also understood that Ho personified Vietnamese anticolonial nationalism and they knew that he had repeatedly appealed to the Americans for protection from French imperialism. Nevertheless, Washington believed that it was in the best interests of the United States to prevent a

Communist revolution from occurring in Indochina, which they equated with advancing the imperial interests of the Soviets and Chinese.[37]

The U.S. policy makers confronted a dilemma in Indochina in the late 1940s. On the one hand, they rejected reimposing colonialism as neither desirable nor possible. On the other hand, they rejected a French military withdrawal that would leave chaos and terroristic activities in its wake and open the way to a Communist takeover in Vietnam. Not wanting the French either to win or get out, the State Department officials began a search to find an elusive third force in Vietnam politics: leaders who possessed authentic nationalist credentials and were neither Communist stooges nor French puppets.[38]

At the outset of the Cold War with the Soviet Union in 1946 and 1947, the Truman administration pursued a Euro-centered foreign policy premised on the view that Soviet expansionism across war-torn Europe represented the principal threat to American national interests. In March 1947, the president had proclaimed the Truman Doctrine, which committed the United States to a policy of containing Communism in Europe. Within Western Europe, France was the focus of the U.S. concerns in the late 1940s because it had a war-shattered economy, an unstable government, and a popular Communist Party. The U.S. officials feared that the Communists could legally come to power in France.

Committed to keeping France within the Free World orbit, the United States provided France with political and economic support during the late 1940s. Part of this support took the form of leaving the French a free hand in Indochina. Between 1946 and 1949, the official U.S. position on the Franco-Vietminh War was one of neutrality. Covertly, the United States furnished the French with substantial amounts of financial and military assistance.[39] In late 1946, Washington made $160 million available to the French for use in Vietnam. In September 1948, the U.S. ambassador to France privately told French officials that Washington would consider it appropriate for the French to spend a portion of their Marshall Plan funds on military operations in Indochina.[40] American Indochina policy during the late 1940s was hostage to the much more important commitment of building up postwar France to prevent a possible Communist takeover in that crucial European country.

Just as it profoundly altered the political and strategic situation in Indochina, the Chinese revolution brought about major changes in America's Indochina policy that, in turn, were components of a general reorientation of the U.S. global policy during 1949 and 1950. The French, facing both a much more formidable foe armed and trained with Chinese assistance and the loss back home of popular support for their colonial war, began requesting direct assistance from the United States. France warned the U.S. officials that without greater amounts of American military and economic assistance they could lose the war and would have to leave Indochina. They found a receptive audience in Washington, where President Truman and his advisers were reappraising American foreign policy in the light of the Soviets' successful testing of an atomic device and the Maoist victory in China.

In the aftermath of these two shattering blows to American prestige and power, President Truman and his advisers convinced that the recent Chinese revolution accorded with Stalinist ambitions for imposing Communism worldwide, looked at a world divided into two hostile camps. In his public utterances, Truman interpreted this political bipolarity in highly charged terms. In Truman's Manichaean view, the complex conflicts of interest between the Western powers and the Communist nations pitted the forces of light against the forces of darkness in a mortal struggle for control of the political future of the planet.[41] Fearing a shift in the balance of power in favor of the Communists and dreading the prospect of global war between nuclear-armed nations, the Truman administration initiated plans to increase American military capabilities, shore up the defense of Western Europe, and extend the containment policy to the Far East.[42]

Convinced that Europe faced grave danger from an expansionist Soviet Union now empowered with nuclear weapons, the United States moved to shore up French defenses and to propose rearming West Germany. Fearful lest the French not approve the creation of a European Defense Community (EDC), a plan for integrating French and West German forces into a multinational army, the United States met French demands for direct American support for their Indochina campaign. The Truman administration implemented a program of direct military and economic assistance for the French colonial war in Indochina in the hopes that such support would induce the French to cooperate with the U.S. strategic designs for Europe and would also free up French resources for the newly created North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

America Extends Containment to Southeast Asia

At the same time the United States was committing itself to underwriting the security of Western Europe, Washington came to the conclusion that, in the aftermath of the Chinese revolution, the strategic security of Southeast Asia itself had become an important U.S. national interest. From the American perspective, it appeared that Southeast Asia, with its explosive mix of declining European imperial powers and unstable newly independent states, was vulnerable to pressure from both China and the USSR. Loss of these rich former European colonies to the Communists would close Western Europe out of major markets. Cutting off sources of vital raw materials such as rubber, tin, and oil would retard Europe's postwar recovery. Loss of the region would also set back the economic recovery of Japan, the nation that had become America's principal Far Eastern ally following the Maoist revolution in China. Japan had quickly morphed from vanquished foe to strategic and economic anchor of America's newly expanded containment policy. America also needed prosperous trading partners in Europe and the Pacific Rim that could earn the foreign exchange convertible to dollars needed to buy the exports that would help sustain the U.S. economic growth and prosperity in the postwar era.

According to the emerging American Southeast Asian policy calculus, the U.S. officials regarded Indochina, particularly Vietnam, as the key to the security of the entire region. If Ho Chi Minh's revolution, now backed by both the Chinese and the Soviets, succeeded in driving the French out of Vietnam, it would open the rest of Southeast Asia to Communist penetration.[43] It was the application of the domino theory to the First Indochina War following the Maoist triumph in China that greatly raised the American stakes in Indochina. It transformed what had been a comparatively minor appendage of the U.S. Euro-centered goal of shoring up France after World War II into a major foreign policy commitment in its own right.

The domino theory reflected the American failure to appreciate the power of Asian nationalisms, and simultaneously it revealed a tendency to exaggerate the appeal of European ideologies to Asian nationalists who possessed their own distinctive histories and highly evolved cultures. The U.S. officials assumed that as Vietnam went, so went the rest of the Third World. The conviction that "any single state could dominate so vast a region or that its diverse inhabitants might embrace a single ideology now seems one of the strangest artifacts of Cold War thinking."[44]

Washington feared that if Vietnam fell to the Communists, so would Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, and Malaysia. Japan, Indonesia, even the Philippines and the Indian subcontinent, would be vulnerable. In time, possibly Australia and New Zealand could fall to the Communist juggernaut. Americans feared that severe economic problems and political instability in many of these Asian countries in the aftermath of war and decolonization made Communism appealing to people and undermined their ability to resist aggression.

By 1950, Indochina had become one of the front lines in the global Cold War. In American eyes, the French were no longer merely fighting to reimpose colonialism on the Vietnamese, but had become an integral part of the Western world's concerted effort to contain Chinese and Soviet Communism in Europe and Asia. The United States had to "draw the line" in Southeast Asia by providing economic assistance to friendly governments and helping to reconstruct the Japanese economy. Now that China had been removed from the capitalist orbit, Southeast Asia would be crucial for the Japanese future, as a source of raw materials and as a market for manufactured goods.

In addition to developments in Europe and Asia, domestic political considerations, particularly the growth of domestic anti-Communism, exerted a strong influence on the Truman administration's new foreign policy design. Republicans accused Truman's administration of being "soft on Communism"; that is, they accused these officials of not taking the tough, effective measures that they insisted were needed to contain the spread of Communism abroad and to squelch "Red" subversion at home.[45]

The Maoist triumph in China gave domestic anti-Communists an enormous boost. Many Republicans and some Democrats charged President Truman, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, and other high administration officials with the "loss of China." Jiang fell, these critics asserted, because the

Truman administration did not provide the Chinese Nationalists with enough military and economic support. Senators Robert Taft of Ohio and William Knowland of California led the Republican onslaught against the Truman administration for losing China. Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, the most reckless of the Republican firebrands who went after the Truman administration, accused Acheson of allowing known Communists to hold important policy-making positions within the State Department.

Truman feared that if his administration did not energetically back the French in Vietnam and they subsequently lost their war, the senatorial wolf pack would be after him again, this time for the "loss of Indochina." Such an outcome would cost both him and the Democrats popular support and probably the next election. This domestic political factor that bedeviled Truman and Acheson became "one of the most powerful and enduring factors shaping American policy toward Vietnam."[46] During the early and mid-1960s, the domestic politics of anti-Communism strongly influenced the foreign policy decisions of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations that gradually committed the United States to its war in Indochina.[47]

The French made it easier for the United States to support directly its Indochina War by creating the Bao Dai puppet regime. In December 1949, Paris finalized the accords to govern the new "Associated States of Vietnam." It enabled the French to claim that they were fighting to preserve a non-Communist Vietnamese nation from the forces of international Communism. Although Bao Dai remained a weak and unpopular ruler, the U.S. officials claimed publicly that the French were offering the Vietnamese people a genuine nationalistic alternative to the revolutionary cohorts of Ho Chi Minh. Privately, they doubted that the French would either grant Bao Dai any real power or win the war against the Vietminh.

On February 8, 1950, the United States formally took sides in the Franco-Vietminh War when it extended diplomatic recognition to Bao Dai's "Associated States of Vietnam." Truman had brought the United States into the war in Indochina. The United States had completely abandoned its official anticolonial policy of World War II for one supporting a French neocolonial state in Vietnam.

During the first few months of 1950, the U.S. State Department planners began putting together a program of direct economic and military aid for Indochina. In April, Washington officially adopted National Security Council Document Number 64 (NSC-64). NSC-64 expressed official thinking at the highest levels and demonstrated how Cold War considerations crucially shaped the way Truman and his senior advisers responded to the Indochina War.

Washington's primary objective was to promote national leaders who could rally non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists and nullify the appeal of the Vietminh. NSC-64 also revealed doubts about the ability of the French, even with American help, to defeat the Vietminh. The authors of NSC-64 worried that Chinese Communist troops or Communist-supplied arms from outside

Vietnam would strengthen the Vietminh cause. Summing up a portentous situation, the report urged Washington to take all practical measures to prevent further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia.

The U.S. envoys on the ground in Vietnam were even more skeptical of the viability of the Bao Dai government and the struggling French war effort. But Washington took these "fateful steps toward involvement because officials considered alternative courses of action even more perilous." The Americans feared that if they did not lend assistance, the French would surely lose and that outcome would be ruinous to the U.S. interests in Southeast Asia and ruinous to the Truman administration's domestic political interests.[48]

The American decision to aid openly the anti-Communist forces fighting in Indochina not only drew Americans more directly into Vietnam affairs but also brought Washington face-to-face with what would prove to be the central dilemma of its long involvement with Vietnam: "How to foster an independent Vietnamese government while providing the sort of aid likely to make it more dependent on American charity."[49] Repeatedly over the next 25 years, Vietnam would require infusions of military and economic assistance to stave off an imminent Communist victory. But every time the United States came to their rescue, the non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists that we saved became ever more dependent on the patronage of the United States for their continuing survival. Such increasing dependency on a foreign power ensured that they would never be accepted as legitimate rulers by most Vietnamese.

By the time America had committed itself to directly supporting the French military effort, the Vietminh armed forces had gained the strategic initiative and had taken the offensive. The revolutionary nationalists controlled two-thirds of the land and the people of Vietnam. The Chinese were providing Vietminh forces with substantial amounts of modern weaponry, and Chinese staff officers were helping General Giap plan his campaigns. The war had become unpopular in France, and the French government was wavering in its support of the war.

The unanticipated outbreak of the Korean War in late June 1950, when North Korean armies suddenly invaded South Korea to try to unify Korea under Communist control, confirmed the Truman administration's belief that the Soviet Union was an expansionist power intent on dominating all of Asia. Truman and his senior advisers assumed that the North Korean troops were Soviet proxies and that Beijing also marched to Stalin's orders. Chinese intervention in the Korean War in late November 1950 raised the specter in Washington and Paris that Chinese troops could also invade Vietnam in support of the Vietminh revolutionary forces.

Washington linked the French war against the Vietnamese Communists with the U.S. war against the North Korean and Chinese Communists; they were twin fronts in a larger campaign to save Asia from Communist conquest. Initially, American support for the French in the Indochina War derived from American efforts to shore up France after the devastation and humiliation of World War II. With the success of the Chinese Communist revolution and the

outbreak of war in Korea, support for the French in the war now took on a far larger purpose: stopping the spread of Communism in Asia. The Chinese revolution and the onset of the Korean War probably made America's course of action in Indochina irreversible.

In the late summer of 1950, the Truman administration sent the first U.S. aid package to Vietnam. **The Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG)** under the command of General Francis Brink arrived in Saigon in September. The MAAG officials were to coordinate the aid program and instruct the French, and, later, the Vietnamese, in the use of American weapons and tactics. At the same time, the U.S. officials inaugurated a program of economic and technical assistance for the Bao Dai government. Gradually, MAAG officials established military programs, helped to build a Vietnamese national army, and coordinated U.S. military aid with French military operations. MAAG "would play a critical role in creating an enduring American foothold in Vietnam, and, eventually, replacing French military advisers."[50]

During 1951 and 1952, the United States provided increasing amounts of military and economic aid to sustain the French war effort. By the end of Truman's presidency, the U.S. aid to the French war effort had cost nearly $1 billion. With the United States backing the French and China backing the Vietminh, the First Indochina War had become an international affair. It was conjoined with the Korean War, and both were perceived as major Cold War ideological contests—the defense of Freedom against an encroaching Communism.

The French also feared a Chinese invasion of northern Vietnam akin to the Chinese intervention in Korea. Knowing their forces could not cope with the Chinese should they come in, the French sought Washington's assurance that American troops would be sent to Indochina to fight the Chinese if they entered Vietnam. Coordinating their plans with the British, the U.S. officials agreed to respond strongly to a Chinese incursion in Vietnam. Americans would contribute naval and air support to the defense of Indochina. They would interdict lines of communication, blockade the China coast, and if necessary, in conjunction with the British, attack military targets in China.[51]

The Americans found themselves repeatedly frustrated by their French partners. Despite receiving large amounts of the U.S. military aid, the French forces could never reverse the course of the war. To defeat a guerrilla army, an invader force must have overwhelming military superiority and strong popular support. The French never had either. They paid lip service to the cause of Vietnamese nationalism, but they kept the Bao Dai regime tightly under their control, thus preventing it from ever becoming a credible alternative to the revolutionary nationalists. The French also hampered the U.S. aid programs that furnished economic and technical assistance to the Vietnamese people, because they did not want the Vietnamese people to know that the Americans were helping them and they resented efforts by the Americans to gain more influence over the French war effort.

Fears of Communist expansion and French threats that they might have to withdraw from Indochina if the United States did not increase its military assistance kept ever-growing amounts of American military and economic aid flowing into Vietnam from 1950 to 1953. The French had succeeded in portraying Korea and Indochina as two separate fronts in the same war to stem Communist expansionism. However, the Truman administration was still committed to a political solution, Vietnamese independence, not a military solution, which they did not believe was a realistic possibility. The U.S. influence in Vietnam expanded along with its economic, military, and cultural programs. MAAG continued to expand. Agencies that focused on economic and technical aid proliferated. The most important of these agencies was the Special Mission for Technical and Economic Aid (STEM), which worked to build up the Bao Dai regime. The French resented these U.S. agencies and feared loss of cultural and political control over the Vietnamese people.[52]

It was the U.S. decision to support the French war in Vietnam that drew the Americans into their "initial political commitments in Indochina."[53] Here lay the roots of the subsequent long American involvement in Southeast Asia that culminated in the American Vietnam War. By stages, the American commitment in Indochina escalated under a succession of presidencies. President Truman made the initial decision to support the French war effort. President Eisenhower made the decision to intervene in southern Vietnam to replace the French and support the efforts of Ngo Dinh Diem to establish a non-Communist state in order to prevent the further spread of Communism in Indochina. President Kennedy escalated the American effort and inaugurated a small-scale secret U.S. war in South Vietnam. President Johnson made a series of fateful decisions in 1965 to fight a major U.S. war in Vietnam.

Crucial decisions made by subsequent administrations to increase American involvement in Vietnam, including eventually taking over and fighting a major war in that country, were always made as responses to immediate crises. They were made to stave off imminent disaster, that is, a Communist victory, which was always viewed within the larger context of the ongoing Cold War. To the U.S. officials, Vietnam was always about much more than Vietnam. A Communist victory in Vietnam was always understood to be a significant victory for international Communism and a major defeat for the United States and the Free World that would threaten vital U.S. national interests. Domestic political considerations were always an integral part of the Vietnam calculus. Presidents viewed a Communist victory in Vietnam as likely to cause fatal damage to their party's cause in the next elections, and they always had elections to worry about.

These presidents did not often seek advice from Congress, nor was there extensive public debate about Vietnam at any stage of the gradually expanding U.S. involvement in that region. Most Americans never concerned themselves with Vietnam as an initial commitment to support the French efforts in the First Indochina War grew incrementally over a lengthy period into a major American war in Southeast Asia. Vietnam did not become an important

political issue in this country until 1965, and did not become a source of major controversy until 1967, nearly 20 years after American involvement in that region had begun. When Americans awakened one day in the summer of 1965 to find their country fighting a major war in a remote part of the world that most citizens could not find on a map, they had no inkling of the two-decades-long preparation time or the policies or the events that had slowly drawn the United States into war.

The Road to Dien Bien Phu

As the Truman administration, responding to the Soviet possession of nuclear weapons, the Chinese revolution, the Korean War, and the First Indochina War, devised its expanded foreign policy based on containing Communism around the world, the war in Indochina also expanded. The Vietminh offensive during the fall of 1950 forced the French to confront a hard choice. They could either increase their military forces substantially and seek a military victory over the Vietminh, or they could try for a negotiated settlement with their stubborn foes. Neither choice appealed to French officials, and they tried to avoid the dilemma by calling on the United States for military aid and by creating a Vietnamese national army to supplement the French forces. American aid was soon forthcoming, and "the new Army of the Republic of Vietnam began to take shape."[54] In addition, the French brought in their best field commander to take charge of the war, General de Lattre de Tassigny, who infused the French forces with new determination and confidence. He viewed controlling the Red River Delta as the key to winning the war, and he built up French defenses in that region by stringing a series of concrete forts along the boundaries of the delta to prevent infiltration of this strategic region by Vietminh forces.

General Giap, having concluded that the time had come to launch the third stage of the protracted war against the French imperialists, opened a general offensive in January 1951 in the western end of the delta. Two Vietminh infantry divisions, 22,000 troops altogether, attacked the provincial capital of Vinh Yeh, which was defended by a force of 10,000 French. In two days of hard fighting in which Giap employed a series of human wave attacks, the outnumbered French beat back the Vietminh and inflicted heavy casualties on them by using artillery and air attacks. During the ensuing months, the Vietminh attacked other towns at the edges of the delta, and the outnumbered French fought them off every time. Giap called off the failed offensive in June after having lost about 15,000 troops either killed or wounded.[55]

Clearly, Giap's decision to go on the offensive had been premature, and his soldiers paid dearly for his tactical blunder. The campaigns against de Lattre's soldiers showed that the French were still full of fight and that there were serious weaknesses in the DRV Army's ability to fight set-piece battles. But the failed Vietminh offensive in 1951 did not alter the basic strategic situation. The DRV forces significantly outnumbered the French; they could

marshal 225,000 troops against approximately 150,000 French main forces deployed throughout Indochina.[56] The Vietminh controlled the countryside, while the French forces remained in defensive positions. Substantial amounts of the U.S. military aid, the creation of the Vietnamese National Army (the forerunner of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)), the presence of General de Lattre, and the bloody losses inflicted on the Vietminh troops could not turn the tide of war in favor of the French.

Between 1951 and 1953, the Vietminh launched several attacks primarily in northern Vietnam. There was correspondingly little fighting in central and southern Vietnam. French pacification efforts were relatively successful in Cochin China, and the Vietminh forces consequently had a much thinner base of popular support in Saigon and its vicinity. In the north, the DRV forces retained the strategic initiative; the French remained in defensive positions, although occasionally de Lattre would send out a strike force to hit the Vietminh. The normal pattern was for the Vietminh to choose the time and place for an assault. They probed for weak spots, attacked in force, inflicted as many casualties as they could, and then broke off the engagement and retreated to their sanctuaries in Viet Bac. They used protracted warfare strategies to wear down the French by keeping pressure on them, undermining their morale, and weakening their political support in France.

One of the major campaigns fought during this phase of the war took place in the vicinity of Hoa Binh beginning November 14, 1951. Hoa Binh was a town about 50 miles west of Hanoi, outside the de Lattre line of defense. It sat astride a major communications route of the Vietminh in the hills to the west of the Red River Delta. If the French could hold Hoa Binh, they would seriously hamper the ability of Vietminh main forces to mount attacks in the delta regions, and they would extend the French defense perimeter 25 miles west.

But Giap, determined to drive the French out of the strategic site, committed nearly all of his regular forces to the battle. The Hoa Binh campaign raged for three months and included many intense battles. Both sides deployed modern U.S. weapons. The weapons had been furnished to the French under the U.S. aid program; the Vietminh had acquired theirs from the Chinese, and through theft and capture. Giap sent wave after wave of attackers against the French positions. These attacks gradually wore the French down, and they were forced to withdraw from Hoa Binh in mid-February.[57] Vietminh losses were severe; their repeated use of "human wave" attacks cost them dearly. However, the French had once more been the heavier losers. Six months after their most important victory to date, Vietminh political cadres had organized most of the villages of the western delta. More importantly, the Vietminh used the Hoa Binh campaign as a dress rehearsal for a future decisive battle.

During the years 1951–53, as the war raged on, the Vietminh political cadres continued their efforts to organize the Vietnamese people in the cities and coastal enclaves still under French control. The DRV leaders had always emphasized the crucial role that political organization played in their revolution to rid Vietnam of the French presence and implement their socialist

program. They hoped to foment popular uprisings in the cities that would further weaken the declining French grip on Indochina. But Vietminh organizers found little support for their cause among the urban populations.[58] Among the urban classes that they assumed might share an affinity for their movement—intellectuals, students, and workers—they often encountered either opposition or indifference. Disappointed, Vietminh leaders concluded that the major political base of the Vietnamese revolution would have to remain the peasants in the countryside.

To solidify their support among the poorer classes of peasants and to strike against landlords who opposed their program, the Vietminh implemented land reform in areas under their control, modeling it after the Maoist program implemented during the Chinese civil war. In Tonkin and Cochin China, thousands of peasants received land.[59] Land reform strengthened the Vietminh political base in the countryside, weakened the landlord classes, advanced the Vietminh social revolution, and foreshadowed the large-scale land reform programs undertaken in North Vietnam during the mid-1950s, following the defeat of the French.

In June 1953, Joseph Laniel became the Prime Minister of France. His government instructed General Henri Navarre, the commander of the French forces in Indochina, to stabilize the situation in order to place the French in a better position for negotiating a settlement of the war. By the summer of 1953, the DRV forces totaled 350,000 armed troops, organized into eight infantry and one armored division. The size of the Vietminh army increased daily as new troops arrived from China where they had been undergoing military training and political indoctrination.[60] French force levels, deployed over the whole of Vietnam, were not sufficient to counter this large and growing DRV army. The new Vietnamese National Army had little incentive to fight for the Bao Dai government. Navarre knew that this inept army could not effectively supplement the French expeditionary forces. In France, by the spring of 1953, public opposition to the war was widespread; many politicians were openly calling for negotiations to end the conflict that its critics called *la guerre sale* (the dirty war). Washington, fearing that the French might falter and that Indochina would be lost to the Communists, was putting intense pressure on the French government to step up its war effort and to grant the Bao Dai government more control over its own affairs.

Feeling the pressure both from his government and the Americans, General Navarre developed a plan to try to improve the French military position in Indochina before any negotiations began. The first phase involved regaining control of the Red River Delta. Navarre attacked Vietminh strongholds in the western delta. Following a strategy that had been worked out the previous January, Giap did not challenge the French forces; his troops retreated in the face of Navarre's assaults. French troops regained delta provinces that had fallen under Vietminh control.

Washington, although skeptical that the Navarre Plan could succeed, felt no choice but to support it. The U.S. officials feared that the French might

give up and pull out of Indochina, thus forcing the Americans to deal with the Vietminh insurgency. By the summer of 1953, it appeared that the maintenance of the French war in Vietnam was becoming more important to the Americans than it was to the French.

While French forces reoccupied parts of the delta, Giap's forces ranged widely over northwest Vietnam and in the spring of 1953 sent several regiments into Laos, where they threatened a lightly defended French-supported regime. The Vietminh foray into Laos was launched from the remote village of Dien Bien Phu, located in a mountainous region in northwestern Vietnam just ten miles from the Laotian border. Giap sent his forces into Laos because he knew that political necessity would force the French to protect that part of Indochina. They would not risk the spread of revolution or the fall of Laos to the Vietminh. Giap also knew that the French would have to extend their supply lines across a lengthy stretch of Vietminh-controlled territory to defend Laos.[61]

Battle of Dien Bien Phu, 1954

General Navarre, concerned for the safety of Laos and wanting to disrupt the Vietminh offensive in northwest Tonkin, decided to take a strategic gamble. In mid-November 1953, he sent his paratroopers to occupy strong points, thereby blocking a major Vietminh invasion route into Laos and cutting off their major supply route from China. He also intended to tie down a sizable number of Giap's forces to keep them out of the Red River Delta. He chose a site by the village of Dien Bien Phu that lay 170 miles northwest of Hanoi. Nearby were two airstrips located in a broad valley surrounded by hills and mountains.

Navarre assumed that Giap would be forced to attack the new fortress. Knowing that the French would have control of the air over the valley and that he would install artillery at various strong points, Navarre anticipated that his forces would annihilate the attacking Vietminh soldiers. He intended to force the Vietminh to fight a set-piece battle at a place of his own choosing and then inflict a significant defeat on them that would improve the French military position in Indochina and rekindle domestic French support for the war. General Navarre fatally underestimated Vietminh artillery and resupply capabilities. The site he chose, Dien Bien Phu, would soon pass into history as a symbol of French futility and defeat in Indochina

During his military campaigns in 1952 and 1953, General Giap had learned from his mistakes and had become a seasoned battlefield commander. He did not respond immediately to the French thrust into the valley. He postponed massive frontal assaults until after French defenses and morale had been weakened. Meanwhile, he encircled the fortress and kept the French forces tied down in the trap that they had set for themselves.

Navarre, while building up his defenses at Dien Bien Phu, also launched the second phase of his plan to regain the military initiative in Indochina, a series of operations in northern Annam called *Operation Atlante.* These attacks were

designed to clear the Vietminh forces out of north-central Vietnam[62] in order to permit the pacification of this major rice-growing region. Giap chose not to commit any main force units to challenge *Operation Atlante*, relying instead on local guerrillas to disrupt French efforts to pacify these key coastal provinces.

While the DRV and French forces battled each other throughout northern and central Vietnam during the fall of 1953, both sides also moved toward negotiating a settlement. Prime Minister Laniel indicated his interest in finding a compromise solution to the conflict. Ho Chi Minh said that he would like to hear the French proposals.[63] In February 1954, the foreign ministers of the major powers scheduled an international peace conference to convene in Geneva in April to consider proposals for the unification of Korea in the aftermath of the armistice agreement that had ended the Korean War the previous August. Over American objections, the foreign ministers added the settlement of the Indochina War to the proposed conference agenda. News of an impending political settlement to the long war energized both sides. Generals Giap and Navarre intensified their preparations for the decisive battle of the First Indochina War.

Shortly after the announcement that a peace conference would be meeting in May to settle the war, General Giap decided that the moment had come to attack Dien Bien Phu. The main objective was to inflict a decisive military defeat on the French that would coincide with the opening of the Geneva Conference in order to maximize the DRV's leverage at the bargaining table. If the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu fell, the Vietminh would retain the military initiative. A defeat at Dien Bien Phu would probably destroy the remaining French will to continue the war.[64] In the aftermath of a decisive Vietminh victory, the Vietminh leaders believed that the war-weary French might abandon Vietnam.

Giap was confident that he and his staff had devised a strategy that would bring the Vietminh forces victory at Dien Bien Phu. He planned a siege of the French positions. He also planned to destroy the airstrips, thereby cutting off French supply sources and preventing them from bringing in reinforcements. He placed artillery and heavy mortars in the hills overlooking the fortress. Vietminh gunners would bombard the French and wear them down. Infantry assaults would seize their strong points one by one until their center was taken. Giap calculated that control of the heights surrounding the valley gave the Vietminh a decisive advantage. On the eve of battle, "Dien Bien Phu was tightly encircled by a vice of at least four communist divisions."[65]

For the battle, Giap deployed over 50,000 main force troops, another 50,000 support forces, and 200,000 workers to man his supply lines. The Vietnamese were also joined by an estimated 20,000–30,000 Chinese workers, technicians, mechanics, truck drivers, advisers, and artillerymen. In addition to personnel, the Chinese supplied ammunition, weapons, gasoline, and foodstuffs. Chinese staff officers also helped Giap plan and implement his tactics. The Soviets also provided aid to the Vietminh forces. The Soviets furnished trucks and artillery, and they also established an Eastern Bloc aid pool to

support the DRV war effort.[66] Giap and his staff took three months to prepare the battlefield in meticulous detail. Soldiers spent weeks rehearsing their roles in the impending operations.

The French had a scant 12,000 troops under Colonel Christian de Castries dug in at Dien Bien Phu to face the Vietmnh forces. They had arrayed themselves in a coordinated series of strongly defended areas. The main ones were clustered around the larger airstrip; away from these main points, there were four other defended areas, each guarding an approach to their center.[67]

The Battle of Dien Bien Phu began on March 13, 1954, at sunset, when Vietminh artillery placed in the surrounding mountainsides opened fire on the French positions below. Vietminh infantry also assaulted one of the outlying strong points that first night. Fighting was fierce, and the Vietminh sustained heavy losses. Within 48 hours, Vietminh artillery and mortars had shut down both airstrips. Thereafter, the French defenders could only be reinforced and supplied by parachute drop. Vietminh artillery continually shelled the French positions.

Navarre had not anticipated that the Vietminh could bring in the firepower that they did. He had counted on French counter-fire and air forces silencing the enemy's artillery. But the French planes could not destroy the Vietminh guns, because they had been placed in camouflaged tunnels dug deep into the mountains and they were moved around constantly. French flyers were also hampered by dense clouds and fog that continually enshrouded the Vietminh mountain redoubts. French aircraft were also unable to interdict Giap's supply system. With a 4:1 advantage in firepower and a functioning supply system, the Vietminh retained crucial tactical advantages. Two days after it started, "the battle of Dien Bien Phu already was lost."[68]

In early April, Giap launched a series of infantry assaults in an effort to overrun the outer defenses. The French fought them off and inflicted heavy losses on the attacking Vietnamese. Following the failure of his assault tactics, Giap resorted to tunneling. Vietminh sappers tunneled their way toward the French positions. They dug night and day. The French perimeter steadily shrank in the face of the steady advances of the Vietminh sappers. French artillery, mortars, explosive charges, and infantry counterattacks delayed, but could never halt, the tunneling process.

Night and day the Vietminh soldiers came in waves, unrelentingly. The French defenders fought hard and inflicted heavy casualties on the attackers. On May 7, the Vietminh 308th broke through into the center of the French defenses. The next day, Dien Bien Phu fell. The French had lost about 7,500 men, killed or wounded. About 10,000 French soldiers were marched off into captivity, over half of whom perished while they were prisoners of war. During the 56-day battle, the Vietminh sustained an estimated 23,000 casualties killed and wounded.[69] A determined Vietminh force had destroyed a French colonial army in the heart of Southeast Asia.

The Vietminh had won the decisive battle of the war. According to Bernard Fall, the leading historian of the First Indochina War, the more than

10,000 soldiers on both sides who died in that bitter, bloody battle "may have done more to shape the fate of the world than the soldiers at Agincourt, Waterloo, or Stalingrad." General Vo Nguyen Giap explained:

> A colonized people once it has risen up and is united in the struggle and determined to fight for its independence and peace, has the full power to defeat the strong aggressive army of an imperialist country.[70]

The day after the French surrendered at Dien Bien Phu, the Indochina phase of the Geneva Peace Conference began. As the delegates began negotiations at Geneva, the war raged on in Indochina. Pumped up by its great victory at Dien Bien Phu, the Vietminh army, looking for the kill, went after the remaining French forces. The French position in the Red River Delta had collapsed. 80,000 Vietminh guerrillas and four regiments of regulars roamed freely in this vital region. French forces withdrew to a restricted area around Hanoi and Haiphong. Thousands of French civilians evacuated northern Vietnam. Thousands of soldiers deserted the fledgling Vietnamese national army. About 80 percent of the country was now under Vietminh control. They held nearly all of Tonkin, most of Annam, and about half of Cochin China, including much of the rich Mekong River Delta. While the politicians talked at Geneva, the French Army battled for its life in Vietnam.

The French Appeal to Washington for Help

When the Battle of Dien Bien Phu was joined the afternoon of March 13, 1954, General Navarre evidently believed that his artillery and air power would deliver a victory to his forces. Within a few days, Navarre realized that Dien Bien Phu was doomed. With the airstrips closed down, he could not extract his soldiers from the beleaguered fortress. Neither could he adequately reinforce and supply his beleaguered force nor evacuate his wounded. He concluded that only massive air strikes by the U.S. bombers could save the defenders.

High French officials waited less than a week before traveling to Washington to seek help. General Paul Ely, the French Army Chief of Staff, led the French mission to America. He was joined by General Jean Valluy, the head of the French Component of NATO. They met with Admiral Arthur W. Radford, serving as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) for President Dwight Eisenhower.

Eisenhower and his energetic Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who had assumed office in January 1953, inherited Truman and Acheson's policies and problems in Indochina. They shared their predecessors' conviction that the fall of Indochina to the Communists would cause the loss of all Southeast Asia with disastrous political, economic, and strategic consequences for the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia. Eisenhower and Dulles

believed that a military solution, victory over the Vietminh, was attainable. But Paris knew, even if the U.S. officials did not, that the French position in Vietnam was growing desperate. They could no longer fully staff and maintain their forces in Vietnam much less rescue their army trapped at Dien Bien Phu and facing defeat.

President Eisenhower, for his part, in dealing with the French, had a mix of objectives that derived from his having to simultaneously craft policies to resuscitate their failing war in Indochina and to achieve the ambitious goals set by NATO to meet the threat Soviet military power posed to European security. The expansion of NATO forces required the rearming of West Germany, which frightened the French. To assuage French fears posed by a rearmed West Germany, NATO allies had come up with a formula for creating an EDC. While French officials met with their U.S. counterparts in Washington, the French National Assembly was debating whether to ratify the treaty creating the **European Defense Community (EDC)**.[71]

Eisenhower tried initially to infuse the sagging French war effort in Vietnam with new energy. He also tried to persuade the French to grant the Bao Dai government greater powers so it could become a genuine nationalistic alternative the Vietminh. Washington substantially increased the amount of military and economic aid going to the French and Bao Dai nationalists. The U.S. officials also expected to increase their influence over French policies in Indochina and its conduct of the war. Ike was disappointed to see that despite the large increase in the U.S. military and economic assistance, the French military situation continued to deteriorate, and the French efforts to strengthen Bao Dai's regime continued to founder.[72]

Eisenhower and Dulles discovered that they had little leverage with the French. Too much pressure from Washington to fight harder in Vietnam and the French might then refuse to join the EDC, undermining European unity and playing into the hands of the Soviet Union. The U.S. officials also understood that French manpower commitments to the Indochina War significantly reduced the number of soldiers available for NATO assignments or the hoped-for EDC.[73]

Following his meeting with Generals Ely and Valluy, Admiral Radford, fearing that Dien Bien Phu would soon fall to the Vietminh unless the United States intervened militarily, proposed a series of U.S. air strikes to save the beleaguered fortress. Code-named **Operation VULTURE**, the plan included possible use of tactical nuclear weapons. Two U.S. aircraft carriers, cruising off the Indochina coast, carried nuclear weapons, which would be available if requested.

Among the joint chiefs, only Air Force General Nathan F. Twining supported the proposed Operation VULTURE. The others warned that air intervention entailed many risks and could not save the French cause in Vietnam. Army Chief of Staff General Matthew Ridgway emphatically rejected Operation VULTURE. He warned President Eisenhower that air power could not win the Franco-Vietminh War and that the U.S. ground forces

might have to be sent to fight. He also told Eisenhower that if the U.S. ground troops were sent into that war, they "would have to fight under the most difficult logistic circumstances and in a uniquely inhospitable terrain."[74] Influenced by Ridgway's caveats, Eisenhower ruled out the use of U.S. ground forces. With the bitter experiences of the stalemated Korean War, which had ended only the previous year, still fresh in his mind, Eisenhower was not about to risk another quagmire.

Eisenhower would not consider intervening in Vietnam unilaterally. He insisted that any intervention would have to be a multilateral affair joined by America's European allies, mainly the British. None were forthcoming. Eisenhower also sought a bipartisan congressional resolution of support for any action America might undertake in Vietnam. On April 3, 1954, Dulles and Radford met with the congressional leadership. Both Democratic and Republican senate leaders told him that without firm commitments from the U.S. allies, especially the British, to join any proposed intervention, they could not support it. On the same day, the French officially requested the U.S. air strikes to save them from defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Two days later, Eisenhower formally rejected the French request.[75]

For the next three weeks, while the battle for Dien Bien Phu raged on and disaster crept ever closer to the French cause, the United States tried to enlist Allied support for some form of united action in Vietnam. President Eisenhower wrote a long personal letter to his friend Prime Minister Winston Churchill, urging him to join an Allied coalition to block Communist expansion in Southeast Asia.

Eisenhower also held a much publicized press conference on April 7, during which he tried to rally public support for a possible U.S. military intervention in Vietnam. He emphasized the crucial geopolitical stakes that the United States and the Free World had in the outcome of the Indochina War. He made two major arguments on behalf of Allied interests: first, he stressed that Indochina was a major source of raw materials, such as tin and rubber. Second, for the first time he expressed what became known as the **domino theory.** He stated that if Indochina fell to the Communists, the rest of Southeast Asia would fall very quickly, like a "row of dominoes." Japan, our most important ally in the Far East, would be threatened; American strategic interests would be undermined: "So the possible consequences of the loss are just incalculable to the free world."[76]

Despite the pleas and pressures emanating from Washington, British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, speaking for Churchill, rebuffed the U.S. request to join its crusade to prevent a Communist victory in Vietnam. The British did not share the American faith in the domino theory, nor did they share Washington's belief that the loss of Indochina would threaten other members of the international community of nations. They also had no desire to become involved in what they saw as a lost cause. The British also believed that outside military intervention on the eve of the Geneva Conference would wreck any prospect for a negotiated settlement of the war and might provoke a

Chinese intervention into Indochina. Churchill looked to improving relations with China and the Soviet Union and perhaps resolving some of the leading issues of the Cold War.[77]

Even if some agreement for intervention could have been worked out between the British and the Americans, the terms on which Washington would consider intervening in April 1954 were unacceptable to the French. President Eisenhower probably wanted to intervene militarily to try to save the French at Dien Bien Phu, but only if they would reject a negotiated settlement and agree to continue fighting the Indochina War. The French would also have to grant the Americans a greater role in formulating strategy and training indigenous forces. Further, the French would have to agree to Vietnamese demands for complete independence.

The exigencies of French domestic politics required that they reject all the strings attached to the U.S. aid proposal.[78] They would accept losing at Dien Bien Phu and take their chances on obtaining an acceptable negotiated settlement at Geneva, rather than accede to the American demands. To the end of The First Indochina War, the two allies sought incompatible goals: the French fought to restore their empire, while "the Americans wanted them to liquidate that empire in order to build an anti-Communist nationalist base."[79]

In late April, as the end neared at Dien Bien Phu, French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault made a desperate eleventh-hour plea for a U.S. air strike to save the French. President Eisenhower, aware of France's continuing unwillingness to accept the U.S. conditions for intervention, once again refused to go to war for the French cause in Indochina. His refusal sealed the French fate. Having lost the war in northern Vietnam, France prepared to abandon Hanoi-Haiphong and salvage what it could in southern Vietnam. The day after the French surrendered at Dien Bien Phu, diplomats from nine nations gathered around a horseshoe-shaped table inside the old League of Nations building in Geneva to hold open discussions on the "Indochina problem."[80]

As the French debacle played out at Dien Bien Phu, Washington feared that Paris might accede to a settlement that would force their withdrawal from Vietnam and give the Communists control of the entire country. Far from curtailing the U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, the looming French disaster prompted Washington to look for ways to become more directly engaged in Vietnam without committing its own military forces. Eisenhower saw that the United States would have to take control of Indochina's future. In his view, only the United States could prevent a complete Communist victory in Vietnam, a victory that would threaten the stability of non-Communist governments throughout Southeast Asia.

The Geneva Conference

Weary of a seemingly interminable war it no longer had any realistic chance of winning despite the huge step-up in the U.S. aid, the French government sought a compromise solution. Joseph Laniel, over American objections, got

the Foreign Ministers' Council to place the Indochina War on the agenda of the upcoming Geneva Peace Conference. Reluctantly, the Eisenhower administration acquiesced in the French decision to seek a political solution to the war. The U.S. officials reluctantly participated in the Geneva Conference; they would have much preferred that there be no political solution to the Indochina War. They wanted the French, with the U.S. support, to continue fighting and ultimately defeat the DRV forces. Washington also feared that the French, given the war-weariness of the French people and the military and political momentum the Vietminh had gained in Indochina, would accept a negotiated settlement that would lead to a Communist takeover of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and open the floodgate of Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. President Eisenhower also hoped that supporting Vietnam could abet American efforts to isolate Communist China, a primary Cold War consideration.

Even though the Western allies, especially the French, were negotiating from a weak position, negotiators eventually achieved a settlement that forced the Vietminh to accept much less than complete control of a unified Vietnam. For weeks, Washington also kept alive the option of a possible U.S. military action in Vietnam in the event the conference failed to produce an acceptable diplomatic solution to the war. The Vietminh fear of the U.S. military intervention powerfully influenced their decision to accept a compromise settlement.

Nine delegations attended the Geneva Conference. Representatives from Laos and Cambodia attended. Two delegations from Vietnam showed up, one representing Bao Dai's government and the other representing Ho Chi Minh's. Pham Van Dong headed the delegation from the DRV and Tran Van Do headed the delegation from the State of Vietnam. France, of course, attended, as did the Americans, the Soviets, the British, and the Chinese. Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov and British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden served as co-chairs of the conference.

In the awkward position of having to attend a conference they did not support and whose outcome they feared, the Americans played a relatively minor public role in the negotiations. Dulles instructed the American delegation to participate in the proceedings only as an interested party, not as a principal or belligerent power. The secretary of state rarely attended the sessions. Undersecretary Walter Bedell Smith usually headed the U.S. delegation during the conference sessions.

Negotiations at Geneva were dominated by the foreign policy concerns of the major powers who negotiated over the heads of the Vietnamese and imposed an agreement on them. Since they were winning the war and controlled most of the land and population of Vietnam, the DRV expected to emerge from Geneva with agreements reflecting their strategic superiority. The Vietminh did not achieve political gains at the conference table commensurate with their military triumphs. The Vietminh failure occurred because of the U.S. behind-the-scenes diplomatic maneuvering and because such a

resolution of the Franco-Vietminh War did not conform to the national interests of the major powers dominating the conference.[81]

Washington was opposed to any agreement that took away territory from Cambodia, Laos, or Vietnam. Dulles got the British to back the American position and tried to persuade the French to avoid making any settlement that would transfer territory to the Communists.

But the French negotiated skillfully at Geneva, playing the Soviets and Americans against each other. French officials threatened Washington with rejection of the proposed EDC, the top U.S. priority in Europe, if the United States insisted on making demands at the bargaining table that might prevent a political resolution of the Indochina conflict. The French also held out to the Soviets the prospect of French rejection of the EDC, which the Soviets desired, if the Soviets could persuade the Vietminh to moderate their demands and offer the French terms that they could accept.

The Soviet leaders, in the aftermath of Stalin's death, were also interested in moderating Cold War tensions. Since they did not have major interests in Southeast Asia, Soviet diplomats played a role in restraining DRV demands.

Fearful of the U.S. intervention in the war if it went on much longer, China joined the Soviets in putting pressure on the Vietminh to reach an agreement that was acceptable to the French. China, exhausted after years of civil war and fighting in the Korean War, where its armies sustained a million casualties, wanted to devote its resources to internal development. The Chinese leaders also sought international recognition and reasoned that if they were seen as playing a responsible role at the conference, their standing in the eyes of European leaders would be enhanced. The Chinese did not care whether the Communist state on its southern periphery controlled all or part of the territory of Vietnam as long as it protected China's southern flank. Soviet and Chinese pressure forced the Vietminh to moderate their demands and played a crucial role in arranging the final settlements.

> The political reality of Vietminh power in Vietnam must yield to the larger reality of its powerlessness in the world at large.[82]

Over the next two months, the outlines of a settlement gradually emerged, based on the temporary partitioning of Vietnam to allow the regrouping of military forces following a cease-fire. Elections to unify the country would be held within two years, before July 20, 1956. Before an agreement could be fully worked out, Laniel's government fell. His place at Geneva was taken by the radical socialist leader Pierre Mendes-France, who swore that he would resolve the Indochina conflict within 30 days or resign. He came to Geneva committed to disengaging France from the war as quickly and gracefully as possible.[83] Movement toward a settlement based on partition accelerated. With an agreement in sight, the conference recessed for a few days.

While the delegates rested from their labors, the U.S. officials "made the most fundamental decision of its thirty-year involvement in Vietnam."[84]

Washington realized that military intervention was not possible and that the French would not continue fighting. Despite their concerted efforts to prevent its occurrence, the U.S. leaders could also see that a political resolution to the First Indochina War was imminent and that the Communists were going to gain control of the northern half of Vietnam. Eisenhower and Dulles decided to intervene directly in Vietnam's internal affairs. Washington planned to replace the French in Vietnam and to assume responsibility for the defense of Cambodia, Laos, and southern Vietnam in the aftermath of the French defeat. America would pick up the sword that the French were dropping. They would hold the line against further Communist expansion in that region. There would be no more Dien Bien Phus on their watch. It was Eisenhower's fateful decision to intervene in southern Vietnam that directly involved the United States in the Vietnam conflicts that culminated in the American Vietnam War. Once Eisenhower had committed the United States to intervening in Vietnam, it became virtually impossible for him, or any of his successors to reverse course. From this point onward (July 1954), it became inevitable that Americans would one day be fighting a large-scale war in Vietnam.

The conference resumed, and agreements were reached on the details of the settlement that would end the First Indochina War on July 21, 1954. A cease-fire was declared, and Vietnam was partitioned at the **17th Parallel** of north latitude. Chinese Premier Zhou En-lai had to put enormous pressure on Ho Chi Minh to get him to accept the 17th Parallel as a temporary boundary between the two regroupment zones. Ho Chi Minh had wanted the 13th Parallel as the boundary, which would have given the French only Cochin China—the southern third of Vietnam and the sole region where the French and Bao Dai government could claim to have control.

The agreements specified that the partition line was to be a provisional military demarcation "on either side of which the forces of the two parties shall be regrouped after their withdrawal."[85] The DRV forces were to regroup north of the line; Bao Dai's and the French forces were to regroup south of the line. The Geneva Accords explicitly identified Vietnam as a whole as an independent state. They did not create two states; they only created a temporary military division within a single state. Years later, while the United States waged its war in Vietnam, the U.S. officials adduced legal arguments to justify its war based on the fiction that the Geneva Accords had created "South Vietnam," a nation-state with full sovereign rights. This transparently false claim provided antiwar activists with one of their many objections to the American Vietnam War.

To prevent further fighting, both sides were to have 300 days from the date the document was signed to make all personnel transfers to either regroupment zone. People were encouraged to move if they wished. There were to be no reprisals against people for the side they had chosen or anything they had done during the war. Both regroupment zones of Vietnam were prohibited from entering into any military alliances, bringing in any new military forces or weapons, or developing additional military bases.

As neither government would tolerate the permanent division of Vietnam's territory, the agreements provided for consultations between representatives of the two zones to begin July 20, 1955. These consultations were to lead to free elections to be held within two years, supervised by an International Control Commission made up of inspectors from Poland, India, and Canada. Whichever government won the elections would govern a reunified Vietnam beginning in 1956. The agreements also established cease-fires for Cambodia and Laos and declared these countries to be independent nations under their current governments.[86] The accords also acknowledged that those two new nations had the right of self-defense, but they were prohibited from entering military alliances or permitting foreign bases on their soil unless their security was clearly threatened. Most of the Geneva participants assumed that the French would remain in Vietnam to supervise the implementation of the settlement that had been worked out at the conference. During the subsequent two years, Vietnam would constitute two military zones administered north of the 17th Parallel by the Democratic Government of Vietnam (DRV) and south of the 17th Parallel by the State of Vietnam (see Figure 2.1).

Bao Dai and his newly appointed prime minister, Ngo Dinh Diem, denounced the agreements, and Bao Dai ordered Do not to sign them. Washington was unhappy with the loss of northern Vietnam to the Communists and refused to be associated formally with the Geneva agreements. Walter Bedell Smith did not assent to them, explaining that the U.S. policy of nonrecognition of the Communist government in China precluded any official agreements with Chinese officials. Instead, he issued a separate protocol stating that the United States acknowledged the agreements and would "refrain from the threat or use of force to disturb them." Smith's protocol also stated that the United States would "view any renewal of the aggression in violation of the aforesaid agreements. . . as seriously threatening international peace and security." He added that Washington would "continue to seek to achieve unity through free elections, supervised by the UN to ensure that they are conducted fairly."[87] President Eisenhower added to the ambiguity of American policy toward the Geneva Accords by announcing that since the U.S. government had not signed them, Washington did not consider itself bound by them. Subsequently, the United States acted to undercut the Geneva Accords by creating an international military alliance, sending military personnel into southern Vietnam, and helping to sabotage the 1956 elections. Worse, according to historian John Prados, legal arguments justifying the American Vietnam War placed the nation in the awkward position of relying on accords that Washington had not signed and were the first to breach.[88]

The war that had ended in defeat for the French was, by extension, also perceived as a serious setback for the United States. But Eisenhower and Dulles were not entirely displeased with the outcome of the Geneva Conference. In their view, it could have been much worse. The accords did not reflect battlefield realities. They knew that their power politics, adroit French diplomacy, and Soviet and Chinese pressure had forced Ho Chi Minh to accept

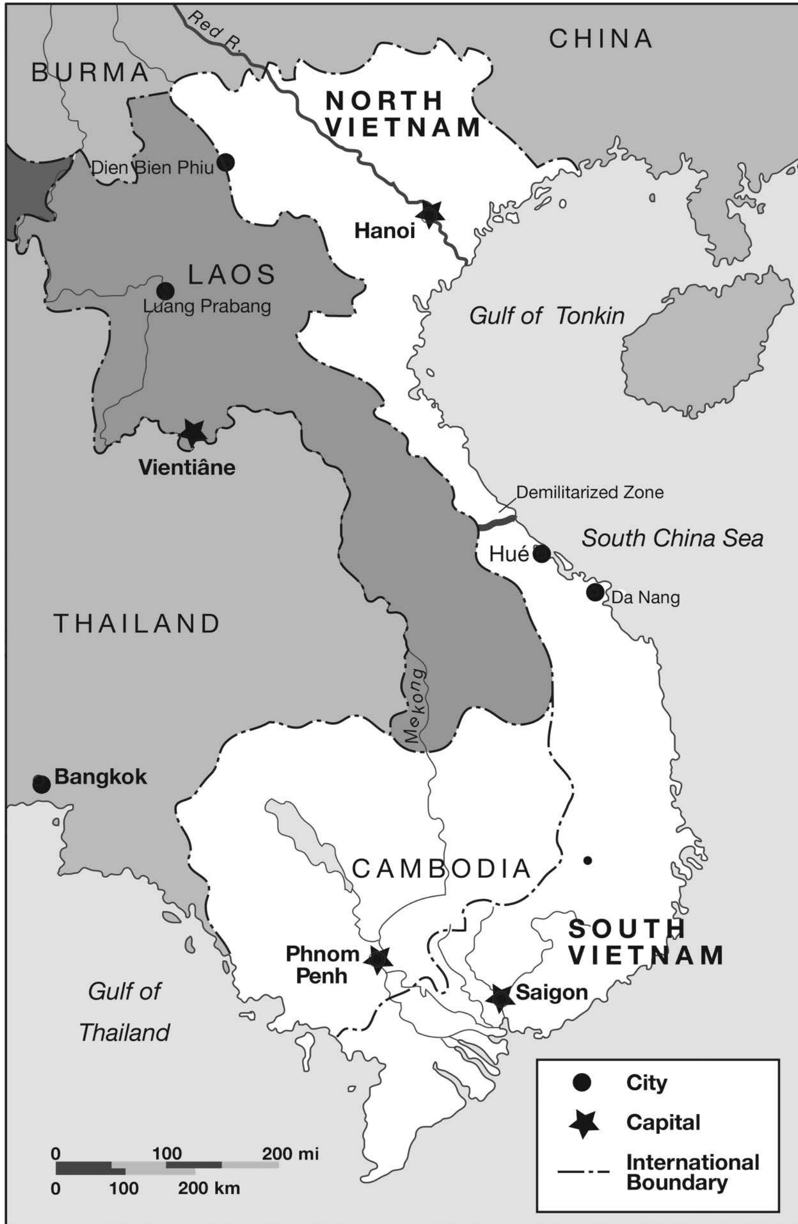

Figure 2.1 The Geneva Accords (July 1954) ended French colonial domination of Indochina. Cambodia and Laos emerged as sovereign nations. Vietnam was provisionally partitioned at the 17th Parallel of north latitude, pending the outcome of elections scheduled to be held within two years. *Public domain.*

half a country at Geneva, even though his armies controlled most of the entire country. They also saw that the provisions of the Geneva agreements partitioning Vietnam, permitting a temporary regroupment of forces and people, and calling for nationwide elections within two years to reunify the country amounted to a face-saving formula permitting the defeated French to make a gradual exit from Indochina. Eisenhower and Dulles also realized that these same provisions provided them an opportunity to supersede the French in Vietnam. The Americans had a pro-American government in Saigon, two years, and half a country to work with.

Washington intended to use that two-year interim to turn Bao Dai's government into a nation-state that would provide the people of Vietnam with a genuine nationalistic alternative to Communism. They believed it possible that Bao Dai could win the national elections two years hence and emerge as the leader of a united Vietnam. The U.S. officials also believed that they could effect arrangements that would protect the strategic security of Southeast Asia in the aftermath of the partial Communist victory in Vietnam and that those arrangements would confine the spread of Communism to northern Vietnam. They would hold the line at the 17th Parallel and save the rest of Indochina and Southeast Asia from the threat of Communism. They would also effectively contain the expansionist tendencies of Communist China and the Soviet Union in that vital region.

Even before the Geneva Conference had officially ended, the United States was pledging its support to the Bao Dai government and preparing to subvert the accords.[89] Because of the U.S. intervention in southern Vietnam, the Geneva Accords did not produce a permanent political solution to the Indochina conflict, only a temporary military truce. The "conference was merely an interlude between two wars—or rather, a lull in the same war."[90]

Lessons from a War

There is a kind of symmetry between the reactions of the Americans and the Vietminh to the outcome of the Geneva Conference. Both came away disappointed, but at the same time both perceived opportunities to exploit in the settlement and both expected the future to go their way.

Ho Chi Minh had been willing to bow to Soviet and Chinese pressure and to settle for half of Vietnam because he feared that the United States would intervene militarily if a reasonable settlement were not arranged. The U.S. forces in Vietnam would seriously impede the Vietminh's planned scenario for Vietnam, so Ho Chi Minh did what he had to do to keep them out. From his vantage point at Geneva in July 1954, the DRV had gained more than it had lost at the conference. The international community had acknowledged the legitimacy of his government. Despite partition and the continuing presence of French troops on its soil, Vietnam had officially regained its sovereignty after over 80 years of colonial subjugation. The accords kept the Americans out and also prepared the ground for the departure of the French. Only the discredited Bao Dai

regime remained as Ho Chi Minh's political competition. Ho was confident that he could win the upcoming unification elections, and he looked ahead to governing a reunified Vietnam under Lao Dong control.[91] Within two years, the Vietminh expected to acquire control of all of Vietnam through democratic political processes. Ho Chi Minh did not anticipate that the Americans would soon supplant the French in southern Vietnam and block his plans.

For its part, the Eisenhower administration thought the French had lost for two main reasons: they had not fought hard enough or long enough, and they had lacked the determination and firepower to defeat the DRV forces, even with substantial U.S. help. They were also an anachronistic colonial power, trying to cling to the remnants of empire in Indochina. They could not bring themselves to offer the Vietnamese a genuine nationalistic alternative to the Vietminh. Eisenhower and Dulles both believed that American intervention in southern Vietnam could succeed, because the United States was a vastly richer and more powerful nation than France, and it was coming to help Bao Dai build a modern nation-state. American technology, know-how, and good intentions would succeed where French efforts had failed.

Washington's diagnosis of the French defeat was reductive. Yes, the French lost in Indochina because they had never sent enough troops to give themselves a realistic chance to win the war, and because most Vietnamese perceived the Bao Dai government as only a cover for continuing French domination. However, other, more important factors determined the outcome of that war.

The proper question to ask was not why the French lost, but why did the Vietminh win? The French, backed by the United States, fought a war that they could not realistically expect to win, even if they had been willing to send more troops and offer Bao Dai's government more of the attributes of independence. Local conditions and historical circumstances brought about the Vietminh victory over the French, which is to say that Vietnam realities determined the outcome of the Franco-Vietminh War.

During the years of the First Indochina War, Vietnam still possessed a colonial society with many serious social and economic problems, all of which contributed to popular support for the revolutionaries. Inflation, high taxes, and usurious interest rates all bore heavily on the people of Vietnam, especially on the rural poor. Government corruption and incompetence coupled with official indifference to the welfare of the rural population strengthened popular discontent and played into Vietminh hands.[92]

In addition to the indigenous social and economic conditions, the organizational strength of the revolutionaries played a crucial role in bringing them their ultimate success. The Vietminh revolutionary political organization and the extraordinary leadership of Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues were decisive. Party cadres continued their organizing efforts both in the urban areas and in the villages of Vietnam. Most importantly, the party succeeded in channeling the nationalistic aspirations of most of the Vietnamese people regardless of their politics. The revolution's prime strength was always politics, not war.

The Vietminh leaders understood that in the long run the chief weakness of the French war effort in Vietnam was not that their soldiers could not fight effectively or that they were pursuing a colonial agenda, but that it was undermined by declining public support in France for the war. The loss of popular support for the war eroded the political will of a succession of French governments to conduct it vigorously, and eventually forced them to the conference table where they negotiated agreements that provided for their phased withdrawal from Indochina. Vietminh party leaders developed a sophisticated military, political, and diplomatic strategy to undermine their enemy's will to fight.[93]

Years later, when the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front (NLF) forces fought another war, this time against the American successors to the French and the Vietnamese successors to Bao Dai, they remembered the lessons that they had learned during the war with France: what the Vietnamese do and what happens in Vietnam are crucial to the outcome of the war. Be patient and fight a protracted war. It had taken a thousand years to rid Vietnam of Chinese dominion. It had taken 80 years to get rid of the French colonialists. Be prepared to fight the Americans until they too lose their political will and abandon Vietnam, however long that takes. Exploit the social and economic conditions created by a series of corrupt, ineffective, and elite-based governments. Rely on party organization and political discipline. Retain the voice of Vietnamese nationalism. Fight a people's war. These strategies enabled the Communists to defeat a more powerful foe, the French. Twenty years later, they used the same strategies to defeat a much more powerful foe, the Americans.

The American war in Vietnam, fought from 1965 through 1972, largely replicated the French war. There were, of course, important differences between the two conflicts; there was no American equivalent of Dien Bien Phu. The U.S. troops were never defeated in any major battles or ever suffered any decisive military setbacks. Americans made much greater use of helicopters and employed vastly greater air power. The Americans also used military force on a much larger scale than the French. But the similarities between the two wars were quite remarkable and significant. Their duration and outcomes were similar. Both began with high hopes and ended in disaster for the Western powers and in victories for the Asian Communists. Both the Americans and the French tried to use their technological superiority, which gave them greater firepower, mobility, and control of the sea and air to win wars of attrition. They found that these advantages were not sufficient to defeat the complex and sophisticated diplomatic-political-military strategies employed by their enemies. Political maneuver defeated military firepower and tactics defeated technology in both wars.

Neither the French nor their American successors ever managed to create stable governments that offered the Vietnamese people a viable nationalistic alternative to the Communists. Both failed to develop pacification strategies that neutralized the efforts of insurgent political cadres to maintain support

among the predominately rural populations. Neither nation ever developed non-Communist Vietnamese forces strong enough to defend themselves against the DRV forces that were receiving support from China, the Soviet Union, and the Eastern Bloc. Both only used Vietnamese forces extensively after domestic public support for the wars had seriously eroded. "The areas that caused the most problems for the French in southern Vietnam were also the worst trouble spots for the Americans."[94]

The French and the Americans were eventually forced to negotiate agreements that provided for their withdrawal from Vietnam, mainly because the long-running wars had become unpopular among their home populations and their governments no longer had enough political support to continue them. During both wars, the Vietnamese revolutionaries, sensing that the loss of popular support was the fatal weakness that would eventually undermine both the French and the American war efforts, patiently and skillfully employed a variety of political, military, and diplomatic strategies that promoted war-weariness on the Western home fronts.

Many French and American war veterans felt that they had made sacrifices in vain. They believed that they had fought in wars that their governments did not go all out to try and win. They had fought well in a losing war but had returned home to civilian populations that did not appear to care about, understand, or appreciate what they had done. The long, losing wars also had devastating impacts on national morale and national self-esteem in both countries, draining both nations of significant amounts of their wealth.

Eisenhower, Dulles, and their successors, enmeshed in the Cold War ideology of containment and its domino correlatives, responding to the political imperatives of domestic anti-Communism, neither understood nor heeded the lessons of the First Indochina War. The U.S. officials, indifferent to the French analogue, would in time replicate their disaster.

Notes

1 Hess, *Vietnam*, 33.
2 Kahin, *Intervention*, 9.
3 Edward Doyle, Samuel Lipsman, and the editors of Boston Publishing, *Passing the Torch, The Vietnam Experience* (Boston, MA: Boston Publishing, 1981), 16–17; Harold Isaacs, *No Peace for Asia* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 152–75. Isaacs was an American journalist in Saigon who wrote a firsthand account of Anglo-French cooperation in the South from 1945 to 1946 to suppress the Vietnamese nationalist revolution. Prados, *Vietnam*, 17–18. Acheson is quoted in Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 12.
4 Peter M. Dunn, *The First Vietnam War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985). Dunn has written a history of the complex political and military conflict in Vietnam during the first year after World War II, which he states made up a "First Vietnam War." According to Dunn, the French-Vietnamese conflict (1946–54) was the "Second Vietnam War," and the war waged between the U.S./ARVN forces and the NLF/PAVN forces (1965–75) was the "Third Vietnam War."
5 Quoted in Clyde Edwin Pettit, *The Experts* (Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart, 1975), 11.

6 "Jacques-Phillipe Leclerc," second only to De Gaulle himself as a war hero in France, was the assumed name of Jean de Hautecloque.
7 Buttinger, *A Dragon Defiant*, 81; Edgar O'Ballance, *The Indo-China War, 1945–1954* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 59–60.
8 Doyle, *Passing the Torch*, 18–20; Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power*, 114–18.
9 Quoted in Kahin, *Intervention*, 19.
10 In defense of his strategy of accepting the return of the French for a few years to get the Chinese out of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh berated a group of VNQDD leaders who wanted to keep the Chinese in Vietnam in order to keep the French out: "You fools! Don't you realize what it means if the Chinese stay? Don't you remember your history? The last time the Chinese came, they stayed one thousand years." Quoted in Doyle, *Passing the Torch*, 21.
11 A copy of the Preliminary Franco-Vietnamese Convention of March 6, 1946 is printed in Porter, ed., *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 1, 95–97, Document 59; Jean Sainteny, *Histoire d'une Paix Manquee* (Paris: Amoit Dumont, 1953) is an insider's account of French Indochina policy in 1945–46; and Chen, *Vietnam and China*, 146–50. The most comprehensive account of the negotiations leading to the March 6 agreement is found in Devillers, *Histoire du Vietnam*, chaps. 11–13.
12 Between August and October 1945, Ho Chi Minh wrote seven letters to the U.S. leaders appealing for support for Vietnamese independence. In one letter, Ho proposed that Vietnam be placed on the same status as the Philippines and that Vietnam be allowed to become an American territory. Because the United States did not recognize Ho Chi Minh as the head of a legitimate government, all the letters were ignored. Copies of several of his letters are printed in Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 1, 83–86, 95.
13 Quoted in Doyle, *Passing the Torch*, 23.
14 Hammer, *Struggle*, 159–74.
15 O'Ballance, *The Indo-China War*, 75.
16 Kahin, *Intervention*, 23–24; Hammer, *Struggle*, 181–91.
17 Doyle, *Passing the Torch*, 26.
18 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 127.
19 Quoted in Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 19.
20 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 128–31; O'Ballance, *The Indo-China War*, 74–85. The Vietminh military treatise was written by Troung Chinh, who borrowed much of his doctrine from Mao's book, *On Protracted War.*
21 O'Ballance, *The Indo-China War*, 79–80.
22 Bernard Fall, *Street without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2005), 27–30. Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 131–32.
23 Ibid., 133.
24 Vo Nguyen Giap, "Activate Guerrilla Warfare," a directive issued by Giap November 17, 1947, printed in Porter, ed., *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 1, Document 113, 169–71.
25 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 136.
26 Hammer, *Struggle*, 224–28; Kahin, *Intervention*, 25–26.
27 Kahin, *Intervention*, 28–33.
28 Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 32. Many of these modern weapons the Vietminh now possessed were American-made and had been captured by the Maoist forces from Jiang's beaten Nationalist forces as they fled for their lives; Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 139–40. The Soviets, not involved in Southeast Asia, still inclined to concede Western hegemony in that region, felt compelled to recognize the DRV so as not to lose influence in the Communist camp to the more militant Chinese.

29 Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The U.S. in Vietnam, 1946–1966*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 69–75; see the *Platform of the Vietnam Worker's Party*, February 19, 1951:

> The primordial task of the Vietnam revolution, therefore, is to drive out the imperialist aggressors to gain complete independence and unity for the people, . . . and root up the vestiges of feudalism and semifeudalism so that there is land for those who till it, to develop the People's Democratic Regime, and to lay the foundations for socialism.

A copy of the platform is printed in Porter, ed., *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 1, Document 212, 337–44.

30 Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 57–61.

31 O'Ballance, *The Indo-China War*, 104–5.

32 Ibid., 106–7. Quang Zhia, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 18–19.

33 Ibid., 114–15.

34 Ibid., 116–17. Lucien Bodard, *The Quicksand War: Prelude to Vietnam* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1967), translated from the French, *La Guerre d'Indochine: L'enlisement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963) and *La Guerre d'Indochine: L'humiliation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965) has an account of the Battle of Dong Khe; quote is from Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 33.

35 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 144–45.

36 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 28–29.

37 Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 21–24. Telegram from Secretary of State Acheson to the U.S. Consulate in Hanoi, May 20, 1949. A copy is printed in Porter, ed., *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 1, Document 131, 198–99. Acheson commented on Soviet recognition of the DRV in a State Department bulletin issued February 13, 1950:

> The recognition by the Kremlin of Ho Chi Minh's Communist movement in Indochina . . . should remove any illusions as to the 'nationalist nature' of Ho Chi Minh's aims and reveals Ho in his true colors as the mortal enemy of native independence in Indochina.

The U.S. Department of State *Bulletin*, 22 (February 13, 1950) is also printed in Porter, ed., *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 1, Document 156, 225.

38 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 31–32. Department of State Policy Statement, September 27, 1948. A copy of this policy statement is found in Porter, ed., *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 1, Document 121, 178–81.

39 Kahin, *Intervention*, 36–37. Between 1946 and 1949, the United States provided covert financial and military assistance via metropolitan France for the French colonial war in Indochina.

40 Ibid., 37–38. Kahin has found evidence suggesting that of the $525 million in the U.S. aid to support the French budget in fiscal 1953, almost half came from ECA counterpart funds released for the use of the French military in Indochina. T. E. Vadney, *World*, 133; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 22.

41 On March 12, 1947, President Truman appeared before Congress to give his famed speech, calling for enactment of an aid package for Greece and Turkey. The substance of his address has become known as the Truman Doctrine, and it announced the first application of the developing U.S. policy of containment of Communism in southern Europe.

42 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 12. In April 1950, at Truman's request, the State Department and Defense Department jointly prepared a top-secret report for the National Security Council, known as *NSC-68*, which outlined an enlarged U.S. Cold War foreign policy.

43 Kahin, *Intervention*, 29; Gary Hess, *The United States' Emergence as a Southeast Asia Power, 1940–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 40.
44 Gaddis, *We Now Know*, 190.
45 Kahin, *Intervention*, 40–41.
46 Ibid., 29–30.
47 Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam*, 80–86.
48 Kathryn C. Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 29–31; Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 43, 46–47.
49 Ibid., 48.
50 John Morrocco and the editors of Boston Publishing, *Thunder from Above: Air War, 1941–1968, The Vietnam Experience* (Boston, MA: Boston Publishing, 1984). In the summer of 1950, Congress authorized $164 million for arms, ammunition, planes, ships, trucks, jeeps, and tanks for the French war effort in Indochina. At about the same time, the U.S. economic and technical assistance program for the Bao Dai government committed $50 million over a two-year period. Quote is from Statler, *Replacing the French*, 27.
51 Statler, *Replacing the French*, 46–47.
52 Ibid., 39–42, 49.
53 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 146; Hess, *Vietnam*, 34.
54 O'Ballance, *The Indo-China War*, 120–39.
55 Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 34–45.
56 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 355.
57 Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 47–60. The place name Hoa Binh translates as "Peace."
58 Duiker, *Communist Road*, 152–53.
59 Ibid., 154.
60 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 154–55; Kahin, *Intervention*, 39. Prados, *Vietnam*, 24. At the time of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, French forces in Indochina totaled about 500,000. Only about 80,000 of them were ethnic French. The French did not send conscripts to fight in their Indochina colonial war for political reasons. The rest of the French Indochina Expeditionary Force was made up of French Foreign Legion forces, French North African troops, Indochinese (predominantly Vietnamese) troops, and Bao Dai's inchoate Vietnamese National Army.
61 Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 312–15; Marc D. Bernstein, "Setting the Stage for Dien Bien Phu," in *Vietnam* (October 2007), 41–47.
62 O'Ballance, *The Indo-China War*, 208–9.
63 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 1, Document 292, 495–97, "Speech by Premier Laniel Before the National Assembly," March 5, 1954 (extracts); Bernard Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (New York: Lippincott, 1967), 47.
64 Ibid., vol. 1, Document 292, 493–94, "Report by Giap to Senior Field Commanders on the Dienbienphu Campaign," January 14, 1954 (extract).
65 Ibid. vol. 1, Document 295, 497–98, "Appeal by Vo Nguyen Giap to All Cadres and Fighters, Units and Services, on Beginning the Dienbienphu Campaign," March 1954; Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 317–23. Quote is from Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 85.
66 O'Ballance, *The Indo-China War*, 218, 225, and 230; Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 128–29, 177–80. Fall notes that the failure of the French air force to interdict the Communist supply route that covered 500 miles from the Chinese border to Dien Bien Phu foreshadowed a similar failure of the U.S. Air Force to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which supplied the VietCong and the PAVN forces fighting in southern Vietnam.
67 O'Ballance, *Indo-China War*, 213–17. Another 4,000–5,000 troops parachuted into Dien Bien Phu during the battle to join the defenders; Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 54, notes that Colonel de Castries was an aristocrat whose forbears included a general who had served with Lafayette during the American Revolution.

68 Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 321.
69 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 162. Of the 18,000 defenders of Dien Bien Phu, fewer than half were French. The others included Legionnaires, mainly Germans and Eastern Europeans, Africans, and over 6,000 Vietnamese loyal to the French.
70 Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army* (Hanoi: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1961), 187. Giap is also quoted in Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 36; Fall's quote is found in *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 448.
71 Prados, *Vietnam*, 26–27.
72 Kahin, *Intervention*, 42. In fiscal 1953, the Eisenhower administration spent $1.3 billion, 61 percent of the total cost of the war for that year. For 1954, America financed 78 percent of the total cost. The total cost to Americans for supporting the French colonial war in Indochina from 1950 to 1954 came to over $2.8 billion. Tuchman, *March of Folly*, 257, states that most of the U.S. aid money "trickled away into the pockets of profiteering officials."
73 George C. Herring and Richard H. Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: 'The Day We Didn't Go to War' Revisited," *Journal of American History* 71 (September 1984): 343–63.
74 Kahin, *Intervention*, 45–46; Herring and Immerman, "The Day We Didn't Go to War," 343–63; and Herring, George C., *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1996), 33–34. Ridgway quote is cited in Herring, 34.
75 Kahin, *Intervention*, 48; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3rd ed., 35.
76 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3rd ed., 34–35.
77 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 1, Document 315, 542–43, "Telegram from Dulles in Geneva to the State Department," April 25, 1954; Statler, *Replacing France*, 79–80.
78 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 35; Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 300–3.
79 Hess, *Vietnam*, 47; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3rd ed., 34.
80 Kahin, *Intervention*, 52–53; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 198; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3rd. ed., states that it is difficult to tell what Eisenhower and Dulles wanted to do because they maneuvered so craftily during this crisis.
81 Logevall, *Embers of War*, 597. Kahin and Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, 43.
82 Quote is from Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 38–39; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3rd. ed., 41–42.
83 Statler, *Replacing France*, 98–106.
84 Ibid., 66.
85 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 1, Document 378, 642, "Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam," July 20, 1954.
86 The armistice agreements, the Final Declaration, the protocol issued by Bedell Smith, and the statement by Eisenhower are found in the U.S. Department of State, *American Foreign Policy, 1950–1955: Basic Documents* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1957), vol. 1, 750–88. The Geneva Accords consist of two distinct, related agreements: (1) A bilateral armistice agreement signed on July 20, 1954, by Brigadier General Henri Delteil on behalf of the French forces fighting in Indochina and by Ta Quang Buu on behalf of the People's Army of Vietnam that partitioned the country into two temporary regroupment zones; and (2) A Final Declaration issued on July 21.
87 Porter, ed., *Documents*, vol. 1, Document 381, 656, "Declaration by Walter Bedell Smith, Representing the U.S. Delegation to the Geneva Conference," July 21, 1954; Statler, *Replacing the French*, 106.
88 Kahin and Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, 59–62; Prados, *Vietnam*, 37.

89 George Donelson Moss, ed., *A Vietnam Reader: Sources and Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1991). See essay by the editor, "An American Entanglement: U.S. Involvement in Indochina, 1942–1975," 5.
90 Karnow, *Vietnam*, 199.
91 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 163–64; Kahin and Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, 47.
92 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 166–67.
93 Ibid., 168.
94 Thomas C. Thayer, *War without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985); also see Peter M. Dunn, "The American Army: The Vietnam War, 1965–1973," in Ian F. W. Beckett and John Pimlott, eds., *Armed Forces and Modern Counter-Insurgency* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 80–81, 85. Dunn faults the Americans for not seeking the advice of the French and for not absorbing "their bitterly-learned lessons." The U.S. Army "became, in effect, a large French Expeditionary Corps—and met the same frustrations."

3 America's Experiment in Nation-Building

The SEATO Protocol, 1954

During the summer of 1954, the Eisenhower administration firmly committed itself to creating a new nation in the southern half of Vietnam in order to block further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. The **National Security Council (NSC)**, meeting a month after the Geneva Conference, interpreted the accords as a major victory for the Communists, which gave them a salient for applying pressure to the nations of Southeast Asia. The NSC report called for the United States to negotiate new international agreements in order to provide strategic security for the new country it was going to create in southern Vietnam, and to protect Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, and the other nations of Southeast Asia from possible Communist inroads.[1]

To fulfill the policy recommendations of the NSC review, Secretary of State Dulles journeyed to Manila to orchestrate the **Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)**. Dulles had been promoting an alliance of Asian powers since the Dien Bien Phu crisis. Washington intended the alliance to evolve into "a regional multilateral defense system."[2] The creation of SEATO was part of a dual U.S. strategy developed during the summer of 1954 to block the further spread of Communism in Indochina in the aftermath of the Geneva settlement. The U.S. officials sought simultaneously to create a viable non-Communist nation-state out of the provisional regroupment zone south of the 17th Parallel and to broaden international involvement in Southeast Asia by joining partners in Europe and Asia.

The new security arrangements were embodied in the Pact of Manila, signed on September 8, 1954. It created SEATO, a loosely constructed alliance, including the United States, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, and three Southeast Asian nations—the Philippines, Thailand, and Pakistan. The major neutral nations of the region—Burma, India, and Indonesia—declined to join.

Dulles wanted to include the State of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos as members of the new alliance but because of restrictions imposed by the Geneva agreements and French objections, they could not join. However, Dulles got around these obstacles by attaching a protocol to the SEATO agreement that projected an "umbrella of protection" over Laos, Cambodia, and the

State of Vietnam. The protocol circumvented the provisions of the Geneva Accords, which had tried to neutralize Indochina.[3] Cambodia promptly repudiated the SEATO protocol, and Laos was later excluded by treaty. But the French and Bao Dai accepted the protection offered by SEATO for the temporary military regroupment zone south of the 17th Parallel created at Geneva, which the protocol referred to as "the free territory under the jurisdiction of the State of Vietnam."[4]

Unlike the NATO alliance upon which it was modeled, SEATO carried no military obligations. It called only for members to consult with one another in the event of an attack on a signatory or one of the Indochina countries covered by the protocol. SEATO allowed the United States a freedom to maneuver and to decide if military intervention was warranted to suppress an insurrection or to thwart aggression. Washington viewed SEATO as a defensive alliance erected to block Chinese expansion in Southeast Asia and to prevent a possible invasion of southern Vietnam across the 17th Parallel by the Hanoi regime.

SEATO promoted the diplomatic fictions that the United States was proclaiming, that the southern half of Vietnam had quickly evolved from a temporary administrative zone into a free and independent state, and that the 17th Parallel had just as quickly morphed from a transient demarcation line into a permanent political boundary. SEATO was part of a U.S.-instigated process of defining a new state at a time when there was legally only one Vietnam. At the time, Vietnam was prohibited from joining any alliances or entering into any military agreements; its political future was to be determined by free elections scheduled for July 1956. When the United States moved to subvert both the letter and the spirit of the Geneva Accords, the U.S. officials claimed that the SEATO protocol provided a legal justification for American intervention into Vietnam to deter North Vietnamese "aggression" against South Vietnam. In reality, the ambiguous American position provided only a flimsy and hollow rationale for war based on alleged SEATO obligations.[5]

The Advent of Ngo Dinh Diem

Emperor Bao Dai received Ngo Dinh Diem at his villa in Cannes on June 18, 1954, and appointed him the new prime minister of the fledgling State of Vietnam because he wanted a more credible nationalist, in office. Diem was a staunch Vietnamese patriot, one of nine children of a prominent man who had served as a court chamberlain to Emperor Thanh Thai. The Ngo Dinhs were Catholics, and even as a boy Diem stood out for his devotion to religious duties. He attended Quoc Hoc lycée in Hue, the same school that Ho Chi Minh, another mandarin's son, had attended ten years earlier. Graduating at 16, Diem enrolled in the French-run School for Law and Administration in Hanoi, where he graduated at the top of his class. Following graduation, Diem moved immediately into government service. Within a few years, he had reached mandarinic rank and was the provincial chief of a district containing 300 villages.[6]

Diem early demonstrated an abiding hatred of the French for their domination of his country, and of the Communists whom he regarded as enemies of Vietnamese nationalism. In 1932, the young emperor Bao Dai, aware of Diem's energy and administrative talents, appointed him as the minister of the interior. Diem proposed a long list of reforms to modernize the ministry and to give it real authority. Neither Bao Dai nor his French masters would accept his proposed reforms. Diem, angry and disillusioned, resigned. He retreated from public life and never held another government position until he became the premier of the fledgling state in the southern half of Vietnam in June 1954.[7]

Diem refused all offers from the Japanese, the Vietminh, and Bao Dai to participate in various governments that were formed after World War II. Ho Chi Minh, who wanted to obtain the support of Vietnam's sizeable Catholic minority, offered Diem the post of minister of the interior, the same position he had held under Bao Dai. Diem refused, denounced the Vietminh and Ho to his face, and stalked out of his office.[8] During the Franco-Vietminh War, Diem was one of the few Vietnamese nationalists who did not join the Vietminh.[9]

In 1951, Diem came to the United States and lived for two years at a Maryknoll seminary in Lakehurst, New Jersey. From that base, he traveled around the country campaigning for Vietnam's independence. Initially, Diem was ignored by prominent people, including government officials who had no time for an obscure Vietnamese patriot who was hated by their French allies and their Communist enemies alike. However, Diem made one invaluable contact: Francis Cardinal Spellman, the most politically active prelate within the United States.

Diem also acquired support from liberal academics, most notably Wesley Fishel, a political scientist on the Michigan State University faculty, at a time when that university was working closely with various agencies of the federal government to wage the Cold War. Fishel and other academic Cold Warriors were advocates of a fashionable "third force" theory for waging the Cold War in developing countries struggling to free themselves from the vestiges of imperial domination. Third force theorists argued that the United States, if it desired to retain influence in these developing countries, had to support leaders who were neither Communists nor colonialists. They should ally themselves with "anticommunist movements of national liberation."[10] To these academic Cold Warriors, Ngo Dinh Diem, with his impeccable anti-Communist and anti-French colonialist credentials, appeared to be a promising "third force" leader.

Diem's Catholic connections were the key to his acquiring support for his cause. Through Spellman, he met several prominent Catholic laymen, including Democratic Senators John F. Kennedy and Mike Mansfield, and Supreme Court Associate Justice William O. Douglas. He may have met Senator Joseph McCarthy, a conservative Republican who was the most vociferous of the anti-Communist senators. McCarthy's Catholicism and his belief that

the Cold War would be won or lost in Asia instead of Europe inclined him to support Diem. Most American politicians had no grasp of the multitude of factions maneuvering for power in southern Vietnam, but they could see that Diem was a staunch anti-Communist who supported the American side in the Cold War.[11]

In the summer of 1954, when it appeared that France would lose the Indochina War and the Communists might take over Vietnam, Washington decided to intervene to replace the French and to try to save southern Vietnam from Communism. The U.S. officials looked for a leader of southern Vietnam whom they could back. They wanted no part of Emperor Bao Dai, the titular head of the French-backed regime in Saigon, who preferred living on the Riviera with his mistress to residing in Saigon. There were numerous anti-Communist political leaders in the boiling caldron of Saigon politics contending for power in the summer of 1954, but only Diem had traveled to America; only Diem had networked fervently for his cause, and only Diem had acquired the support of American religious, academic, and political leaders. While the other anti-Communist leaders struggled to build power bases in Saigon, Diem had built "a power base in the nation that would prove to matter most."[12]

Diem was only one of many Vietnamese political leaders seeking the job of prime minister in Bao Dai's decrepit pseudo-government. Several had more impressive credentials than Diem. Had Bao Dai been free to choose a leader, he probably would have chosen Phan Huy Quat, who had previously held several cabinet posts in the State of Vietnam. But in June 1954, Bao Dai chose Diem to be his new premier because he understood that after Dien Bien Phu, the French were on their way out and the Americans were bent on replacing them in South Vietnam. He also knew that many prominent Americans, including President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, admired Diem as the avatar of the "third force" strategy for waging the Cold War in developing countries and they would likely provide the State of Vietnam with increased amounts of aid.[13]

Although the U.S. officials in Washington never seriously considered supporting any other man, the U.S. officials on the ground in Saigon had misgivings about Diem. They knew that he lacked popular support and political experience, and also had rather odd personality traits. French civilian and military officers, still in control of affairs in the southern half of Vietnam, who knew Diem, despised him. They considered him incompetent, impossible to work with, and a leader without a constituency. Few Vietnamese had ever heard his name. From the French perspective, Diem was the worst of all possible appointments that Bao Dai could have made.[14]

Diem Struggles to Survive

Diem arrived in Saigon on June 25, 1954. From the beginning, he tried to govern as if the State of Vietnam was a legal sovereign entity. Diem discovered quickly that the government he had inherited from the French rested

on an inefficient and a corrupt bureaucracy, an army whose fighting prowess and loyalty to him were both questionable, and a capital city and surrounding countryside seething with a bizarre amalgam of fierce political rivalries. Local military and political leaders conspired with the French and Bao Dai to ensure an early demise to Diem's leadership. Compounding Diem's troubles, the Geneva agreements, promulgated on July 21, called for nationwide elections to unify the country within two years. Ho Chi Minh and the Lao Dong were odds-on favorites to win these forthcoming elections and to take over the whole country. Diem had arrived in southern Vietnam only to discover that he had no money, no power, no bureaucracy, no army, and no popular base of support.

Throughout the fall and winter of 1954–55, America's Diem experiment was constantly in danger of collapsing. His regime was caught in the midst of an intense conflict between the French and the Americans for influence in southern Vietnam. The French bitterly observed that the United States was trying to supplant them in southern Vietnam. Their charges were confirmed when Eisenhower wrote Diem a letter on October 23, 1954, pledging the U.S. economic and military assistance.[15] At the time, according to the Geneva Accords, Bao Dai, although residing in the south of France, was still the head of the State of Vietnam, and the French were still nominally in charge of Vietnamese affairs. General Paul Ely, who commanded the French Expeditionary Corps (FECs), an army of 90,000 troops, served as the highest civilian authority and commander-in-chief of all military forces in southern Vietnam.

Henceforth, the U.S. aid money went directly to Diem rather than through the French legation, which had previously been the recipient of all aid. When the French delayed turning over full powers of governance to Diem until December 1954, the U.S. officials suspected that the French were trying to hang on in the South and also build bridges to the Hanoi regime to protect extensive French investments in that region. The U.S. officials also knew that the French were encouraging Diem's political rivals and trying to undermine Diem because he was strongly pro-American and anti-French. French rejection of the U.S. plan for a European Defense Community a month after Geneva annoyed the Americans who pushed harder to enhance their military, political, economic, and cultural influence in South Vietnam.[16]

With no army to enforce his edicts, Diem had no chance to consolidate his regime or unify the warring factions that dueled for power and the spoils of office in southern Vietnam. The Cao Dai religious sect ruled over the northern Mekong Delta. Its leader, Pham Cong Tac, could field an army 25,000 strong. The Hoa Hao, a Buddhist sect, used an army of thousands to control a region south and west of Saigon. In the central highlands, approximately 30 *Montagnard* tribes had for centuries rejected control from Vietnamese state authority. Thousands of Vietminh troops remained in the southern regroupment zone. These "stay behinds" dominated about one-third of southern Vietnam. They established "a network of cadres to harass the Diem government through acts of sabotage and assassination."[17]

Diem was also virtually powerless to control events in Saigon, which was controlled by the Binh Xuyen, a criminal syndicate headed by Bay Vien, a godfather-type crime boss. Vien could field a large force of 40,000 armed thugs who protected his lavish vice and crime empire. The Binh Xuyen operated the Grande Monde, a huge and opulent casino. Down the block from the casino was the world's largest brothel, the Hall of Mirrors. Another block down was an opium factory that supplied all of Indochina with high-grade products.

Bao Dai sustained his lavish lifestyle at his Riviera villa on payoffs from Bay Vien. In return, with French approval, Bao Dai placed Vien in charge of the Vietnamese *Surete*, the national police, with authority over gambling, prostitution, and opium traffic! Diem could not prevent Bay Vien from using the police powers of the state to protect his criminal empire. The CIA station chief William Colby sardonically observed that Diem "only controlled the space of his own palace grounds."[18]

Diem almost lost that bit of power when the French backed a coup plot against Diem hatched by VNA Army Chief of Staff General Nguyen Van Hinh during the fall of 1954. But the French were outmaneuvered by a U.S. Air Force Colonel Edward G. Lansdale, whom John Foster Dulles and his brother Allan, the director of the CIA, had recruited to lead a CIA group sent on secret assignment to help establish a non-Communist government in southern Vietnam. Lansdale informed General Ely that if the coup went forward, the United States would cut off all funding for the VNA. Lansdale also bought off the politico-religious sects that were supporting Hinh and demanded that Bao Dai dismiss him from his command. General Hinh went off to French and rejoined the French Army.[19]

Even though temporarily reprieved, Diem's position remained precarious. Nine members of his cabinet resigned. The French supported all efforts to rid the country of Diem. Daily pronouncements and press reports claimed that his demise was imminent.

In early November, Eisenhower and Dulles, still backing Diem, sent a special envoy, General J. Lawton Collins, out to Saigon with full powers to do whatever he could to strengthen Diem's government and help him to bring order to his anarchic country. Before departing for Saigon, Collins met with CIA clandestine service chief Frank G. Wisner who advised Collins to work closely with Lansdale who had established contacts with all factions and appeared to have the confidence of Diem. As Collins left for Saigon, Dulles told him that the chances of success of his mission were "only one in ten," but the opportunity to prevent the spread of communism made the effort necessary.[20]

Over the next several months, observing his *modus operandi*, Collins grew increasingly skeptical of Diem's ability to survive in office and govern effectively. Diem focused so intently on micromanaging the pettiest details that he appeared incapable of seeing the larger view. Diem, who trusted no one except a few family members, primarily his younger brother Nhu, refused to broaden the base of his government, and refused to negotiate with any of his many rivals. He also ignored all of Collins' suggestions. Concluding that

Diem was hopeless, General Collins informed Washington that he had to be removed from office. Collins recommended that he be replaced by Phan Huy Quat, the popular leader that Bao Dai would probably have appointed the prime minister if he had not seen the necessity of placating the Americans. Lansdale, who was spending more time with Diem, was much more upbeat about his prospects of establishing a viable government. Perhaps aware of Lansdale's views, Dulles quickly rejected Collins' suggestion, telling him, "we have no choice but to continue our support of Diem."[21]

As the new year began, Diem's precarious position got a bit less precarious. The dollar supplanted the franc as the State of Vietnam's unit of currency. Diem now enjoyed financial control over the VNA, because the dollars flowed directly to him. Since Diem now signed their paychecks, the VNA generals were less susceptible to French influence and less inclined to get involved in coup plots against him.

Returning from a SEATO conference, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles made his only visit to Vietnam in February 1955. He spent little time with Collins and apparently met with Lansdale. Senator Mansfield, who also visited Saigon and met with Diem, told Dulles that Diem was the right man for the job and if he should fall, the United States should suspend all aid to South Vietnam. In a private conversation with Ngo Dinh Diem, Dulles assured him that he had the full support of the U.S. government. Diem interpreted Dulles' promise to be a guarantee of support against all of his adversaries. Before leaving Saigon, Dulles made a dramatic show of publicly supporting Diem. Shortly after the Secretary of State departed, the State of Vietnam leader initiated a chain of events that culminated in the Battle for Saigon.[22]

The Battle for Saigon, April 27 to May 3, 1955

Instead of broadening his base of support, in March, Diem moved to neutralize his enemies one-by-one. He first went after the Binh Xuyen when he refused to renew their gambling license. He then moved against the sects by ending the subsidies that the French had been paying the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao leaders for years in order to purchase their loyalty to Bao Dai's State of Vietnam. Responding to Diem's crackdowns, Bay Vien joined with the sect leaders to form the United Front National forces.

On March 21, the United Front issued an ultimatum, insisting that Diem undertake a complete reorganization of his government and install a new cabinet of ministers acceptable to all United Front Parties. The United Front represented a formidable challenge to Diem's authority. Anticipating his defeat, several cabinet members resigned, including foreign minister Nguyen Van Do, Diem's cousin. General Collins tried to persuade Diem to open negotiations with Bay Vien. Diem refused and the Binh Xuyen prepared for war. Diem countered by ordering his VNA forces to take control of police headquarters, the citadel of Bay Vien's criminal empire. Diem's troops surrounded the fortress with Bay Vien's thuggish police forces barricaded inside.[23]

Bay Vien's answer came at midnight March 29–30. Two hundred Binh Xuyen troops attacked VNA headquarters in retaliation for Diem's assault on police headquarters. During the three-and-a-half hour battle that ensued, casualties were light on both sides. Far more innocent bystanders than troops were killed; the bodies of civilian casualties littered the sidewalks in downtown Saigon.

General Collins, who believed that the U.S. mission of creating a non-Communist state in southern Vietnam could be accomplished, also believed that unless Diem were removed from office, the Communists would one day control all of Vietnam. He cabled Eisenhower and Dulles to inform them that Diem had to go in order to avoid a war that endangered the entire anti-Communist enterprise in South Vietnam.[24]

Alarmed by Collins' cable, Eisenhower recalled him to Washington for consultations. Collins returned to Washington on April 22 to vigorously make his case for Diem's removal before a gathering of top administrative officials. Collins also addressed senior members of the House and Senate foreign relations committees. He could not convince several of these congressional leaders that Diem had to be removed from office. Senator Mike Mansfield, Catholic and scholarly, formerly a college professor specializing in Asian history, strongly supported Diem and dismissed Collins' arguments as uninformed and biased against Diem.

But Collins thought he had made his case to be rid of Diem with Eisenhower and Dulles. On April 27, the Secretary of State sent secret cables to the embassies in Paris and Saigon informing them that Diem would be removed from office. Suggested replacements included Phan Huy Quat and Tran Van Do, two officials who enjoyed French support and popular followings among the predominantly Buddhist population. Six hours after the cables left Washington, Dulles was informed that fighting had erupted between the Binh Xuyen forces and the VNA. The Battle for Saigon was joined.[25]

Upon learning of the outbreak of fighting in Saigon, Dulles promptly cancelled the two cables dismissing Diem. Embassy officials were instructed to await further developments. Meanwhile, in Saigon the war escalated rapidly, engulfing much of the city. It is not known who fired the first shot that started the war. The most plausible explanation is that Diem, who probably knew that the Americans were considering dumping him, seized an opportunity to stave off dismissal. Diem perceived a last chance to save himself if he could take out the Binh Xuyen before they took him out. It was a gutsy and desperate gamble.[26]

On April 28, savage warfare erupted in the streets of Saigon. Large sections of the city became free fire zones. According to some accounts of the fighting, more troops were involved in the battle than fought in Saigon during the famed Tet-68 Offensive. Neither side employed any real strategy. It was a battle of wills to see which side could inflict and absorb the most punishment. Perhaps a thousand soldiers from both sides died that day. Thousands more were wounded. Businesses and homes were destroyed, and an estimated

20,000 people were left homeless. After 48 hours of continuous fighting, the VNA gradually gained the upper hand. When Collins returned to Saigon on the morning of May 2, the battle was ending. The Binh Xuyen forces had been shattered. Bay Vien, with the remnants of his army, had disappeared into the Mekong Delta. The leader of the Cao Dai sect fled the country and most of the Hoa Hao forces surrendered to Diem's victorious VNA.

By the end of May 1955, Diem had overcome his enemies and had outmaneuvered the French. He had also scuttled General Collins' efforts to find a new leader to replace Diem. He was master of Saigon and now controlled his army, which had been augmented by the addition of thousands of sectarian troops. Diem's defeat of the crime lords and sects also convinced the U.S. officials that they no longer needed the support of the French or Bao Dai. As French officials continued to denounce Diem and call for his removal, Dulles informed Paris that the United States had strongly re-embraced Diem. He further indicated that he would "be happy to see the French leave."[27] "Ultimately, the sect crisis destroyed what remained of Franco-American political collaboration in South Vietnam."[28]

Diem renamed his forces the **Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN**), pronounced "arvin" by the U.S. soldiers who subsequently served in Vietnam. Diem, whose hatred of the French was as intense as ever, ordered his army to adopt American-style uniforms and the American salute. Following Diem's achieving substantial power with the U.S. help, the French made preparations to leave Vietnam. By April 1956, the last French soldiers and civilian officials had departed Saigon, ending nearly 100 years of French colonial rule. "Their departure made America South Vietnam's big brother."[29]

Diem Consolidates His Regime

The U.S. backing enabled Diem to eventually defeat all of his political foes. The U.S. support also helped Diem cope with a massive influx of refugees who fled northern Vietnam during the last six months of 1954 following the Communist takeover. Approximately one million civilians, some 700,000 of them Catholics, fled the north under the provisions of the Geneva Accords, which permitted free movement between regroupment zones. Whole parishes under the leadership of their priests headed south. Former soldiers in the Vietnamese National Army, colonial administrators, wealthy landlords, and businessmen who feared reprisals at the hands of the victorious Vietminh also joined the exodus south.

Even though many of these Catholic peasants were uncertain and fearful about life under the Communists and voted with their feet, the mass migration south was not an entirely spontaneous folk movement. The Catholic Church, the U.S. and French officials, and the Diem administration all promoted the migration. Edward Lansdale's CIA group initiated a propaganda campaign to increase the numbers of refugees heading south. They spread rumors that the Vietminh were going to close all the parish churches and

murder the priests. They printed pamphlets with slogans such as "The Virgin Mary has departed from the North."[30]

The mass migration of northern Catholics received extensive media coverage in America. The U.S. officials and journalists depicted the migrants as pitiable refugees fleeing Communist tyranny for the freedom and religious tolerance they would find in southern Vietnam. Tom Dooley, a young Navy doctor and devout Catholic involved in transporting the refugees, wrote powerfully of people fleeing from the godless cruelties of Communism. His book, *Deliver Us from Evil*, became the first great bestseller on Vietnam. It was one of the most influential works of propaganda produced during the Cold War era. Anyone reading Dooley's best-selling book or seeing a popular movie based on it would respond positively to his emotional appeal for Americans to support Ngo Dinh Diem's government and country. Vivid images of a flight to freedom became ingrained in the American public consciousness.

The U.S. and French ships and aircraft transported the refugees who made the thousand-mile journey from Haiphong to Saigon. Private American religious and charitable agencies assisted the Diem government's efforts to resettle the migrants in southern Vietnam. Both the United States and Diem's fledging regime scored Cold War propaganda points during the refugee crisis.

The migrants radically altered the religious geography of Vietnam. Prior to the migration, most of Vietnam's Catholics lived north of the 17th Parallel. By 1956, of Vietnam's approximately 1.5 million Catholics, over 1 million of them resided in South Vietnam. Even though approximately 85 percent of the South Vietnamese population professed a variant of Buddhism, these northern Catholics comprised a major political asset for Diem. They significantly enhanced his popular base. In return, they held a disproportionate share of high military and government positions in the Diem government.

With his popular base enhanced by the massive influx of northern Catholics, confident of the strong backing of the U.S. officials, Diem now moved to eliminate Bao Dai, who was still the nominal head of the South Vietnamese state, and a symbol of French influence. Bao Dai posed no threat to Diem, but he resented Bao Dai's monarchial pretensions and decadent lifestyle. While the emperor remained in France, Diem, with Lansdale's assistance, arranged a referendum in which people could vote either for Bao Dai or himself as the head of state.

The referendum was held on October 23, 1955. Diem's soldiers supervised the polling places and Diem's officials counted the ballots. Some districts tallied more votes for Diem than they had registered voters. The Saigon-Cholon area, with 450,000 registered voters, cast 605,025 votes for Diem. At the end of the day, he announced that he had won, with 98.2 percent of the vote.[31] On October 26, 1955, Diem proclaimed the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam with himself as the head of state. The political career of Bao Dai, Vietnam's last emperor, had reached its end. He never returned to the land his ancestors had ruled since 1802.

As he consolidated his authority, Diem could rely on the political support of four main groups: (1) the sizable Catholic population, now more than doubled

in size by the addition of the northern exiles; (2) a small but influential class of wealthy planters; (3) the Vietnamese serving in the government bureaucracies, the police, and the armed forces; and (4) a new urban middle class created by the massive flow of U.S. funds to South Vietnam. Collectively, these four groups comprised a rather narrow base of support.[32]

The Commodity Import Program (CIP) comprised the major component of the American economic aid program to South Vietnam. The CIP began in January 1955. Originally designed to absorb purchasing power to hold down inflation that would have been ignited by the rapid injection of large sums of money into the relatively small Vietnamese economy, the CIP also enabled the United States to fund the cost of Diem's army, police, and civil service. Diem was relieved of the need to tax the Vietnamese people because, in effect, the American taxpayers were underwriting the costs of his government. The commodity-import system generated the consumer goods that the new middle class wanted at prices they could afford. It kept taxes down, inflation rates low, and paid for most of the costs of Diem's and his successors' governments.[33] It also purchased the loyalty of the new urban middle classes to Diem, and to whomever might come after him in Saigon, and to their American sponsors.

The CIP did have some adverse long-run impacts on the economy and on many of the people of South Vietnam. While the CIP greatly expanded the size of the urban middle classes and made some Vietnamese wealthy, it created a narrowly based prosperity that never reached into the countryside or benefited the rural masses, who made up 85 percent of the southern Vietnamese population. The villagers could never afford to participate in the new consumer economy that American aid dollars sustained. The gap between city affluence and rural poverty widened. Saigon prospered, while poverty persisted in the countryside.

The CIP, in effect, created an artificial economy that could last only as long as the U.S. officials were willing to pump hundreds of millions of dollars of American tax money into South Vietnam each year. The CIP also brought wholesale corruption and graft. Importers eagerly paid huge bribes to government officials to obtain licenses that practically guaranteed their becoming rich. Sizable black markets flourished. The CIP, which brought in mostly consumer goods, also retarded South Vietnamese industrial development. There were no incentives for Vietnamese entrepreneurs to import capital goods and set up factories to produce items that could be imported easily and cheaply from America and then sold for windfall profits.

The South Vietnamese economy never industrialized or moved toward self-sufficiency. South Vietnam remained an economic dependency of the U.S. capitalist juggernaut. In the long run, two of the chief reasons for the failure of Diem and his successors to achieve stable and popular governments in South Vietnam were their failures to promote economic development and to establish a popular base of support among the rural masses. The seductive lure of the CIP is partly to blame for both failings.

As the time approached for holding nationwide elections in Vietnam, as called for in the Geneva agreements, Diem had no intention of permitting them to be held in the half of Vietnam that he controlled. The United States backed Diem's actions even though it was inconsistent with Washington's calls for free elections in other divided countries such as Germany and Korea.[34] Diem claimed legal grounds for his refusal. He cited the treaty signed by French and South Vietnam officials recognizing the State of Vietnam as an independent sovereign state, which predated the Geneva agreements. He pointed out that the South Vietnamese delegates did not participate in the negotiations at Geneva. Further, not only had South Vietnamese officials not signed either the armistice or the treaty, they had denounced all the agreements and dissociated themselves from them.[35]

Diem also insisted that only his government stood for the fulfillment of the nationalist aspirations of all Vietnamese people to live within a unified, independent Vietnam. He stated that the Communists would never permit a free election to be held in those parts of Vietnam under their control.[36] Diem may have had another reason for refusing to allow the elections. President Eisenhower acknowledged that if elections had been held during that summer of 1956 to reunite Vietnam in accordance with the provisions of the Geneva Accords, Ho Chi Minh would have received 80 percent of the votes.[37]

Diem's refusal to permit the elections to take place as scheduled marked a critical juncture in the growing U.S. investment in South Vietnam and the shifting context of the Cold War rivalry between the major Communist and Western nations. Henceforth, the focus of the major power rivalries would be in the volatile Third World. What made these regions of Africa and Asia so unstable was the emergence of newly independent countries, often headed by inexperienced leaders, trying to emancipate their people from the vestiges of colonial domination. Seeing opportunity to score Cold War propaganda victories over their American competitors, the Soviets began to move into these Third World trouble spots during the mid-1950s. They also saw opportunities to enhance their strategic and economic interests *vis-à-vis* their Western rivals.

Diem is mainly responsible for the non-elections of 1956. The British and French tried unsuccessfully to persuade him to consult with the North. The U.S. officials supported Diem, perceiving that he was determined to prevent the elections and recognizing that stymieing these elections accorded with their efforts to prevent the further spread of Communism in Southeast Asia. Diem had crushed his internal political adversaries, had deposed Bao Dai, and had eliminated lingering French military and political influence in southern Vietnam. Beyond unilaterally canceling the election, Diem looked ahead to reorganizing his government and working on land reform. He envisioned himself as a non-Communist Asian nationalist; he did not view himself as an American puppet.

Diem pulled off the non-elections not only because of American backing, but because the Soviet Union and China showed remarkably little concern that the elections go forth as scheduled. Neither of the major communist

powers wanted a confrontation with the United States over a relatively insignificant country that could lead to war. The leaders of both nations also hoped to improve their international standing as responsible major powers seeking diplomatic solutions to international conflicts. The Chinese periodically tried to hold South Vietnam to carrying out the elections, but never applied any concrete pressure.

Of all the nation-states that forged the Geneva Accords, only Hanoi appears to have really wanted the elections to ensue. Ho Chi Minh tried hard to make them happen. He made every effort to get the British and the Soviets, the co-chairs of the Geneva conference, to apply pressure to Diem. He also tried to use the French to force Diem's hand, not realizing that they had lost control in the South to the Americans and to Diem's regime.

When Hanoi understood that the French could not help them and the major Communist powers had their reasons for not pushing Diem hard, they were bitterly disappointed. They could also see that the U.S. nation-building enterprise in South Vietnam was gaining momentum. Ho Chi Minh realized his dream of a unified Vietnam under Lao Dong control would be deferred indefinitely. In the interim, he would concentrate on building socialism in the northern half of Vietnam. In time, he would shift tactics—from trying to defeat the emerging South Vietnamese state via peaceful political means to subverting it from within.[38]

For Washington, this shifting context of the Cold War rivalry brought about by Soviet penetration of the Third World significantly enhanced the American sense of what was at stake in Vietnam. It reinforced the U.S. notion of its global mission—the urgent need to deflect an aggressive international conspiracy reaching into regions of vital interest to America and her allies. It also reinforced the U.S. tendency to view all diplomatic developments within a zero-sum framework, to calculate any shift in the political fortunes of contending Vietnamese factions as a gain or loss for either Communism or Freedom.

Social Revolution in Northern Vietnam

While Diem was taking charge in the south, the Vietnamese Communist Party directed a Communist version of nation-building in the half of Vietnam that lay north of the 17th Parallel. Although the Communists did not have to confront the political challenges to their rule in North Vietnam that Diem had to face in South Vietnam, the serious economic challenges faced by the Communist leaders were much more daunting than those faced by Diem. Most of the fighting during the First Indochina War had occurred in northern Vietnam; consequently, the damage to the war-torn economy of Tonkin was far greater than any damage done to the southern half of the country.

When the French and non-Communist Vietnamese pulled out in the fall of 1954, they "gutted basic services, and sabotaged or dismantled industries as they withdrew from the North."[39] Much of the technical and skilled manpower in northern Vietnam also left with the French. North Vietnam had fewer resources

and more people than South Vietnam. Agricultural productivity was low. The division of the country deprived North Vietnam of its traditional source of rice. Historically, the North had imported much of the rice its people consumed from the South, and Diem refused to meet with Hanoi's emissaries to discuss economic integration or trade. Only an emergency loan from the Soviets enabled North Vietnam to import rice from Burma in 1955 and avoid a famine.[40]

The requirements of reconstructing northern Vietnam in the wake of a destructive war and the urgent need for food forced Hanoi to seek assistance from China and the Soviet Union. External aid was crucial, not only to meet immediate needs, but also to realize North Vietnam's long-term objective of building a modern socialist political economy.[41] Although China and the Soviet Union provided significant economic and technical assistance for the reconstruction of that portion of Vietnam under Communist control, that aid amounted to only a fraction of the assistance that the United States provided South Vietnam during the same period.

The new government that the Vietminh established in Hanoi in the fall of 1954 was cast in the Marxist-Leninist mold. All power was concentrated within the executive directorate (Politburo) of the Lao Dong headed by the top party leaders, Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Pham Van Dong. The most powerful leader within the Politburo was the First Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Truong Chinh. Opposition parties were forbidden on the grounds that non-Communists could not possibly be Vietnamese patriots.

The Vietnamese Communists permitted a national legislature to exist and regularly scheduled elections were held, but the legislature had no power independent of the Politburo, which ignored its laws whenever it wanted to and routinely presented it with programs to approve. "People's democracy" in practice meant that the people of North Vietnam came under the control of a Communist ruling elite whose authority flowed from its monopoly of state power.

Party members organized into blocs called cadres wielded political authority at all levels, down to urban neighborhoods, rural villages and hamlets, workplaces, schools, and occupations. These cadres also monopolized local government offices. Through the cadres, both party doctrine and government policy, often one and the same, reached every citizen. When fully articulated, the party apparatus was the mechanism for collectivizing the entire society.[42] The cadres, using a combination of positive incentives and coercion, worked especially hard to impose collectivist discipline on the rural masses.

While Diem, with American help, was maneuvering to overcome his many political rivals in Saigon, Ho Chi Minh announced on January 1, 1955 that the time had come to implement Communist principles of economic and social organization:

> We shall endeavor to restore our economy, agriculture, commerce, industry, and transport, gradually to raise our living standards. We shall continue our work of mobilizing the masses for land rent reduction and land reform.[43]

It was through rebuilding and restructuring the northern economy that the Communist leaders sought to achieve their major objective: a self-sufficient industrializing economy within five years. Socialist reconstruction would be based upon the twin pillars of agricultural reform and industrial development.

When the government turned to the difficult task of rebuilding the war-shattered economy of northern Vietnam, its first priority was rebuilding the infrastructure. Transportation and communication systems lay in shambles. One of the first projects the government undertook was the rebuilding of the railroad that linked Hanoi with Lang Son at the Chinese border. Under relentless pressure from party officials, 80,000 workers rebuilt the lines in six months. Most of the workers were "volunteers," who were not paid for their hard labor. The human costs of this forced labor were high, resulting in deaths, injuries, illness, malnutrition, and exhaustion.[44] Rebuilding the railroad was crucial to the development of the northern economy because it linked Vietnam not only with China, but also with the Soviet Union and the East European Communist countries. Over North Vietnam's Hanoi-Lang Son railroad would come over $2 billion of industrial and military equipment that "fueled its recovery and later its war against South Vietnam."[45]

China furnished extensive economic assistance to the North Vietnamese. Ho Chi Minh journeyed to Beijing in 1955 where he was met personally at the airport by Mao Zedong.[46] Between 1955 and 1960, Chinese aid to North Vietnam totaled about $225 million, and thousands of Chinese technicians worked in various projects all over the country. The Chinese interest in helping Ho Chi Minh modernize his country was to ensure that a friendly regime protected China's southern flank; the Chinese did not want either the United States or the Soviet Union to dominate Indochina. The North Vietnamese leaders were quite willing to accept the Chinese aid; however, they also recalled the long history of Chinese domination of their country and took care not to become dependent on China.

Ho Chi Minh also traveled to Moscow in 1955, where he was warmly received by the Soviet leaders. He had lived in the Soviet Union for many years and had derived his political ideology from Marxist-Leninist doctrines. The Lao Dong goal was for North Vietnam to industrialize along Soviet lines. The Soviets granted the North Vietnamese a wide array of aid programs. Soon, northern Vietnam was swarming with Soviet technicians, engineers, agricultural experts, and managers to help the North Vietnamese industrialize their predominantly agrarian economy.

But Ho and his Politburo colleagues were no more likely to become Soviet puppets than dependents of China. They skillfully extracted much aid and technical assistance from both countries, retained their freedom of maneuver, and played one Communist power against the other. By contrast, the Diem government in southern Vietnam between 1955 and 1960 became ever more dependent on the U.S. economic and military aid to finance its operations, to keep its consumer economy going, and to protect its security.

Senior members of the Politburo restructured the North Vietnamese economy during the mid-1950s. French-owned coal mines, steel factories, and textile plants were taken over by the government, as were banks and utilities. The former owners were not compensated for their lost properties. The commissars permitted some capitalist enterprises to survive; they retained a private sector of commerce and small-scale manufacturing. While a private sector and profits were permitted, wages and prices were subject to government regulation. The Politburo did not allow free-wheeling entrepreneurial capitalism to develop in North Vietnam.

Politburo economic planners regarded the creation of a more efficient agricultural system as the key to economic development. Industrialization would be retarded until they could make their rural economy more productive. Party officials also wanted to drive a sizable part of the rural population, which made up about 85 percent of the total population, off the land in order to ease population pressures in the countryside and to furnish workers for developing industries.

Party planners believed that the ultimate solution to the problem of low farm productivity would be the collectivization of agriculture à la the Soviet Union and China. Large-scale, mechanized collective farms would raise productivity and eliminate surplus rural populations. But to placate the land-hungry peasantry for whom socialism held no attractions, the Communists "preceded collectivization with a program of land reform."[47] The top party leader Truong Chinh took control of the North Vietnamese land reform. Lands belonging to wealthy landlords were seized and turned over to the poor. Since there were not enough rich landowners to satisfy the massive land hunger of North Vietnam's rural poor, roving political cadres of land reformers classified some of the wealthier peasants as landlords. About 2 million peasants received land. The old landlord class was destroyed, and a new class of landowners composed of newly middle-class peasants strongly supportive of the Hanoi regime took control of the villages.[48]

But many abuses accompanied the North Vietnamese land reform. In November 1956, Catholic farmers in Nghe An Province who were victimized by the reign of terror in the countryside rebelled against its excesses. To halt the spreading violence, Ho Chi Minh sent a division of regular army troops to quell the rebellion. By most estimates, more than 50,000 people died from malnutrition and security crackdowns.[49] In some regions, farmers protested to the International Control Commission, which had been created at Geneva to monitor the armistice. Ho Chi Minh temporarily halted the land reform program, ordered the release of some prisoners, and apologized publicly for the abuses and "mistakes" party cadres had committed. Officials responsible for the worst excesses and atrocities were dismissed. Truong Chin was forced out of office. The harsh land reform program and the methods used to implement it left a residue of bitterness and distrust, as well as deep divisions in the countryside between the beneficiaries and the victims of land reform.

Ho, of course, had expected the scheduled reunification elections to be held. However, Diem was able to subvert the provisions of the Geneva Accords that called for the national unification of Vietnam via the political mechanism of free elections in July 1956 largely because the major powers either supported or accepted the division of Vietnam. The French had departed and were no longer involved in Vietnamese political affairs. The United States backed Diem, but neither the Soviet Union nor China considered it to be in their national interest to back Hanoi's efforts to fulfill the terms of the Geneva settlement and to unify their country.[50] As far as the international community was concerned, Vietnam had been permanently partitioned at the 17th Parallel, and two *de facto* states, North Vietnam and South Vietnam, had been created. Even when it became clear that reunification elections would not occur, the Politburo elite, preoccupied as they were with implementing their socialist revolution in northern Vietnam and lacking support from the major Communist powers, were not prepared to resort to force to unify their country in 1956. Their policy remained one of strict compliance with the Geneva Accords and restricted the activities of southern insurgents to political work.

Nation-Building in Southern Vietnam

The ambitious American effort to create a non-Communist nation-state in southern Vietnam in the middle and late 1950s took on many aspects of a crusade in Southeast Asia. By 1958, over 1,500 Americans representing numerous government and private agencies were at work in South Vietnam on various projects. South Vietnam received the largest single share of the American foreign aid budget, and the U.S. mission headquartered in Saigon was the largest in the world. The mission, under the nominal direction of the U.S. ambassador to Saigon, comprised a myriad of agencies, each with its own personnel, budget, and programs. In addition to the regular embassy staff, these agencies included the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the United States Information Agency (USIA), the United States Operations Mission (USOM), and the Military Assistance-Advisory Group (MAAG). The MAAG was undoubtedly the most important of these agencies, because building up the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) was the top U.S. priority. About 80 percent of the total U.S. assistance program for South Vietnam went to building up its military forces.[51]

The MAAG had been assigned primary responsibility for training the ARVN. The 342 members of the American advisory group inherited a challenging assignment. The ARVN soldiers were poorly trained and poorly equipped. The ARVN was short of officers, certainly of qualified officers. "Diem tended to value political reliability in senior officers far more than military expertise."[52] Consequently, the officer corps, especially at the senior level, was riven with political intrigue. Diem, who functioned as his own minister of defense, frequently bypassed the military chain of command to give orders directly to unit commanders.

The MAAG advisers also discovered that the South Vietnamese commanders were not patriots. They lacked any national feeling for their newly created country. Most of them had fought with the French Expeditionary Force during the First Indochina War. Most spoke French better than they did Vietnamese, and many were French citizens. None of Diem's senior commanders had ever been associated with the resistance to French colonialism, the supposed foundation of Diemist nationalism, and South Vietnamese patriotism. Insubordination was rampant, and senior officers were reluctant to discipline subordinates who had political connections. Army Chief of Staff General Le Van Ty bluntly told General Samuel T. Williams, the MAAG commander, that "many of our units would disappear into the countryside at the very start of the reopening of hostilities."[53]

Corruption in the ARVN was rampant. Many South Vietnamese officers saw their military careers as an opportunity to enrich themselves and their families. Senior officers often developed nonmilitary enterprises on the side that included black marketeering, drug dealing, and prostitution. Some regional commanders set themselves up as warlords in outlying districts, and their soldiers collected "taxes" from the villagers.[54]

General Williams and his advisory teams went to work to try to turn a thoroughly politicized, thoroughly corrupt ARVN that was incapable of fighting into an effective military organization. American-style training schools and methods were implemented. Thousands of Vietnamese officers were sent overseas to attend the U.S. military schools. The ARVN was trimmed from a bloated 250,000-man force to a leaner, more efficient 150,000 troops. Soldiers were equipped with modern weapons and taught modern tactics. The "heart of the American advisory effort was the Combat Arms Training Organization (CATO),"[55] an operations staff that controlled all the MAAG field detachments assigned to the various Vietnamese commands from the corps level down to the infantry, artillery, or armored battalions in the field. Advisers played key roles in determining the effectiveness of the training and discipline that the ARVN units acquired.

The effectiveness of the American advisers was sometimes hindered by language and cultural barriers. Few Americans could speak Vietnamese (or French) and they sometimes displayed racist attitudes, calling the Vietnamese "natives." Some American advisers vented anti-Asian stereotypes, viewing their Vietnamese charges as passive, cunning, and incapable of understanding modern technology. Some Vietnamese soldiers were slow to learn English, often resented their brusque American advisers, and did not always train conscientiously. Many remained suspicious that the Americans had come to replace the French as their new colonial masters. The U.S. advisers had to spend much time reassuring their South Vietnamese counterparts that they had not come as conquerors; they had come to help South Vietnam achieve independence and to be able to defend itself against aggression.

By the late 1950s, the U.S. efforts to turn the ARVN into a modern and disciplined fighting force had only partially succeeded. Diem still insisted on

selecting senior commanders on the basis of their politics rather than on their professional competence. Corruption continued to pose problems. But the chief shortcoming of the new model ARVN was that the MAAG had trained it for the wrong mission.[56] The MAAG advisers, perceiving that Diem appeared to have eliminated all internal political opposition, concluded that an invasion across the 17th Parallel posed the chief threat to the security of South Vietnam. The U.S. advisers were also influenced by their Korean experiences; many of them had helped the South Koreans build up their defenses against invasion from the North Koreans during the Korean War. The U.S. advisers therefore created a ARVN with the capability of fighting a conventional main force war that could defeat an external invader, and they were dismayed to discover that the ARVN could not cope with the guerrilla insurgencies that arose in the South Vietnam to challenge Diem's rule.[57] By training the ARVN forces for the wrong mission, the Americans also revealed that they had failed to assimilate the lessons learned so painfully by the French in the Indochina War.

Along with military assistance, Washington pumped over $1 billion in foreign aid into the South Vietnamese economy during the late 1950s, most of it into the aforementioned CIP that sustained the South Vietnamese government and created a new class loyal to Diem and his American sponsors. The United States also provided over $150 million in direct economic and technical aid. The U.S. money repaired war-damaged roads and railroads, enhanced agricultural productivity, improved schools, and raised public health standards.

One of the most important components of the U.S. nonmilitary aid going to South Vietnam was provided by a group of advisers from Michigan State University. Organized by a Professor of Political Science Wesley Fishel, the **Michigan State University Group (MSUG)** provided training in public administration, police administration, and economics. The MSUG also furnished cover for CIA officers disguised as staff members.[58]

By 1957, the American experiment in nation-building in southern Vietnam appeared to be a stunning success. Starting with almost nothing in the summer of 1954, Ngo Dinh Diem had risen to preside over a stable government protected by a modern army and sustained by a flourishing consumer economy. To confirm South Vietnam's nationhood and to celebrate Diem's political achievements, he was flown to Washington in the American presidential jet for a triumphant two-week tour of the United States. President Eisenhower met Diem at the airport and told him:

> You have exemplified in your corner of the world patriotism of the highest order. You have brought to your great task of organizing your country the greatest of courage, the greatest of statesmanship.[59]

Diem's American tour was the high point of his presidency among his American benefactors. He enjoyed far greater popularity within the United States

than he did in his own country. Diem was invited to address a joint session of Congress. He enjoyed a tickertape parade in his honor down Broadway and attended a private Mass celebrated by Cardinal Spellman. He was feted at public gatherings as the gutsy leader had overcome the inveterate political fragmentation of Saigon to create a strong, stable government, a showcase of freedom. He was the patriotic Vietnamese leader who was more than a match for Ho Chi Minh. South Vietnam was offered to the world as a model of enlightened U.S. foreign policy in action. The South Vietnamese had established a free society and were holding the line against the further spread of Communism in Indochina. Diem was the leader of his people fighting on the front lines of freedom, stemming the Communist tide.

Eisenhower did not have to deal with investigative reporters challenging his administration's optimistic portrayal of conditions in Vietnam and the performance of the South Vietnamese government as his successors would have to in the 1960s and 1970s. The American people trusted their political leaders and reporters generally accepted official versions of the daily news. Indeed, the titans of the mainstream press were all cheerleaders for Ngo Dinh Diem. Saving an Asian nation from the scourge of communism was an immensely popular American crusade during the 1950s and the press lords all promoted the cause. The *New York Times* praised Diem for "advancing the cause of freedom and democracy in Asia." Henry Luce, founder and editor-in-chief of *Time, Life,* and *Fortune*, wrote an editorial for *Life* that hailed Diem as "The tough miracle man of Vietnam." Afterward, the word "miracle" became indelibly associated with America's Diem experiment.[60]

"Diemocracy" in Action

Beneath the brightly shining surface of public celebration, all was not going well in Vietnam south of the 17th Parallel, even during 1957, Diem's *annus mirabilis.* Diem did not believe in nor did he try to implement a democratic political system in South Vietnam. He clearly stated his autocratic political philosophy:

> Our political system has been based not on the concept of management of the public affairs by the people or their representatives, but rather by an enlightened sovereign.[61]

To please his American sponsors, in 1956 Diem established a constitutional system modeled on the U.S. Constitution, with executive, judicial, and legislative branches. Formally, the Republican Government of Vietnam (GVN or RVN) was a constitutional democracy. But Diem's constitution lodged almost all powers of government in the executive branch. Diem's powers resembled those of the Vietnamese emperors or the French governors-general, not the limited powers exercised by the U.S. presidents. Diem controlled all judicial appointments; therefore, the South Vietnamese judiciary never established

its independence from the all-powerful executive authority. Diem also had considerable legislative power; the National Assembly could only initiate legislation covering comparatively minor matters.

In addition, Diem extinguished the regional autonomy of Cochin China and southern Annam. He appointed province chiefs for South Vietnam's 41 provinces and all administrators for the nation's 246 districts. By decree, he abolished elective village councils and then appointed officials to supervise the affairs of the country's 2,500 villages and 16,000 hamlets, the local levels of government with which the peasants identified.[62]

Neither the imperial Confucian administrators nor the French colonial administrators had ever completely abolished the tradition and practices of village autonomy. While ridding Vietnam of French colonialism and the remnants of the old monarchy, Ngo Dinh Diem saddled the South Vietnamese people with the most ruthlessly authoritarian government in their history.

Diem also staffed his civilian and military bureaucracies almost exclusively with Catholics, many of whom had recently migrated south, and he saw to it that Catholic villages received most of the U.S. aid funds. Many of the native Southerners resented these outsiders who enjoyed special privileges, did not speak their dialects, and did not understand their particular problems. This regional imbalance caused special problems for the Diem government's relations with many southern peasants and prevented the national government from ever winning their trust or loyalty. Southern Buddhist peasants especially resented having northern Catholics, who looked down on them and were indifferent to their welfare, administering their affairs.[63]

Trusting no one, Diem relied heavily on his family to govern South Vietnam. Behind a republican facade, nearly total power "remained lodged with Diem and his immediate family,"[64] the Ngo Dinhs. The most powerful members, after Diem, included Diem's youngest brother Ngo Dinh Nhu and Nhu's wife Tran Le Xuan, who functioned as South Vietnam's First Lady. (Diem, because he had taken a vow of celibacy, never married.) Two of Diem's brothers, Ngo Dinh Thuc, the archbishop of Hue and Catholic primate of Vietnam, and Ngo Dinh Can, ruled central Vietnam. Another brother, Ngo Dinh Luyen, bright and well educated, served as the international spokesman for the family, roaming the world as a kind of all-purpose envoy. Several other relatives and in-laws held important offices, including Madame Nhu's father, who was South Vietnam's ambassador to the United States for many years.

The *Can Lao*, a secret political party directed by Nhu, was the chief instrument of family rule. It was the only political party permitted in South Vietnam. Cells of the *Can Lao* reached into every agency of the government, infiltrated the ARVN, controlled the National Assembly, the police, the militia, the schools and colleges, the media, and entered into every level of the administrative apparatus of the Diem government.[65] The *Can Lao* cells provided the sinews that connected all the parts of Diem's police state.

Having consolidated its power in Saigon and the other cities in South Vietnam, Diem's family regime moved to suppress all remaining opposition in

South Vietnam. They set out to exterminate Vietminh supporters, who had remained in the South following the armistice and who controlled many of the southern villages. In the course of fighting and defeating the French, the Vietminh had established itself in many regions of southern Vietnam. It controlled perhaps one-third of the villages within South Vietnam, with an estimated population of 2–3 million people. The Vietminh strongholds included parts of the Mekong Delta and coastal enclaves.

Nhu spearheaded the drive to eliminate the Vietminh presence in South Vietnam. During 1955 and 1956, thousands of Vietminh cadres rallied to the Diem government, or were imprisoned or killed. Perhaps as many as 50,000 were imprisoned and 12,000 killed. Diem issued ordinances in 1956 and 1959 that gave government officials virtually a free hand to root out any opposition to his regime.[66] Diemist repression fell most heavily on the countryside. Ostensibly, Nhu's campaign aimed only to root out the Communists, but it also included anyone opposed to or suspected of opposing Diem: religious sectarians, intellectuals, journalists, socialists, and liberals.

Agriculture supported 85 percent of the population and provided the nation's two principal exports, rice, and rubber. Land ownership was concentrated in the hands of a small class of wealthy landowners. Almost all the rice lands of the Mekong Delta, one of the richest rice-growing regions of the world, belonged to absentee landlords. Delta rice lands were worked by tenant farmers who had to pay usurious rents to the landowners in the form of 50–70 percent of the annual crop. These tenant farmers comprised an impoverished, debt-ridden rural proletariat.

American experts helping to build a modern nation urged Diem to implement a program of land redistribution. Officials working with the MSUG understood that any government wishing to achieve a popular base of support among the rural population needed to implement land reform. The Communists had accomplished land reform in the part of Vietnam they controlled by liquidating the landlord class. Thousands of landowners were killed and their lands distributed free of charge to formerly landless peasants. Diem had no desire to emulate the Communist approach to land reform. He knew that he could not alienate the powerful landlord class in southern Vietnam, all of whom, for obvious reasons, were strongly anti-Communist.

Diem issued several decrees on land reform in 1955 and 1956. But his approach to land redistribution alienated many peasants. Landlords loyal to Diem were allowed to repossess rice lands that Vietminh cadres had confiscated during the Franco-Vietminh War and had given to poor peasants. The special courts established to adjudicate landlord-tenant disputes were dominated by landlords and officials responsive to landlord interests. Programs designed to hold land rents to no more than 25 percent of the value of the annual crop often were inefficiently administered.[67] A program to settle villagers on abandoned lands in the Mekong Delta promised to be popular, but Diem's insistence that the people buy the land from the government angered many peasants. Another program to distribute rice-growing lands to

tenants succeeded in providing some tenants with land. But only about 10 percent of the eligible peasantry in southern Vietnam were able to get the land, which came from expropriated French estates that Diem's government had purchased from their former owners, with funds provided by the United States. Under Diem's program, landlords were allowed to retain sizable landholdings, up to 100 hectares, for their own use. Far more Vietnamese lost lands than acquired them during Diem's eight years in power.[68]

Starting in 1957, the Diem government initiated a resettlement program for some of the Catholic refugees from North Vietnam and for peasants from overpopulated coastal enclaves. They were resettled in the sparsely populated central highlands. The new settlers were placed in fortified villages on lands claimed by *Montagnard* tribes. In addition to seizing their lands, Diem also attempted to impose his rule on the *Montagnards* and to Vietnamize them. Long accustomed to autonomy and allowed to retain their cultural identities under French rule, the *Montagnards* fiercely resented the intrusive Diemist policies. By 1958, some of the *Montagnards* were rebelling against the government's policy of forced assimilation.[69] Subsequently, the Communists were able to win the support of some of the *Montagnard* tribes by exploiting their many grievances against the GVN.

During the years when the U.S. government officials and journalists were extolling Diem's triumphs in the South, his policies were alienating much of the rural population. Even though his government was entirely dependent on American aid for its survival, the U.S. officials had very little leverage against the strong-willed ruler. Diem was convinced that only he knew what needed to be done and that only he knew how to do it. Diem and his brother Nhu also believed that the Americans would be forced to go along with them no matter what they did as long as the family oligarchy maintained a tough anti-Communist stance in South Vietnam. They were correct, because it was not until the early 1960s, when Diem's government was engulfed by revolution, that worried U.S. officials began pressing him to make reforms.

Diem's political ideology—an unwieldy mix of doctrines called "personalism" developed by Nhu to provide an ideological alternative to Communism—blended Confucian, Catholic, and Marxist principles. It added up to a muddled rationale for a species of paternalistic despotism: as the leader-father of his people, Diem knew what was best for his country, and it was his duty to implement the policies that would achieve the Diemist conception of the general good. The people's duties were to respect and obey their wise and noble leader. Diem viewed his people, if by "the people" one meant the rural masses who constituted 85 percent of the South Vietnamese population, as potential enemies who must be kept under surveillance and tight administrative control. The Ngo Dinh family oligarchy attacked and tried to suppress all of its opponents. Inevitably, it generated more enemies than it suppressed. Its actions provoked resistance. In time, that resistance evolved into armed rebellion. Hanoi took over and directed that rebellion, which evolved into revolution.

Origins of the Southern Insurgency

According to the provisions of the Geneva agreements that arranged an armistice and proposed a political settlement for the Franco-Vietminh War in 1954, the armed forces and supporters of both sides were allowed 300 days in which to withdraw to one of the two regroupment zones, with the French and their supporters retiring to the zone south of the 17th Parallel and the Vietminh and their supporters moving north of that line. During the 300-day interim, about 900,000 people moved south and 200,000 moved north. An estimated "50,000 to 90,000 Vietminh sympathizers went to the North, while approximately 10,000 to 15,000 remained in the South."[70] The Vietminh cadres remaining in South Vietnam were under instructions to protect the remaining revolutionary forces in that region, maintain the party apparatus, and retain their influence in the villages sympathetic to the Vietminh program. These Vietminh "stay-behinds" formed the nucleus of the armed rebellion that would erupt within a few years in South Vietnam.

During the first years of Diem's rule, opposition had come mainly from the sects and the Binh Xuyen. During these years, the Vietminh stay-behinds, following their instructions, involved themselves mostly in political activity and prepared for the upcoming unification elections scheduled for July 1956 that they expected to win. They were disappointed and angry when the promised elections were never held. They were also disappointed that the major powers, including their Communist allies, accepted the cancellation of the elections and the Communist leaders in Hanoi were not prepared to force the issue. Some left the ranks of the Vietminh, but most remained loyal to Hanoi and to its goal of a unified and an independent Vietnamese nation under the Communist rule.

Nearly all Vietnamese, northerners and southerners, whatever their political beliefs and affiliations, held to a concept of a single all-embracing nation. These nationalistic sentiments either were not perceived or were ignored by the U.S. officials who had embarked on a crusade to create a new nation south of the 17th Parallel. Disregarding the strong sense of national identity held by most Vietnamese citizens, a succession of American administrations advanced the notion that those Vietnamese who happened to live south of the 17th Parallel under a "free" government had developed their own sense of nationhood and patriotism that was distinct from the sentiments held by the Vietnamese living north of that line under a Communist regime imposed on them by the victorious Vietminh.

But the idea of a permanently divided Vietnam was no more acceptable to Diem, his successors, or their followers than it was to Ho Chi Minh, his successors, or their followers. Nor was it any more acceptable to that broad spectrum of Vietnamese who did not support either the Communists or the Diemists. "Adherence to the principle of a unified Vietnam was common to almost all Vietnamese; where they differed was under what authority it should be reunited."[71] For nearly all Vietnamese, there was only one homeland; the

conflict was over who should rule that homeland. The southern insurgency that became a revolution, which in time involved the United States in a major war in the region formerly known as Indochina, was always a struggle for control of one country.

These nationalistic aspirations to live within a unified country, embraced by nearly all Vietnamese, explain why a "South Vietnamese" national consciousness never evolved. There existed only a region cut off from the rest of Vietnam by an arbitrary line drawn by diplomats who never intended for it to become a permanent political boundary.

What did evolve in the southern part of Vietnam by the late 1950s were three political groupings. One was loyal to Diem and his successors and supported their American patrons; a second faction supported the Vietminh and looked to national reunification under the leadership of the Lao Dong Politburo. But a third force evolved, composed of those who held to a goal of wanting to live in a Vietnamese nation governed by neither Saigon nor Hanoi.[72]

In 1956, the first Communist call to arms in southern Vietnam came from Le Duan, a veteran revolutionary leader from his command post in the Mekong Delta. Duan described how the Diem regime was relentlessly tightening its control in the South while imprisoning and killing Vietminh "stay behinds" and other opponents of its rule. In response, Hanoi authorized the southern Vietminh to shoot in self-defense. It also authorized the assassination of State of Vietnam officials and terror-bombing of its institutions. Throughout 1957, hundreds of local government officials were killed or kidnapped, and sporadic terrorist attacks in Saigon and other cities killed or injured dozens more. Observing how quickly Duan implemented Hanoi's call for armed resistance in the South, senior officials brought him north. Within a short period of time, he was appointed the Secretary of the Lao Dong (Vietnam Workers' Party), North Vietnam's Communist Party.[73]

A majority of Duan's colleagues on the Politburo, fully engaged in nation-building in northern Vietnam, had no desire to provoke the U.S. military intervention in South Vietnam, especially given the lack of support for Vietnam's reunification from the USSR and China. Consequently, the Politburo reaffirmed its policy of calling for peaceful political activity in South Vietnam. Duan wrote a pamphlet to the southern cadres outlining Hanoi's policies.[74] While affirming Hanoi's contention that the revolution in South Vietnam would develop peacefully, Duan also advocated a more militant policy that would actively promote reunification and prepare the southern cadres for possible revolutionary activity. Duan's ambiguous tract served as Hanoi's policy in South Vietnam until 1959 when fast-developing events in that region provided Duan and his more militant colleagues their opportunity to change the Politburo's approach.

Figure 3.1 Provinces and provincial capitals. *Public domain.*

The rebellion in southern Vietnam had begun a death at a time when cadres assassinated Diemist police and civic officials.[75] However, Nhu's drive to root out the Vietminh was effective in many areas. Cadre members were arrested, imprisoned, and killed. In many districts, the party apparatus disappeared or was reduced to a harried rump scrambling to elude the *Can Lao*. Nhu kept the pressure on and continued to eradicate Communist cells in the South. The southern Vietminh were reduced to pockets of resistance in a few regions, struggling to survive, without any help from Hanoi.

"In desperation, local leaders in many areas began to act on their own initiative."[76] Armed units were formed in response to attacks by Diem's forces, even though these actions violated Hanoi's official policy. Guerrilla units were formed in the Quang Ngai province, in the U Minh forest, in the Mekong Delta, and in what the U.S. soldiers would come to know as War Zone D, a region northwest of Saigon. War Zone D would become a key basing area during the revolution, because it was near the Cambodian border and also allowed access to the Mekong Delta and the central highlands. By the end of 1958, the southern insurgents "had clearly reopened the deferred war of national liberation."[77]

Hanoi began developing a new policy in January 1959. At a plenary session of the Politburo, Le Duan, the most powerful advocate for a more militant policy, emphasized the dire threat faced by the southern cadres. Unless the Party intervened, the southern insurgency was in danger of being annihilated by Nhu's forces. Duan also voiced a concern that Diemist repression would eradicate the revolutionary organization in South Vietnam.

The Communist leadership also perceived the growing popular discontent with Diem's policies and methods of governance, and they wanted to exploit it. But they had also concluded that Diem could not be overthrown by political means. Among the Communist leaders, debates turned on how high a priority to assign the growing southern insurgency and on what combination of political and military strategies should be used in South Vietnam to overthrow Diem and reunify the country. They preferred to continue developing the northern economy and to avoid an overt military strategy that would provoke the United States into armed intervention. If that happened, there would be a full-scale, protracted war, which would surely engulf them. Hanoi ardently wished to avoid that war.[78]

A Politburo directive issued in May 1959 authorized the formation of a base in the central highlands for political organizing leading to limited guerrilla warfare. A few months later, another directive widened the scope of permissible politico-military activity to include other regions as opportunities developed. It also instructed the North Vietnamese army to establish a **Special Military Operations Corps** dubbed **Doan 559 (Group 559)**, a logistics unit with the capability of moving weapons, ammunition, people, and supplies overland from North Vietnam to South Vietnam along an infiltration route that ran through the Laotian panhandle. This infiltration route would be more commonly known as the Ho Chi Minh trail during the American Vietnam War.

Hanoi also began sending southern cadres that had regrouped in North Vietnam following the 1954 armistice down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to join the southern insurgency. Some of these infiltrators entered the South by crossing the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that divided the two regions near the 17th Parallel.[79] Many of these "regroupees" had received special training while in North Vietnam, and once they returned to southern Vietnam, they assumed leadership positions in the developing insurgency.

In 1959 and 1960, the level of conflict between Diem's forces and the revolutionaries escalated throughout southern Vietnam. Guerrillas raided ARVN outposts and assassinated thousands of Diemist village officials. The Communists staged significant uprisings in three areas that had been long-time insurgent strongholds. In January 1960, in the Ben Tre province in the lower Mekong Delta, Madame Nguyen Thi Dinh led 160 soldiers armed with only a few homemade weapons. The insurgents acquired a large popular following, gained control of several districts within the province, and overran government outposts. These attacks forced the Saigon government to withdraw its troops from enough areas to allow the Vietminh to distribute thousands of hectares of land to poor peasants. In the Tay Ninh province, northwest of Saigon near the Cambodian border, a Vietminh main force unit overran a government outpost. In the Tra Bong district of Quang Ngai province near the northern coast of South Vietnam, insurgents were able to fight off Diem's troops and establish "liberated zones" incorporating dozens of villages and thousands of people.[80]

Diem struck back hard at his enemies in an effort to suppress the rising insurgency. Nhu continued his efforts to break the back of the Communist organizations. ARVN troops raided guerrilla strongholds. Diem, with assistance from the energetic folks at the MSUG, implemented a program to isolate villages from the guerrilla forces by resettling the people in areas where the ARVN forces could protect them. A series of fortified villages, called "agrovilles," were constructed in strategic areas, and the peasants were relocated.

The agroville program failed disastrously. Peasants were conscripted for forced labor to build the agrovilles. The people deeply resented being forcibly removed from their ancestral lands and burial sites—central to Buddhist culture. They were not adequately compensated for their losses and they were forced to walk long distances to tend their fields instead of living on their lands. Originally, Diem's officials planned to construct 80 agrovilles. But peasant resistance and insurgent attacks led to the abandonment of the program at the end of 1960, after only 22 agrovilles had been built. After the war, it was discovered that the architect of the agroville scheme, Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao, was a Communist agent. He had sold the plan to Diem, then designed it in such a way as to ensure that the peasants were alienated from Diem's government.[81]

Civil War in Laos

Even as Diem battled the growing insurgency against his regime in the late 1950s, Washington showed greater concern about developments in Laos than

what was happening in southern Vietnam. Even though Laos had not received nearly as much attention in the U.S. media as had Vietnam, Washington considered it a strategically important country and had become increasingly involved in its internal affairs at the same time that the U.S. officials were pouring funds and people into South Vietnam in support of Ngo Dinh Diem's government.

In July 1954, when the Geneva Accords were promulgated and Laos had received its independence, the Royal Lao government had a mildly pro-Western tilt. The United States, replacing the French, lavished economic and military aid on that country. It made Laos its first test of strength in Southeast Asia, the first country in which the line against further Communist expansion in the post-Geneva era would be clearly drawn. By early 1960, the United States had invested hundreds of millions of dollars in Laos, mostly in military aid, in support of a series of leaders.[82]

In mid-1954, Laos, a mountainous, landlocked feudal kingdom, was hardly a nation at all. Until the Americans intervened and pulled it into the Cold War, it was a quiet political backwater—an underdeveloped, sparsely populated region. It had been colonized by the French at the end of the nineteenth century as a sort of afterthought to their conquest of Vietnam, with whom it shared a long border. About half of the 3 million inhabitants of Laos consisted of ethnic Lao, who lived on fertile plains near the Mekong River and its tributaries. The remainder of the population constituted a melange of hill tribes who inhabited the mountainous interior. At the time of the American intervention in the mid-1950s, perhaps 2 million people lived in areas nominally controlled by the Royal Lao government. The other million inhabitants lived in areas nominally controlled by a Communist movement that called itself the *Neo Lao Hak Sat* (Lao Patriotic Front). Americans knew the Laotian Communists as the ***Pathet Lao***, which translates "land of the Lao."[83]

In accordance with the provisions of the Geneva Accords, the *Pathet Lao*, led by Prince Souphanouvong and backed by Hanoi, had regrouped in the two easternmost provinces of the country. Prince Souvanna Phouma, the leader of the royalist forces, had negotiated an agreement with Prince Souphanouvong, establishing a neutralist Laos under a coalition government. Washington opposed Phouma's effort to form a coalition government with the Communists and pursue a neutralist foreign policy.[84] In its efforts to nudge the Royalist government away from its concert with the Communists, the U.S. officials provided Phouma with about two-thirds of his budget during the late 1950s.

In 1959, the Eisenhower administration, using the CIA, installed a pro-Western government in Laos under the rule of General Phoui Sananikone. Embracing a strident anti-Communism, he ousted Prince Souvanna and had Prince Souphanouvong imprisoned. Washington backed General Sananikone, significantly increasing the amount of the U.S. aid going to Laos and sending a military mission. The Sananikone government proved to be inept, unpopular, and corrupt. Much of the money for the U.S. assistance programs went into the pockets of officials.[85] The *Pathet Lao*, now excluded from

power, with the support of the Soviet Union and Hanoi, resumed its guerrilla war against the Laotian government. The North Vietnamese sent cadres to train and equip the *Pathet Lao* who consolidated their control over the eastern provinces of Laos.

One day in August 1960, while General Sananikone was out of town, a military coup led by paratroop Captain Kong Le seized power. Captain Le invited Prince Souvanna to return to power and form a neutralist government. General Sananikone, reacting to the coup, proclaimed his own government and marched on the capital, Vientiane. Prince Souvanna fled to Cambodia, and Captain Le joined the *Pathet Lao* forces. The United States continued to back General Sananikone. The CIA recruited tribes from the mountainous regions who supported General Sananikone's forces. The most important of these tribal forces came from the Hmong (Meo), led by General Vang Pao.[86] In December 1960, General Sananikone overthrew the neutralist government and returned to power. Washington's unrelenting hostility toward Laotian neutrality drove Souvanna Phouma into the arms of the *Pathet Lao* and the Soviet Union. He also sought support from China and North Vietnam. Responding to the U.S.-backed coup, the Soviets airlifted supplies to the *Pathet Lao* forces.[87]

As the 1950s ended, the crisis in Laos was intensifying. A dirt-poor, largely passive population was caught amidst political chaos and a fitful, low-intensity civil war. The U.S. efforts to prevent Laotians from forming a neutralist government in coalition with the Communists had destabilized Laotian politics and provoked Soviet intervention. American efforts to create a strong anti-Communist government in Laos had failed. However, the U.S. intervention had created an ominous possibility: a civil war that could bring about a Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union.[88]

A Failing Experiment

Washington intervened in Indochina at the time of the Geneva agreements to build a new nation in the southern half of Vietnam in order to prevent the further spread of Communism in Southeast Asia in the aftermath of the French military defeat in the First Indochina War. The U.S. officials confidently believed that they could succeed where the French had failed. Apparently not understanding or appreciating the depth of Vietnamese nationalism, Eisenhower and his advisers did not fully realize the perils and the low potential of the enterprise they had so eagerly embraced.

The Americans could hardly have chosen a less promising place than southern Vietnam to try their experiment in nation-building. Sixty percent of the Vietnamese population resided in northern Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh was by far the best known Vietnamese leader. His leadership of the revolution that liberated Vietnam from French colonialism had earned him enormous prestige and a popular following among the rural masses who comprised 85 percent of the Vietnamese population. The Vietminh leaders were committed

to unifying Vietnam under their rule. At the time of the American intervention, Bao Dai's government was virtually nonexistent. His new premier, Ngo Dinh Diem, arrived in Saigon only to discover that he had no popular following. Few Vietnamese residing in southern Vietnam had ever heard or seen his name. The civilian and military bureaucracies existed mostly on paper. Diem had no money and no real power. The French, still in charge in Saigon, wanted to get rid of him. The political culture of Saigon and its environs was riven with factionalism. The economy, based on exporting rice and rubber, had been devastated by years of warfare.[89]

The U.S. officials could not see that there was scant basis for erecting a viable nation-state in the southern half of a country whose inhabitants had a strong sense of national identity and a proud tradition of national independence stretching back over 900 years before the coming of the French. The Vietnamese people may have quarreled violently among themselves for years over what kind of government should rule their country, but nearly all Vietnamese agreed that there was only one Vietnam to rule. In addition, conditioned by their history and culture to be wary of outsiders, many Vietnamese resented the American presence, suspecting the U.S. officials to be colonial surrogates for the French.

Even if Diem had established a more democratic and popular government than his family-run despotism, he and his U.S. backers would eventually have been challenged by the leaders in Hanoi who would not have tolerated permanent partition of their country, an alien foreign presence, or a Diemist government. But Diem's favoritism toward his Catholic coreligionists, the shortcomings of his land reform programs, his assault on village autonomy, and his repressive attacks on all his critics and opponents had alienated the large majority of southern Vietnamese from his regime by the late 1950s.[90]

Neither Diem nor any of his successors, the vast panoply of American aid programs, or the U.S. military power could ever create a durable new nation out of a political fragment. The U.S. effort in southern Vietnam always was a long-odds gamble without realistic prospects of success. During that fateful summer of 1954, the U.S. officials had undertaken a probably impossible mission that would eventually result in a large-scale war America would ultimately lose. The fatal flaw in the U.S. strategy of nation-building lay in the Americans' attempt to create a separate state and society in the southern half of a unitary nation. Advanced technology, vast amounts of money, and a can-do attitude could not overcome history.

South Vietnam remained a political contrivance, a figment of American anti-Communist diplomatic and strategic imperatives in Southeast Asia.[91] South Vietnam was a U.S. invention—not the place, but the idea of the place. The United States created South Vietnam and installed its leaders. What the U.S. officials had labored to produce was not a self-sufficient nation-state. It remained on continuous life support from the United States. They had brought forth an autocratic family oligarchy that could only be sustained by massive infusions of U.S. economic aid and military power.[92]

Only the caprice of the American electoral calendar saved President Eisenhower from having to confront the failure of the U.S. nation-building experiment in southern Vietnam and the failure of the U.S. effort to shore up anti-Communist forces in Laos as well. It would be the fate of his successor to have to choose between abandoning South Vietnam and Laos to the Communists or significantly raising the American stakes in Indochina.

Notes

1 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 1, Document 386, 666–68, NCS 5492/2, "Review of U.S. Policy in the Far East," August 20, 1954.
2 Hess, *Vietnam*, 49.
3 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 1, Document 389, 672–75, South East Asia Collective Defense Treaty, September 8, 1954; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3rd ed., 48–49.
4 Ibid., 675.
5 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 45; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 46–47; Prados, *Vietnam*, 36.
6 Anthony T. Bouscaren, *The Last of the Mandarins: Diem of Vietnam* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1965), 11–17; Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Press, 1973), 107–8.
7 Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950–1963* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 19–21.
8 Ibid., 22–23.
9 Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 111–12.
10 Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 26.
11 Robert Scheer, *How the United States Got Involved in Vietnam* (Santa Barbara, CA: Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, 1965), 13–16; Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 29–30.
12 Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 33.
13 Statler, *Replacing France*, 118–19; Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 38–39.
14 Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 33.
15 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 1, Document 395, 681–82. "Letter from Eisenhower to President Ngo Dinh Diem," October 23, 1954. The key sentence reads, "The Government of the United States expects that this aid will be met by performance on the part of the Government of Viet-Nam [*sic*] in undertaking needed reforms." Eisenhower clearly hedged the U.S. aid commitments to Diem.
16 Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam*, 327–38; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 49–50.
17 Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 61.
18 Ibid., 62.
19 Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), 18; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 43–46; Prados, *Vietnam*, 39, 43.
20 Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 64.
21 Ibid., 68–69.
22 Ibid., 64–70; Prados, *Vietnam*, 42–44, 52–53.
23 Edward Geary Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 154–227 and 244–312; Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 100–28; Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 70–71. Dulles appointed Lansdale. Lansdale, an Air Force Colonel who headed a CIA covert action group stationed in Saigon, had been involved in the Philippines during the

late 1940s and early 1950s when the U.S. forces suppressed the Hukbalahap, a Communist insurgency strongest on Luzon. The Americans backed Ramon Magsaysay, a popular reform leader who established a stable, pro-American government in the former U.S. colony, which had achieved independence on July 4, 1946. To Dulles and Lansdale, the challenge they faced in southern Vietnam was to find a Vietnamese Magsaysay.

24 Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 72.
25 Ibid., 74–75.
26 Lansdale had earned Diem's trust. He urged Diem to strike at his enemies when he did. Lansdale also claimed to have bribed the sect leaders to either join Diem or at least stay neutral during the Battle for Saigon.
27 Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 79.
28 Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 260–312; Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 138; Statler, *Replacing France*, 142.
29 Quote is from Prados, Vietnam, 53; Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 80.
30 Ibid., 53.
31 Kahin, *Intervention*, 95.
32 Ibid., 84–85.
33 Ibid., 84–88; Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, 125–37.
34 Statler, *Replacing France*, 176.
35 Dwight David Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Mandate for Change, 1953–1956* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 372.
36 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 1, 1–2, Declaration of the Government of Vietnam on Reunification, August 9, 1955.
37 Ibid.
38 Statler, *Replacing France*, 155–81. Statler's chapter on the non-elections of 1956 focuses on Diem's agency and the lack of commitment by the major Communist powers to seeing that the elections took place as scheduled.
39 William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Short Political and Military History, 1954–1975* (New York: New American Library, 1986), 18.
40 Karnow, *Vietnam*, 225.
41 Hess, *Vietnam*, 64.
42 Doyle et al., *Passing the Torch*, 102–3.
43 Quoted in Doyle et al., *Passing the Torch*, 102.
44 Ibid., 103–4. Thousands of workers volunteered to work on the project without pay for patriotic reasons. However, thousands more were pressed into unpaid labor by squads of soldiers who swept through villages and forcibly recruited workers for the project.
45 Ibid., 104.
46 Neither the Russian premier Nikita Khrushchev nor the American president Richard Nixon were met personally upon their arrival in Beijing by Mao.
47 Duiker, William, *Vietnam: A Nation in Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983), 107.
48 Karnow, *Vietnam*, 225–26; Hess, *Vietnam*, 64; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 34–36.
49 Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 19; Karnow, *Vietnam*, 225–26; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's* War, 32–33; also see Edwin E. Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 178–240; and his article "Land Reform and Land Reform Errors in North Vietnam," *Pacific Affairs* 49 (spring 1976): 70–92. Moise says approximately 5,000 peasants were executed. Gareth Porter, *The Myth of the Bloodbath: North Vietnam's Land Reform Reconsidered* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972).

Porter estimates that about 2,500 people lost their lives. Prados, *Vietnam*, 65–66, says most estimates set the death figure at more than 55,000.

50 Note from Pham Van Dong to the Geneva Co-Chairs, April 9, 1956, insisting that the Geneva agreements required both the French and Diem's government to hold elections, in Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 8, 15–16; also see Note from the British Embassy in Moscow to the Soviet Foreign Ministry, April 9, 1956, informing the Soviets that the British government did not agree that South Vietnam was required to hold the elections, in ibid., 17–18; see also Message from the Two Co-chairs of the Geneva Conference to the Governments of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam, May 8, 1956, in which the Soviets, in effect, conceded that they would not push for reconvening the Geneva Conference or the holding of elections, in ibid., 19–20.
51 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 57; Hess, *Vietnam*, 60.
52 Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941–1960* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1985), 278.
53 Ibid., 280.
54 Ibid., 281.
55 Ibid., 289.
56 Ibid., 268–74; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 58–60.
57 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 61.
58 Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, 102–29; Prados, *Vietnam*, 58.
59 Video clip from "America's Mandarin," part three of the television documentary series *Vietnam: A Television History*, produced by Boston WGBH and the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), first shown in October 1983.
60 Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 101–2.
61 Diem's quote is found in Olson, James and Roberts, Randy, *Where the Domino Fell:—America and Vietnam, 1945–1995*, 2nd. ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 6.
62 Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution*, 132–34.
63 Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, 51–55.
64 Kahin, *Intervention*, 95.
65 The full name for the Can Lao was *Can Lao Nhan Vi Cach Mang Dang* (Personalist Labor Revolutionary Party).
66 Kahin, *Intervention*, 96–97; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 56, cites figures of 50,000 prisoners and 12,000 killed.
67 Race, Jeffrey, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 55–61. Race documents the failure of Diemist land reforms in Long An, a strategic Mekong Delta province.
68 Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, 104–5, 120–24. At the time of Diem's ascension to power in the South, about 40 percent of rice lands were owned by 2,500 people, one-quarter of 1 percent of the rural population.
69 Kahin, *Intervention*, 99.
70 Duiker, *The Comunist Road*, 172–73.
71 Kahin, *Intervention*, 103.
72 Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 7–9.
73 Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 44–45.
74 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 175.
75 Race, Jeffrey, "The Origins of the Second Indochina War," *Asian Survey* (May 1960): 381 ff.
76 Duiker, *Communist Road*, 184.
77 Ibid., 184; quote is from Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 545.

78 Ibid., 186–90.
79 Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 24–25; Porter, ed., *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 21, 44–46, "Communique of the 15th Plenum of the Lao Dong," May 13, 1959. This communique reflects the decision made by the Communist leaders to permit armed struggle in the south as part of the insurgent strategies to undermine Diem's GVN. The DMZ was created at the Geneva Conference in July 1954. It was a buffer zone five miles wide dividing the northern regroupment zone (North Vietnam) from the southern regroupment zone (South Vietnam). It extended from the South China seacoast to the village of Bo Hu Su along the Ben Hai River, and due west from there to the Laotian border at the 17th Parallel of north latitude.
80 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 190–93; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 66–68.
81 Doyle et al., *Passing the Torch*, 157–59; Prados, *Vietnam*, 68–69.
82 Arnold R. Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 159.
83 Ibid., 155–56.
84 Hess, *Vietnam*, 69.
85 Ibid., 69–70.
86 Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 164–68.
87 Hess, *Vietnam*, 70–71.
88 Doyle et al., *Passing the Torch*, 186–87.
89 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3rd ed., 49–50.
90 Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 58–59.
91 Mike Gravel, ed., *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of U.S. Decision Making in Vietnam* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), vol. II, 22; Loren Baritz, *Backfire: Vietnam—The Myths That Made Us Fight, the Illusions That Helped Us Lose, the Legacy That Haunts Us Today* (New York: Ballantine, 1985), 16.
92 Hess, *Vietnam*, 60–63.

4 America Raises the Stakes in Vietnam, 1961–63

Cold War Crises

When John F. Kennedy took the presidential oath of office on January 20, 1961, the world appeared to be entering the most perilous stage in its history. The ceaseless global Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union raged on. In Asia and Africa, Third World nations were breaking free from colonialism; they struggled to establish stable governments and develop modern institutions. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev saw possibilities for advancing Soviet interests in the turmoil generated within the emerging nations of the Third World. In a speech delivered a few days before Kennedy's inauguration, Khrushchev vowed his support for anticolonial "wars of national liberation."

Kennedy, sensing the American Cold War angst during his 1960 presidential campaign, had attacked what he called the "horse and buggy" policies of the Eisenhower administration. He charged that the Republicans permitted the American economy to stagnate and had allowed the Soviets to gain the initiative in space-age technology. Kennedy vowed to "get the country moving again." Although Kennedy devoted a considerable amount of time criticizing Eisenhower's conduct of foreign policy, never once did he mention Vietnam, Indochina, or Southeast Asia. He never spoke about Ho Chi Minh or Ngo Dinh Diem. Kennedy and the Republican presidential candidate, Vice President Richard Nixon, argued about how best to handle foreign policy crises in Cuba, Berlin, and Taiwan. The candidates' focus revealed the relative unimportance of Vietnam during the fall 1960 campaign. Most Americans knew nothing about what was going on in Vietnam or Laos. Media coverage of events in both countries was infrequent and desultory.

To rally the nation to face the challenges he saw, Kennedy sounded the theme of a nation embattled, facing crises around the world, with the fate of the Free World hanging on the outcome of the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States. He warned that the time was short, that the perils were grave, and that the news would get worse before it got better. But he also struck a pose of gallant defiance: he welcomed the challenge "of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger." Responding to what he

perceived as Khrushchev's challenge, Kennedy made an unlimited commitment to defend freedom around the globe.

> Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty.[1]

Despite evidence of a growing rift between China and the USSR, Kennedy and his senior advisers embraced the containment ideology held by his predecessors, Eisenhower and Truman. The New Frontiersmen viewed Communists forces as an interlocked threat that must be checked by the United States around the globe. Kennedy and his men also shared a penchant for action. They eagerly sought arenas in which to challenge Soviet initiatives. The new secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, a Republican and former president of Ford Motor Company, called for the largest peacetime increase in defense spending in the U.S. history. The United States immediately embarked on a crash program to build up both its strategic nuclear arsenal and its conventional military forces.

Seeing the need for a greater variety of responses to Cold War challenges, the Kennedy administration expanded its strategic capabilities. It scrapped the Eisenhower doctrine of "massive retaliation," replacing it with the concept of "flexible response," strategic versatility that permitted a calibrated U.S. response to any Soviet-backed uprising without having to risk a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union. Recognizing that the Third World would be the principal Cold War battleground of the 1960s, the new administration sought to develop a counterinsurgency capability to neutralize Soviet support for revolutionary uprisings. As part of a general review of defense policies, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatrick headed a panel on Southeast Asia. The panel developed a long list of measures to enhance South Vietnam's war efforts. President Kennedy became a strong supporter of counterinsurgency, believing that Vietnam and Laos would be appropriate places to test these new theories and strategies.[2]

Kennedy and his advisers viewed Vietnamese Communism as an advance arm of Chinese and Soviet Communism that was absolutely dependent on them for its sustenance. They did not understand that Vietnamese revolutionary nationalism rested on a largely autonomous national foundation.[3] To the New Frontiersmen, South Vietnam remained a domino threatened by external aggression, whose fall would imperil other Southeast Asian nations and threaten the vital national security interests of the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia.

As a senator, Kennedy had been a strong backer of Ngo Dinh Diem; he had consistently supported the Eisenhower policy of keeping Vietnam partitioned and maintaining a non-Communist state in its southern half. Kennedy quickly made ensuring the survival of South Vietnam a top foreign policy priority, confident that the new counterinsurgency forces that he planned to

deploy to Vietnam would enable Diem to defeat the insurgents and demonstrate that Soviet-sponsored wars of national liberation could not succeed anywhere in the Third World.

Other factors strengthened Kennedy's commitment to retaining a non-Communist government in southern Vietnam. His thin margin of victory in the 1960 election made him vulnerable to Republican charges that he was "soft" on Communism. Ironically, he had leveled similar charges at Eisenhower during the recent campaign, and he knew well that Nixon and other Republican leaders would be quick to retaliate if he should appear irresolute in the pursuit of anti-Communist foreign policy objectives or if the Communists should make advances anywhere in the world. As a Democratic president, he also felt vulnerable to the legacy of McCarthyism and memories of the "loss of China." Further, the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba, occurring early in his presidency, probably reinforced his inclination to take a tough anti-Communist stance in Southeast Asia.[4]

Crisis in Laos

During his last year of office, Eisenhower became increasingly alarmed by the expanding insurgency in southern Vietnam. He knew that Diem's Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) could not suppress it. But events in neighboring Laos were even more worrisome to the President. The civil war in Laos threatened to produce an alliance between one faction of the Royalists and the Communist Pathet Lao that could bring about a confrontation between the United States and the major Communist powers.

On his last day in office, Eisenhower briefed his successor John F. Kennedy on the most pressing global problems. He never mentioned Vietnam by name, but he warned Kennedy that Laos was the most acute Cold War crisis at that moment. He told him that if Laos were lost, the entire Far East would soon follow. The old general discussed both the costs and benefits entailed if it became necessary to intervene militarily to save that country and from a Communist takeover.[5]

Kennedy considered military intervention in Laos in March 1961, and then decided against it after conferring with the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). The Joint Chiefs warned the president about the pitfalls of a land war in Asia. They told Kennedy that if Washington sent troops to Laos, it was likely that China would also send forces. If the United States did intervene militarily, the Joint Chiefs recommended that it be full-bore; hit them with everything we had—60,000 troops, air power, even nuclear weapons—and be prepared to engage the Chinese. Otherwise stay out.[6] Kennedy stayed out.

Kennedy's failure to intervene in Cuba at the time of the Bay of Pigs fiasco probably killed any possibility of sending troops into Laos. How could Kennedy explain to the American people his willingness to send troops to Laos 9,000 miles away if he was unwilling to send them to Cuba 90 miles away? Kennedy also understood the unpromising political situation in Laos. He did

not hold General Sananikone in very high regard, nor did he perceive him as being a terribly promising instrument with which to fight America's Cold War battles in Southeast Asia.[7] Renouncing the military option in Laos, Kennedy sought a political resolution of the civil war.

The Soviets and the British agreed to reconvene the Geneva Conference and to try to work out a negotiated settlement among the Pathet Lao, neutralist, and pro-Western groups in Laos. In May 1961, the three Laotian factions began negotiations at Geneva. Eventually, they worked out an agreement that created a tripartite coalition government. The agreement was signed on July 23, 1962.[8] According to its terms, Laos became a neutral nation governed by a coalition under Prime Minister Prince Souvanna, with the pro-Western and Communist factions sharing power. The new coalition government was a fragile creature that favored the *Pathet Lao* and its North Vietnamese backers, who kept thousands of troops in eastern Laos in violation of the Geneva agreement.[9] The Communists controlled the eastern half of the country, including two provinces bordering Vietnam containing major infiltration routes along the developing Ho Chi Minh Trail. Kennedy also violated the 1962 Geneva agreement on Laos when he ordered the CIA to expand military operations in that country. The U.S.-sponsored "secret war" in Laos escalated as the CIA recruited 9,000 Hmong tribesmen to strike against the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex that ran along southern corridor of Laos for hundreds of miles.[10]

At the time that he opted for a political settlement in Laos, Kennedy increased the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam because Diem's position continued to deteriorate. Kennedy had received a pessimistic report from General Lansdale stating that the southern insurgents were increasing their numbers, extending their control over more and more villages, and getting closer to their goal of toppling Diem's government. Lansdale called for an increase in the U.S. aid to the Republican Government of Vietnam (GVN) and a 20,000-man increase for the ARVN. He also recommended that the South Vietnamese armed forces be taught how to confront the revolutionaries with the "tactics and strategy of unconventional warfare."[11]

Hanoi Takes Over the Southern Insurgency

As the southern insurgency escalated, the Third Party Congress of the Lao Dong, meeting in Hanoi in September 1960, formally endorsed the revolutionary uprising in southern Vietnam. It adopted a resolution stating that the Vietnamese revolution now had two primary goals: completing the socialist revolution in North Vietnam and liberating South Vietnam from the Diemist puppet regime in order to complete reunification of the country. The resolution stated that the two goals were of equal importance and integrally related. Hanoi viewed the developing revolutionary situation in southern Vietnam as a continuation of the national revolution that had been going on in Vietnam since August 1945.[12]

In order to ensure their control of the southern insurgency, the Communist leaders in Hanoi also approved plans to reorganize the developing revolutionary forces in the South and form a new united front. Following the Congress, the military cadres in the South also gathered to form a united military command. On February 15, 1961, the **People's Liberation Armed Force (PLAF)** was created. Tran Luong, a southerner, was chosen to head the PLAF command, but soon after his appointment, several generals arrived in South Vietnam from the People's Army of Vietnam (**PAVN**) to reactivate the southern command that had directed Vietminh forces during the First Indochina War. It was known as the **Central Committee Directorate for the South (*Truong Uong Cuc Mien Nam*).** The Americans referred to the southern command as the **Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN)**. The southern command, which had direct ties to the Lao Dong Politburo, took control of the PLAF with its 17,000 main force troops. In addition to its main force units, the PLAF also included regional forces, guerrillas who operated at district levels, and local irregulars who were farmers by day, indistinguishable from other villagers, and anti-Diemist terrorists by night.

It was these PLAF forces that American soldiers called the **"VietCong."** No revolutionary organization in South Vietnam ever called itself the VietCong. Ngo Dinh Diem coined the term, VietCong, a contraction of the phrase, "Viet-nam Cong-san," meaning "Vietnamese who are Communists." Diem had coined the term to disparage all of his political opponents, both Communist and non-Communist alike, by calling all of them VietCong.[13] Not to be outdone by Diem in the coining of propagandistic epithets, the insurgents promised to liberate the country from "My-Diem," which can be translated as "American-Diem." My-Diem reminded the villagers that Diem's government was so dependent on the intrusive alien Americans as to be inseparable from them. While Diem and Nhu vowed to rid the land of VietCong, the rebels promised to rid southern Vietnam of My-Diem.[14]

While the PLAF formed up, at a secret meeting place near Saigon on December 20, 1960, delegates created the **National Liberation Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF or *Mat Tran Dan Toc Giai Phong Mien Nam Viet Nam*)**. "The creation of the NLF in 1960 was a northern response to genuine peasant uprisings at the village level in the southern countryside; it was a construct poised to reap the success of the spontaneous agitation and portray it as a concerted uprising *(dong khoi nghia)* orchestrated by communist cells under the direction of the VWP." The NLF was a reincarnation of the Vietminh Front tactic adapted to southern Vietnamese politics. Its Central Committee included representatives of the sects, Catholic and Buddhist organizations, labor, intellectuals, women, nationalists, socialists, and *Montagnards.* Below the Central Committee, the NLF had various administrative levels paralleling the various levels of Diem's government. Its basic units of organization were the village-level associations.[15]

At their founding conference, the NLF organizers adopted a 10-point program, which, like its Vietminh predecessor, stressed nationalistic rather than

revolutionary goals.[16] Most of its leadership was not recruited from Communist ranks, although some, like Chairman Nguyen Huu Tho, had close links with the Vietminh. In fact, at all levels, the number of Communist Party members who were permitted to assume leadership roles within the NLF was strictly limited. The Hanoi leadership had taken care to disguise its relationship with the NLF. The NLF had the appearance of an autonomous organization composed of a broad spectrum of southern nationalists whose primary goals were expelling the Americans, replacing Diem's government with a coalition government, and seeking peaceful reunification with North Vietnam.[17] The NLF represented itself as a broad-based popular alternative to the autocratic Diem regime. Hanoi hoped that its exercise in political camouflage would enable it to avoid an armed confrontation with the United States.

The political composition of the NLF, its program, indeed its very existence, proved to many observers that the rebellion was an indigenous southern uprising against a corrupt and tyrannical regime backed by the United States. For many critics of the U.S. policy in Vietnam, the NLF was a standing contradiction to Washington's oft-proclaimed charge that the southern insurgency was in reality an invasion from North Vietnam. By 1960, there was throughout South Vietnam hostility to Diem's government that stretched across a broad political spectrum. This popular antagonism fueled the rising level of insurgency. A potent list of grievances had accumulated from the Diemist terror, the failed land-reform program, the loss of village autonomy, and governmental policies that usually favored Catholics and the landlord class at the expense of the rural masses.

But Hanoi organized and directed the rebellion in South Vietnam from its inception. Party cadres provided the organizational structure and leadership that gave the southern insurgency the focus and dynamism it needed to mount a serious challenge to the GVN. The Lao Dong Central Committee's southern branch (COSVN) commanded the revolutionary struggle in southern Vietnam. "The insurgency was a genuine revolt based in the South, but it was organized and directed from the North."[18]

The NLF was not a spontaneous formation of dissident southern nationalists. It was linked to Hanoi and represented the southern wing of the Vietnamese revolutionary nationalist movement. It was formed in response to and in accordance with directives issued by Hanoi. The Lao Dong Politburo meeting in Hanoi determined the NLF's program and its strategy. The decentralized structure of the NLF and its communitarian basis gave the southern movement a degree of autonomy and flexibility. It often solved its problems its own way, punished enemies, and promoted land reform, without directives from Hanoi or even at odds with the Politburo.[19]

Hanoi exercised general control of the NLF through the instrumentality of the **People's Revolutionary Party (PRP)**, created in January 1962. The PRP, formerly the southern branch of the Lao Dong, formed the inner core of the NLF structure. The PRP cadres operated within all departments and at all levels of the NLF, providing education, administration, coordination, and

leadership. The PRP served as the hidden government of the NLF.[20] Through the PRP and COSVN, the Politburo guided the NLF and the PLAF.

Hanoi did not set out to overthrow the Saigon government in 1956 after Diem cancelled the scheduled elections. Initially, party leaders hoped to achieve reunification by peaceful political means. By 1959, they perceived that Diem's government, although repressive and unpopular, was too strong to be toppled by political means because of its American backing. By 1960, after years of delay and internal debate, the political directorate in Hanoi decided to support a revolution developing in southern Vietnam as a necessary means to achieve its long-standing goal of a unified Vietnam under its control.[21] Pressured by Le Duan and his supporters, the Politburo allowed the southern insurgents to take military action in particular situations. Otherwise, Duan insisted, Hanoi risked losing control of the movement and perhaps its failure.[22]

ARVN Attempts a Coup against Diem

In November 1960, the South Vietnamese army mounted a *coup d'etat* against Ngo Dinh Diem. The coup attempt was a significant and revelatory event, for it showed that despite Diem's dependence on the loyalty of his armed forces to stay in power, his increasingly rigid and arbitrary methods of ruling had alienated important segments within the military.

The revolt was led by Lieutenant Colonel Vuong Van Dong, a northerner who had fought with French forces against the Vietminh during the First Indochina War. He later received advanced training in the United States. The U.S. advisers serving in South Vietnam regarded Dong as one of the brightest and most promising officers in ARVN. What frustrated Dong, and inclined him to consider mounting a coup against Diem, was Diem's arbitrary rule and his constant meddling in the internal affairs of the South Vietnamese army. Dong was supported by many ARVN officers, some of whom were members of various anti-Communist nationalist groups opposed to Diem. Diem had promoted officers on the basis of political allegiance rather than professional competence. The political-minded officers who flourished under Diem's rule had joined the secret Catholic-dominated *Can Loa*, run by Diem's brother Nhu.[23]

The American ambassador to South Vietnam since 1957, Elbridge Durbrow, had a long record of trying to persuade Diem to make reforms. He suggested that Diem allow greater civil liberties and freedom of the press, restore village elections, and offer more economic assistance to the peasants, particularly land reform.[24] Diem consistently ignored Durbrow's advice and continued to tighten his control of the South Vietnamese government.

The U.S. military advisers, worried about the survival of the GVN, had begun to shift the emphasis of their military training of the ARVN units from conventional warfare to counterinsurgency tactics. Three **U.S. Special Forces** teams arrived in South Vietnam to train elite units of the ARVN for

counterinsurgency warfare.[25] MAAG officials, concerned with developing an effective military response to the insurgency, opposed Durbrow's efforts to reform Diem. These military officers believed that such pressures to push Diem toward democracy at a time when his government was under stress, both from the VietCong and from disloyal army elements, could only undermine him and endanger the whole nation-building enterprise.

As he planned the coup, Dong recruited many disgruntled officers, including his Commanding officer Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi, who had been one of Diem's favorites. The coup also had the support of some anti-Communist nationalist political leaders and it probably had the backing of some U.S. officials who, having lost confidence in Diem, pledged to support the coup leaders if they were successful.

Dong launched the coup attempt at dawn on November 11, 1960. Three battalions of Colonel Thi's Airborne Brigade fanned out through Saigon and surrounded Doc Lap Palace (Independence Palace—the South Vietnamese equivalent of the American White House). The mutinous paratroopers raked the palace walls with automatic rifle fire. Diem was almost killed when a rebel gunner fired a burst of rounds through Diem's bedroom window shattering his bed, from which he had risen a few minutes earlier.

While the paratroopers attacked Diem's palace, the coup leaders took over the headquarters of the national security service, Radio Saigon, and placed most of the Saigon-based generals under house arrest. Many Saigon-based ARVN troops rallied to the insurgents. Crowds of civilians massed outside the palace gates, supporting the rebels and demanding regime change. Radio Saigon, in rebel hands, announced that a "Revolutionary Council" controlled South Vietnam's government. The Diem regime appeared finished.

But on the verge of victory, the rebels hesitated. Dong wanted to storm the palace and capture Diem. However, Colonel Thi believed that Diem, after agreeing to some mandated reforms, would be the best available leader. Taking advantage of the split within the ranks of the coup leaders, General Nguyen Khanh, the Chief of Staff of the ARVN and a future president of South Vietnam, coordinated loyalist defenders of the regime. Later that day, Khanh left the palace to meet with the rebel leaders to find out what their demands were. Dong and Thi told Kahn that they wanted military officers and opposition political figures appointed to keep Diem in check and to ensure that necessary reforms were implemented.

Diem and Nhu used the negotiations between Khanh and the rebel leaders as a stalling tactic—to allow time for loyalists to enter Saigon and save the Diem regime. (One of the loyalist units that showed up was the Fifth Division under the command of Colonel Nuguyen Van Thieu, also a future president of South Vietnam.) Diem agreed to end press censorship, liberalize the economy, and hold free elections. He agreed to dissolve his cabinet and coordinate with the Revolutionary Council to establish a coalition government. Diem taped a speech detailing his concessions and the rebels broadcast it over Radio Saigon in the early morning hours of November 12.

As Diem's speech was being aired, several loyalist units arrived in Saigon. They immediately attacked the rebel forces encircling Doc Lap palace. While the battle raged, Ambassador Durbrow tried to stop the fighting. He told Diem that if the bloodshed was not stopped immediately, the entire population would rise up against both the loyalists and the rebels, and all of Vietnam would go communist. The fighting continued—within a few hours the coup had been crushed. Hundreds of people were killed, mostly civilians engaging in anti-Diem protests who were gunned down by loyalist soldiers. His regime secured, Diem promptly reneged on all of his promises; his security forces began rounding up and jailing scores of dissidents.

After the failed coup, Dong, Thi, and other prominent officers involved in the Coup fled Vietnam for Cambodia, where they were quickly granted asylum by Prince Norodom Sihanouk. At the time, relations between the two governments were tense. Cambodia allowed the NVA and PLAF to use its territory as a staging area for attacks within South Vietnam. For their parts, Diem and Nhu had supported attempts to overthrow Sihanouk.

For Diem, the failed coup was a turning point in relations with his American supporters, which had been mostly strong and unconditional since he had consolidated his regime in 1955. Diem blamed Durbrow for a perceived lack of U.S. support. He was angered by the U.S. media coverage of the attempted coup, which portrayed Diem as authoritarian and viewed the revolt as a manifestation of widespread discontent with his rule. From then on, Diem became increasingly suspicious of Washington's policies. Lansdale, now back in Washington, who had helped Diem achieve power, supported Diem and criticized Durbrow. Senior U.S. military officials in Washington and Saigon backed Diem. The rift between American and diplomatic representatives in South Vietnam began to grow. Durbrow continued to pressure Diem to liberalize his regime and MAAG officials continued to support him uncritically.

Despite his flimsy power base and the clear warning of the coup attempt, Diem continued to govern by his usual methods. The only changes made were to tighten security and be even more concerned about the political allegiances of his generals. Whether he fully realized it or not, he faced a mounting threat to his rule by the southern insurgency, which had become a revolution, supported and directed by Hanoi. And that revolution became the American war. And along that road to war, Diem would fall by the wayside, the victim of another coup for which the November 1960 attempt proved to be a dress rehearsal.

As 1960 ended, Eisenhower, in the final weeks of a long presidency, was content to reaffirm the U.S. support for the South Vietnam government, preoccupied as he was with crises elsewhere in the world and preparing to turn the reins of government over to his successor.

> Washington stood at the brink of a conflict it hardly understood, at the side of an ally with crippling weaknesses.[26]

Shoring Up the Diem Regime

Despite their rising worries over Diem's survivability, for most of their first year in office, Kennedy officials continued Eisenhower's policies in South Vietnam. In May 1961, Kennedy approved actions to try to shore up Diem's deteriorating position. He ordered an increase in the MAAG contingent in South Vietnam by 100 advisers, approved the 20,000-man increase for the ARVN, and sent in 400 Special Forces troops (**Green Berets**) to train South Vietnamese forces in counterinsurgency tactics. He also dispatched Vice President Lyndon Johnson to South Vietnam to assure Diem of continuing the U.S. support. Johnson performed his assignment enthusiastically with a whirlwind tour of South Vietnam, praising Diem at every stop. At a farewell banquet, Johnson hailed Diem as the "Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia."[27]

In addition, the president authorized covert operations against North Vietnam. South Vietnamese paramilitary units were sent into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) on espionage, sabotage, and psychological warfare missions. They also attacked enemy supply lines and staging areas. Kennedy also established a task force headed by Deputy National Security Adviser Walt Rostow to consider additional measures that the United States might have to take if the Communist threats to Laos and South Vietnam increased. Rostow's recommendations included bombing North Vietnam, blockading its ports, and sending the U.S. combat forces to South Vietnam.[28] The president's actions in the spring of 1961 represented a minimal response that did not move the U.S. commitment in Vietnam much beyond the levels achieved under Eisenhower. They were mainly intended to shore up Diem's government, buy time, keep options open, and enable Kennedy and his advisers to deal with the U.S. foreign policy crises elsewhere, which they considered far more urgent.

In the fall of 1961, events forced President Kennedy to give greater attention to Vietnam. Hanoi increased the rate of infiltration of regroupees into the South. The NLF forces escalated their military campaigns, threatening to overrun the Mekong Delta. VietCong main force units also launched a major offensive in central South Vietnam. They seized Phuoc Vinh, the capital of Phuoc Long province, 60 miles northwest of Saigon. The NLF regular forces attacked other provincial towns in the central highlands. President Diem, frightened by the rising level of military activity, called for additional U.S. military aid. The U.S. Joint Chiefs considered sending the U.S. combat forces to the embattled country.[29]

Kennedy, hesitant to send the U.S. combat forces to Vietnam, instead sent his personal military adviser General Maxwell Taylor, accompanied by his most hawkish civilian adviser Walt Rostow, on a fact-finding mission. Taylor's findings, submitted to the president on November 3, were starkly pessimistic: Diem's government was ineffective and unpopular. ARVN forces refused to take the offensive against the insurgents. Taylor recommended that the

United States undertake a "limited partnership" with the GVN. Specifically, he recommended that Washington significantly increase its military support for Diem and upgrade the performance of GVN paramilitary and local defense forces in order to free the ARVN regulars for combat against the NLF forces. He also recommended sending 8,000 U.S. combat troops.[30]

While administration officials were considering Taylor's report, Kennedy received another recommendation, this one written by Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles and Averell Harriman, the chief American negotiator at Geneva. Bowles and Harriman frankly doubted Diem's ability to survive, and they opposed increasing the U.S. commitment to the GVN. They believed that the causes of Diem's decline were primarily political; his failing government could not be saved by the U.S. military action. Bowles and Harriman proposed instead that Kennedy seeks a negotiated settlement in Vietnam. They called for an expanded agenda at Geneva, currently dealing with Laos, to work out a negotiated solution for Vietnam based on the 1954 Geneva Accords. Other dovish administration voices joined Bowles and Harriman in proposing a negotiated settlement of the Vietnam issue.[31]

Kennedy's advisers had given him clear choices for Vietnam. He could either expand the U.S. commitment in an effort to seek a military solution or he could try for a political settlement. Kennedy quickly ruled out a negotiated settlement for Vietnam. Having already opted for negotiations on Laos, suffered the Bay of Pigs fiasco, and accepted the Berlin Wall, Kennedy feared that a decision to seek a political settlement in Vietnam would send the wrong signal to Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders who already believed that Kennedy was not tough enough to stand up to Soviet pressure tactics. Adding to his concern, Kennedy had recently met with Khrushchev for a series of talks in Vienna. Kennedy feared that the Soviet leader had mistaken his civility and restraint for weakness. Kennedy also rightly assumed that he would face domestic political reprisals from his anti-Communist flank if he opted for negotiations on Vietnam as well as on Laos.

But the president refused to send the U.S. combat troops, which would significantly raise the U.S. commitment in South Vietnam. He believed that the introduction of U.S. combat forces into southern Vietnam might jeopardize the Laotian negotiations at Geneva. Kennedy was skeptical that combat forces could solve Diem's problems, believing that the South Vietnamese themselves would have to defeat the insurgents. Kennedy also feared that once the U.S. soldiers engaged in combat and took casualties, the pressure to send more troops would be intense. Diem himself did not welcome the U.S. combat troops. He wanted increased U.S. financial support and equipment to strengthen his own forces, not the U.S. armies fighting in his country.[32]

Rejecting both negotiations and an immediate dispatching of U.S. combat troops, Kennedy tried to solve the Vietnam dilemma by choosing the cautious middle ground. Influenced by a memo from Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, the president rejected Taylor's proposal to send the U.S. ground combat forces. However, Kennedy approved

Taylor's proposals to increase significantly the number of U.S. military advisory and combat support personnel going to Vietnam. In addition, initiating an aid program called "Project Beefup," Washington sent helicopter, transport, and reconnaissance aircraft to add firepower and mobility to Diem's army.[33] Kennedy authorized the use of napalm and the Air Force began the aerial spraying of defoliants to deny the VietCong ground cover and food crops. Kennedy also approved funding to increase the ARVN force levels and to upgrade their training and equipment. Further, Washington endeavored to improve the performance of South Vietnamese district forces and local security forces.

The President hoped that these middling actions would arrest the steady political and military erosion occurring in South Vietnam. He also knew that the large increases in the number of U.S. advisory and support personnel would violate the Geneva Accords of 1954. Washington feared that the Communists could gain a propaganda windfall from the American violations of the agreements. Accordingly, in December 1961, the State Department issued a White Paper that claimed that renewed aggression by Hanoi, which violated the Geneva agreements, justified the U.S. escalatory actions in South Vietnam.[34]

Kennedy's mildly escalatory decisions in November 1961 formed the basis of the U.S. Vietnam policy for the remainder of his presidency. It also established a pattern of responses. Despite his bold rhetoric, in action Kennedy was a cautious Cold Warrior. He preferred to make short-term responses to immediate problems and he usually tried to split the difference between his hawkish and dovish advisers.

Because many Kennedy administration officials believed that Diem's inept and repressive government was itself a major cause of the insurgency and an obstacle to defeating it, all of their aid increases were approved with the proviso that Diem would take actions to reform his government and broaden his base of support. But Diem always resisted the U.S. pressures to get him to reform his administration and to make his army fight the insurgents more aggressively. Diem made it clear to the new U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam Frederick Nolting, who had replaced Durbrow, that South Vietnam's governance was an internal matter beyond the province of U.S. officials. He told Nolting bluntly that the GVN "did not want to be an American protectorate."[35]

The persistent refusal of Diem and his successors to make reforms that would have made their governments more responsive to the welfare of the peasants who made up most of the South Vietnamese population was a major cause of the ultimate Communist victory and the American defeat in South Vietnam. In Diem's case, it was much more than his obsolete ideology, stubbornness, and arrogance. He and Nhu resented and rebuffed the U.S. efforts to intervene in what they regarded as an internal matter. They also perceived that America had committed itself to their cause and would continue to provide them with support even if they did not make the requested reforms. They

understood that Washington preferred stability and continuity above all else. Further, they knew that the Americans would not pressure them severely to make changes while they were under the stress of insurgent assaults because the U.S. officials did not want to undermine their fragile regime and thereby facilitate an NLF victory.

But there were other, more fundamental reasons why Diem and all subsequent leaders of South Vietnam, mostly army generals, could never make the necessary reforms that might have strengthened their governments and improved their chances for long-term survival. These factors also shed light on the underlying South Vietnamese political limits that continually frustrated the U.S. efforts in Vietnam and ensured the eventual U.S. defeat and the demise of South Vietnam. Diem and all of his successors did not respond to the U.S. requests for reform because they could not do so, at least not without grave risk to their survival.

In the first place, they would lose legitimacy, the perceived right to govern, in the eyes of their own people if they appeared to be puppets, doing what their American masters dictated. To appear to be *My-Diem* was ruinous. That was a charge consistently made against them by Hanoi and NLF propagandists. Second, the South Vietnamese governments, whether headed by a civilian or general, were essentially military dictatorships. Their power, their ability to govern, depended mainly on the support of powerful senior military officers whose loyalty had to be purchased. Any effort to move beyond the generals and reach out to other classes with land reform, a wider suffrage, or village autonomy risked provoking a *coup d'état*.[36]

Yet, another obstacle prevented the U.S. officials from pushing South Vietnamese governments in a reform direction. Genuine reform that might have broadened a regime's popular base also would have risked bringing to power a leader who might have sought a cease-fire, opted for negotiations with NLF officials, formed a neutralist coalition government, and asked the Americans to leave. The U.S. officials regarded such possibilities as tantamount to an American defeat because they believed that such a government would soon be dominated by NLF leaders who would eventually seek a reunion with Hanoi.

A succession of South Vietnamese governments dared not reform, and American officials dared not push them too hard toward reform. These unresolved (and unresolvable) political dilemmas constituted an integral part of the American ordeal in Vietnam.

A Limited Partnership

Kennedy's November 1961 decisions to violate the military provisions of the 1954 Geneva agreements and to increase significantly the U.S. military support levels for the GVN were intended to keep Diem in power, at the same time keeping the American commitment in South Vietnam limited, preserving the administration's freedom of action, and maintaining the U.S. control of events in Vietnam. Kennedy was not trying to win in Vietnam; he was

doing only enough not to lose. By opting for the limited partnership, he revealed that he was not prepared to make the tough decisions: either try to negotiate a settlement and withdraw, which he knew would be perceived by many powerful Americans as a victory for the Communists, or send large numbers of U.S. combat forces to try to win the war in South Vietnam.

Kennedy had inherited a commitment in South Vietnam from Eisenhower. He would not abandon it, fearing the loss of U.S. prestige and power *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union and political damage to his administration at home if he did. The costs of pulling out appeared to him greater than the costs of getting in a little deeper.[37]

Without realizing it, Kennedy had "maintained the momentum of American involvement,"[38] a momentum that neither he nor his successor could arrest before the United States plunged into full-scale war.

To implement the newly formed limited partnership with the GVN, the United States expanded its military presence in southern Vietnam. A reorganized and expanded military mission, the **Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV)**, commanded by General Paul Harkins, replaced the MAAG. Thousands of American advisers poured into South Vietnam during 1962. Hundreds of U.S. helicopters, reconnaissance, and transport aircraft arrived, with American pilots and maintenance personnel on board. Giant M-113 armored personnel carriers (APCs) arrived to haul the ARVN forces into battle. Special Forces units moved into the central highlands to train *Montagnards* in various kinds of counterinsurgency operations. The U.S. advisers accompanied ARVN forces into combat zones, and American helicopter pilots flew ARVN troops into battle. Although the U.S. forces were officially limited to advisory and support roles, by the summer of 1962, the U.S. soldiers were fighting and dying alongside of their ARVN counterparts in South Vietnam. The United States had involved itself in an "undeclared war" in South Vietnam.[39]

During the first half of 1962, bolstered by the large increases in the U.S. advisers, support personnel, and equipment, the South Vietnamese army took the offensive against the VietCong insurgents. Using helicopters flown by American pilots, ARVN commanders moved into VietCong strongholds northwest of Saigon and in the U Minh forest along the Gulf of Thailand. South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) pilots incinerated villages with napalm and defoliated crops and livestock. The ARVN 7th Division attacked a guerrilla stronghold in the Plain of Reeds, 80 miles southwest of Saigon, killing scores of VietCong during three days of fighting. In July, ARVN forces launched a major offensive in the Kien Hoa province. A month later, ARVN forces, supported by the U.S. helicopters, invaded the Cau Mau peninsula.[40]

The ARVN mounted larger offensives against VietCong strongholds later in the year. In November, a force of more than 2,000 troops, transported by over 50 U.S. helicopters, launched a full-scale attack in War Zone D, northwest of Saigon. It was the advent of the helicopter more than any other contribution the Americans made to the GVN war effort during the 1962 buildup

that enhanced the fighting abilities of the ARVN forces. Helicopters, which began arriving in Vietnam in December 1961, transformed the war. They were flown on combat assault missions, provided transport and ferry services, and supplied Special Forces camps deep in the central highlands.

As the conflict expanded in 1962, the U.S. advisers discovered that there was not just one war in South Vietnam, but several, each with its own terrain, methods of warfare, and strategic importance. The Mekong Delta, a watery world of flat expanses, rice paddies, and irrigation canals, dominated by the many tributaries of the Mekong River, constituted one war region. Travel in the delta regions was mostly by boats and sampans. In 1962, the VietCong had about 10,000 main force troops and at least that many guerrilla irregulars in the delta. Operating out of bases located in remote, impenetrable swamps, the insurgents were almost immune from attack and enjoyed uncontested mobility in this strategic region containing 60 percent of the South Vietnamese population and producing about 75 percent of its annual rice crop. The Mekong Delta always comprised the beating heart of the southern insurgency that became a revolution.[41]

Beginning about 50 miles north of Saigon and running north for almost 200 miles, and varying in elevation from 500 to over 3,000 feet, lay the mountain plateaus of the central highlands. Here, another kind of war raged. Dominating central Vietnam, the highlands were sparsely inhabited by the *Montagnard* tribes. The VietCong often recruited the *Montagnards*, historically hostile to the Vietnamese, who regarded the *Montagnards* as primitives. Since troops could not operate effectively in the highlands without *Montagnard* support, both the Americans and the GVN tried to wean the *Montagnards* away from the insurgents. By spring of 1962, several ARVN divisions were deployed in the central highlands to try to contain the Communists, because the forces that could control this region held the key to the strategic security of the populated coastal enclaves.[42]

North of the central highlands lay the jagged peaks of the Truong Son Mountains, a rugged wilderness of rain forests, steep ridges, and roaring rivers. In this region, South Vietnam narrowed to a width of 30–60 miles. Lying just below the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and bordering Laos to the west, the Truong Son Mountains were a major infiltration route for the VietCong. The rugged peaks rising to 8,000 feet were virtually inaccessible to ARVN forces. The guerrillas dominated the region, frequently overrunning ARVN units and ambushing their reconnaissance patrols.[43]

At the same time that his armies, with enhanced U.S. support, went after the VietCong, Diem implemented a "strategic hamlet" (*ap chien luoc*) program. Strategic hamlets were designed by a Stanford professor Dr. Eugene Staley and promoted by a British advisory mission headed by Sir Robert Thompson, who had used strategic hamlets to defeat an ethnic Chinese-based insurgency in Malaya during the mid-1950s. Through the strategic hamlets, Thompson planned to complement the ARVN military effort by offering the Vietnamese villagers physical security and economic development. Peasants would

be removed from areas of VietCong activity to secure villages defended by ARVN forces initially, and then later by specially trained local militia. Civic action teams would restore village self-government, and implement social and economic programs that would benefit the villagers. The VietCong, no longer able to conceal themselves in villages, would have to come out into the open and fight.

American counterinsurgency enthusiasts supported the strategic hamlet program. The MSUG group was actively involved. Roger Hilsman, a senior state department official, wrote a paper for President Kennedy, which became the basis for JFK's approval of the program. They understood that to defeat the VietCong insurgency, it would be necessary to cut it off from its popular base in the rural villages. Winning the villagers' hearts and minds required more than weapons; it required furnishing the peasants with positive economic and political incentives for supporting the South Vietnamese government.

Before these programs could be implemented, the GVN would have to guarantee the physical security of the villagers, both to insulate them from insurgent attacks and to deny the guerrillas access to provisions and recruits. Kennedy administration officials believed that the strategic hamlet program promised to separate the VietCong from the villagers and would thereby kill the rebellion.[44] Washington also believed that strategic hamlets would rectify the GVN's most serious political weakness, its lack of support among the peasantry.

Diem embraced the idea of isolating the VietCong from the rural population. Under the rubric of Operation Sunrise, the first fortified villages were under construction in March 1962 in the Ben Cat district of the Binh Doung province, a heavily forested VietCong stronghold 40 miles northwest of Saigon. The ARVN forces dispersed the insurgents. By summer, several strategic hamlets had been carved out of the jungle, accommodating over 3,000 people. The new villages were equipped with schools, medical clinics, markets, and a defense force.[45]

Diem hailed the strategic hamlet program as the ultimate solution to the problems of rural pacification and reconstruction. Diem's brother Nhu was particularly enthusiastic and became the driving force behind the program. He saw the strategic hamlets not only as a means of isolating the people from the VietCong and regaining loyalty to the GVN via economic development, but also as vehicles for social control, political indoctrination, and ideological transformation. With the villagers under the control of the GVN, Nhu planned to convert all of them to his philosophy of Personalism. During the summer of 1962, Operation Sunrise was expanded to other provinces. As the year ended, Diem and Nhu declared 1962 to be the "year of the strategic hamlet."

The Revolution in Southern Vietnam Gathers Momentum

The initiative seized by the ARVN forces during 1962 proved temporary. Despite using helicopters and having the U.S. advisers integrated into the

command and staff structure of the South Vietnamese forces at every level, the ARVN forces were prone to operational failures. It proved difficult for the South Vietnamese military to locate and trap the elusive VietCong guerrillas amidst the swamps and paddy lands of the delta. Peasants sympathetic to the insurgents would inform the guerrillas of ARVN or provincial force movements, giving them ample time to escape. The large-scale ARVN sweeps through VietCong-infested regions usually netted few casualties, prisoners, or captured weapons and stores. As soon as the South Vietnamese forces withdrew, the VietCong returned to reestablish their networks. The VietCong also made good use of intelligence and mobility to offset ARVN-U.S. firepower. VietCong tactics could neutralize and occasionally defeat ARVN-U.S. technology.

During the latter half of 1962, the insurgents built up their forces and continued to make gains in the northern Mekong Delta region. The delta was split into northern and southern halves by the Bassac River, one of the Mekong's many tributaries. Historically, the southern Mekong Delta region had been a Communist stronghold since the days of the Vietminh. During 1962, the VietCong and GVN forces fought for control of the people and resources of the northern half, with the VietCong gradually gaining the ascendancy.

During this time, the NLF more than compensated for the substantial increase in the U.S. military aid going to the South Vietnamese forces. The number of main force units the VietCong could field expanded. The size of their maneuver battalions increased, and their training, discipline, and operational capabilities improved. Their recruits came mainly from the ranks of the southern peasantry, although their forces were significantly enhanced by about 5,800 infiltrators coming into the south via the Ho Chi Minh Trail during 1962.[46] Most of these infiltrators were regroupees, southerners who had gone north in 1954 and 1955. They constituted highly motivated, thoroughly indoctrinated, specially trained cadres who moved into leadership positions within the VietCong ranks. Insurgent firepower increased, coming mostly from captured U.S. weapons acquired when the rebels overran ARVN outposts or ambushed small units. The insurgents also purchased the U.S. weapons from some ARVN officers who were quite willing to do business with the VietCong. They also obtained some modern Chinese weapons, such as automatic rifles and mortars, which had been brought down the Ho Chi Minh Trail (see Figure 4.1). VietCong planners devised tactics to counter the heliborne assaults of the ARVN forces. As their tactical sophistication improved, the guerrillas proved more willing to stand and fight the South Vietnamese forces.[47]

The escalating conflict in the vital northern Mekong Delta region came to a head early in 1963 during the Battle of Ap Bac, the most important battle of the developing revolutionary war in southern Vietnam.[48] In late December, ARVN forces learned of the presence of a heavy concentration of enemy troops near the hamlet of Ap Bac, located in the Dinh Tuong province 45 miles southwest of Saigon. The U.S. officials were delighted because it appeared that the VietCong were preparing to engage the South Vietnamese

army in a set-piece battle. A golden opportunity appeared for the ARVN 7th Division, led by Colonel Bui Dinh Dam, a Diem favorite, to attack and destroy a major VietCong force. Instead, the battle that occurred on January 2, 1963 turned out to be a stunning rebel victory and an ARVN fiasco. It revealed all of the shortcomings of the South Vietnamese armed forces and served as an ominous sign of the future.[49] It also thrust into prominence the senior U.S. military adviser to the ARVN 7th Division, Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann, one of the American heroes of the Vietnam War.[50]

Vann had prepared what appeared to be a can't-miss battle plan, which called for South Vietnamese forces to launch a three-pronged attack on rebel troops. Over 3,000 ARVN troopers, supported by American-operated helicopter gunships, APCs, and bombers, would advance on the approximately 320 rebel soldiers of the PLAF 514th Battalion from the north, south, and west. The western area was deliberately left unguarded so when the VietCong fighters attempted to escape to the west, they would be slaughtered by aircraft and artillery fire.[51] Circling overhead in his L-19 spotter plane, Colonel Vann, advising Colonel Dam, would coordinate the attacks.

Against the 3,000 ARVN and provincial troops, supported by armor, artillery, helicopters, and bombers, the VC 514th had only automatic rifles, two 30-caliber machine guns, grenades, and a few light mortars. They also had limited stores of ammunition, only enough for about one day of fighting.[52] As the battle began, it appeared that the heavily outnumbered and outgunned rebels, having no exit, would be quickly overwhelmed and destroyed.

The battle did not unfold as Vann had expected, mainly because ARVN officers were incompetent and ARVN soldiers were unwilling to fight. Provincial forces, probing from the south, halted their advance on orders from their commander, Major Pham That Tho, when they encountered resistance from the VC forces. The VC hit 14 of the 15 helicopters involved in the battle, shooting down five of them with rifle fire. The APCs commanded by Captain Ly Tong Ba were delayed for hours by his caution. When they finally arrived, guerrillas armed only with small arms fire were able to neutralize the 10-ton armored behemoths, because the ARVN soldiers lacked effective leadership and tactical competence.[53]

Colonel Vann, observing from the air, exhorted Colonel Dam to order both Major Tho and Captain Ba to move their troops forward. They both refused to obey Dam's orders. Vann then requested an airborne unit from Saigon to be brought in to try to salvage the battle. But the order for the paratroopers had to go through Major General Huynh Van Cao, formerly the 7th Division commander and now the commander of IV Corps, with control over military operations in the northern Mekong Delta. Cao, whose rank owed more to his political connections than to his professional competence, delayed calling in the airborne forces for several hours, then landed them at a site that permitted the VietCong forces to withdraw from the field during the night. Under secret

Figure 4.1 The Ho Chi Minh Trail. *Public domain.*

orders from Diem to keep ARVN casualties low, Cao chose defeat at Ap Bac to protect his career rather than seek the victory that could have been his.[54]

What could have been a major ARVN victory turned instead into a significant victory for the NLF and its forces. It was much more than a military success for the VietCong, who had stood and fought against superior forces. It was a smashing psychological victory that NLF propagandists used to recruit more troops and to win the allegiance of more hamlets to their cause. Ap Bac also signaled that the momentum of the expanding war had shifted to the NLF. By the summer of 1963, many of the villages of the strategic northern Mekong Delta either supported the NLF or took a neutral stance.[55] The GVN mainly controlled only towns and cities scattered over the region.

For the ARVN forces, "Ap Bac epitomized all the deficiencies of the system."[56] The battle served as a paradigm for military failure. For Diem, the political loyalty of General Cao and Colonel Dam represented, above all else, coup insurance. He wanted the 7th Division available to rush to Saigon if necessary to repel possible challenges to his regime by dissident ARVN generals. Diem was determined to keep ARVN battle casualties low. He and his brother Nhu believed that both the November 1960 coup attempt and another attack on Diem's life in February 1962, when two disgruntled VNAF pilots had bombed his palace, had been provoked by casualties sustained by ARVN forces fighting the rebels. Diem preferred political survival to waging an aggressive war against the VietCong in the countryside. General Cao and Colonel Dam preferred losing a battle to risking Diem's displeasure and dismissal from their commands. It was a matter of priorities, and Diem considered unhappy ARVN generals more dangerous foes then the NLF insurgents supported by Hanoi. For Diem and his family oligarchs, the key to remaining in power lay in retaining a favorable balance of loyal ARVN forces and in keeping the U.S. economic and military support.

Ap Bac revealed the long-present shortcomings of an army whose leaders were more expert at playing politics than at fighting battles. According to Colonel Wilbur Wilson, the U.S. senior adviser to III Corps, "The generals got to be generals by virtue of their ability in political intrigue, not as a result of their ability to lead men."[57] Further, the officer class of Diem's army came mostly from urban middle- and upper-class families, often Catholic and French-speaking. They had no nationalistic feelings for South Vietnam. Most had served with the French forces fighting the Vietminh. These officers often held in contempt their enlisted troops, who were mostly peasant conscripts or mercenaries.

Colonel Vann was infuriated by ARVN officers who were indifferent to the welfare of the troops entrusted to their commands, and who did not want to lead them into battle. Further, Ap Bac demonstrated the pitfalls of going to war with troops who were afflicted with low morale and whose performance suffered from a lack of training and discipline. Many ARVN soldiers openly admitted that they were afraid of the guerrillas and did not want to engage them in a firefight. Colonel Vann and the other American advisers discovered

that they were trying to wage war against the Vietcong guerrillas "with an army that suffered from an institutionalized unwillingness to fight."[58]

By contrast, at Ap Bac, the NLF forces had stood their ground against fearsome weapons and troops that outnumbered them 10 to 1, and they had fought with great tenacity for a cause in which they believed, a cause for which they were willing to die. "Ap Bac was a decisive battle . . . for the Vietnamese revolution in the South." Above all, the battle highlighted the limits of American power in Vietnam.[59] The U.S. wealth, military technology, and advisory leadership could not compensate for the deficiencies of an army that did not want to fight and whose leaders were under orders not to incur many casualties.

Had Ngo Dinh Diem spent as much effort trying to defeat the insurgents and transforming his government into a dynamic alternative to the NLF; he would never have been challenged by ARVN officers, most of whom were committed anti-Communist nationalists eager to suppress the VietCong revolt. But after the November 11, 1960 coup attempt that had nearly brought down his regime, Diem, more than before, promoted and assigned officers on the basis on their political loyalty. On February 27, 1962, two dissident VNAF pilots, Second Lieutenant Nguyen Van Cu and First Lieutenant Pham Phu Quoc, bombed Doc Lap palace attempting to assassinate Ngo Dinh Diem. One bomb penetrated a room of the palace where Diem sat reading, but it failed to detonate. Diem attributed his miraculous survival to "divine protection." Both Cur and Quoc claimed that they wanted to get rid of Diem because he was more focused on maintaining his autocratic rule than fighting the VietCong. After the failed attack, Cu fled to Cambodia, but Quoc was arrested and imprisoned. Although they did not organize coup attempts or try to murder Diem, many other ARVN officers, all committed anti-Communist nationalists, angry and frustrated by the regime's incessant politicking, felt no need to support Diem or come to his aid when in the summer of 1963, his regime faced its final crisis. Many of them either sat out the coup that brought him down or else joined it.[60]

While Saigon's armed forces were losing ground to the insurgents in the northern Mekong Delta, the much-vaunted strategic hamlet program was coming unraveled in the same region. Most Delta peasants resented being removed from their ancestral lands. They refused to move and had to be forcibly relocated, many to hamlets whose security could not be guaranteed. Few young men of military age moved because they were either avoiding conscription or had joined the VietCong. Many of these insecure hamlets were infiltrated by the VietCong. Even in the secure hamlets, many of the programs that were supposed to bind the people to Saigon were never implemented. Promised land reforms were not implemented. Many relocated peasants ended up losing ancestral lands that they had been forced to abandon, for which they received little or no compensation from GVN officials. Even though the United States provided ample funds for promised strategic hamlet social services, most were never implemented because of official corruption.

"The strategic hamlets were more akin to concentration camps than communities."[61] In areas where the strategic hamlets were more successful, VietCong terrorists often attacked the villages, intimidated the people, and kidnapped or murdered Diemist officials.

The main reason that the strategic hamlets failed was that Diem and Nhu viewed them primarily as a means of extending their political control over the rural population, rather than as furnishing an opportunity to provide the peasants with positive incentives for supporting the South Vietnamese state. They were not trying to win the "hearts and minds" of peasants; they were trying to coerce and indoctrinate them. Rural Vietnamese could find little in the strategic hamlet program that worked for their benefit. Even though South Vietnamese officials generated rigged statistics that vastly exaggerated the number of strategic hamlets constructed and their resident populations, the GVN continued to lose popular support at the rice-roots level throughout the latter half of 1962 and into 1963.[62]

The decline in the ARVN's military effectiveness and the failures of the strategic hamlet program reflected the political deterioration occurring in South Vietnam from mid-1962 to mid-1963, despite the military escalations of the Kennedy administration.[63] The NLF guerrillas continued to grow in numbers and to enhance their military capabilities. More importantly, VietCong political cadres continued to gain the support of increasing numbers of villagers in the countryside. The military actions of the guerrillas supported and advanced the political goals of the insurgency. Always, the VietCong fighters and political cadres worked in tandem, coordinating their activities to achieve their objectives.

There were many reasons why increasing numbers of South Vietnamese peasants chose governance by Hanoi-backed NLF officials over that provided by American-backed GVN officials in 1962 and 1963. In part, the peasants reacted to the political shortcomings of many Diemist officials: their repressiveness, corruption, and ineptitude, as well as their lack of genuine interest in the peasants' needs and problems. The GVN simply never gave many villagers any good reason to support it and often provided very good reasons to reject it. In part, the villagers reacted against the ARVN and provincial troops, who failed to provide them with physical security and who sometimes abused the peasants, stole their food, rice crops, tools, and animals. Often, indiscriminate ARVN use of artillery and aerial bombing injured, maimed, and killed civilians, destroying their homes.

Many villagers were coerced and intimidated into at least passive support for the rebels. The NLF use of terror, which included kidnappings and selective assassinations of Diemist officials, landlords, collaborators, informers, and spies, often carried out with great brutality, could be very effective. The NLF propagandists also played on the xenophobia of the peasants, invoking bitter memories of French colonialism and linking the Diem government and its American patrons (My-Diem) to the hated colonial past.[64]

But skilled NLF organizers also developed many positive incentives with which to win over the villagers, whose support was absolutely crucial to their

cause. Highly disciplined party cadres often practiced the "three withs": they lived with the villagers, they ate with the villagers, and they worked with them in the rice fields. These cadres were trained to treat the villagers with courtesy, to listen to them, and to respond to their needs. The NLF cadres often gave land confiscated from Diemist landlords to landless peasants. They helped peasants market their crops. They improved public health, sanitation, educational, and maternity services. They restored traditional village autonomy. They organized farmers, women, and young people into village associations under local leadership. They appealed to the traditional Vietnamese values of family and Communalism and to the strong nationalist feelings of the peasants.

In 1962 and 1963, a revolution directed by the Hanoi Politburo was taking root and gathering momentum in the southern Vietnamese countryside. Villages, although remaining physically within the country nominally governed by Ngo Dinh Diem, had been removed politically from his authority and removed militarily from the control of his army. These villages were now administered by NLF cadres. The cadres also organized the villagers for self-defense. These "combat villages" provided the basis for the integrated political-military campaign that the NLF would wage for over a decade.

The revolution that had been underway in Vietnam since 1945 and had verged on completion in 1954, only to be thwarted by the partition of the country, the subsequent American intervention, the establishment of the Diem government, and the ouster of the French, had revived and was gathering momentum in the early 1960s.[65]

Strains in the Limited Partnership

Even though the political and strategic situation in southern Vietnam was rapidly deteriorating, Washington saw no reason for reappraising its policy. In Saigon, both Ambassador Nolting and MACV Commander Paul Harkins proclaimed that progress was being made. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, returning from a trip to Vietnam in November, reported that "every quantitative measure that we have shows that we are winning the war."[66] At a December 12, 1962 press conference, President Kennedy spoke optimistically about the war. Premier Diem pronounced the counterinsurgency program a success and insisted that the GVN military forces were containing the insurgents in the countryside.

The wall of U.S. and GVN official optimism was breached by some younger members of the American press corps assigned to cover the Vietnam War. The young reporters represented a new breed of journalists, very much part of the Sixties generation. They were unlike the older correspondents who were accustomed to accepting briefings by Diemist officials and the U.S. military spokesmen. Because these new journalists accompanied the ARVN forces into the field and interviewed the U.S. military advisers like Colonel Vann, who talked frankly with them about the outcome of Ap Bac and other

engagements, they discovered, initially to their surprise, that far from winning it, Saigon was in fact losing the war in the Mekong Delta. The ablest of these young journalists included David Halberstam of the *New York Times*, Neil Sheehan of United Press, Malcolm Brown of Associated Press, and Charles Mohr of *Time*.

Their articles depicted the Diem regime as both inept and corrupt, and they held him primarily to blame for the failing GVN effort. They called the strategic hamlet program a sham. They challenged official statistics that inflated both the number of strategic hamlets constructed and the number of VietCong killed.[67] Halberstam filed stories describing the military and political gains that the rebels were making in the northern Mekong Delta.[68] Sheehan described how pessimistic reports from advisers serving in the field with ARVN units were suppressed at MAC-V headquarters. Diem, enraged by the Americans' negative reportage, struck back at his journalistic critics by expelling several journalists employed by NBC, CBS, and *Newsweek*. Despite pleas from Ambassador Nolting to reinstate them and his warnings that banning the journalists would cost Diem valuable popular support in the United States, the South Vietnamese leader refused to lift the ban.[69]

To harried U.S. officials in Saigon and to the Diem family, any stories in the American press that deviated from the official line of optimism and progress toward inevitable victory over the Communists were considered to be treasonous, giving aid and comfort to the enemy. The U.S. officials denied the journalists' accounts and accused them of hurting the war effort. General Harkins, who insisted that Ap Bac had been an ARVN victory, accused Halberstam of being unfair to Diem and of writing lies to make him look bad.[70] President Kennedy, who was trying to hide both the growing U.S. involvement in the expanding war in South Vietnam and any bad news emanating from the war zone from the American people, was angered by Halberstam's columns. Kennedy tried to get *New York Times* publisher Arthur O. Sulzberger to recall him. Sulzberger rebuffed the president, and Halberstam stayed in Vietnam.[71] The reporters responded to these attacks by accusing the U.S. officials of deceiving the American people about the growing U.S. involvement in battles that were being lost.[72]

These young journalists were patriotic Cold Warriors, ideological anti-Communists; they wanted the South Vietnamese and their American advisers to win the war against the NLF. They condemned the performance of the ARVN forces in the field and Diem's way of governing because they could see that the PLAF forces were winning battles and recruiting more supporters from the rural population because of GVN and ARVN ineptitude. Browne and Sheehan were U.S. Army veterans. Halberstam was an Army reservist. The Marines later awarded Charles Mohr a Bronze Star for bravery during the battle to reclaim Hue in February 1968. These journalists saw through the lies and cooked statistics of Saigon officials and the fatuous U.S. official optimism based on Diemist deceptions. What the reporters were trying to do was warn Washington and the American people that the war was failing.

Unless Diem and Nhu were replaced or radically altered their approach to governance and war, the war would surely be lost.[73]

Behind the declarations of official optimism, internal reports told a more realistic story of growing tension between Diem and the U.S. officials. The relationship between the GVN and Washington deteriorated in 1963. Both Diem and Nhu were alarmed by the rapid buildup of the American advisory apparatus. Diem was infuriated by a policy that gave the U.S. military advisers control over the distribution of aid to the provinces; Diem demanded that these advisers be recalled. The CIA reports sent to Washington confirmed the political deterioration occurring in the delta region and elsewhere.[74] Colonel F. P. Serong, an Australian counterinsurgency expert, sent a secret report to General Harkins describing the failure of the ARVN forces to provide security for the rural population.[75] The U.S. officials continued to press Diem to make reforms, which he refused to make, because he correctly feared that they would undermine his regime. During 1963, the American-GVN partnership became increasingly strained. Some U.S. officials were losing faith in Diem and calling for a coup to rid the country of the failing Diem family oligarchy.[76]

President Kennedy, who wanted a realistic appraisal of America's Diem experiment, selected his friend Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield, the most powerful congressional supporter of Diem, to head a special fact-finding delegation to South Vietnam. In South Vietnam, Mansfield arranged to meet with Halberstam, Sheehan, and some of the other young reporters who had been writing critically about the Diem government and its failing war effort. They bluntly told Mansfield that the ARVN was not defeating the VC; they told him that Diem's inept and repressive leadership was an obstacle not an asset in the counterinsurgency war. They also told him that MACV and the U.S. embassy officials who continued to support Diem and claim that the ARVN was winning the war in the countryside were either deluded or dishonest.[77]

Upon his return, Mansfield warned Kennedy that the United States was in danger of being drawn "inexorably" into the doomed role and bloody fate of the French colonial armies in Southeast Asia.[78] He told the President that the U.S. escalations had made the Diem regime more unstable and ARVN forces less able to contain the growing NLF insurgency. Additional efforts necessary for the survival of the GVN would have to come from Saigon, not Washington, and if they were not forthcoming, the United States should either reduce its commitments to South Vietnam or get out.

Kennedy angrily rejected Mansfield's recommendations. He continued to support Diem's government, despite the growing rift between the U.S. officials and their South Vietnamese clients.[79] However, Mansfield had caused Kennedy to begin to question whether Washington's commitment to building a non-Communist South Vietnam meant supporting Diem forever. Mansfield, indispensable for saving Diem in the mid-fifties, had driven the first nail in his coffin.[80]

The Buddhist Crisis, May–July, 1963

On May 8, 1963, a crisis exploded in Hue that within a few months would bring down the Ngo family oligarchy. Government troops fired into a crowd protesting a law forbidding the flying of religious flags celebrating the 2,527th anniversary of the Buddha's birth. Eight people were killed. Demonstrations soon spread to Saigon. Two days later, thousands of Buddhists took to the streets to protest the shootings and to demand religious freedom. Diem responded by rejecting their demands and jailing the Buddhist leaders. He denied that his soldiers had fired on the demonstrators in Hue; he blamed the shootings on an NLF operative with a hand grenade. Diem's rigid and deceptive response provoked additional demonstrations. Buddhist monks, called bonzes, frequently staged protests in front of the National Assembly building in Saigon.

The Buddhist revolt reached a new dimension on June 11, when Thich Quang Duc, a 73-year-old bonze, immolated himself in front of large crowds at a busy intersection in downtown Saigon. American news photographers and reporters, alerted beforehand by Buddhist leaders, were at the scene. Quickly, horrific pictures and accounts of the burning monk made the front pages and television news highlights in America and around the world.

> "When Quang Duc consigned his body to the flames on that fateful June day, he reduced America's Diem experiment to ashes as well. Diem would hang on the power for five more months, but his regime had entered its final stages."[81]

Quang Duc's flaming sacrifice made the political crisis in Vietnam in the summer of 1963 a big story in the American news media. Americans, many of whom had previously given little thought to Vietnam, appalled by the images of self-immolation, gained insight into the depth and passion of the Buddhist opposition to Diemist rule. World opinion, shocked by the dramatic photograph, criticized Americans for supporting a government that persecuted religious worshippers.

Many of the news stories emanating from Saigon sharply criticized Diem's repressive actions. The U.S. officials brought intense pressure on Diem to rescind the ban and conciliate the Buddhists. But Diem was unresponsive to their pleas. His brother Ngo Dinh Nhu continued to denounce and redbait the Buddhists. Nhu also advised Diem to ignore the American demands and suppress the Buddhist revolt. Madame Nhu made a ghastly situation worse when she exclaimed, while being interviewed on CBS television, that all the Buddhist leaders have done is "to barbecue a bonze."[82]

The Buddhist rebellion, which was more a political than a religious uprising, had long been in the making. Its roots lay in the mass emigration from the North following the Geneva agreements of July 1954, when nearly a million Catholics streamed south to form a popular base of support for Diem's

emerging government. Under Diem's family rule, Catholics received favored treatment and enjoyed special privileges and opportunities. Priests enjoyed political influence; most district and province chiefs were Catholics.[83]

The Buddhist uprising in Hue reflected not only the passions of the moment, but also the accumulated resentments deriving from years of discrimination and repression. The rebellion also reflected a growing militancy on the part of younger, more political monks, who were determined to challenge Diemist proscriptions and to seek a greater role in public life. There were divisions within their ranks, but generally the Buddhists called for Diem's removal, an end to American intrusions in Vietnamese affairs, and a neutral South Vietnam governed by a coalition of factions looking toward peaceful reunification with the North. Diem refused all but token concessions.[84] By midsummer, the war against the VietCong had virtually halted. The demonstrations and fiery sacrifices continued as more monks and nuns immolated themselves. South Vietnamese society appeared on the verge of disintegrating.

On the evening of August 20, a group of ARVN generals met with Nhu to work out a response to the Buddhist problem. The next day, Diem declared martial law and appointed General Ton That Dinh as the commander of the Saigon region. That night, Nhu used the U.S.-trained and financed Special Forces under the nominal command of General Dinh to occupy key pagodas in Saigon and Hue. Nhu also launched midnight raids on pagodas all over South Vietnam. Over 2,000 temples were raided and more than 1,400 monks, nuns, neophytes, and ordinary citizens were arrested. Hundreds of people were killed or injured.[85]

Thousands of high school and college students, traditionally apolitical, took to the streets in Saigon and Hue to support the Buddhists. Diem promptly ordered their arrest and shut down their schools and colleges. He then went on Saigon radio to announce that he was imposing a curfew, extending from 9:00 P.M. to 5:00 A.M. Soldiers and police were under orders to shoot anyone found on the streets during those hours. Military personnel performed all government functions. Diem had turned his government into an armed camp.

Diem and Nhu knew that their actions would displease Washington. They knew that the American media would react negatively and that President Kennedy and other high officials might denounce their actions. But they still believed that Washington would discern no alternative to Diemist rule. They assumed that the U.S. officials would continue to support them rather than see the country fall to the Communists. After all, American leaders had been doing just that for more than eight years. This time, Diem and Nhu had it wrong. The Ngo brothers probably sealed their fate when they tried to pin the crackdown on the Buddhists on the ARVN. Nhu told a CIA official that ARVN generals had planned the pagoda raids. Within days, some ARVN officers were in contact with Americans asking what their attitude would be in the event of a coup against the Diem regime.[86]

Decline of Ngo Dinh Diem

The final months of the Ngo family regime in southern Vietnam resembled a three-ring circus. In one circle, the Ngo brothers maneuvered frantically to suppress all opposition and retain power. In the second circle, ARVN generals maneuvered to organize a coup, disguise it from Diem and Nhu, and solicit support from their American patrons. The third circle comprised alarmed U.S. officials who maneuvered to keep abreast of events, keep options open, and try to keep the whole anti-Communist enterprise in South Vietnam afloat.

Kennedy's appointment of Henry Cabot Lodge to place Frederick Nolting as the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam demonstrated Washington's toughening stance toward Diem. Lodge arrived in Saigon August 22. At his first meeting with Diem, he bluntly told the premier that because of the Buddhist crisis, American public opinion had turned against him. He would have to set his house in order: get rid of Nhu, silence Madame Nhu, and conciliate the Buddhists. Lodge emphasized that Diem no longer enjoyed unconditional support, and that he had to change or else the U.S. aid would be cut. Lodge further indicated that these demands were not negotiable.[87]

Within 48 hours of his arrival in Saigon, Lodge received a cable sent by a trio of second-tier State Department officials, all of whom wanted to remove Diem from power. Lodge was instructed to give Diem a chance to get rid of Nhu, but, if Diem refused, the message indicated that Diem himself might have to be removed from office. Lodge was also instructed to inform the dissident generals that the United States was prepared to abandon Diem if he continued to prove uncooperative and that Washington would support a replacement government. This controversial cable, without ever using the words "coup" and "overthrow," amounted to an order to oust Diem because its authors surely knew that Diem would never replace Nhu, silence Madame Nhu, or conciliate the Buddhists.[88] Although the cable was drafted and sent when President Kennedy and Secretary of State Rusk happened to be out of town, both approved sending the cable. At a meeting two days later, Kennedy polled all of his advisers one-by-one; all stood by the cable. Kennedy stuck by the policy established by the August 24 cable until Diem was gone.[89]

After another meeting with the South Vietnamese president, Lodge concluded that Diem would never separate himself from his brother and sister-in-law. In Lodge's view, a coup that rid South Vietnam of Ngo family rule remained the best hope for establishing an effective government and winning the war against the VietCong. Having determined that ARVN general officers offered the only realistic alternative to Diem family rule, Lodge instructed his subordinate Lucien Conein, a French-born former CIA agent, to make contact with high-ranking ARVN officers and inform them that the United States would welcome a coup that promised to topple Diem. Within 24 hours, Conein reported to Lodge that he had contacted Major General Tran Van Don, whom Diem had recently appointed commander of the ARVN. Don would be the chief planner of the coup that eventually brought Diem

down. Lodge also learned that Brigadier General Le Van Kim had indicated that the ARVN could carry out a coup that would remove Diem from power if the United States signaled its support.[90]

Working through Conein, Lodge assured the generals planning Diem's overthrow that they would have the U.S. support if the *coup d'état* succeeded. Lodge also sent President Kennedy a secret cable on August 28 informing him that the United States "was launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back; the overthrow of the Diem government."[91] But the generals, unable to gain the support of key officers commanding troops in the vicinity of Saigon, and fearful of Nhu's machinations, aborted the coup, placing it on indefinite hold.[92]

On August 29, French president Charles de Gaulle proposed neutralizing Vietnam along the same model as the Laotian settlement. It would create a federated government allowing Diem to remain in power in southern Vietnam. de Gaulle's recommendation aimed at forcing the Americans to exit Vietnam and allow the Vietnamese to settle their own affairs.

Recognizing de Gaulle's ploy for what it was, President Kennedy quickly rejected it, but Diem did not and DRV Prime Minister Pham Van Dong expressed support in principle. Nhu, sensing the danger to the regime posed by the developing alliance between the U.S. officials and dissident ARVN officers, sought a rapprochement with the NLF. Nhu even went so far as to meet with Mieczyslaw Maneli, the Polish delegate to the International Control Commission (ICC). Apparently, the so-called "Maneli affair" did not represent a serious effort by Nhu to initiate contact between Saigon and Hanoi. There is no documentary evidence that Nhu ever met with any NLF or DRV officials. However, the U.S. officials in Saigon operated on the assumption that Nhu's gestures toward the NLF and Hanoi were genuine. His actions only increased their growing resolve to get rid of him and his outspoken wife, and Diem too, if the South Vietnamese president insisted on retaining close ties to his brother and sister-in-law.[93]

On September 2, President Kennedy sat for a televised interview conducted by CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite. When Cronkite asked the President about the war in South Vietnam, Kennedy stated: "I don't think unless a greater effort is made by the government to win popular support that the war can be won." Cronkite asked a follow-up question: "Do you think the government has time to regain the support of the people?" Kennedy answered, choosing his words carefully: "I do. With changes in policy and perhaps with personnel, I think it can win. If it doesn't make those changes, I would think that the chances of winning would not be very good." Kennedy was sending dual messages to South Vietnamese leaders. To Diem: either get rid of Nhu and his noisy wife, or we get rid of you! To Tran Van Don: we will support any change in government that promises to conciliate the Buddhists and fights the VietCong more effectively.[94]

Kennedy, following the interview with Cronkite, sent another fact-finding team, headed by Robert McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor, to appraise

the political and military situation in South Vietnam. Both McNamara and Taylor were hawks and their report praised the performance of the ARVN and MACV. They reported that the war effort had made great progress since 1962. They got it wrong. The ARVN was not winning the war. At the time McNamara and Taylor made their visit, the South Vietnamese army was steadily losing territory and villages to the VietCong. The NLF controlled much more territory and population in the fall of 1963 in the Mekong Delta region than it had 18 months earlier. McNamara and Taylor recommended stepped up training for the ARVN forces so that within a few years, "essential functions now performed by U.S. military personnel can be carried out by Vietnamese. . . ."[95] The report recommended that the Pentagon announce plans soon to withdraw 1,000 U.S. military personnel by the end of the year. These withdrawals would be explained as an initial step in a long-term program to replace the U.S. military personnel with South Vietnamese soldiers without impairing the war effort. The McNamara-Taylor report included the first mention of what in time would become the policy of Vietnamization.[96]

Although their report was hardly a vote of confidence for the Diem regime and both McNamara and Taylor were beginning to have their doubts about Diem, they nevertheless advised Kennedy not to support any coup attempts. They favored applying selective pressures to Diem to get him to stop persecuting the Buddhists and rebuild his base of support among the urban elites. Ambassador Lodge had a much clearer grasp of the dire political situation in South Vietnam than either McNamara or Taylor. Lodge understood that Diem would never separate himself from Nhu; however, McNamara and Taylor ignored Lodge's views in their report to the president.[97]

Despite its inaccuracies and faulty judgments, Kennedy embraced the recommendations of the McNamara-Taylor report, adopting a policy of applying selective pressures against Diem. Kennedy cut off the funds to support some Special Forces under Nhu's control. He also recalled the CIA station chief in Saigon, John Richardson, who was known to be friendly with Nhu. These measures, intended as such by Kennedy, were taken as signals by General Don and the other coup planners to accelerate their plotting and seek greater support from the Americans. Lodge, through Conein, assured the conspirators that the United States would do nothing to hinder the coup and would extend military and economic support to any new regime that broadened its base of popular support, effectively prosecuted the war, and cooperated with the U.S. officials.[98]

Senior officials within the Kennedy administration still remained divided over whether to support Diem or the coup planners. Vice President Johnson, CIA Director John McCone, McNamara, Rusk, and Generals Taylor and Harkins continued to support Diem. State Department officials believed that Nhu and Diem had to go; they supported the coup plotters. "Kennedy himself vacillated, adhering to the policy of not overtly supporting a coup, but not discouraging one either."[99] JFK relied on Lodge, who was on the scene and backed the coup plot. For several weeks, the coup conspirators plotted,

while the U.S. officials fretted indecisively. As the *coup d'état* became imminent, Kennedy's chief concerns appear to have been that it might fail or that if it succeeded, that the U.S. officials be capable of plausible deniability. Lodge reassured the nervous president that the coup would succeed and that any new government would be an improvement over Diem and Nhu.[100]

The Fall of Ngo Dinh Diem, Nov. 1, 1963

As October 1963 came to an end, Saigon seethed with rumors, plots, and counterplots. General Don and his co-conspirators had planned their coup scrupulously. They had secured the support of key generals commanding troops in the vicinity of Saigon. They neutralized the forces of generals remaining loyal to the Ngos and established a precise timetable of operations. Nhu, knowing a coup attempt was nigh, but not knowing precisely which generals and troop units were involved, schemed furiously to flush out the conspirators, even going so far as to concoct an elaborate fake coup that involved one of the generals who, unbeknownst to Nhu, was part of the real coup.

The *coup d'état* that destroyed the Diem regime began on November 1 at 1:30 P.M. Saigon time. The coup leaders moved their forces into place, seizing control of key military and communication facilities. Once certain that a coup against them was underway, Diem and Nhu, from a command post inside the presidential palace, attempted to contact ARVN units that they believed still remained loyal to them. They quickly discovered that all had either joined the coup, been jailed or killed, or could not get their forces to Saigon. Although trapped inside the palace, Diem and Nhu refused the generals' repeated demands to surrender. They tried unsuccessfully to lure the coup leaders to the palace for consultations, a stalling device that had worked to thwart the November 1960 coup attempt.

At 4:30 P.M., as the coup went forward, Ngo Dinh Diem phoned Ambassador Lodge, who was staying at the American embassy:

DIEM: Some units have made a rebellion and I want to know what is the attitude of the U.S.?

LODGE: I do not feel well enough informed to be able to tell you. I have heard the shooting, but am not acquainted with all the facts. Also, it is 4:30 A.M. in Washington and the U.S. Government cannot possibly have a view.

DIEM: But you must have some general ideas. After all, I am Chief of State. I have tried to do my duty. I want to do now what duty and good sense require. I believe in duty above all.

LODGE: You have certainly done your duty. As I told you only this morning, I admire your courage and your great contribution to your country. No one can take away from you the credit for all you have done. Now I am worried about your physical safety. I have a report that those in charge of the current activity offer you and your brother safe conduct out of the country if you resign. Had you heard this?

DIEM: No. (*Pause*) You have my phone number.
LODGE: Yes. If I can do anything for your physical safety, please call me.
DIEM: I am trying to reestablish order. (*Hangs up.*)[101]

Diem no doubt inferred the American position from Lodge's offer of asylum: the U.S. officials were supporting the coup and would do nothing to prevent it from succeeding. The United States was abandoning an ally it had installed in power back in 1954 and 1955, one it had supported for nearly a decade.

At about 7:00 P.M., Diem and Nhu exited the palace through a secret underground passageway and fled to the home of a friend, a wealthy Chinese merchant residing in the Cholon district. Nearly 12 hours later, ARVN troops loyal to the coup leaders overwhelmed the guards and occupied the presidential palace. The next morning, Diem phoned General Don's headquarters from St. Francis Xavier church in Cholon. He and Nhu offered to surrender in exchange for pledges of safe conduct. Don accepted their offer, although he told them that their surrender would have to be unconditional.

General Duong Van Minh, who had assumed command of the coup, dispatched two jeeps and an APC to fetch the deposed leaders. According to several accounts of the coup, Minh also dispatched his personal bodyguard Captain Nguyen Van Nhung, with secret instructions to assassinate Diem and Nhu. The deposed leaders were taken prisoner in front of a small chapel near the house of their friend and placed in the back of the personnel carrier. Their hands were tied behind their backs. Captain Nhung joined the bound brothers in the back of the vehicle. When the armored car returned to coup headquarters, Diem and Nhu were no longer among the living. They had both been shot in the back of the head. Nhu had also been stabbed several times.

The victorious rebels quickly went after the rest of the Ngo family leaders. Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc fled to the Vatican. Ngo Dinh Can was arrested in Hue and executed shortly thereafter by a firing squad. Madame Nhu survived the bloodbath only because she was traveling in the United States when the coup occurred. The coup leaders believed that it was necessary to eradicate the Ngo Dinh family because they feared Diem and Nhu still had some support and might find a way to return to power if they remained alive. Diem and Nhu were buried in unmarked graves somewhere in Saigon.[102]

In Saigon, news of the *coup d'état* brought a joyous response. People poured into the streets to celebrate the overthrow of a tyrant whose power base, at the time of his downfall, had shrunk to a handful of family members, a few government bureaucrats, some police and military retainers, and the Catholic minority. In Saigon, citizens cheered the ARVN soldiers who had taken part in the coup and, assuming that the U.S. officials had ordered the coup, praised all Americans they encountered on the streets.

The U.S. official spokesmen in Saigon and Washington claimed to have known nothing about the coup and insisted that they had had no part in it. They said that it was an internal political matter involving only quarreling factions of Vietnamese politicians. Obviously, the Americans were deeply implicated in

the coup. They were aware of it from its inception, and they had encouraged it. Lucien Conein met often with the plotters and functioned as a conduit among the generals, Lodge, and Washington. Conein was with General Don urging him on the day Diem was overthrown.[103] Without American financial support, promises of noninterference, and most of all, pledges to continue to provide economic and military aid to any replacement government that would emerge from a successful coup, the coup would never have occurred.

President Kennedy had not ordered Diem's or Nhu's deaths. He heard the news that Diem was dead during a meeting with advisers the next day. General Taylor, who attended that meeting, recalled that Kennedy "rushed from the room with a look of shock and dismay on his face."[104] The President had been one of Diem's earliest supporters and strongest champions. In the fall of 1963, Kennedy had sought his replacement as the head of state not his murder.[105] Kennedy told an adviser, "It should not have ended like this."[106] But no one had taken any steps to ensure the brothers' survival other than making contingency plans for granting them asylum prior to removing them from the country. No one told General Don and General Minh that the U.S. officials wanted Diem and Nhu kept alive.

The response in Hanoi to the coup was mixed; the overthrow of Diem both resolved some problems and created new ones for the Communist leadership. Diem had been a leader with some claim to rival Ho Chi Minh as a symbol of Vietnamese nationalist aspirations. The successful coup also confirmed Hanoi's claims that the Diem regime was a corrupt, unpopular regime that had lost all right to rule. However, the Communists had to be concerned because the new government, a military junta led by General Minh, had a potential for achieving a broader base of support. Minh was a southerner and a Buddhist who had been one of the leaders of a coup that had overthrown a tyrant.[107] Ominously, the new government had the strong backing of the Americans, and General Minh pledged to prosecute vigorously the war against the NLF. Hanoi anticipated an enlarged American presence in the South and a consequent escalation of the conflict.[108]

An expanded conflict also posed problems for Hanoi in its relations with the two major Communist powers, the Soviet Union and China. The Soviets had backed off their support of anticolonial "wars of national liberation" and were preaching the doctrine of "peaceful coexistence" with the United States. China, bidding to take over leadership of the Third World, championed the cause of national liberation in the early 1960s. Hanoi's takeover of the southern insurgency that had become a revolution increased the chances of conflict between the DRV and the United States, and appeared to align the Vietnamese Communists with China and against the Soviet Union.[109]

A Failed Limited Partnership

Washington's support for the coup weakened rather than strengthened the security of South Vietnam. Diem's autocracy was followed by 14 different

governments that rose and fell over the next dozen years, none of which governed as effectively or lasted nearly as long as the nine years recorded by America's Diem experiment. Diem's murder solved nothing. "It did not matter *who* led the government in Saigon."[110] No South Vietnamese government could survive without massive infusions of U.S. military power, which only confirmed the NLF claim that whoever happened to be in power in Saigon at any given moment was merely a puppet regime propped up by their imperialist masters. None of these successor regimes could arrest the entropic tendencies of South Vietnam or prevent the eventual reunification of the country under the control of the Lao Dong.

American complicity in the coup "tied the United States to all succeeding regimes."[111] President Johnson, who had supported Diem and argued against the coup, believed that Kennedy's involvement in the coup was the worst error made by the United States during its long involvement in Vietnam. General Taylor shared Johnson's view. The coup made the United States directly responsible for the fate of successive South Vietnamese governments. It also set into motion a train of events that "eventually forced President Johnson in 1965 to choose between accepting defeat or introducing large numbers of American combat forces."[112]

Three weeks after the coup that cost Diem and Nhu their lives, President Kennedy was assassinated. At the time of his death, Kennedy's Vietnam policy was in disarray and his administration was divided over what to do about the failing war against the VietCong. Kennedy loyalists and several scholars have argued that had Kennedy lived and presumably reelected in 1964, he was planning to extricate the United States from South Vietnam sometime in 1965 and therefore there would have been no American war in that country.[113] Given the catastrophic events that unfolded over the ensuing decade, which resulted in the United States expending billions of dollars and losing nearly 60,000 military personnel, it is an argument that has wide and deep appeal.

What Kennedy might have done had he lived can never be known; all thinking about that topic is consigned to the basket marked counter-factual speculation. What can be known is the Vietnam policy of his abbreviated presidency. Kennedy was a conventional Cold Warrior. He embraced a strong anti-Communist ideology; he was committed to containment, and he believed in the domino theory.[114] He and his senior advisers believed unquestioningly that retaining a non-Communist South Vietnam was vital to the strategic security of the United States and its allies in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

In the final months of his presidency, Kennedy repeatedly reaffirmed the American commitment in Vietnam. In the aforementioned televised interview with Walter Cronkite, President Kennedy invoked the domino theory, the classic Cold War rationale for the U.S. commitment in South Vietnam:

> Those people who say we ought to get out are wholly wrong, because if we withdraw from Vietnam, the Communists would control Vietnam. Pretty

> soon Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Malaya would go and all of Southeast Asia would be under the control of the Communists and under the domination of the Chinese.[115]

Three days later, in another television interview, Kennedy told NBC's David Brinkley that the United States would remain in Vietnam to check Chinese expansionism in Southeast Asia. Shortly before he died, the President told Ngo Dinh Diem that the United States gave the highest priority to defeating the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam. On the day Kennedy died, in a noontime speech that he would have delivered at the Dallas Trade Mart, he planned to once again affirm the American commitment in Vietnam.

In all of his public statements, Kennedy was consistently upbeat and he repeatedly reaffirmed a strong commitment to the U.S. effort in Vietnam. He never once suggested to any of his senior civilian or military advisers that he might be thinking about disengaging from Vietnam. Strong evidence that Kennedy, at the time of his death, was strongly and unreservedly committed to building a nation in southern Vietnam that would serve as a barrier to further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia exists in the form of **National Security Action Memorandum No. 273 (NSAM 273)**. Written mainly by McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's National Security Adviser, dated November 21, the day before the President was assassinated, NSAM 273 proposed a series of escalations of the war in Vietnam, some of which would directly pressure the regime in Hanoi. Kennedy had seen a draft of the memorandum and most of the proposed escalations were implemented by Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson.[116] President Johnson never got the impression that Kennedy had any intentions of pulling out of Vietnam. Johnson went to his grave believing that what he did in Vietnam was what Kennedy would have done.

Had he lived, President Kennedy probably would have continued the U.S. incremental escalations in South Vietnam to prevent disaster until he was reelected in November 1964. In the summer of 1965, having to face the same crisis that Johnson had to confront and the same stark choices—accept a Communist victory in Vietnam or undertake a major military escalation that amounted to an American takeover of the war—Kennedy and his senior advisers, all of whom stayed on board to help forge Johnson's Vietnam policy, would in all likelihood have done what Johnson felt compelled to do.

Kennedy was not prepared to pull out and present the NLF and Hanoi with a victory in Vietnam that would have also given the Chinese and the Soviets a major Cold War ideological triumph. At home, Richard Nixon, Barry Goldwater, and other prominent Republican leaders would have exploded in denunciations of a Democratic bug-out in Southeast Asia and blamed them for the "loss of Indochina" to the Communists. If one of John Kennedy's major political goals was to set the stage for a Robert Kennedy candidacy for the presidency in 1968, it is hard to imagine that he would risk fatally compromising his brother's bid by handing the Republicans "the loss of Indochina" to the Communists.

In the name of the ongoing struggle with the VietCong, Kennedy and his advisers claimed the right to intervene in South Vietnam as they chose. South Vietnam was, after all, an American creation and they had installed Diem in power. During the fall of 1963, they supported Diem's overthrow primarily because he refused to follow their advice. He refused to be a puppet—ease up on the Buddhists, reform the government, and most of all more vigorously prosecute the war against the VietCong.[117] The U.S. officials appeared serenely confident that they would somehow muddle through and prevail. The most important consequence of the Kennedy administration's words and deeds from 1961 to 1963 was to increase sharply the American stake in Vietnam and to put the United States on course for a major war in Southeast Asia.

For the duration of his presidency, Kennedy gave Vietnam only sporadic attention. It was rarely near the top of his list of foreign policy crises to be managed. The ongoing Cold War with the Soviets, especially showdowns in Berlin and Cuba, preoccupied the young leader.[118] Vietnam policy was often left to hawkish advisers, principally McNamara, Taylor, Walt Rostow, and McGeorge Bundy. Kennedy does not appear to have shown much interest in Vietnam for most of his presidency. He never asked hard questions or made tough decisions. Only his brother Robert could do that. Robert Kennedy, attending a National Security Council meeting, asked: what if no South Vietnamese government could resist a Communist takeover? If it could not, he stated, then America should extricate itself from the region.[119] President John Kennedy never confronted that potentiality; he reacted to immediate crises and improvised policy.[120]

The president preferred to take cautious middle courses. His middle courses of action managed to stave off disaster but significantly increased the U.S. commitment to Vietnam. During Kennedy's presidency, the levels of economic and military aid to the GVN rose significantly. When Kennedy took office, there had been about 650 U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam; on the day of his death, there were about 16,700, and some of these advisory forces engaged sporadically in combat.[121] When Kennedy took office, the NLF controlled about half of the villages within South Vietnam; on the day of his death, they controlled many more, especially in the strategic Mekong Delta region. Kennedy "bequeathed to his successor a problem eminently more dangerous than the one that he had inherited from Eisenhower."[122]

Americans did not understand the extent to which they were perceived as outsiders meddling in the internal affairs of the Vietnamese people and the consequent liabilities and limits imposed on their actions by that perception. Two thousand years of history had taught the Vietnamese to distrust and fear foreign imperial powers. The U.S. officials persisted in viewing the Vietnamese national revolution as foreign aggression, when in fact the VietCong insurgency originated as an indigenous reaction to repression by the American-backed Ngo family regime. The Americans were the outsiders in South Vietnam, not the VietCong. That insurgency and the threat to its survival posed by the Diem government, in turn, provoked a response from the

Communist leaders in Hanoi, who felt compelled to assume command of the rebellion that was occurring in the southern part of their country and to use it as a vehicle to bring about national reunification. Communism had aligned itself with Vietnamese nationalism.[123]

Kennedy continued the Eisenhower policies in Vietnam, but he significantly raised the stakes and instigated a small-scale secret limited American war. The Indochina interventions of the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations revealed an American tendency to think about Vietnam in terms of Cold War abstractions rather than to understand concrete Vietnamese cultural, social, political, and strategic realities. The U.S. officials gave primacy to global Cold War factors and persistently underplayed particular, local, Vietnamese historical forces. Americans tried to understand events in Vietnam using paradigms generated by their Cold War ideological predilections, not by indigenous Vietnamese realities. The national revolution that the U.S. officials tried for 30 years to thwart had deep Vietnamese roots. Revolution in Vietnam was not a Chinese and Soviet Cold War strategy. The U.S. officials understood that their mission was to stem the tide of expansionist Communism in Indochina. To a large majority of Vietnamese and to much of the rest of the world, Americans, having replaced the French in Vietnam, appeared to be trying to thwart Asian self-determination and preserve Western neocolonial influence in Southeast Asia.

Notes

1 Excerpts from Kennedy's inaugural address are taken from Sorensen, Theodore C., *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 275–78.
2 Prados, *Vietnam*, 62–63.
3 Kahin, *Intervention*, 126.
4 Ibid., 127.
5 It is impossible to know precisely what Ike told his successor about Laos at this meeting. The most plausible analysis is by Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman. They suggest that Eisenhower did not make any specific recommendations for action; rather, he talked about the potential costs and benefits of military intervention in Laos. In effect, he left that decision to the incoming administration. Fred I. Greenstein and, Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 2 (September 1992): 568–87. See also Porter, ed., *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 38, 90–92, which is a memo of the July 19 meeting between Eisenhower and Kennedy. Richard Immerman, "Dealing with a Government of Madmen: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Ngo Dinh Diem," in David Anderson, ed., *Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 133–34.
6 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1965), 309–11.
7 Chester Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970), 191–92; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 78.
8 Protocol to the Declaration of the Neutrality of Laos, July 23, 1962, in Porter, ed., *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 77, 156–60. According to the protocol, all foreign troops and paramilitary forces were to be removed within

30 days. 750 U.S. MAAG forces departed as did a few Soviet pilots. The 10,000 plus PAVN troops remained in Laos in violation of the protocol.

9 Edgar O'Ballance, *The Wars in Vietnam: 1954–1980* (New York: Hippocrene, 1981), 28–31.
10 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 78.
11 Doyle et al., *Passing the Torch*, 181. Kennedy had a special interest in counterinsurgency. He believed that it would be the most effective instrument available for checking Third World guerrilla forces. At the president's direction, special warfare training centers began preparing the U.S. soldiers to challenge guerrillas in the jungles and mountains of Laos and Vietnam.
12 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 194.
13 Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 30–31.
14 Hess, *Vietnam*, 68.
15 Quote is from Nguyen, Lien-Hang T, *Hanoi's War*, *50*. Douglas Pike, *Vietcong: The Organization and Technique of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), 77–84, 109–18; Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 197.
16 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 37, 86–89. "Manifesto of the South Viet Nam National Front for Liberation," December 1960, 86–89. The moderate nature of its program was to serve as a bridge linking the Communists and non-Communist nationalists in a common cause, the overthrow of the GVN.
17 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 196–98.
18 Ibid., 198; Kolko, *Anatomy of a Revolution*, 126.
19 Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 31–32; Kolko, *Anatomy of a Revolution*, 128–29.
20 Pike, *Vietcong*, 136–50.
21 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 27, 68–70, "Address by Lao Dong Party Secretary Le Duan."
22 Hess, *Vietnam*, 68; Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 116–19.
23 William J. Rust, *Kennedy and Vietnam: American Vietnam Policy, 1960–1963* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1985), 1–20; Specter, *Advice and Support*, 369-3-71; and Kahin, *Intervention*, 123–26.
24 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 31, 75–78, "Memo from Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow to President Ngo Dinh Diem," October 14, 1960. In a tactfully worded, lengthy memo, Ambassador Durbrow, who had cleared the memo with the Secretary of State Christian Herter beforehand, suggested many reforms for President Diem to make.
22 Spector, *Advice and Support*, 349–61.
26 Prados, *Vietnam*, 61.
27 Logevall, Fredrik, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the escalation of the War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 32–33. Johnson quote found in Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 124. Journalist Stanley Karnow, who had attended the banquet, asked Johnson off the record if he was sincere in his praise of Diem. Johnson laughed and replied, "Hell, he's the only boy we got over here."
28 Neil Sheehan, Hedrick Smith, E. W. Kenworthy, and Fox Butterfield, *The Pentagon Papers: The Secret History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Bantam, 1971), "National Security Action Memorandum 52," 126–27.
29 Doyle et al., *Passing the Torch*, 191–93; O'Ballance, *Vietnam Wars*, 42–43.
30 Cablegram from Taylor to Kennedy, November 1, 1961, in Porter, ed., *Vietnam Documents*, 140–42.
31 Karnow, *Vietnam*, 248.
32 Kahin, *Intervention*, 134.
33 Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 127.

34 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 84; Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 16–23; Stephen Pelz, "John F. Kennedy's 1961 Vietnam War Decisions," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 4 (December 1981): 356–85; Department of State, *A Threat to Peace* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961). The State Department White Paper documenting Hanoi's violations of the Geneva Accords exaggerates the extent of Hanoi's support for the NLF and contradicts CIA intelligence findings. The Rusk-McNamara memo dated November 11, 1961, appears in Sheehan and others, *The Pentagon Papers*, 150–53.
35 Doyle et al, *Passing the Torch*, 197.
36 Tuchman, *March of Folly*, 299. The Eisenhower administration observed the 1954 Geneva Accords limits on foreign military personnel in South Vietnam. There were about 650 American advisers in South Vietnam in January 1961. By the end of the year, there were over 3,000 advisers and support personnel, 9,000 by the end of 1962. At the time of Kennedy's death, there were about 16,700.
37 O'Ballance, *The Vietnam Wars*, 43–44; Bruce Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy* (New York: David McKay, 1976); Terrence Maitland, Stephen Weiss, and the editors of Boston Publishing, *Raising the Stakes*, The Vietnam Experience (Boston, MA: Boston Publishing, 1982), 19–21.
38 Blaufarb, *Counterinsurgency Era*, 113–15.
39 Maitland et al., *Raising the Stakes*, 23.
40 Ibid.
41 Kahin, *Intervention*, 140–41; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 85–86; and Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 201–3; Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions*, 158–60.
42 Maitland et al., *Raising the Stakes*, 14–15, 18–19.
43 O'Ballance, *The Vietnam Wars*, 43; Hess, *Vietnam*, 74.
44 Neil Sheehan, "Annals of War: An American Soldier in Vietnam: Part 2, A Set-Piece Battle," *New Yorker* 64, no. 19 (July 1988): 35–36; David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam during the Kennedy Era*, rev. ed. (New York: Knopf, 1988), 56–66; Hess, *Vietnam*, 74.
45 The Vietnamese word for hamlet is *ap*. The main action during the Battle of Ap Bac took place near the village of Bac.
46 Halberstam, *Quagmire*, 72–73: Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 457–58.
47 O'Ballance, *The Vietnam Wars*, 44–46.
48 For accounts of the Battle of Ap Bac, see Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 203–65; Palmer, Dave Rich Ward, *Summons of the Trumpet* (New York: Ballantine, 1978), 37–51; and Halberstam, *Quagmire*, 67–81.
49 Sheehan, "Annals of War, Part 2," 58–60.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 60–63; Halberstam, *Quagmire*, 76–81.
52 O'Ballance, *The Vietnam Wars*, 43–47; Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 214–15.
53 Halberstam, *Quagmire*, 79.
54 Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 90; see also Halberstam, *Quagmire*, 52–55.
55 Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 269.
56 Quote is from Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 90.
57 Colonel Wilson is quoted in Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965–1973* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), 47.
58 Hess, *Vietnam*, 75; Sheehan, "Annals of War, Part 2," 62.
59 Hess, *Vietnam*, 74; Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 92.
60 Prados, *Vietnam*, 75–76.

61 Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation* (New York: Delta, 1967), 87–88. By summer of 1963, Ngo Dinh Nhu claimed that two-thirds of the South Vietnamese population resided in secure strategic hamlets. A more realistic figure would have been 5–10 percent; Blaufarb, *Counterinsurgency Era*, 116–27; Pike, *VietCong*, 61–73, 102. According to Pike, NLF cadres kidnapped 9,000 officials and murdered 1,700 in 1962: in 1963, they kidnapped 7,200 and murdered 2,000.
62 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 87, 169–74, "Short-term Prospects in South Vietnam," extract from a memo by Roger Hilsman, December 3, 1962. Hilsman noted the deterioration of internal security in South Vietnam occurring in 1962.
63 Maitland et al., *Raising the Stakes*, 37–41.
64 Ibid., 42–47; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 84–86.
65 Ball, George, *The Past Has Another Pattern* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 339.
66 Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 43–48.
67 See article titled "Vietnamese Reds Gain in Key Area," which appeared under Halberstam's byline on the front page of the August 15, 1963, *New York Times;* Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, 81–84; Sheehan, Neil, "In Vietnam, the Birth of the Credibility Gap," *New York Times*, October 1, 1988, 15.
68 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 115–16.
69 Karnow, *Vietnam*, 296–97.
70 U.S. Army Military History Research Collection, "Senior Officers Debriefing Program, Conversations between General Paul D. Harkins and Major Jacob B. Cough, Jr.," recorded at Carlisle Barracks, PA, 53; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 90–92.
71 Halberstam, *Quagmire*, 148–55, gives his account of the press controversy; Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions*, 157–58.
72 Sheehan, "In Vietnam, the Birth of the Credibility Gap," 15; Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 376–83; Sheehan, Neil, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House), 315–16.
73 Kahin, *Intervention*, 143–45; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 94–95.
74 Maitland, *Raising the Stakes*, 56.
75 Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 94.
76 Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 137–39.
77 Extract of "Report to the President on Southeast Asia-Vietnam," by Senator Mike Mansfield, December 18, 1962, in Porter, ed., *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 88, 174–76.
78 Kahin, *Intervention*, 146–47.
79 Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 138–39.
80 Kahin, *Intervention*, 147–48.
81 David Halberstam witnessed Quang Duc's self-immolation. *Quagmire*, 113; quote is from Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 149.
82 Madame Nhu is quoted in Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 149.
83 Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 191–92.
84 Ibid.
85 Kahin, *Intervention*, 152.
86 Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 153–54; Prados, *Vietnam*, 76–77.
87 Ibid., 157–58.
88 Ibid., 159–60.
89 .Sheehan and others, Cablegram from the State Department to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge in Saigon, August 24, 1963, Pentagon Papers Document 35, 194–195. Roger Hilsman drafted the cable.

90 .Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 161–62.
91 Kahin, *Intervention*, 159–60; Patrick J. Hearden, *The Tragedy of Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 95–96; excerpts from the Lodge cable are quoted in Olson and Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, 101.
92 Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 197–201.
93 Kahin, *Intervention*, 153–56; Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam*, 1963 (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987), 221–30. Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 62–63.
94 Transcript of interview for CBS News, September 2, 1963. *Public Papers of the Presidents: John F. Kennedy*, 1963 (Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1964), 650–53; Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 166–67, quotes from the interview and explains its purpose.
95 Quoted in Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963* (New York: Little, Brown, 2003), 679.
96 Ibid.
97 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 109, 201–3, extract from "Report of the McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam," October 2, 1963.
98 Kahin, *Intervention*, 171; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 100–1; James N. Giglio, *Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1991), 251–52. See 239–54 for an excellent brief analysis of Kennedy's Vietnam policy.
99 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 104.
100 Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 208–11. Shaplen says about $600,000 was funneled through the U.S. embassy to the coup leaders, who used the money to bribe key generals into supporting the coup.
101 Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*. See Documents 48–58, 213–31.23. Ibid., "Lodge's Last Talk with Diem," Document 59, 232.
102 Interview with Lucien Conein recorded on videotape, "America's Mandarin," from the television series, *Vietnam: A Television History*. In 1972, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations investigated the U.S. complicity in the coup that overthrew Ngo Dinh Diem. The committee found extensive U.S. involvement. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Involvement in the Overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1963*, 92nd Congress, 2nd session (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972).
103 .Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 122. Seymour Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot*, a highly critical account of the Kennedy Presidency, cites an interview with Lucien Conein in which Conein states that Kennedy "must have known" that Diem would perish in the coup.
104 Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 301.
105 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 219–21.
106 Kennedy quote taken from Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 180.
107 Hess, *Vietnam*, 77.
108 Ibid., 79–80.
109 Ibid.
110 Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 180–81.
111 Berman, Larry, *Planning*, 28.
112 Ibid. General William C. Westmoreland agrees with Johnson that Kennedy's involvement in the coup that destroyed Diem was a serious error that locked America into a war to defend South Vietnam. Rosen, James, "What's Hidden in the LBJ Tapes," *Weekly Standard*, September 19, 2003, says that President Johnson believed, erroneously, that Kennedy had ordered the murder of Diem and Nhu.
113 Three leading scholars have taken the position that had Kennedy lived, he would have found a way to avoid a large war in Vietnam. Robert Dallek, *An*

Unfinished Life, although he does not push the issue hard. William J. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam: American Vietnam Policy, 1960–1963*, believes that had Kennedy lived, there would have been no American war in Vietnam. John M. Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York: Warner, 1992), insists that Kennedy would never have placed the U.S. combat troops in Vietnam and that he was planning to withdraw all American military advisers by the end of 1965.

114 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 125.

115 Transcripts of interviews for CBS News, 650–53.

116 Logevall. *Choosing War*, 73–74. Prados, *Vietnam*, 81–82.

117 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3rd ed., 119; Hammer, *Death in November*, 211.

118 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 479.

119 Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 501; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), vol. 2, 746–47.

120 Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, x. In an interview given after his brother's death, Robert Kennedy said that the president never thought seriously about retreating from Vietnam. When asked what John Kennedy would have done if the government of South Vietnam appeared about to fall to the Communists (the situation Johnson faced in the summer of 1965), Robert Kennedy, confirming the short-term *ad hoc* nature of the Kennedy Vietnam policy, said that his brother would have faced that problem when he came to it.

121 Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 103. Newman makes much of NSAM 263 issued October 3, 1963. NSAM 263 announced that the U.S. military mission would be mostly completed by the end of 1965 and that 1,000 troops could be withdrawn by the end of 1963. The U.S. military mission was not completed and the troops were not withdrawn as scheduled because the military situation deteriorated. The VietCong, supported by NVA forces, taking advantage of the political chaos reigning in South Vietnam, pressed ever closer to victory in 1964 and 1965. About a thousand U.S. military advisers came home, but they belonged to a construction battalion whose mission had been completed and Kennedy had ordered them replaced by other soldiers.

122 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 107.

123 Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 188.

5 America Goes to War, 1964–65

A Changing World Order

Lyndon Johnson and his senior foreign policy advisers operated within an international environment that they perceived to be changing as they turned their attention to Vietnam following Kennedy's death in late November 1963. The Sino-Soviet split appeared to be irrevocable; some U.S. officials believed that the two major Communist powers might have a war one day. The Sino-Soviet split also bore directly upon the expanding war in southern Vietnam. Hanoi supported China in its conflicts with the Soviets and "Soviet influence in Vietnam was negligible."[1] The United States no longer faced an international Communist monolith bent on world domination; the Soviet-Chinese conspiracy had fragmented into quarreling moieties.

Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union had improved markedly since their confrontation in Cuba in October 1962 over Soviet efforts to install nuclear-capable intermediate range missiles in Cuba aimed at the United States. Negotiating a nuclear test ban treaty and grain deals with the Soviets in mid-1963 encouraged some U.S. officials to hope for a lasting *détente* with the USSR. But the United States continued its policy of non-recognition of China, trying to isolate the People's Republic of China (PRC) from international life. The U.S. officials saw China as an expansionist state seeking to assert leadership of revolutionary forces in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

To the U.S. officials, Southeast Asia appeared especially vulnerable to Chinese intrusions in late 1963. South Vietnam was descending into political chaos in the aftermath of Diem's death. Both leftist and rightist forces challenged the fragile neutralist government of Laos. In Cambodia, Prince Sihanouk had cast off both the U.S. aid and offers of protection. In Indonesia, Sukarno was seeking Chinese support for his war against a pro-Western government in Malaysia, a country in which China had supported a Maoist insurgency of ethnic Chinese during the early 1950s. Washington feared that China might try to exploit the political disorder in countries along its southern periphery and that the food-short Chinese might be tempted to overrun the rich rice baskets of Southeast Asia.

The winds of change blowing in other regions of the world heralded the dawning of a more polycentric world order in late 1963. In Western Europe,

De Gaulle was challenging the U.S. dominance of the NATO alliance and was trying to reassert French influence in Vietnam. Rioting, revolution, and rising anti-Americanism in Latin America fueled the U.S. fears of a spreading Castroism within a region long dominated by the "Yanqui" colossus. Birthing pains among African nations emerging from a colonial past posed threats to world stability. A superpower confrontation in the Congo had been narrowly averted in 1961 by a United Nations intervention.

The U.S. officials feared that the Communist powers might intervene in some of these Third World trouble spots and that such interventions could bring, *inter alia,* confrontations with the United States and the threat of nuclear war. It is within this context of a more fluid, unstable, and polycentric world order, in which the chief threat to American strategic interests appeared to emanate from Chinese expansionism in Southeast Asia, that Johnson and his senior advisers forged their Vietnam policies.

Doing the Same Only Doing More of It

President Johnson inherited from his late predecessor both a strong commitment to the survival of a non-Communist South Vietnamese state and a group of advisers who had orchestrated that commitment. From late 1964 to mid-1965, during which time Johnson transformed "a limited commitment to assist the South Vietnamese government into an open-ended commitment to preserve an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam,"[2] and took his nation to war, the men who most influenced the shaping of Southeast Asian policy were a coterie of Kennedy holdovers: Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Maxwell Taylor. Johnson "had inherited the policy and the men who made it."[3] Of these men, McNamara, through his *ex officio* clout, forceful personality, keen analytic mind, and retentive memory that allowed him to regurgitate large amounts of quantitative data on command, exerted the greatest formative influence on Johnson's Vietnam policy.

Vietnam did not dominate Johnson's presidency during his first year; he had entered the White House committed to fighting another kind of war than the one raging in southern Vietnam. Early in his presidency, he had declared "unconditional war on poverty in America."[4] Johnson intended the fight against poverty to be an integral part of what he labeled a "Great Society," a broad range of welfare, social reform, and civil rights legislation that he would soon propose to Congress.[5] In Johnson's expansive view, his Great Society would fulfill the social vision of the New Deal by eradicating residual poverty and racial injustice. The new president would use the powers of the federal government to bring the 40 million Americans still denied equal access to the American dream into the socioeconomic mainstream. Creating his Great Society would also ensure Johnson, a man of vaulting ambitions and possessor of an outsized ego, an honored place in the national memory. Great Society would be his great legacy.

It is one of the many ironic dimensions of the American Vietnam ordeal that Lyndon Johnson, the man whose highest goal had been to expand the American system to include all its citizens, felt compelled to Americanize the war in Southeast Asia, a large-scale foreign war that soon curtailed his domestic war on poverty, slowed the march of civil rights, and strangled his Great Society. The war in Southeast Asia that President Johnson and his advisers set in motion eventually claimed the lives of over 58,000 of their fellow citizens, a disproportionately high number of whom had come from the ranks of the disadvantaged classes, whom Johnson had committed himself to helping. Compounding the irony, from the ranks of the strongest supporters of Johnson's Great Society reforms would come some of the most cogent critics of his Vietnam War policies.

Johnson quickly embraced the U.S. commitment in Vietnam, considering it an integral part of the Kennedy agenda that the new President, in his first speech to the American people, had vowed to continue.[6] Like Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy before him, Johnson considered Southeast Asia a vital strategic interest of the United States. Two days after becoming president, he boldly asserted, "I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the president who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went."[7]

Although Johnson embraced immediately the U.S. commitment in South Vietnam, he shared Kennedy's reluctance to invest large amounts of the U.S. military power in the region. He did not want to fight another land war in Asia, nor did he want to bomb the North. He feared that large-scale U.S. military intervention would undermine the ability of the South Vietnamese forces to fight their enemies aggressively. The new president also feared that the injection of the U.S. combat forces into the Vietnam War would provoke adverse reactions throughout the world and trigger uprisings of domestic opposition that could stifle his domestic reform program and cost him the 1964 presidential election. He rejected initial proposals from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to undertake major air and ground operations against North Vietnam.[8] Johnson understood the dilemma that had plagued his predecessor concerning the U.S. Vietnam policy: "Doing more, doing less, or doing the same all entailed enormous risks."[9]

Within 48 hours of Kennedy's death, Johnson held a full-scale briefing on Vietnam, attended by all of his senior foreign policy advisers. He was informed that the new military government of South Vietnam was not broadening its base of support and the war was going badly in many provinces. At this meeting, Johnson opted for a continuation of Kennedy's policy of sending the U.S. military advisers to South Vietnam, along with substantial amounts of economic and military aid. In addition, he approved the conduct of covert operations within eastern Laos and North Vietnam. The conferees approved National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM 273), drafted by McGeorge Bundy the day before Kennedy was assassinated (Ch. 4, p. 50) stressing the continuity of policy between his and his predecessor's administrations:

> It remains the Central Objective of the United States in South Vietnam to assist the people and government of that country to win their contest against the externally directed and supported Communist conspiracy.[10]

NSAM 273, along with subsequent increases in the number of advisers and the amount of aid going to South Vietnam and a step-up of covert operations against the DRV, constituted Johnson's Vietnam policy for the first year of his presidency. Johnson adopted a policy of doing the same thing that Kennedy had done, only doing more of it.

Coup Season in South Vietnam

As Johnson reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam, General Duong Van Minh, the leader of the **Military Revolutionary Council (MRC)**, the new ruling junta in South Vietnam, rid his country of the last vestiges of Ngo family rule. Initially, the ARVN generals who now ruled South Vietnam enjoyed wide popularity. They unshackled the press, emptied Ngo Dinh Nhu's political prisons, suspended the strategic hamlet program, and provided existing hamlets with social services hitherto lacking. Saigon's vibrant café and night life flourished and the "Paris of the Orient" once again became a cheerful and noisy cosmopolitan city. And once again, the city's fragmented political life erupted. Religious sectarians, students, labor leaders, intellectuals, socialists, and especially the Buddhists and Catholics quarreled heatedly over the political future of their unstable and fragile state.

As Saigon returned to life, the Ninth Plenum of the VWP (The Vietnamese Communist Party) Central Committee meeting in Hanoi in December 1963 enacted a series of resolutions that decisively influenced the course the insurgency in South Vietnam would take over the next 18 months. These resolutions implemented the strategic plan of Le Duan, First Secretary of the Central Committee, North Vietnam's most powerful leader. Duan's ascendancy to power meant that the most hawkish elements in the government were now in charge. They proceeded to mobilize the entire country behind the war effort via a marked increase in the rate of infiltration of arms, materiel, and men to southern Vietnam. They issued new directives stressing that winning the insurgency in the South was not only a task for southerners, but it was also a task for all the Vietnamese people, North and South. Preparations were made to improve the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex and to infiltrate PAVN units into southern Vietnam. Duan appointed General Nguyen Chi Thanh commander of COSVN, the Central office of the Southern Command, through which the DRV maintained its control of the developing revolution and kept the indigenous revolutionary leadership in the South at the margins of power.[11]

Le Duan believed that he had devised a military strategy that would bring victory to the revolutionaries during 1964. Called the General Offensive and General Uprising (*Tong cong kich, Tong khoi nghia,* or *GO-GU.*), it consisted of two parallel actions, a general counteroffensive that would trigger popular risings in the cities that would bring down the South Vietnamese government. Duan and his colleagues realized that their escalations ran the risk of a war with the Americans; however, they expected that their efforts would bring about the rapid collapse of the South Vietnamese government and the forced

withdrawal of their American patrons without having to fight a major war. Le Duan and his fellow hawks made a huge miscalculation; their "go for broke" strategy failed. Their efforts to bring about a more rapid demise of South Vietnam and force the Americans out provoked a major war with the United States that delayed the completion of the Vietnamese national revolution for more than a decade, cost an estimated 3 million lives, and brought extensive physical destruction to their country.[12]

While Le Duan and his fellow DRV hawks plotted what they expected to be the speedy downfall of Minh's new government in Saigon, that government was alarming the U.S. officials with its penchant for acting independently of its American patrons. It soon proved to be more interested in seeking a negotiated settlement of the conflict than in fighting the PLAF forces. Hoping to move the conflict in South Vietnam from the military to the political plane, the MRC sought the support of rural elements, the sects, Buddhists, and even some of the factions within the NLF. The Saigon generals opposed any proposals by Americans to increase the U.S. advisory role in the conduct of ARVN operations or to expand the war against the NLF. They also opposed the U.S. plans for taking the war to the North, especially a proposed bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Meanwhile, the expanded war continued to go badly for ARVN forces. In early January 1964, in two engagements, one in Long An province and another in War Zone C north of Saigon, NLF battalions outmaneuvered South Vietnamese divisions.

General Minh and his colleagues believed that the appeal of the VietCong had been lessened by Diem's overthrow and that the rural population would be more responsive to government programs administered by local officials acting independently of the Americans. The MRC would strive to form a government of national reconciliation that would seek to coexist peacefully with Hanoi. Most members of the Military Council, including generals Minh and Don, had formerly served in the French colonial forces, and they were responsive to French President Charles De Gaulle's offer to help the Vietnamese achieve a peaceful reunion of their country, free of external influences, including America influence.

The U.S. officials emphatically rejected the prospect of French intrusion into Vietnamese politics, a cease-fire, negotiations with NLF elements, and the formation of a coalition government that might ask the Americans to leave. Such possibilities risked the collapse of the American rationale for intervention in southern Vietnam that had prevailed for a decade. Washington held neutralization of South Vietnam in anathema; in their view, it would be tantamount to defeat, because it would leave the Communists in a dominant position throughout Indochina, "a situation that would have adverse effects throughout Southeast Asia."[13]

From Washington's vantage point, the political and strategic situation in southern Vietnam deteriorated rapidly in the months following Diem's demise. The Buddhists and Catholics, the most powerful political factions in Saigon, waged bitter internecine warfare. In the rural areas, provincial governments

verged on collapse. The remaining strategic hamlets were being dismantled, often by their peasant occupants who viewed them more as internment camps than havens.[14] The NLF continued to expand its influence in the South. The MRC proved incapable of governing the fractious politicians of South Vietnam and the ARVN appeared unwilling to take the fight to the VietCong.

The MRC was not destined to remain in power for long. During its brief reign, tensions and rivalries persisted among ARVN leaders, including members of the ruling council. One of these leaders, Major General Nguyen Khanh, who had supported the coup but was not a member of the ruling council, began plotting his own coup to overthrow the Minh-Don group. Khanh was motivated by his fears that the current leaders could not manage the war against the PLAF and they might be tempted to seek to neutralize Vietnam along the lines of the Laotian settlement.

He was supported by MACV commander General Paul Harkins and some members of Harkins's military advisory group, particularly Colonel Jasper Wilson. Wilson helped shift the balance of power among ARVN commanders toward Khanh and he kept Harkins informed of the plot's progress. Khanh's coup also enjoyed the tacit support of Taylor and McNamara, who wanted to be rid of leaders they perceived as inept, pro-French neutralists unable to either fight or govern effectively.[15] The bloodless coup that brought Khanh to power occurred on January 30, 1964. President Johnson, having opposed the overthrow of Diem, happily endorsed Khanh, who appeared eager to get on with the war.

Khanh's bid for power opened the coup season in southern Vietnam. There would be five more coups during the next year, and South Vietnam would have seven governments in 1964 alone. As the succession of coups made a travesty of South Vietnamese political life, the U.S. officials pleaded with their charges to maintain at least a semblance of political stability; otherwise, any chance of winning the war against the VietCong would be lost.

Hoping that he was the man to rally his people and turn the war around, the U.S. officials supported General Khanh. Khanh also appealed to the Americans because he was the first South Vietnamese leader who promised to accept their advice. McNamara and Taylor accompanied Khanh on a barnstorming tour of South Vietnam, a public relations effort designed to sell the little-known leader to his own people. The trio appeared at rallies in several cities, with Khanh standing in the middle, flanked by Taylor and McNamara, both raising Khanh's arms in triumphalist displays of Allied unity. At these rallies, McNamara liked to shout "*Vietnam Muon Nam*" (Vietnam a thousand years), but he failed to achieve the proper pitch and pronunciation. To many Vietnamese in the audience, McNamara's shouts sounded like "Southern duck wants to lie down."[16] These rallies may have had the opposite effect from that intended by the Americans. They made Khanh, a short, squat man standing between two tall U.S. officials, appear inconsequential, even undignified.

Displacing Minh with Khanh had not arrested the growing antiwar and neutralist sentiment among people residing in Saigon-controlled areas,

especially among the Buddhists. A few weeks before Khanh took power, the Buddhists emerged as major participants within South Vietnam's fractious politics. Eleven major sects joined in a Unified Vietnamese Buddhist Church, which included a political Institute for Secular Affairs led by Thich Tri Quang. Several ARVN generals suddenly rediscovered their Buddhist roots, abandoning Catholicism. Buddhist activists would roil South Vietnamese political waters for several years.[17]

Back from his efforts at promoting General Khanh, McNamara submitted a pessimistic report to Johnson on March 16, 1964. In his report, McNamara noted the deterioration of the political and military situation in the South that had occurred since Diem's downfall. He estimated that the VietCong now controlled about 30–40 percent of the territory. In 22 of 43 provinces, the VietCong controlled at least 50 percent of the land area. McNamara also noted that in many areas administered by Saigon, much of the population did not support the ARVN cause. Village defense forces refused to fight, deserted, and often joined the VietCong. The ARVN desertion rates and draft dodging were high, while the VietCong were energetically recruiting new forces in many of the rural provinces. To revive the nearly moribund war effort, McNamara recommended increasing the size of ARVN forces, augmenting the U.S. economic and military aid, and developing a plan for taking the war to North Vietnam.

The next day, Johnson met with the National Security Council (NSC) to consider McNamara's recommendations. After a brief discussion, Johnson decided to implement most of McNamara's proposals, a decision that amounted to continuing the U.S. advisory role in South Vietnam on an expanded scale. National Security Action Memorandum 288 (NSAM 288), issued on March 17, restated the American goal: to preserve an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam, which was necessary to prevent all Southeast Asia from turning Communist and to prove to the rest of the world that Communist wars of national liberation could be curtailed. NSAM 288 called for a national mobilization plan to put South Vietnam on a war footing and for major increases in the number of ARVN forces. The memorandum also approved increases in various U.S. aid programs and in the number of U.S. military advisers serving in South Vietnam.[18]

At about the same time that Johnson implemented McNamara's recommendations, an interagency study group, working under State Department auspices, proposed a series of military operations against North Vietnam. The study group's most important recommendation was aerial bombing. Bombing would put military pressure on the North, threaten to destroy their nascent industrial economy, and demonstrate the U.S. power and resolve to the Khanh government, Hanoi, Beijing, Moscow, and the rest of the world. The urge to take the war north had many sources, but apparently the prime concern was to bolster the flagging morale of the South Vietnamese leaders. William Bundy, a member of the interagency group, also drafted a proposed congressional resolution authorizing the president to wage war against North Vietnam.[19]

In late May 1964, the Joint Chiefs proposed a sequence of carefully graduated military operations against North Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs' scenario incorporated many of the recommendations of the State Department's interagency group. These proposals included bombing missions and the mining of North Vietnamese ports. The Joint Chiefs also recommended that these military operations be accompanied by consultations with the U.S. allies and that Congress enact a resolution authorizing the president to do "whatever is necessary with respect to Vietnam." The proposed scenario stressed the gradualist, restrained, and limited nature of these military actions. The operations were only intended to persuade Hanoi to stop supporting the insurrection in South Vietnam by threatening the northerners with ever greater punishment if they did not. President Johnson prohibited military actions that might threaten North Vietnam's survival or might appear to the Chinese and Soviets to threaten North Vietnam's survival. Johnson and other administrative spokesmen repeatedly announced publicly that the United States had no intention of destroying the Hanoi regime. They also gave repeated assurances through private and diplomatic channels. How much punishment the North received would be up to them, because at each step of the way they would be given a chance to call off their support of the southern insurgency.[20]

> The bland language of the scenario masked a stern reality: However modern and reasonable it sounded, the logic of calibrated response was the logic of the rack, articulated in the language of game theory and the accountant's spread sheet.[21]

The Joint Chiefs' scenario also revealed a growing tendency among the U.S. officials to look to North Vietnam for a solution that continued to elude them in South Vietnam. Further, the proposals showed a growing tendency to resolve South Vietnam's serious social, economic, and political problems by military means.[22]

By June 1964, Johnson had available a scenario prepared by the Joint Chiefs, recommending a carefully calibrated series of military operations against North Vietnam designed to force them to abandon their support of the revolution raging in South Vietnam or gradually incur extensive damage to their industrial sectors. In addition to these contingency plans prepared by his senior military advisers, the president also had a draft copy of a proposed congressional resolution authorizing him to take the war to North Vietnam. Johnson, who believed that Harry Truman had made a serious mistake when he failed to seek congressional approval for the Korean intervention in 1950, planned to seek a congressional authorization if and when he decided to take the war to North Vietnam. He also wanted to avoid being caught in a situation similar to Eisenhower's of not getting congressional approval for any military interventions to try to save the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

But Johnson was not ready to widen the war in Vietnam at that time. He continued to be reluctant to shift his emphasis from social reform at home

to waging a major foreign war. He doubted that military power alone could solve South Vietnam's many unresolved problems. He could not be certain that the proposed military measures would cause North Vietnam to abandon the southern insurgents. Even if Hanoi did stop supporting the NLF, the Viet-Cong might be able to continue their rebellion indefinitely unless the Khanh government mounted an effective counterinsurgency campaign. Johnson could not count on strong congressional, media, or public support for making war on North Vietnam without advance preparation or a clear cause.

Rather than adopt the Joint Chiefs' scenario for war against North Vietnam in June 1964, Johnson authorized instead an increase in the covert campaign against North Vietnam that he had approved at the outset of his presidency. These operations, code-named Operations Plan 34-Alpha (**OPLAN** 34-A), included air and naval surveillance missions and commando raids against radar sites and coastal military installations. Acutely aware of the ongoing intertwining of the Laotian and Vietnamese civil wars, Johnson also ordered the U.S. pilots to attack Pathet Lao positions along the Laotian panhandle to disrupt North Vietnamese supply lines that ran through that area.[23]

As he authorized the step-up in covert operations against selected North Vietnamese targets, Johnson also sent a warning to Hanoi via Blair Seaborn, the Canadian representative on the **International Control Commission** (**ICC**). Seaborn was instructed to tell the North Vietnamese leadership to stop supporting the VietCong effort in South Vietnam or the United States would attack North Vietnam with devastating results. The DRV Premier Pham Van Dong, meeting with Blair, defiantly told him to tell the U.S. leaders that the DRV would continue to support the NLF until it prevailed. He also told Seaborn that the American choices in Vietnam amounted to either continuing indefinitely a war they could not win or accepting a neutral South Vietnam and withdrawing.[24]

Despite the great expectations of McNamara, Taylor, and his other American sponsors, General Khanh quickly showed himself to be an ineffective leader and war manager. The people did not rally to his leadership in the towns and cities. Saigon's numerous political factions continued their quarrels with each other. In the countryside, the VietCong continued to maintain the initiative, and their military forces grew larger and more aggressive. The DRV increased its support of the revolutionaries in southern Vietnam.

By the summer of 1964, Johnson was gearing himself up for a reelection battle at a time when there was a growing concern within the Congress and among segments of the American public about Vietnam. A television documentary produced by CBS reflected rising public worries about what the Johnson administration intended to do in Vietnam if the VietCong continued to gain ground and the Saigon government continued to decline. Johnson decided to wait until after the election to confront the Vietnam conundrum. Delay would also permit him to seek reelection as a moderate peace candidate offsetting the appeal of his hawkish challenger, Senator Barry Goldwater. Any major commitment of the U.S. military forces in Vietnam could only be sold

to the American people as a response to overt acts of war against the U.S. forces by the North Vietnamese or the National Liberation Front, and no such acts appeared forthcoming.[25]

The Gulf of Tonkin Incidents, August 2–4, 1964

During the first few days of August 1964, a series of controversial incidents took place in the Gulf of Tonkin involving the U.S. and North Vietnamese naval forces. These incidents brought about the implementation of many of the proposed military actions against North Vietnam, including the first U.S. bombings of North Vietnamese targets. They also brought about the enactment of a resolution, which President Johnson later used as a declaration of war.

On Sunday morning, August 2, three North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked the destroyer USS *Maddox,* which was engaged in a top-secret electronic surveillance mission, code-named DESOTO patrol, off the coast of North Vietnam. The *Maddox* cruise would be the fifth such patrol off the DRV coast since December 1962. Two nights earlier, South Vietnamese patrol boats from a U.S.-led Special Operations force had bombarded North Vietnamese military and radar installations on the offshore islands of Hon Me and Hon Nieu, in the vicinity where the *Maddox* was patrolling when it was attacked. The South Vietnamese raids were part of the series of **OPLAN** 34-A covert operations that the CIA and military intelligence groups periodically conducted against North Vietnam. The commanding officer of the Maddox was not told about the OPLAN 34-A raids. A local North Vietnamese naval commander, who probably linked the **DESOTO** patrol with the earlier night's OPLAN 34-A assaults, ordered DRV boats to attack the *Maddox,* whose patrol route at times brought it to within eight miles of North Vietnam's mainland coast and within four miles of its offshore islands.[26]

By the time the DRV patrol boats caught up with the *Maddox* on the afternoon of August 2, it was cruising in international waters, 28 miles off the Vietnamese coast. In a brief encounter, *Maddox* opened fire with its three-inch and five-inch guns, badly damaging one of the attacking boats. Naval aircraft operating from the nearby carrier USS *Ticonderoga* attacked the torpedo boats, firing rockets and strafing them with 20 mm cannons. They inflicted damage on all three of the boats, which were headed back toward their bases. The *Maddox* sustained very minor damage (one enemy 14.5 mm machine-gun bullet pierced one of its aft electronic gunfire directors).

In Washington, 10,000 miles away, President Johnson reacted angrily but with restraint to the news of an attack on a U.S. warship. Some of his advisers called for retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnamese targets. One of those officials who favored this course of action was the newly appointed U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, General Maxwell Taylor. General Khanh, the South Vietnamese leader, also called for air strikes against North Vietnam.[27]

Resisting pressures to bomb North Vietnam, Johnson instead directed the Navy to order the *Maddox* to resume its patrols, this time joined by another destroyer, the USS *Turner Joy*. The destroyers continued to cruise along North Vietnamese shores, but were careful to get no closer than 16 miles. The *Maddox* continued to record North Vietnamese radar and radio signals, including some on North Vietnamese navy channels. The Pentagon put the U.S. combat forces on alert and strengthened a U.S. fighter-bomber squadron in Thailand. Johnson also took the precaution of using a recently installed "hot line" to tell the Soviets not to be alarmed by the presence of two U.S. warships in international waters just off the coast of North Vietnam. The President took these military actions to assert traditional U.S. claims to freedom of the seas and to demonstrate to the North Vietnamese that the United States was not intimidated by the torpedo boat assaults.

On the evening of August 3, additional OPLAN 34-A raids were conducted by three fast boats on DRV coastal targets, a radar facility at Vinh Son and a guard post at the mouth of the Son River. Johnson had been notified of the additional OPLAN 34-A raids. His advisers had also informed him that they believed that the North Vietnamese patrol boats had attacked the *Maddox* because their leaders apparently connected the DESOTO patrol with the OPLAN 34-A attack. Johnson knew that ordering the destroyers to resume their patrols risked additional attacks on the U.S. warships.[28]

At 7:15 P.M., on the evening of August 4, Captain John J. Herrick, onboard the *Maddox*, the commander of the DESOTO operation, who was never informed of the OPLAN-34-A raids, received a warning from the National Security Agency (NSA) that three North Vietnamese boats operating in the vicinity of Hon Me Island were preparing to attack the two destroyers. At 7:46 P.M., the *Maddox* picked up a radar contact traveling at high speed about 35 miles to the north. The two ships, the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*, wheeled about and headed southeast in the direction of the *Ticonderoga*, about 200 miles away, with the *Maddox* in the lead and the *Turner Joy* following 1,000 yards astern. About 30 minutes later, both destroyers, spotting three more radar contacts, went to general quarters and called for air support. Shipboard analysts evaluated the blips on their radar screens as North Vietnamese patrol boats attempting to set an ambush for the destroyers. Six aircraft soon arrived overhead from *Ticonderoga*, having been dispatched 50 minutes earlier, and they searched the area but could find no enemy boats.

At 9:34 P.M. the confusion began. Both destroyers, now 60 miles from the North Vietnamese coast and 180 miles north of the DMZ, began shooting at radar targets. Herrick also began sending messages stating that his ships were under attack. The sonar operator on board the *Maddox* reported many torpedoes in the water. Crewmen onboard both ships reported that they saw torpedo wakes in the water.[29] Almost everyone onboard the two destroyers believed at the time that they were under attack.

There were clouds, rain storms, heavy surface fog, and it was a moonless night. Twenty-knot winds churned the sea. Surface visibility was near zero.

Herrick's attack reports were based on evaluations of radar and sonar contacts. Naval aircraft flying cover over the two destroyers at low altitude and searching for the alleged attacking boats could never find them, nor did the pilots ever see any torpedo wakes, even though they could easily spot the wakes of the destroyers.

For two hours, the two destroyers zigged and zagged furiously around an area of the Gulf of Tonkin in efforts to avoid what their officers and most crewmen thought were torpedo attacks. They fired hundreds of rounds of three- and five-inch shells at their unseen targets, laid depth charges at shallow depths, and even tried to ram their invisible attackers. The Navy pilots, on orders from the destroyers, fired missiles into the ocean at unseen targets. Herrick, trying to evaluate the confusing situation, dispatched a later message expressing his doubts that either of the destroyers had been attacked the night of August 4. He stated that he believed that enemy patrol boats had attempted an ambush earlier in the evening, but that it never occurred because Herrick had maneuvered his ships away from the ambush area. He urged a complete evaluation of the night's events before any further action was taken. He attributed the radar and sonar contacts to weather effects, and to his crew's inexperience, confusion, and anxiety.[30]

While the two destroyers raced around in Gulf of Tonkin waters firing at unseen targets, in Washington, Johnson informed that a second attack in two days had been made on the U.S. ships on the high seas, ordered retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnamese targets. He concluded that the North Vietnamese were trying to make the United States look weak and ineffectual, like a "paper tiger." President Johnson also decided that it was a propitious moment to have his long-awaited congressional resolution enacted.

McNamara, the chief architect of Johnson's evolving war policy, took charge of preparing the reprisal attacks. While the Joint Chiefs of Staff readied a strike execute order, McNamara sought confirmation that the second attack had occurred. He discounted Captain Herrick's cautionary message. He asked Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, Commander of the Pacific Fleet (**CINCPACFLT**), about the latest reports from the destroyers. Admiral Sharp, who had not read Herrick's cautionary message at the time McNamara called him, told McNamara that he was convinced that a second attack had occurred. The evidence that convinced McNamara that there had been a second attack came from **NSA** radio intercepts of North Vietnamese naval communications. While the military prepared the air strike plan and McNamara sought his confirmation, other officials finalized the wording of the resolution to be sent to Congress. Johnson meanwhile met with congressional leaders to inform them of the incidents and to solicit their support for the resolution that would sanction the retaliatory attacks.[31]

Three years after the United States had gone to war in Vietnam, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee conducted a full-scale investigation of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents. Several of its members challenged the validity of the

August 4 attack. McNamara, testifying before the committee, insisted that the NSA intercepts proved that the attack in question had taken place.

Years later, James B. Stockdale further undermined McNamara's credibility concerning the Gulf of Tonkin incidents. On August 2, 1964, Commander Stockdale was the flight leader of the aircraft that had driven off the patrol boats attacking the *Maddox.* On August 4, when the second attack was supposed to have occurred, Stockdale also led the flight that provided supporting cover for the two destroyers that dark and stormy night out in the Gulf of Tonkin. Stockdale has written an account of the events of that controversial night in the Gulf of Tonkin:

> I had the best seat in the house from which to detect boats—if there were any. I didn't have to look through surface haze and spray like the destroyers did and yet I could see the destroyers' every move vividly. Time and time again I flew over the *Maddox* and the *Joy,* throttled back, lights out, like a near-silent stalking owl, conserving fuel at a 250-knot loiter speed. (When the destroyers were convinced that they had some battle action going, I zigged and zagged and fired where they fired.) The edges of the black hole I was flying in were still periodically lit by flashes of lightning—but no wakes or dark shapes other than those of the destroyers were ever visible to me.[32]

On August 5, 1964, Stockdale led one of the raids against North Vietnam retaliating for the attack that he doubted had occurred. Five days later, Stockdale was visited by two of McNamara's assistants who asked him if there had been any boats attacking the destroyers the night of August 4. He told them that he never saw any. President Johnson voiced his doubts that a second attack had occurred a few days after ordering the retaliatory raids when he told George Ball, "Hell, those dumb, stupid sailors were just shooting at flying fish."[33] Johnson ordered the DESOTO patrols to continue, but he also separated them from OPLAN 34-A raids.

On the night of September 18, there occurred a replay of the August 4 incident, complete with radar and sonar contacts, reports of torpedoes in the water, ships firing at unseen targets, aircraft flying overhead unable to spot any enemy boats, and advisers calling for more retaliatory raids. Johnson, cautious this time, with an election coming up, refused to order more sorties against North Vietnamese targets.

But McNamara, in the crisis atmosphere prevailing in Washington on August 4, 1964, preferred quick action to restrained analysis. At a short National Security Council Meeting, McNamara confirmed the second attack for the president, and plans for the retaliatory raids were finalized. President Johnson wanted the reprisal raids timed so that they would be occurring at the same moment he would be explaining to the American people why he had ordered the bombing of North Vietnamese targets. He told the American people that he had ordered the raids to retaliate for "open aggression on the high seas

against the United States of America." He also reassured the public, by noting that "We seek no wider war."[34]

But the air raids, code-named PIERCE ARROW, were delayed; the first planes attacked their targets 90 minutes after the president's speech. Naval aircraft from the *Ticonderoga* and *Constellation* flew 64 sorties against the four DRV patrol boat bases and an oil storage at Vinh, from which the attacks originated. The air raids destroyed or damaged several boats and destroyed approximately 25% of the oil storage complex.[35]

The Gulf of Tonkin incidents amounted to relatively minor skirmishes with significant consequences. They provoked the first major U.S. attacks on North Vietnamese military targets; they convinced the DRV leaders that the United States intended to wage a major war in Vietnam against them as well as the NLF forces in South Vietnam; and they provided Johnson with the opportunity to ask congress to enact a resolution, which he later used as a legal justification to wage an expanded American war in Vietnam. They represented a catalyst for the escalation of the war against North Vietnam, a major step toward Americanizing the Vietnam War. They also put Vietnam on the map for millions of Americans who hitherto had paid little or no attention to events in Southeast Asia. Even so, Vietnam remained a relatively minor foreign policy issue.

Whether North Vietnamese boats mounted a second attack on the U.S. warships the night of August 4, 1964 became one of the enduring controversies of the Vietnam War, with participants, high-ranking officials, electronic analysts, scholars, and journalists aligned on both sides. McNamara and Admiral Felt insisted that the attack did occur, citing NSA intercepts of North Vietnamese naval communications as proof. President Johnson, Captain Herrick, and Commander Stockdale all expressed their doubts that a second attack occurred. Years later, General Vo Nguyen Giap, who had been the commander of the North Vietnamese armed forces in 1964, acknowledged the August 2 attack, but he denied that a second attack on August 4 ever took place.

Over the ensuing decades, various parties weighed on this famous controversy. Most argued that no second assault occurred the night of August 4, 1964. Edwin Moise, a historian who spent years meticulously reconstructing the confusing events that occurred in the Gulf of Tonkin during August 2–4, 1964, appeared to have established beyond reasonable doubt that no second attack occurred.[36]

However, it was not until December 2007 that this enduring controversy was finally resolved when the NSA declassified and made available to the general public Robert Hanyok's *Spartans in the Darkness*, the official history of NSA intercepts for the Indochina Wars.[37] Hanyok's work demonstrated that the alleged second attack never happened. He found that NSA analysts stationed at Phu Bai made a series of translation and interpretive errors, which convinced them that the North Vietnamese had ordered a second attack for the night of August 4, 1964, when in fact they had not. NSA analysts subsequently sent the

warning to Captain Herring early in the evening of August 4. With this false foundation in mind, crew members on board the *Maddox* saw the evidence around them as confirmation of the attacks that they had been warned were coming. They misinterpreted their own propeller noises as incoming torpedoes and ultimately reported an attack that never occurred.

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

On August 5, the resolution was sent to Congress. The next day, the Senate committees on Foreign Relations and Armed Services met in joint session to consider it. Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, presided over the hearings. Johnson urged Fulbright to move the resolution through quickly so it would have the maximum impact. The president assured Fulbright that he planned no wider war after the retaliatory raids.

At the committee hearings, McNamara presented the administration's version of the events. He portrayed the ambiguous incidents occurring in the Gulf of Tonkin as clear and simple acts of aggression: they were unprovoked attacks against the U.S. ships engaged in routine patrols in international waters. He made no mention of the OPLAN 34-A raids, and he did not tell the senators that the destroyers were on spy missions. Although he was aware that the North Vietnamese may have presumed a linkage between the OPLAN 34-A raids and the DESOTO patrols, McNamara portrayed the attacks as irrational acts of aggression.[38]

All but one of the senators on the two committees accepted McNamara's duplicitous version of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents. The lone challenge came from Senator Wayne Morse. An anonymous Pentagon leaker had informed Morse of the OPLAN 34 A raids and DESOTO patrols. Morse linked the clandestine raids with the attacks on the ships. McNamara categorically denied that there could be any connection and reiterated that the *Maddox* was on a routine patrol in international waters both times it was attacked.[39] No other senators were interested in pursuing Morse's line of questioning. The committees voted 31 to 1 to send the resolution to the full Senate; Morse cast the lone dissenting vote.

The next day, Fulbright, who would turn against the war within a year and become the Senate's most prominent dovish critic of Johnson's war policy, guided the resolution rapidly through the full Senate, allowing only perfunctory debate. Long accustomed to routinely approving presidential foreign policy initiatives and sharing the administration's view that the United States had to respond to acts of aggression against its armed forces, nearly all of the senators approved the resolution unquestioningly. And nearly all appeared unconcerned about the possible uses a president might make of it.

Although he supported the resolution, Senator Frank Church observed that the U.S. policy toward Vietnam was "more a product of our own addiction to an ideological view of world affairs . . . rather than a policy based on a

detached and pragmatic view of our real national interests." Senator Daniel Brewster asked Fulbright if the resolution would approve sending armies to fight in Vietnam. Fulbright told him that it would. Senator Gaylord Nelson proposed an amendment making it clear that Congress, by passing the resolution, was not authorizing a change in the U.S. advisory role in Vietnam nor approving an expansion of the American commitment to South Vietnam. Fulbright, who agreed in principle with Nelson, talked him out of adding the amendment by telling him that it would only cause confusion and delay. John Sherman Cooper asked Fulbright if the resolution would grant the president the power to take the country to war. Fulbright, who later repudiated the role that he played in rushing the Gulf of Tonkin resolution through the Senate, replied that it would. Fulbright also observed that while he did not believe that President Johnson intended to bomb North Vietnam, the resolution allowed him to do so. Fulbright acknowledged that in case the president decided to involve the United States in a full-scale war in Vietnam, he probably would not seek a declaration of war from Congress. In that case, the resolution would serve as a formal declaration of war.[40]

Senator Morse continued to oppose the resolution. He was joined by Senator Ernest Gruening who opposed the broad grant of power to the president conveyed by the resolution. Gruening had earlier denounced the American efforts in southern Vietnam:

> All Vietnam is not worth the life of an American boy. The United States is seeking vainly in this remote jungle to shore up self-serving corrupt dynasties or their self-imposed successors, and a people that has demonstrated that it has no will to save itself.[41]

Knowing that the Senate would soon pass the resolution overwhelmingly, Senator Morse denounced the Johnson administration. He charged that the United States had provoked the attacks by escorting the South Vietnamese boats close to North Vietnam's shores. He also accused the U.S. officials of covering up South Vietnam's attacks on North Vietnam's military installations. He further accused Washington officials of violating the United Nations charter by refusing to seek a peaceful resolution of the conflict and by bombing North Vietnamese targets in retaliation for the attacks on the U.S. destroyers.

Showing remarkable prescience, Senator Morse forecast a disastrous outcome for the U.S. involvement in Indochina similar to the French catastrophe. He predicted that the United States would soon be engaged in a full-scale war in Vietnam, having to deploy hundreds of thousands of combat forces and necessarily incurring tens of thousands of casualties. He also predicted that the American people would one day repudiate the current administration for its perfidy and folly in the Gulf of Tonkin and would vindicate his and Senator Gruening's votes against the resolution. He concluded his extraordinary speech with the observation that the days of Western dominance in Asia were

over: "Like the European countries before us, we must find a way to withdraw gracefully from Vietnam."[42]

With only Morse and Gruening dissenting, the Senate approved the resolution 88 to 2. The House had previously passed it unanimously, 416 to 0. House members showed no interest in questioning or debating the resolution. The mainstream news media accepted official versions of the events and editorialized in support of the retaliatory raids. A public opinion poll released on August 10, the same day Johnson signed the resolution, showed that 85 percent of the public supported the air strikes. Prior to his ordering the raids, a majority of Americans had held negative views of Johnson's handling of Vietnam. His actions transformed the public's views of his presidency and significantly increased his prospects for winning the upcoming election. Johnson's approval ratings in the polls shot up from 42 percent to 72 percent. All of the indicators denoted a nation that was unified in its support of the attacks on the North Vietnamese.[43] When Senators Gruening and Morse sought reelection, they were both defeated.

The resolution that Johnson would later use as a congressional authorization for the U.S. Vietnam War had an Orwellian official title: The Joint Resolution to Promote the Maintenance of International Peace and Security in Southeast Asia. It soon became known as the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. The key language in the 300-word document that granted Johnson the legal authority he later used to wage a war in Vietnam:

> The Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander-in-Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attacks against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression. The United States is therefore prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.[44]

Johnson intended that the reprisal raids and the prompt congressional passage of the resolution would serve several political purposes. The administration sent General Khanh and his South Vietnamese political opponents a message that America was determined to back his government. At home, by demonstrating that the president could defend the U.S. interests in Vietnam without expanding the war, Johnson silenced Republican presidential challenger Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, who had previously urged Washington to escalate the war and send additional ground troops to South Vietnam. Goldwater had no choice but to support the air strikes and vote for the resolution. By neutralizing Goldwater, Johnson effectively removed the war issue from the upcoming election campaign. The first congressional debate on Vietnam had brought "a near-unanimous endorsement of the president's policies and provided him an apparently solid foundation upon which to construct future policy."[45]

Johnson also intended the raids to be a warning to the North Vietnamese leaders that if they continued to support the southern insurgency, they could expect to lose their nascent industrial economy to American bombs. But Hanoi did not react as Johnson and his advisers expected. They read the retaliatory raids as a sign that the United States intended to try to extricate itself from its failed policy in South Vietnam by expanding the war to the North. The men in Hanoi viewed the raids as a prelude to a major American war. They believed that the U.S. officials were preparing to send ground troops to the South and to bomb the North, and perhaps to invade North Vietnam as well. Although unhappy about the prospects of a war with the United States that they had hoped to avoid, the Communists' leader affirmed their continuing support of the southern insurgency. Pham Van Dong met with Canadian ICC representative Seaborn for a second time on August 10. Dong told Seaborn to tell Johnson that the DRV would fight the United States if war came. Hanoi also decided to send regular combat forces to South Vietnam. Soon, three regiments, about 4,500 men, were on their way to war. These regiments represented the first PAVN regulars to be sent South.[46]

Although they successfully rallied popular support for the reprisal raids, Johnson and McNamara had misled both the Congress and the public. Later, when Senator Fulbright and other congressional leaders realized that they had been deceived, they turned against a war they had come to believe that Johnson and McNamara had tricked them into approving. Fulbright was especially bitter, believing Johnson had deliberately misled him at the time the president asked him to steer the Gulf of Tonkin resolution through the Senate by indicating that his administration had no intentions of subsequently taking America to war.

The DESOTO missions, aligned with the OPLAN 34-A raids, were provocative to the North Vietnamese, whether their alignment was deliberate or inadvertent, and there is evidence that they were connected. The incident of August 2, when North Vietnamese gunboats attacked the *Maddox*, lasted 15–20 minutes and caused only minimal damage. The August 4 incident never occurred. It was only imagined by nervous and inexperienced sailors, most of whom had never been in a combat situation before.[47]

The president had also expanded the U.S. commitment in Vietnam to include not only defending South Vietnam, "but also to responding to North Vietnamese provocations."[48] The long-standing barrier against taking the war north of the **DMZ** had been breached. PIERCE ARROW represented both a culmination and a prologue. It was the capstone of the U.S. policy of limiting American involvement in Vietnam to an advisory role that had been in place for a decade; it also foreshadowed the abandonment of that advisory role and the escalations that led to the large-scale American war in Vietnam.[49] The American response to the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, characterized by official confusion, faulty judgment, and duplicity, was a crucial link in the chain of events that eventually plunged the United States into a war in Vietnam. The air raids, followed by Hanoi's decision to send regular troops south, moved the United States and North Vietnam toward the brink of conflict.

Johnson did not, as many Americans later suspected, seek the congressional resolution as a blank check for bringing the United States into a war to which he had already committed himself after his reelection. Johnson was not seeking a predated declaration of war. In August 1964, Johnson still hoped that the United States could sustain a non-Communist government in southern Vietnam without having to fight an American war in that region.

Johnson did not want to be a war president. Following his election, he intended to concentrate on implementing the social legislation that he had earlier labeled the Great Society. He feared that a war would divide Americans and undermine his reform program. In 1964, Johnson had reduced defense expenditures. The number of military personnel serving on active duty had decreased and monthly draft calls were reduced.

But Johnson's hope of avoiding a major war in Vietnam rested on two illusions: (1) the current South Vietnamese leaders could build a stable government and defeat the VietCong and (2) Hanoi could be pressured into abandoning the August 1945 revolutionary vision of a united Vietnam free of Western influence.[50]

The 1964 Election and the Developing War in Vietnam

Vietnam was not a prominent issue in the 1964 presidential campaign; the election focused on domestic issues and the candidates' leadership qualities. Johnson had adroitly handled the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, and public interest in Vietnam was still relatively slight. During the campaign, the news media rarely gave the events of Vietnam extensive coverage. The conflict to date had been characterized by relatively small-scale, low-intensity warfare. The U.S. combat role was limited; costs and casualties were comparatively light. Most Americans were uninformed and unconcerned about *la guerre sale* occurring in a comparatively small, poor country located in a remote corner of the globe.[51] Johnson's campaign focused on peace, at least avoidance of a nuclear war, with nonintervention in Vietnam implied. The war LBJ wanted to fight was a war on poverty within the United States.

Barry Goldwater, the Republican presidential candidate, called for victory in Vietnam. He suggested that tactical nuclear weapons could be used and he called for bombing North Vietnam to interdict men and materiel headed for southern Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh trail. Johnson publicly criticized Goldwater for his advocacy of bombing North Vietnam. The Democratic Party also spent a lot of their campaign funds making negative television ads. One controversial ad characterized Goldwater as a maniac whose foreign policy would destroy the world. It showed a little girl, picking petals off a daisy and counting "one, two, three. . . ." Then, the child looks up startled, and the frame freezes on her eyes as she dissolves into a mushroom-shaped cloud; the screen goes black. An explosion follows, and after a pause of several seconds, the voice of President Johnson is heard: "These are the stakes . . . .We must either love each other or we must die."[52]

The president made few campaign appearances until late September, and when he made speeches, he made only a few references to Vietnam. Johnson hoped that these scanty remarks about Vietnam would persuade the American public that he did not intend to expand the U.S. role in Southeast Asia. He appeared to commit himself to not sending the U.S. combat troops to fight a land war in Asia. At Eufaula, Oklahoma, on September 25, he said, "We don't want our American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys. We don't want to get involved in a nation with 700 million people and get tied down in a land war in Asia." He told a crowd in Akron, Ohio, on October 21, "We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves." Just days before the election, Johnson told voters in South Carolina that their job was to elect a candidate who would avoid war.[53]

These remarks taken out of context sound like promises Johnson made to not Americanize the Vietnam War. In the years that followed, after the United States was enmeshed in a controversial war and Johnson had become a controversial leader, these remarks, made during the heat of the 1964 presidential campaign, would provoke bitter accusations that the president had lied to the American people about his intentions in Vietnam in order to achieve his reelection.

But when these and other speeches are read closely, it is clear that Johnson injected qualifiers and other ambiguous remarks into his texts. In his campaign speeches, Johnson also stated that America would not abandon its commitments in Vietnam. He hinted that he might change his mind later about bombing North Vietnam and that he might even send the U.S. combat troops.[54] These rhetorical escape hatches represented the efforts of a canny politician who knew that he had obtained the necessary authority from Congress to commit America to war in Vietnam if he determined that he must.

At the same time, Johnson gave his audiences false assurances that he would never take the nation to war in Southeast Asia when he knew that he might have to in the near future. While he did not talk about this possibility during the reelection campaign, he knew that the situation in South Vietnam was fluid and deteriorating. He was also involved with the contingency planning by his hawkish advisers for bombing North Vietnam and for sending the U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam.

Johnson's rhetorical subterfuges worked. He obtained his landslide victory in November, crushing Goldwater. The Democrats rolled up their largest congressional majorities since the glory days of the New Deal. But neither Johnson, his advisers, nor the media pundits viewed his great electoral triumph as a mandate for anything in Vietnam. Many Americans who voted for Johnson would later turn against the war, in part because they no longer trusted the man in the White House who they believed had plotted war while promising peace.

Origins of the Air War over North Vietnam, 1964–65

During the months between the Gulf of Tonkin incidents and Johnson's landslide victory on November 3, 1964, political turmoil prevailed in South

Vietnam. The NLF forces continued to take control of more and more of the country. On August 16, General Khanh, taking advantage of a period of euphoria generated in Saigon by the U.S. retaliatory attacks on North Vietnam, tried to acquire dictatorial powers. Buddhist activists and students took to the streets to protest this power grab and forced Khanh to back down. With Ambassador Taylor's blessing, a group of younger officers called the "Young Turks," which included Generals Nguyen Cao Ky, Nguyen Van Thieu, and Nguyen Chanh Thi, restored Khanh to power. In October, the generals selected a civilian, Harvard-educated Tran Van Huong, former mayor of Saigon, as the prime minister. General Khanh stepped down to become the commander-in-chief of the South Vietnamese armed forces in return for his promise to stay out of politics. Despite his pledge, Khanh and the Young Turks remained the powers behind the new civilian leadership.[55]

While the political turnstiles were spinning in Saigon during the fall of 1964, the PLAF escalated the war. On October 11, three VietCong battalions attacked ARVN forces in the Tay Ninh province, northeast of the capital city, and they inflicted heavy casualties. On October 31, VietCong guerrillas attacked Bien Hoa airport on the outskirts of the capital city. Mortar shells rained down on the airfield, killing four U.S. and two ARVN soldiers. Seventy-six soldiers were wounded, including 30 Americans. The VC also destroyed five B-57 bombers and damaged 22 other U.S. and South Vietnamese aircraft.

The VietCong assault on the Bien Hoa Airport amounted to a major shift in guerrilla tactics. For the first time in the developing war, they directly attacked a U.S. military installation. General Nguyen Chi Thanh, the new COSVN commander, implementing Le Duan's bold "go for broke" strategy aimed at defeating the ARVN and driving the Americans out of Vietnam, ordered the attack of Bien Hoa. Ambassador Taylor noted the shift in tactics and notified President Johnson. Taylor called the attack "a deliberate act of escalation and a change in the ground rules." He recommended that Johnson should order an appropriate act of reprisal against a DRV target. But Johnson, with the elections still two days away, did not order any retaliatory strikes. In early November, NLF forces mounted their largest offensive of the war to date. In two weeks, two VietCong Regiments occupied most of Binh Dinh, a key populous coastal province and long-time insurgent stronghold.[56] Again, the U.S. did not respond. As November 1964 ended, President Johnson and his advisers had to confront a major crisis in Vietnam: the ARVN verged on defeat; the shaky GVN verged on collapse; the NFL, supported by Hanoi, verged on winning the revolution.

As 1964 approached its end, the Communists were close to victory in Vietnam for the third time in 20 years. They had been there in August 1945, when the Japanese occupation came to an end, only to have the French return. They got close again in June 1954, following Dien Bien Phu, only to be denied victory by major power diplomacy and the U.S. intervention in southern Vietnam. They would be denied victory once again by the U.S. decision to

Americanize the war during the first half of 1965. Another decade would pass before the Communists would again approach victory. And when that moment came in the spring of 1975, the Americans no longer had the will to even try to deny them their long-sought goal.[57]

As year's end approached, the U.S. officials had formed a consensus to bomb North Vietnam. According to its advocates, bombing the DRV could achieve a variety of goals. In their judgment, it would interdict the infiltration of men and material into South Vietnam, and boost morale in Saigon. It would also induce Hanoi to abandon the insurgency in the South by punishing North Vietnam so severely that its leaders would soon understand that they could not hope to support the PLAF, except by incurring unacceptable losses.[58]

Although Johnson and nearly all of his senior civilian and military advisers accepted the logic of escalation, there was some disagreement among them about the kind of bombing campaign proposed for North Vietnam. This division pitted the president's civilian advisers against his military advisers. The civilians, led by McNamara and Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs John T. McNaughton, called for gradually applying air power to North Vietnam. This kind of air war was devised to send Hanoi a signal that it must either stop supporting the NLF or face the gradually increasing destruction of its country. The controlling assumption among the gradualists was that at some point the increasing pain inflicted upon the North Vietnamese by the bombing would induce Hanoi to abandon its support of the revolution in South Vietnam rather than see its military facilities, infrastructure, and industrial sectors destroyed. The gradualists also designed the bombing to give Johnson maximum flexibility; he could increase or decrease the pressure in response to Hanoi's behavior. The gradualist campaign was also perceived as safer; its advocates believed that it would not provoke Chinese or Soviet entry into the conflict.[59] It would be a "slow squeeze," designed to save South Vietnam from North Vietnam.

Military advocates of bombing, led by Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell and Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, urged Johnson to launch a "fast squeeze." They wanted full-scale air attacks on North Vietnam's military bases, transportation systems, and industries. They argued that only a massive and intense bombing campaign could force Hanoi to the bargaining table on the U.S. terms. They believed that only fear of national extinction would force Hanoi to abandon the revolution in South Vietnam.[60]

As Johnson's top civilian and military advisers argued among themselves about how best to escalate the war, undersecretary of state George Ball, the No. 2 man in the state department, strongly opposed bombing North Vietnam. Ball did not believe bombing would either weaken North Vietnam's war-making ability or demoralize its population. He had served in the French embassy during the French Indochina War and understood the nature of the political-military struggle in Vietnam. He doubted that bombing North Vietnam was the proper counter to the Hanoi-supported revolution in South

Vietnam. He also doubted that bombing North Vietnam could raise the morale of the South Vietnamese.

Ball raised some challenging issues. Suppose, he asked, that Hanoi stopped supporting the NLF. Could the ARVN forces, given the current disarray in Saigon, defeat them, even if the VietCong had to go it alone? He also pointed to the risks entailed by bombing. Suppose, in retaliation for the bombing, the North Vietnamese invaded South Vietnam in force? The United States would either have to send its armies or accept a Communist victory. No matter how it was done, gradually or all-out from the start, Ball warned Johnson that bombing could bring the Chinese and the Soviets into the war; it could also heal the rift between the two major Communist powers. Most importantly, he warned Johnson that once he started down the escalatory road, the United States would not be able to control events. Ball suggested that negotiations with all of their risks, including a neutral government in the South and an American departure, better served the U.S. national interest than any scenario likely to come from bombing. For Ball, the wiser course for Washington to take, however painful it might appear to Johnson's advisers, was to seek a political solution and get out of Vietnam.[61]

If it is assumed that the ultimately disastrous U.S. military intervention in Vietnam showed that George Ball's counsel was correct, then the question that must be asked is: why did his warnings, like Cassandra's, go unheeded by Johnson and all his other senior advisers in the fall of 1964? The best answer is that the president and nearly all of his men considered a Communist victory in South Vietnam to be unacceptable. Rejecting withdrawal or negotiations, they insisted that bombing was necessary to avert a complete collapse in Saigon. Ball was also a loyal team player. He made it clear that he would support administration policy even if they ignored his advice. "The administration turned to air power as the only acceptable solution to an urgent problem."[62]

On November 27, 1964, an interagency Working Group of the NSC, headed by William Bundy, developed a gradualist bombing campaign to be implemented in two stages. Phase One, which would last for 30 days, called for air strikes along the major infiltration routes in eastern Laos and for reprisal strikes against North Vietnam in response to NLF attacks on the U.S. installations or personnel. While Phase One bombings were being carried out, Ambassador Taylor would try to get South Vietnam's squabbling politicians to resolve their differences. Once Saigon's politics were stabilized, Phase Two would kick in. It would be a systematic air war of rising intensity carried out against North Vietnamese military targets that would last for several months or until Hanoi abandoned the insurgency in southern Vietnam.

Johnson delayed implementing Phase One bombing mainly because of the persisting political instability in South Vietnam. He told his advisers that he would not order any bombing of North Vietnam until the South Vietnamese politicians had put their political house in order and ARVN forces were able to take the war to the insurgents. Perhaps Johnson's hesitation also represented the yearnings of an instinctively cautious politician looking for a way

out of Vietnam with honor and minimal damage at home and abroad? Johnson and many of his senior advisers held ambivalent attitudes and harbored inner doubts about America's growing military involvement in Vietnam. Historian John Prados has characterized "the process as one of ambivalent men marching into a conflict they did not understand in pursuit of goals they had failed to clarify."[63]

Ambassador Taylor conveyed Johnson's message to the top echelons of Saigon's fractious military and civilian leadership: there would be no bombing of North Vietnamese targets until South Vietnam had a stable government. However, some of the generals either ignored or did not fully understand Taylor's message. In mid-December, Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky and General Nguyen Chanh Thi made a bid for power that amounted to another coup attempt. President Johnson, informed that yet other coup was underway in Saigon, exclaimed,

> I don't want to hear anything more about this coup shit! I've had enough of it, and we've got to find a way to stabilize those people out there![64]

Taylor, furious at Ky's and Thi's blatant display of political irresponsibility in the face of imminent danger, gave the South Vietnamese generals a traditional army-style chewing out:

> I made it clear that all the military plans which I know you would like to carry out are dependent on government stability. Now you have made a real mess. We cannot carry you forever if you do things like this. . . . You people have broken a lot of dishes and now we have to see how we can straighten out this mess.[65]

Although the South Vietnamese generals were infuriated by Taylor's tactless reproach, he managed to persuade them to support Huong's government. Meanwhile, the Buddhists, sensing the war-weariness and desires for a negotiated settlement among many segments of the population, launched a new wave of protests, including more immolations by fire. The Buddhists also called for Ambassador Taylor to resign. In Hue, riotous students attacked the U.S. Information Service Library.[66] The protests had taken on a distinctly anti-American as well as an antigovernment cast. The U.S. officials once more feared that a government that would be willing to negotiate with the NLF and favor the expulsion of Americans might come to power. General Khanh fed these fears by making overtures to some of the Buddhist factions and parroting some of their anti-American sentiments. The CIA reported that Khanh had also made contact with NLF elements, further alarming American officials.

While political factions maneuvered and battled in the streets of Saigon, VietCong forces continued their terrorist attacks on the U.S. installations and inflicted a series of defeats on ARVN forces. On Christmas Eve 1964, the

VietCong bombed the Brinks Hotel in downtown Saigon in which the U.S. officers were billeted. The blasts killed two American officers, and wounded 38 Americans and 13 Vietnamese. On New Year's Day, at Binh Gia, about 40 miles southeast of Saigon, two of ARVN's elite units, a Ranger battalion and a Marine battalion, were mauled by forces of the VietCong 9th Division, the first PLAF main force unit to reach divisional size.[67] At Binh Gia, there were 445 South Vietnamese and 16 American casualties against only 32 confirmed VietCong casualties.[68] Again, the United States did not respond to these attacks. On January 6, 1965, Ambassador Taylor sent an extremely pessimistic assessment of the situation in South Vietnam to President Johnson. Taylor feared that a political collapse was imminent and that a neutralist government reflecting a Khanh-Buddhist alliance could come to power in Saigon. Unless the United States implemented a bombing campaign immediately against the North Vietnamese, such a government would probably negotiate with NLF elements.[69]

For more than a year, Hanoi had been pursuing Le Duan's *Go-Gu* strategy in southern Vietnam designed to win the war in the countryside, foment popular uprisings in the cities, and bring down the struggling South Vietnamese government. They intended to supplant the RVN with a coalition dominated by the NLF that would adopt a neutralist stance internationally, tell the Americans to get out of Vietnam, and seek a peaceful reunion with the North. In January 1965, it appeared to the Communist leadership that they were close to achieving their goals. The Saigon government was shaky and the ARVN forces were increasingly ineffective. Since Johnson authorized the retaliatory air strikes in early August following the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, he had been restrained, unwilling to order further air raids for any of the VietCong attacks, even attacks on the U.S. installations and advisers. Johnson's restraint encouraged Hanoi's leaders to believe that they might be able to achieve their objectives without a major war with the Americans, which they fervently wished to avoid. They hoped that Johnson would adhere to the pledges he made during the recent presidential campaign in which he appeared to promise the American people that he sought no wider war in Vietnam.

But the fear of an imminent collapse of South Vietnam combined with pressures from nearly all of his senior civilian and military advisers encouraged Johnson to take more aggressive action against North Vietnam. In a classic inversion of logic, Johnson now agreed that the reason for delaying the bombing of the North Vietnam, continuing political instability in South Vietnam, had become the main reason for attacking the North. "Fear that the pro-Western South Vietnam would become first a neutralist then a Communist regime drove him to expand American efforts to defend Saigon."[70]

Despite his shift, Johnson continued to delay implementing the bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Guided by his political intuitions, he was not convinced that it should be undertaken as long as the South Vietnamese political situation remained so unstable and the war effort appeared so

unpromising. But on the morning of February 7, 1965, the VietCong fired artillery rounds at the barracks of a U.S. Marine base at Pleiku in the central highlands. The VC also attacked a nearby helicopter base at Camp Holloway. Nine Americans died and 137 were wounded in the assaults.[71] The VietCong also destroyed or damaged 22 helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft.

Within a matter of hours, Johnson had ordered the Joint Chiefs to implement FLAMING DART, a series of reprisal air strikes against preselected North Vietnamese targets. For two days, the U.S. Navy and South Vietnamese aircraft flew retaliatory strikes against DRV sites located just north of the DMZ.[72]

Undeterred by these air strikes, the VietCong struck again on February 10. They attacked a hotel that housed members of the 140th Maintenance Detachment, an Army aircraft repair unit, at Qui Nhon, a coastal city 85 miles east of Pleiku. After the assaults, rescuers pulled 23 bodies and 21 wounded soldiers from the rubble.[73]

Johnson retaliated, this time with heavier air strikes against military targets in North Vietnam. This time, Washington did not characterize the air strikes as tit-for-tat reprisals, but called them generalized responses to a continuing pattern of aggressive acts.

National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, who was visiting Vietnam at the time of the Pleiku attack, wrote Johnson a long memo calling for the implementation of sustained bombing. Bundy asserted that if a systematic bombing campaign were not undertaken, the South Vietnamese cause would be lost within six months to a year and the Communists would control all of Vietnam. He admitted that the bombing campaign might fail, but Washington had to try it in order to preserve its credibility as a great power in world affairs.

On February 13, 1965, Johnson authorized ROLLING THUNDER, a systematic, gradually expanding bombing campaign using both American and **VNAF** aircraft to strike at North Vietnamese targets. Even though ROLLING THUNDER represented a major U.S. escalation of the expanding war, the Johnson administration issued no public statement. As columnist James Reston described it in next day's *New York Times*, the United States had entered "an undeclared and unexplained war in Vietnam."[74]

A large majority of Americans supported this latest U.S. escalation of the war. A Gallup poll taken at the outset of ROLLING THUNDER showed that 67 percent of the public supported the bombing of North Vietnam. Nearly all Congressional Democrats supported the President's actions, except for Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening, the two senators who had voted against the Gulf of Tonkin resolution back in August 1964. Republicans likewise strongly supported ROLLING THUNDER, including Barry Goldwater, the Republican presidential candidate whom Johnson had defeated so overwhelmingly in the recent election. All prominent newspapers, including the *New York Times*, editorially supported the bombing of the North. However, the nation's most influential newspaper columnist Walter Lippmann doubted that bombing

North Vietnam would be effective. He called for the neutralization of South Vietnam. Privately, Lippmann, who had a brief conversation with President Johnson, told McGeorge Bundy that the situation in South Vietnam was hopeless.[75]

As Washington made its decisions to initiate an air war against North Vietnam, the political sands in Saigon shifted once again. On February 14, General Khanh named Phan Huy Quat, who had been a popular leader in Saigon for years, the new prime minister. Quat, a physician by training, quickly selected a new cabinet that included four other doctors. Pundits quickly dubbed Quat's government the "medicine cabinet." A few days after the medicine cabinet took office, another coup attempt erupted, led by Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao and General Lam Van Phat. They intended to oust General Khanh from his position as the commander of the ARVN; however, Air Marshal Ky used his control of the air force to disperse the coup forces and Khanh kept his job, but only for a little while longer.

Marshal Ky and General Thieu, the leaders of the Young Turks, hitherto aligned with Khanh, then convened a meeting of the Armed Forces Council. The council voted to remove Khanh from his position as the commander-in-chief of ARVN and to affirm its support for Quat and his medicine cabinet. Khanh tried to rally ARVN generals to his support, but he failed. Colonel Wilson, who had helped Khanh come to power 13 months earlier and whom Khanh trusted, persuaded him to resign and leave the country. The Young Turks deposed Khanh because of his growing alliance with the Buddhists and his efforts to establish contacts with NLF elements. Khanh's erratic one-year reign had ended.

Ambassador Taylor, who had backed the Young Turks, had also wanted to be rid of Khanh because he was skeptical that a Khanh-controlled government could be relied on to support the air war against North Vietnam. Ambassador Taylor feared that Khanh might seek a neutralist alternative to continuing the war.[76] General Westmoreland, the MACV commander, also backed the coup. Khanh's departure cleared the way for the Young Turks, who, with American blessings, would soon become the military rulers of South Vietnam. After a long period of instability, Washington believed that a government was finally emerging in Saigon that would follow American advice and enthusiastically support the widening American war.

The U.S. Ground War in South Vietnam Begins

When ROLLING THUNDER began, administration officials confidently expected that it would bring Hanoi to its senses. It would take only a few weeks, at most a few months, of bombing before the North Vietnamese Communists abandoned the southern insurgents. DRV leaders, aware of the destructive potential of America's arsenal of high-tech air weapons systems, would abandon the southern insurgents rather than risk losing their industrial and transportation infrastructures.

But ROLLING THUNDER achieved none of its expected goals. It failed to bring Hanoi to the bargaining table on American terms. Supplies from North Vietnam for the PLAF continued to pour into many parts of South Vietnam. A State Department Intelligence Note on the effects of bombing found that the air strikes had not diminished the morale of the North Vietnamese people. Instead, State Department analysts found that the U.S. bombing had increased North Vietnamese resolve and enabled the North Vietnamese leaders to tighten their control over the populace.[77] Bombing North Vietnam also failed to bolster morale in South Vietnam, failed to halt the entropic tendencies of Saigon politics, and failed to grant a reprieve to the GVN from the steadily increasing NLF military and political offensives. "The military and political fabric of the southern regime continued to unravel even more rapidly than before."[78]

Gradually taking the war to North Vietnam increased rather than decreased the pressures on Washington to send troops into South Vietnam. Soon after the bombing campaign had begun, Johnson's advisers pressed him to move to the second escalatory stage: sending in the U.S. combat forces. The troops were needed to protect the U.S. air bases in South Vietnam from NLF attacks. More ominously, bombing had also provoked the introduction of additional PAVN forces into South Vietnam.[79] ROLLING THUNDER brought about what its opponents feared, massive ground retaliation by the North Vietnamese, without bringing about what its proponents sought, the DRV to the conference table to negotiate on terms then acceptable by the United States.[80]

There is a direct link between the gradually expanding bombing campaign against North Vietnam and Washington's decision to send the first U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam. General Westmoreland, fearing PLAF attacks against the large American air base at Danang, requested two battalions of Marines to provide ground security for that facility.[81] The MACV commander had no faith in ARVN forces that had been assigned to protect the air field.

Ambassador Taylor initially opposed Westmoreland's request for troops. Citing the French experience, Taylor questioned whether American troops could fight a guerrilla war successfully in Southeast Asian jungles. He also believed that the introduction of the U.S. combatants would tempt the ARVN commanders to unload more of the burden of the fighting onto the Americans. He could foresee American combatants taking full responsibility for the war "amid a population grown as hostile to [the] American presence as it had been to the French."[82] Most of all, Taylor worried that the introduction of even a small contingent of the U.S. combat forces with a specific and limited mission would remove an important limit on the U.S. involvement in South Vietnam, a limit that the U.S. officials had observed since the beginning of the Indochina Wars. It would be a foot in the door to an ever-widening commitment, and once that first step was taken, it would be very difficult to hold the line.[83]

Washington ignored Taylor's prophetic objections. Johnson promptly approved General Westmoreland's request for security forces that had previously been endorsed by Admiral Sharp, the commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet. Sharp was in charge of the air war and Westmoreland's immediate superior in the chain of command.

The landing of American troops that transformed the Vietnam War and the U.S. role in it occurred on the morning of March 8, 1965, at a beach south of Danang. At 9:03 A.M., Marine Corporal Garry Powers leaped from his amphibian landing craft, waded through ankle-deep water, and jogged up the wet sand. He would be the first of the more than 2.7 million young men and women who would serve in South Vietnam over the next seven and one-half years. As wave after wave of Marines streamed ashore in full battle gear that warm spring morning, they encountered throngs of pretty Vietnamese girls who placed leis of yellow dahlias and red gladioli around their necks. The mayor of Danang made a welcoming speech celebrating the festive occasion. Overhead, helicopter gunships searched for VietCong snipers in the nearby jungle-covered hills.[84]

A few weeks after the Danang landings, military commanders were urging Johnson to take the next step. General Westmoreland, fearing security threats to other U.S. military installations and disturbed by intelligence reports that the NLF planned to occupy a large sector of the central highlands, establish a government there, and then drive to the coast and cut South Vietnam in two, asked Washington for two Army divisions, one to deploy in the highlands, the other to send to the Saigon area.[85] Admiral Sharp, Army Chief of Staff Harold Johnson, and other members of the JCS all endorsed General Westmoreland's request for additional combat forces.

President Johnson had come face to face with the dilemma that his predecessors who had previously involved the United States in Vietnam—Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy—had all managed to evade. He confronted the ultimate test: how to respond to the imminent collapse of South Vietnam. Johnson faced two fundamental questions. Did the U.S. national security require the saving of South Vietnam? Did saving South Vietnam require the sending of large numbers of U.S. ground combat forces into that country? The President and virtually all of his inner circle of senior civilian and military advisers unhesitatingly concluded that the only acceptable answers to those two fundamental questions were "yes" and "yes."

Johnson and his advisers had repeatedly ruled out the options of withdrawal, negotiations, or an all-out air war against North Vietnam. Knowing that the gradualist air war was not producing the desired results, nor was it likely to any time soon, Johnson and his advisers knew that if they did not send combat forces, and send them quickly, the GVN would probably go under before year's end. Having convinced themselves that defeat for the South Vietnamese regime would result in unacceptable strategic and diplomatic disasters for the United States in Southeast Asia and around the globe, and having convinced themselves that the loss of South Vietnam would also activate

a right-wing Republican political assault on their liberal Democratic administration at home, Johnson and his advisers could only accept the ineluctable logic of their policy formulations and agree to send more combat forces.

On March 29, 1965, a gray Renault sedan stalled on Saigon's Vo Di Nguy, a street running along one side of the American embassy compound. Within minutes, 300 pounds of plastic explosives packed in the trunk of the car erupted into a giant fireball. The powerful blast extensively damaged the embassy. It killed 20 and injured over 100 people, who were either working in the embassy, were passersby, or were dining in restaurants across the street from the American headquarters. As dazed and bleeding embassy staff members stumbled out of the wrecked building, Saigon police shot and killed the VietCong terrorist who had deliberately stalled the explosives-laden car near the embassy.[86]

Two days later, President Johnson met with members of the **NSC** to review the U.S. Vietnam policies. He agreed to send an additional 20,000 combat troops to Vietnam and to expand the air war against the North. He called for a major effort to be undertaken to create a multilateral force to intervene in South Vietnam. "**Third Countries**" such as South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand would be asked to send troops to Vietnam. Most importantly, additional Marine combat units would be deployed in the vicinity of Danang, and their mission would be expanded to include offensive operations against VietCong forces within a 50-mile radius of the Marine bases.[87] Although Johnson had escalated the war and had changed the mission of the ground combat forces, he insisted publicly that there had been no changes in the U.S. Vietnam policy. The President's remarks notwithstanding, the Marine mission had made a critical transition for static defense to offensive mobile operations.[88]

On April 6, 1965, McGeorge Bundy issued **NSAM** 328, implementing Johnson's decisions. On that date, there were about 27,000 U.S. troops in South Vietnam, most of them noncombatants. Within a few weeks, thousands of combat troops would be pouring "in country." Confronted with a choice, as he put it in his own words, "of running in or running out of Vietnam," Johnson chose to run in. While he expanded the U.S. military presence and changed its mission from advice and static defense to limited offensive operations against the NLF forces, Johnson chose not to inform the American people of those important moves. At a press conference, he stated, "I know of no far-reaching strategy that is being suggested or promulgated."[89]

As the air war against North Vietnam expanded and the first ground combat troops were being sent into South Vietnam, public opinion polls showed that a large majority of Americans supported the U.S. efforts in Vietnam.[90] Influential media editorials all supported the president's actions. But as the United States escalated the war in Vietnam, criticism erupted in Congress, in the media, and on university campuses. Thousands of citizens wrote letters addressed to the White House attacking the U.S. war policy. Johnson was attacked both for doing too much and for not doing enough. The words

"hawk" and "dove" entered the emerging public discourse on the war. The words were not precise descriptive terms, but they identified the two emerging strands of public opinion critical of the administration's war policies. Hawks favored a stronger military effort, an all-out air war and the sending of more U.S. combat forces. Doves called for an end to the bombing of North Vietnam and opposed the sending of U.S. combat forces to South Vietnam. Many doves also wanted a negotiated settlement of the conflict, followed by the U.S. withdrawal.

In an effort to promote public support for administration war policies, the State Department published a White Paper entitled "Aggression from the North." It contended that the DRV had launched an aggressive war to conquer sovereign people in a neighboring state. Even though the White Paper cited data showing that Hanoi had infiltrated men and materiel into southern Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail and by sea, it probably generated more opposition than support. It minimized the indigenous southern Vietnamese rebellion against Diem's rule, which grew into an insurrection that became a revolution. However, the basic problem with the White Paper was the historic fact that the 1954 Geneva Convention had recognized Vietnam as a unitary state temporarily divided into two regroupment zones. The DRV could not invade its own country. What the State Department paper attempted to do was disguise political and military reality: the United States was intervening in a civil war in one country, Vietnam. The U.S. officials tried to give its expanding interventions in Vietnam a legal gloss by ignoring the Geneva Accords and simply asserting that South Vietnam was an independent nation, a claim that grew less credible as a succession of South Vietnamese governments became ever more dependent on the U.S. support for their survival.[91]

The escalating war in Vietnam, especially the bombing campaigns against North Vietnam, stirred up considerable intellectual ferment across the American political spectrum. Within the mainstream papers and journals, except on the Right and the Far Left, there appeared a consensus favoring a negotiated settlement. The first vocal opposition to the war appeared on university campuses. Professors at the University of Michigan, Harvard, and the University of California at Berkeley staged "teach-ins" featuring speakers who attacked Washington's war policies. Academics opposed to the war staged a national teach-in modeled on those held on university campuses. Telephones linked 122 colleges to a national debate on the war staged at the Sheraton hotel in Washington, D.C. The highlight of the national teach-in featured a debate between Professor Robert Scalapino, a political scientist from the University of California, Berkeley, who defended the U.S. policy in Vietnam, and George Kahin, director of Southeast Asian studies at Cornell, who mounted a dovish critique of that policy.[92] The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), previously involved with community organizing and assisting poor people, organized the first antiwar protest march. About 15,000 people, mostly college students, gathered in the nation's capital to demonstrate their opposition to the developing U.S. war in Vietnam.

Aware of the growing hawkish and dovish criticisms of his Vietnam policies, President Johnson, on the evening of April 7, 1965, delivered a major speech at Johns Hopkins University in which he attempted to silence his critics at both ends of the political spectrum. He tried to appear tough enough to satisfy the hawks, but soft enough to give the doves hope. He told the American people, "we are there because we have promises to keep . . . we are also there to strengthen world order," and "we are there because there are great stakes in the balance." He forcibly stated that the United States would remain in Vietnam as long as was necessary to protect South Vietnam and that he would use whatever force was necessary to repel aggression. But he also stated that the United States remained ready for "unconditional discussions" if they would lead to a peaceful settlement. Johnson's talk of his readiness for unconditional negotiations was mostly a public relations gesture. Neither he nor his advisers had given any thought to the form or substance of such talks had they occurred. The President added that when the war was over and South Vietnam could live in peace without fear of aggression from North Vietnam, the United States would sponsor a billion-dollar developmental program for the Mekong River valley, a kind of "TVA for Southeast Asia" that would include North Vietnam.[93] In his speech, Johnson was trying not only to disarm his critics and to persuade Americans to support his Vietnam policies, but to find the right mix of sticks and carrots that would persuade Ho Chi Minh to settle on the U.S. terms.

A large majority of the American public reacted favorably to the president's speech at the Johns Hopkins University. Reactions in Congress were mostly supportive. Media editorializing was generally enthusiastic. The thousands of letters and telegrams sent to the White House ran five-to-one in favor of the president. But his words failed to satisfy or silence most hawks or doves. Soon after the speech, the term "credibility gap" appeared in the media to describe the skepticism voiced by some journalists and politicians over whether the Johnson administration was being entirely candid about its Vietnam policies.[94]

On April 8, responding to Johnson's offer of unconditional discussions put forth in the Johns Hopkins speech, North Vietnam's premier, Pham Van Dong, offered Hanoi's bases for negotiations. It consisted of four points:

1. The United States would have to accept the 1954 Geneva Accords: stop all acts of war against North Vietnam and withdraw all of its forces from South Vietnam.
2. Until Vietnam was reunified, the Geneva Agreements must be strictly observed; that meant no alliances with any foreign power, no foreign bases, and no foreign military personnel in either zone.
3. The internal affairs of South Vietnam must be settled in accordance with the program of the NLF.
4. The peaceful reunification of Vietnam would be achieved by the people of both zones without any foreign interference.[95]

Johnson and his advisers were especially concerned about point 3, which they understood as calling for an NLF takeover of the South Vietnamese government. Notwithstanding their rejection of specific DRV proposals, it is doubtful that the Johnson administration was seriously interested in a negotiated settlement of the conflict in April 1965. Washington feared that the South Vietnamese government was too weak militarily and politically to risk a negotiated settlement, although for political and diplomatic reasons they knew they had to appear to want a settlement.

Johnson understood that if two-thirds of the American population supported his Vietnam policies in the spring of 1965, two-thirds also favored a negotiated settlement of the war. But at that time, Johnson intended to apply more military power in hopes of strengthening the position of the GVN so that future negotiations might bring about a settlement on terms acceptable to Washington. In the meantime, Washington sought to buy time. A short bombing pause from May 13–18 did not elicit any reduction in PLAF activity, nor did it entice Hanoi into modifying its negotiating stance. But it did defuse some of Johnson's domestic critics and it cleared the decks for a wider war, which may have been its main purpose.

Hanoi was not really serious about negotiations either in April 1965; it did not anticipate Washington's accepting its four-point program as a basis for negotiations. Le Duan was still pushing his "go for broke" strategy. The North Vietnamese leaders were probably proposing terms more to improve relations with the Soviet Union, who had endorsed the four-point peace program and whose economic and military assistance would be crucial in a protracted war with the United States, than to settle the conflict in Vietnam.

Both sides, regardless of what they said for public relations purposes, made nonnegotiable demands that each knew were unacceptable to the other: the United States would not compromise on its insistence that an independent non-Communist South Vietnamese state be allowed to exist in the southern part of Vietnam. Hanoi would not compromise its goal of an NLF-dominated coalition government taking over in South Vietnam, which would lead inevitably to the peaceful reunification of Vietnam under Communist control. By summer, both sides had abandoned their diplomatic sparring and were going after each other on the battlefield.[96]

On April 20, McNamara, Taylor, the JCS, and other high-ranking U.S. officials met in Honolulu to chart the next phase of the U.S. military buildup in South Vietnam. Since Washington had agreed to send some combat forces to South Vietnam, Taylor had opposed increasing their numbers and had been trying to confine those troops "in country" to security patrols in the immediate vicinity of coastal air bases. General Westmoreland's staff challenged Taylor's enclave concept. They insisted that his enclave strategy represented "an inglorious static use of U.S. forces in overpopulated areas with little chance of direct or immediate impact on the outcome of events."[97]

In Honolulu, Westmoreland, backed by the Joint Chiefs, requested 17 additional Army maneuver battalions, specifically, the 173rd Airborne Brigade,

and all necessary support forces; he also wanted authorization to deploy them in unrestricted offensive operations. With McNamara leading the way, the conferees worked out a compromise. Taylor abandoned his opposition to further combat deployments. Westmoreland got his infantry battalions plus an additional 40,000 troops, including 7,000 "Third Country" forces from South Korea and Australia. But the MACV commander accepted Taylor's proposal that the troops would be assigned to four enclaves that would be established at Chu Lai, Qui Nhon, Quang Ngai, and Bien Hoa.[98]

The next day, President Johnson approved the troop increases and their assignment to the four enclaves. Altogether, an additional 82,000 soldiers were ordered to join the 33,500 already serving in South Vietnam. The Honolulu decisions, although they did not meet all of the military's operational demands, significantly increased the number of U.S. combat troops in South Vietnam and "marked a major step toward a large-scale involvement in the ground war."[99] The senior U.S. officials meeting in the Hawaiian capital acknowledged that bombing North Vietnam could never force Hanoi and the NLF to abandon their war against Saigon. These advisers believed that the U.S. forces had to take over and fight the war on the ground if the South Vietnamese were to have a chance to stabilize.[100]

On May 4, Johnson asked Congress for $700 million to support the U.S. military operations in Vietnam. Johnson made it clear to the lawmakers that he would regard a vote for the money as an endorsement of his Vietnam policies. Even though Johnson's evasive rhetoric made it difficult for many legislators to understand just what Johnson's Vietnam policies were at this time or what his future intentions might be, they could not vote against funding for soldiers already in the field. In two days, with almost no debate, a compliant congress overwhelmingly approved the appropriation bill; the House approved the request by a 408–7 vote and the Senate by a margin of 88–3.[101] The three senators who voted "No" included Morse, Gruening, and Gaylord Nelson. Johnson would later insist that this vote on the appropriation bill and the Gulf of Tonkin resolution refuted dovish critics who claimed that he never gave Congress a chance to pass judgment on his Vietnam policies.

In South Vietnam, despite the bombing, increased U.S. aid, and the introduction of U.S. combat forces, ARVN forces verged on disintegration. Desertion and draft avoidance rates were high. The politicized ARVN officer corps had virtually given fighting the war over to the Americans and were concentrating on doing what they did best—engaging in constant political intrigue and using their military positions to enrich themselves and their families.

The PLAF forces, strengthened by the addition of PAVN regulars now fighting in South Vietnam, pressed their offensive. In the Phuoc Long province, northwest of Saigon, VietCong Regiments attacked a Special Forces camp at Dong Xoai and also attacked Song Be, the provincial capital. At Ba Gia, in the coastal province of Quang Ngai, another VC Regiment destroyed two ARVN battalions. In the central highlands, NLF forces overran several district towns and besieged a Special Forces camp at Duc Co, a remote site

in the Pleiku province. ARVN was suffering about 2,000 battle casualties per month and losing an additional 10,000 men a month from desertions. With ARVN losses running high and its military organization nearing collapse, General Westmoreland concluded that only the rapid, large-scale introduction of U.S. combat forces could avert defeat.[102]

As the ARVN verged on losing the war, civilian government in Saigon collapsed and military rule returned. The fifth government within a year came to power when the Young Turks overthrew the medicine cabinet of Phan Huy Quat in early June. Taylor and Westmoreland were glad to see Quat go. His supporters included a faction of Buddhist activists who wanted to end the war. Quat also opposed the introduction of large-scale U.S. combat forces into his country. The new government was headed by a military directorate of ten senior ARVN officers led by a triumvirate: Air Marshal Ky, General Thieu, and General Thi. All were pro-American, and all favored Americanizing the war. Thieu became the Chief of State and Ky became the Prime Minister. Ky announced that he had only one hero, Adolf Hitler, "because he pulled his country toegther."[103]

The Ky-Thieu-Thi government represented the *reductio ad absurdum* of the South Vietnamese political process. The regime could hardly be called a government at all; it consisted of a committee of generals who did not represent any South Vietnamese groups in the political sense. Having no political base and with most of its army incapable of fighting, the new government could survive only with massive American economic and military support. In the name of self-determination and to ensure the continuation of the war against the VietCong and the NVA forces fighting in southern Vietnam, Washington supported a political facade in Saigon. In order to survive in power, the handful of generals who passed for a government in Saigon had to surrender control of the war to the Americans, which they were more than happy to do.

Americanizing the War in Vietnam

General Westmoreland, in a June 7, 1965, cable, requested an increase in the U.S. troops from 82,000 to 175,000—41,000 immediately and 52,000 over the next several months, a total of 44 battalions. He also called for abandoning the modified enclave strategy and supplanting it with an offensive strategy. He warned that anything less than a rapid, large-scale commitment of U.S. forces with the freedom to fight aggressively risked imminent defeat in South Vietnam.[104]

McNamara, after spending a week in Saigon July 14–21, confirmed the military leaders' warnings that a failure to act decisively would probably mean defeat for the GVN within a few months. He also told Johnson that vigorous U.S. involvement in the war could avoid defeat in the short run and probably produce a favorable settlement in the long run. McNamara recommended sending the additional 44 battalions that Westmoreland had requested, which would bring the total U.S. force level in Vietnam to 179,000 by year's end.[105]

McNamara's recommendations triggered a week of intensive discussions among the president and his senior advisers that stretched from July 21 to July 28, during which:

> Johnson made his fateful decisions, setting the United States on a course from which it would not deviate for nearly three years and opening the way for seven years of bloody warfare in Vietnam.[106]

President Johnson's decisions for war were based on very little strategic planning and even less analysis. During April 1965, on his own initiative, General Westmoreland had directed the MACV staff to prepare an estimate of the size of the forces required to win if the air campaign was maintained at its current levels and combat were restricted to southern Vietnam. His staff concluded that at least 200,000 troops would be needed initially with more, probably many more to follow. Even then, the MACV study could only promise that victory would be long in coming and the price would be steep. Westmoreland's request for the additional 44 battalions, which McNamara approved, was merely the first installment, a necessary minimum. Neither Johnson, McNamara, nor any other senior adviser read the MACV strategic estimate. Wade Merkel, a senior analyst at the RAND Corporation, found that "President Johnson made the fateful decision to commit U.S. forces in a combat role with no clear sense of the probable costs or the likelihood of success associated with any course of action."[107]

Although he made the momentous decisions that Americanized the Vietnam War, Johnson rejected the military's call for an all-out air war, mainly because he feared that it would provoke Chinese military intervention, as had happened in Korea. The decision to send large numbers of U.S. combat forces amounted to an open-ended commitment to defend South Vietnam. The amount of force required and the length of time needed to defeat the enemy would depend on the Communists' willingness to raise their own stake in the war's outcome. Without intending it or fully realizing it, Johnson committed the United States to a war of indeterminate size and duration.

During the last week of July 1965, the president decided that American boys would henceforth have to do what, during his presidential campaign in 1964, he had told his fellow citizens that only Asian boys would do: fight a land war in Southeast Asia. These July decisions, the nearest thing to a formal decision for war in Vietnam ever made by the U.S. officials, represented the culmination of a year and a half of debate and indecision over America's Vietnam policy. During these late July debates, George Ball had his last opportunity to make the case for an American withdrawal from South Vietnam. For Johnson, Ball's arguments were refuted by a trio of senior advisers, McGeorge Bundy, Rusk, and especially McNamara, whose ability to recite massive amounts of factual data from memory impressed the president. Johnson, while willing to listen to Ball, had no intention of withdrawing from Vietnam, ended the discussions by opting for a wider war.[108]

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Earle Wheeler, urged President Johnson to put the nation on a war footing by calling the Reserves and National Guard to active duty. The president refused to mobilize the Reserves and National Guard because he feared that such an act might precipitate a divisive congressional debate over Vietnam that would undermine the coalitions he was building to enact Great Society legislation. McNamara urged him to declare a state of national emergency, seek a new congressional resolution, ask for a tax raise, and place the July decisions squarely before the American people. McGeorge Bundy urged Johnson to declare a national emergency and make a formal speech to the American people telling them that the nation was going to war in Vietnam.[109] President Johnson refused to take any of these actions. He did not want to alarm the major Communist powers. He did not want to put his domestic reform agenda at risk by dividing Congress and he did not want to stir the passions of the American people. The president chose to take the nation to war by stealth.[110] He decided to fight the Vietnam War on the sly, to avoid raising taxes, and to use the Gulf of Tonkin resolution as the functional equivalent of a war declaration. These clever short-term ploys by a savvy political manipulator succeeded, but they also paved the way for long-term political disaster for the nation, the Johnson administration, and the American people.[111]

As Johnson and his top echelons made their decisions that Americanized the Vietnam War, they ignored the supposed object of everyone's concern, America's South Vietnamese ally. The generals in Saigon were never involved in or even consulted about the decisions to inaugurate ROLLING THUNDER or later to send large contingents of U.S. ground combat forces to South Vietnam. The generals would be briefed on the steps being taken and their acquiescence would be expected. Indeed, Generals Ky and Thieu had no choice but to support these decisions, since their survival in power depended on the Americans maintaining a strong military presence in South Vietnam and providing high levels of military and economic assistance.

On the morning of July 28, Johnson met with congressional leaders. At noon, he held a televised press conference. He continued to mislead Congress, the media, and the American people about his Vietnam decisions. The president insisted that he had not authorized any change of policy, implying that the American role in Vietnam continued to be that of advising and supporting the South Vietnamese forces, when in fact he had committed the United States to fighting a major war. While acknowledging that he was sending 50,000 more troops, doubling draft calls, and bringing the total U.S. forces in South Vietnam to about 125,000, Johnson downplayed his intention to send more soldiers later. He also did not mention that he had agreed to allow General Westmoreland to deploy the U.S. forces into any combat zone that the U.S. field commander deemed necessary.

Because of Johnson's evasive remarks, most Americans probably did not realize that their nation was going to war. Those who did understand that America was going to war probably did not give it much thought. They

assumed now that the United States was fully engaged in the war, it would be a relatively short, small-scale affair with the powerful, well-equipped, and well-trained U.S. combat forces gaining the inevitable victory over the outgunned Communists. A poll taken at the time America went to war asked citizens to predict how they believed the war would end. Eighty percent predicted that it would end quickly with a victory for the United States and its South Vietnamese allies. Not a single respondent predicted that the war would end with an American defeat. No one could imagine the long and hard war that was about to unfold or that the mighty United States would lose it.

The president saw himself as rejecting both the extremes of withdrawal and rapid escalation. Instead, he believed that he was taking the middle course of measured escalation, solidly supported by a large majority of Americans. But beneath the consensual surface, relatively few Americans understood or strongly supported his Vietnam War policies. Most Americans were apathetic and uninformed about a small war going on in a country about which they knew next to nothing and probably could not find on a map. Many people probably supported the war at the time, simply because President Johnson appeared to be a capable leader; they trusted his leadership and anticipated easy victories at minimal cost. When war costs and casualties vastly exceeded anticipated levels and the conflict endured far longer than anyone had expected or could even imagine, Johnson's carefully crafted consensus collapsed into quarreling factions of hawks and doves surrounding the mass of confused and frustrated citizens.

Johnson and his advisers forged a Vietnam War policy that rested upon a number of dubious assumptions and misperceptions, some of which they had inherited from previous administrations. Some of Johnson's advisers understood that international relations were more complex and dynamic in 1965 than they had been in the 1950s. They understood the implications of the Sino-Soviet split and sensed that the emerging polycentrism heralded a breakup of the bipolar world dominated by the United States and the USSR. But the president and his advisers remained thralls of the containment ideology and its domino correlative, just as the Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy administrations before them.

Johnson and most of his aides perceived Ho Chi Minh as an agent of Chinese expansionism. They believed that the line against Communism had to be drawn and held in southern Vietnam, lest all Southeast Asia be pressured by the Asian colossus and vital U.S. interests in that crucial region be undermined. They believed that America would be humiliated if it withdrew from Vietnam. They feared that China and the USSR, emboldened by an American debacle, would support Third World insurgencies wherever they appeared. If wars of national liberation could not be suppressed or contained, America would lose credibility in the world; its allies would be demoralized, and they would no longer trust the United States to honor its commitments.

Additional considerations underpinned Washington's determination to hold the line in Southeast Asia to prevent the fall of the dominoes to

Communism. Johnson administration officials did not want the economic resources of Southeast Asia to fall into Communist hands. They intended to preserve the rice lands and raw materials of that region for integration into the world economic system, particularly for access by the Japanese and America's NATO allies. The U.S. officials also retained a sense of mission about their country's role in world affairs. They saw themselves as champions of a noble cause destined to triumph in Southeast Asia.[111] An implicit cultural ethnocentrism also influenced the U.S. officials as they forged an interventionist Vietnam policy. Americans, given their vast wealth, advanced technology, and noble intentions, would take over the fighting.[112] They would show their inefficient and passive Vietnamese wards how to fight and win a major war, and help them establish a stable, modern state.[113]

Johnson and his advisers also embraced the McCarthyite myth that had haunted liberal Democrats since the Chinese revolution of 1949. To them, it was axiomatic that the loss of any additional territory in Southeast Asia to Communism spelled political disaster. The loss of southern Vietnam to the Communists would galvanize a political backlash led by small-government Republicans and southern Democrats that could destroy Johnson's beloved Great Society social reforms and civil rights legislation. Johnson was determined not to replicate the fate that had befallen Truman in the early 1950s when he let the United States get bogged down in the Korean War.

McGeorge Bundy called attention to the power of domestic political considerations driving the President's decision to take the nation to war in Vietnam:

> LBJ isn't deeply concerned about who governs Laos,
> or who governs South Vietnam—he's deeply concerned
> with what the average American voter is going to think
> about how he did in the ball game of the Cold War. The
> great Cold War Championship gets played in the largest
> stadium in the United States and he, Lyndon Johnson, is
> the quarterback, and if he loses, how does he do in the
> next election? So don't lose. . . .it's where he is.[114]

Johnson's ignorance of Vietnamese history, culture, and politics, an ignorance shared by his senior advisers, coupled with his habit of thinking in terms of simplistic Cold War cliches, led him to misunderstand the nature of the revolutionary insurgency in southern Vietnam. Johnson never understood that Ho Chi Minh and his revolutionary Communist movement embodied Vietnamese nationalism much more so than did the succession of corrupt and inept military dictatorships that the United States backed. LBJ did not understand that the Hanoi-backed insurgency in southern Vietnam enjoyed widespread popular appeal, in part because it expressed Vietnamese nationalistic aspirations to be free of foreign influences.

Although Johnson and his senior advisors made pivotal decisions during the last week of July that meant America's taking over the Vietnam War, they

did not develop a coherent war strategy. One of the Army's official historians of the Vietnam War observed:

> Boiled down to its essence, American "strategy" was simply to put more U.S. troops into South Vietnam and see what happened.[115]

Johnson and his senior military and civilian advisers evidently regarded Vietnam as another Cold War "problem," analogous to stemming Soviet expansionism in central Europe following World War II. But containment in Europe had built upon solid nationalistic foundations, stable governments, and revamped prosperous industrial economies. There were also a myriad of economic, social, political, and cultural ties between the United States and those European countries. Further, there were obvious linkages of shared national interests in containing the spread of Communism in Europe, which was equated with halting Soviet imperialism.

Containment, which worked in Europe, could not work in Vietnam because none of the conditions that made it work in Europe were present in Vietnam. The U.S. policy in Vietnam ignored and even contradicted Vietnamese history. The major theme of Vietnamese national history is resistance to foreign intrusion, manipulation, and control. It is the crucial component of their national identity. To most Vietnamese, Americans appeared to be foreign invaders following a path previously trod by the Chinese, French, Japanese, and others, all of whom had eventually been driven out of the country.

Had the U.S. officials who made the fateful decisions in July 1965 to wage a major U.S. war in Vietnam been more familiar with Vietnamese history and culture, they might have understood that Vietnamese antagonism toward the Chinese made it unlikely that they would seek to advance Chinese interests in Southeast Asia. The U.S. officials might have also understood the internal political history of Vietnam that enabled the Vietminh to seize control of the nationalistic movement. It had led the resistance to the Japanese and then defeated the French efforts to reimpose colonialism in a bloody war that lasted for eight years. Modern Vietnamese history endowed the North Vietnamese and the VietCong with nationalistic legitimacy, and it also underscored the inherent limits of the American project of nation-building in southern Vietnam.[116]

Johnson was not trying to defeat North Vietnam or destroy the NLF. But he would punish the North Vietnamese from the air, and the U.S. combat forces on the ground in South Vietnam would prevent the Communists from winning the revolution. He believed that, in time, Hanoi would reach its threshold of pain, would grow weary of punishment and persistent failure, abandon the NLF, and agree to let South Vietnam live in peace. Without fully considering the consequences, Washington had chosen to wage a limited defensive war against a determined foe waging an unlimited strategic offensive for the highest of stakes: national reunification and independence from foreign influences.

In the short run, Johnson's centrist leadership was brilliantly successful in forging a consensus among his advisers, Congress, the media, and the American people in support of Americanizing the Vietnam War at the end of July 1965. Simultaneously, he also succeeded in pushing landmark Great Society measures through Congress—among them Medicare/Medicaid, the Voting Rights Act, and federal aid to education. Johnson gambled that a measured escalation of the bombing of North Vietnam and a limited commitment of ground combat forces to South Vietnam would enable him to achieve his military and political goals in Southeast Asia in time for him to fulfill his commitment to social justice at home.

He believed that America could afford to fight a limited war in Vietnam at the same time it completed the New Deal at home. He refused to choose between the Great Society and the war in Vietnam; he refused to choose between being a war leader and a leader of social reform. Johnson's western frontier faith in American omnicompetence led him to believe that the United States could afford both "guns and butter." In his own words, "I wanted both, I believed in both, and I believed that America had the resources to provide for both."[117] Johnson, who went to war in Vietnam to save the Great Society, eventually had to sacrifice part of the Great Society to pay for the Vietnam War.

Notes

1 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 113.
2 Ibid., 108.
3 David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1969), 424–27; quote is from Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 105.
4 Gelb and Betts, *Irony of Vietnam*, 97. The Johnson quote is from the videotape, "Lyndon Johnson Goes to War, 1964–1965," from the television series, *Vietnam: A Television History*.
5 William Leuchtenburg, *A Troubled Feast: American Society Since 1945* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1983), 138.
6 George Donelson Moss, *America in the Twentieth Century* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), 340.
7 Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 364.
8 Ibid., 116.
9 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 124.
10 Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, Document 60, 232–33, "Excerpts from National Security Action Memorandum 273," November 26, 1963, Vaughn Davis Bornet, *The Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1983), 66–68.
11 Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 63–68.
12 Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 57–60; Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 221–23; Hess, *Vietnam*, 77; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3rd ed., 122; Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 81–83.
13 Quote taken from Hess, *Vietnam*, 78; Kahin, *Intervention*, 183–91.
14 Hess, *Vietnam*, 74.
15 Kahin, *Intervention*, 194–207.
16 Quoted in Maitland and others, *Raising the Stakes*, 100–01.

17 Prados, *Vietnam*, 116–120.
18 Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, Document 63, 277–83, “McNamara Report on Steps to Change the Trend of the War,” March 16, 1964. Document 64, 283–85, “Excerpts from National Security Action Memorandum 288 ‘U.S. Objectives in South Vietnam,’” March 17, 1964. Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 140.
19 Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 109–10.
20 Ibid., 113; Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 42–43. 21. Quoted from Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 113.
22 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 151, 283–85, “Draft Resolution on Southeast Asia,” June 11, 1964. The resolution was written by William Bundy, assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs.
23 Hess, *Vietnam*, 79.
24 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 155, 291–92, “Notes by Canadian ICC Representative Blair Seaborn on Meeting with Pham Van Dong,” June 18, 1964. Blair noted that Dong told him that the choices in Vietnam were either a guerre a outrance, which the United States could not win, or neutrality. George Herring, ed., *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 8–9; and Allen E. Goodman, *The Lost Peace* (Palo Alto, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 19–20.
25 The CBS television documentary Vietnam: The Deadly Decision was broadcast April 1, 1964.
26 U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, “Hearings on the Gulf of Tonkin, the 1964 Incidents,” 90th Congress, 2nd Session, February 1968 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968). The official account can be found in Edward J. Marolda and Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *The U.S. Navy and the Vietnam Conflict, vol. 2: From Military Assistance to Combat, 1959–1965* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), 393–462; Prados, *Vietnam*, 93.
27 Kahin, *Intervention*, 214–15.
28 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 163, 301–02. “Telegram from Rusk to Taylor,” August 3, 1964. Rusk told Taylor, “We believe that present OPLAN 34-A activities are beginning to rattle Hanoi, and the Maddox incident is directly related to their effort to resist these activities.” Prados, *Vietnam*, 93–94.
29 Ibid., Document 170, 313–15, “Chronology of Events Relating to the Gulf of Tonkin Incidents By Joint Reconnaissance Center, U.S. Navy,” August 10, 1964 (extract); Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History, 1946–1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1988), 317–20.
30 Edwin Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 106–42. Moise reconstructs the confusing events that occurred during the evening of August 4, 1964. Moise also had access to some of the NSA intercepts.
31 Kahin, *Intervention*, 222.
32 James B. Stockdale and Sybil Stockdale, *In Love and War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 3–36. Stockdale is quoted in Kahin, *Intervention,* 223.
33 Hanoi always denied there was a second attack; it accused the United States of fabricating the second attack as a pretext for launching air raids on North Vietnamese military installations.
34 Kahin, *Intervention*, 223–25; Johnson quoted in Olson and Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, 117.
35 Ronald F. Frankum, *Like Rolling Thunder: The Air War in Vietnam, 1964–1975* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 15.

36 Moise, *Tonkin Gulf.* Rf. Note # 30 earlier.
37 Robert J. Hanyok, *Spartans in the Darkness: American SIGINT and the Indochina War, 1945–1975* (Washington, DC: Center for Cryptological History, National Security Agency), 2002. See Ch. 5 "Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2–4 August 1964," pp. 175–229; Captain Carl Otis Schuster, U.S. Navy (ret.) concisely summarizes the NSA report in "Case Closed: The Gulf of Tonkin Incident," in *Vietnam* (June 2008), 27–33.
38 Maitland et al., *Raising the Stakes*, 160–161.
39 H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (News York: Harper Collins), 323. U. S. News and World Report, "The Phantom Battle," 65–66.
40 Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, 103–104; Hoopes, *Townshend, The Limits of Intervention: How Vietnam Policy Was Made—and Reversed—During the Johnson Administration* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 26.
41 Quoted in Olson and Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, 118.
42 Senator Wayne Morse's lengthy speech is recorded in the Congressional Record, 88th Congress, 2nd Session, August 7, 1964, 18413–27. A synopsis of his speech appears in Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 152–53.
43 Logevall, *Choosing War*, 205. Eighty-five percent of the public approved of Johnson's decision to order retaliatory air raids against North Vietnamese targets. Polls cited in Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 39. Kevin J. O'Keefe in an unpublished paper on print media coverage of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents found that most newspaper and newsmagazine accounts of those events were uncritically accepting of official versions.
44 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 167, 307, "The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution," August 7, 1964.
45 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 123.
46 Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 123.
47 Gelb and Betts, *Irony of Vietnam*, 101; Prados, *Vietnam*, 98–100.
48 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 322.
49 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 125.
50 Ibid., 81.
51 Ibid., 126.
52 Quoted in Moss, George Donelson, *Moving On: The American People Since 1945*, 5th ed. (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2013), 127; Prados, *Vietnam*, 102–103.
53 Quoted in Eric Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Dell, 1968), 279; Prados, *Vietnam*, 102–103.
54 Goldman calls Johnson's rhetorical insertions "escape hatches."
55 Maitland et al., *Raising the Stakes*, 162–63.
56 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 323; Taylor quote found in Olson and Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, 12.
57 Kahin, *Intervention*, 245–46.
58 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 124; Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 236.
59 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 336–39.
60 Ibid., 339–40; Millett and Masloski, *For the Common Defense*, 54.
61 George W. Ball, "A Light That Failed—Top Secret: The Prophecy the President Rejected," *Atlantic* 230 (July 1972): 33–49. The substance of the article is a memo Ball wrote October 5, 1964, which Johnson read. Ball hoped to get Johnson and his advisers to examine their erroneous assumptions underlying the U.S. Vietnam policies and to realize that there were other options available besides escalation. Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 163, suggests George Ball suffered Cassandra's fate.

62 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 126.
63 Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, Document 88, 373–78. "Final Draft Position Paper Produced by Working Group." Quote is from Prados, *Vietnam*, 109.
64 Remarks attributed to Johnson by Jack Valenti in an interview recorded on videotape, "Lyndon Johnson Goes to War, 1964–1965," from the television series Vietnam: A Television History.
65 Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, Document 89, 379–81, "Account of Taylor's Meeting with Saigon Generals on Unrest," December 24, 1964.
66 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 129.
67 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 333–34.
68 Kahin, *Intervention*, 262.
69 Ibid., 263–65.
70 Dallek, Robert, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961–1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 247.
71 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 335–36.
72 Frankum, *Rolling Thunder*, 15–17.
73 Ibid., 19–20.
74 Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, Document 92, 423–27, "McGeorge Bundy Memo to Johnson on Sustained Reprisal Policy," February 7, 1965; Clodfelter, *Limits*, 58–63; Frankum, *Rolling Thunder*, 19–21; Reston is quoted in Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 249.
75 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 172.
76 Kahin, *Intervention*, 294–305.
77 The State Department note is cited in Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, 51.
78 Quote is from Kahin, *Intervention*, 306; Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, Document 97, 440–41, "McCone Memo to Top Officials on Effectiveness of Air War."
79 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 324–25.
80 Paul Kattenburg, *The Vietnam Trauma in American Foreign Policy, 1945–1975* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1980), 131–32.
81 Westmoreland, A *Soldier Reports*, 157.
82 Ibid., 157–58.
83 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 195, 364–65, "Telegram from Taylor to Rusk," March 18, 1965.
84 Maitland and others, *Raising the Stakes*, 174–75.
85 Westmoreland, A *Soldier Reports*, 161.
86 Maitland et al., *Raising the Stakes*, 183–84.
87 Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, Document 98, 442–43, "Order Increasing Ground Forces and Shifting Mission," April 6, 1965. According to Item 11: "The actions themselves should be taken as rapidly as practicable, but in ways that should minimize any appearances of sudden changes in policy. . . . The President's desire is that these movements and changes should be understood as being gradual and wholly consistent with existing policy."
88 Logevall, *Choosing War*, 305. The most thorough analysis of the administration's decision-making about the Vietnam War charges President Johnson and a coterie of his senior advisors with deliberately choosing war and then stealthily escalating it.
89 Quoted in Maitland and others, *Raising the Stakes*, 184.
90 Poll cited in Turner, *Dual War*, 116.
91 Pentagon Papers, *Gravel Edition*, vol. 3. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), 729–30.
92 Goldman, *Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*, 476–77; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 156–57.
93 Johnson's statements from his Johns Hopkins speech are cited in Turner, *Dual War*, 128–29.

94 Turner, *Dual War*, 131–32.
95 Hanoi's Four Points are reprinted in Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young, and Bruce Franklin, eds., *Vietnam and America: A Documented History* (New York: Grove, 1985), 274–75.
96 Kattenburg, *Vietnam Trauma*, 130–33; Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 241–42.
97 Quoted in Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 166.
98 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 198, 370–71, "Memorandum for the President by McNamara," April 21, 1965.
99 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 132.
100 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 174.
101 Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 269.
102 John Morrocco and the editors of Boston Publishing, *The Vietnam Experience, Thunder from Above: Air War, 1941–1968* (Boston, MA: Boston Publishing, 1984), 81–83; Clarke, *The Final Years*, 48.
103 Clarke, *The Final Years*, 22–23. Ky's Hitler remarks taken from Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 270.
104 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 179–82.
105 Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, Document 105, 456–58, "McNamara's Memo on July 20, 1965, on Increasing Allied Ground Force." The memo was drafted on July 1 and revised July 20.
106 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 138–39.
107 Wade Merkel, "The Limits of American Generalship: The JCS's Strategic Advice in Early Cold War Crises." *Parameters* 38, no. # 1 (Spring 2008): 1–14. There are detailed accounts in Kahin, Intervention, 366–401; and in Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, 105–53, that anatomize the decision-making process of July 21–28, 1965, which plunged America into a land war in Asia. Clark Clifford, a friend of Johnson's, and Senator Mike Mansfield joined with George Ball to try to warn the president of the perils of getting involved in a major war in Southeast Asia. See also Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 30–31.
108 Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 274–75.
109 Francis M. Bator, "No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam War/Great Society Connection," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 3 (June 2008): 316–17.
110 Ibid., 321–24. Francis M. Bator, who served as deputy national security adviser under Lyndon Johnson for three years, hypothesizes that Johnson took the nation to war by stealth to avoid divisive debates in congress, which he believed might destroy his social and civil rights legislation.
111 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 107, 139–40; Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1982), 49–50.
112 Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 160.
113 Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 46–51 has a perceptive analysis of American attitudes toward Asians generally and the Vietnamese people in particular.
114 Bundy's quote found in Jonathan Schell, "The Real War in Vietnam," *The Nation* 181, no. 4 (February 4, 2013): 24.
115 Quoted in Clarke, *The Final Years*, 106.
116 Hess, *Vietnam*, rev. ed., 86.
117 Johnson quoted in Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 158.

6 Waging Limited War in Vietnam, 1965–67

The Concept of Limited War

Americans went to war during the summer of 1965, confident that the Vietnamese revolutionary nationalists could not withstand the application of U.S. military power. President Johnson expected a timely U.S. victory that would save South Vietnam, allow him to implement his Great Society, and preserve his broad-based consensus supporting containment of Communism abroad and social reform at home.

Within two years, the American people found themselves mired in a frustrating and costly war. Washington had committed 486,000 troops to Vietnam and was spending over $2 billion per month on the conflict. Despite these large investments of their nation's manpower and wealth, far in excess of what anyone had anticipated when the war began, many Americans perceived that the United States was enmeshed in a stalemated conflict. They faced the dismaying prospect of a protracted war with ever mounting costs and casualties.

During most of 1967, support for the conflict and for Johnson's leadership was declining among the Congress, the media, and the public. A debate between the hawks and the doves over Johnson's war policy was building in Congress and echoing in the streets. Within the White House, presidential advisers were dividing into hawkish and dovish factions. Facing rising war costs, Congress was abandoning Johnson's Great Society reform program. Widening social fissures heralded the breakdown of consensus. In Newark, Detroit, and elsewhere, angry black rioters torched entire blocks of cities.

The prime cause of America's entanglement in a stalemated war of increasing magnitude was the failure of U.S. officials to develop effective strategies for achieving political objectives within a limited war milieu.[1] Traditionally, the U.S. military leaders have not devoted themselves to the development of grand strategy, specifically with the development of the military means required to achieve particular national goals. "The Americans had won every war since the Civil War by an overwhelming combination of superior manpower and weight of materiel, a superiority which minimized the importance of strategy."[2]

As the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union intensified in the aftermath of World War II, both sides built up potent nuclear

and thermonuclear arsenals. Strategists in both nations spawned new theories as they struggled to control these extraordinarily powerful weapons. Within America, given the absence of military theorists, strategic analysts for the nuclear age were recruited from civilian ranks. At institutes and "think tanks," civilian theorists fashioned strategic concepts for the nuclear era. For the most part, military professionals ignored the theories propounded by civilian strategists, considering them arcane intellectual exercises irrelevant to solving the practical problems of war fighting in the atomic age.

One of the theories developed for the nuclear age by civilian strategists was the concept of limited war. It rested on two foundational principles: first, that a nuclear war with the Soviet Union had to be avoided at all costs, for it could never be won, given the immense destructive power of the nuclear weaponry possessed by both sides; and, second, that the United States must contain Communism, which was spreading in the Third World via local, small-scale revolutionary wars, backed by the Soviets and the Chinese. Limited warfare called for the gradual application of economic and military assistance, diplomatic pressure, covert operations, and military force at the site of insurrections. Limited war doctrine called for the employment of these instrumentalities with restraint and skill. A deft touch was required to use just enough and the right mix of persuasion, money, aid, and force necessary to defeat a rebellion and contain the spread of Communism, without provoking a response from the USSR or China that could escalate to a nuclear confrontation with its potential for catastrophe.

The theory of limited war received its first real-world application during the Korean conflict. That war started when North Korea, seeking to bring the entire country under its control, invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950. President Truman, assuming that the North Korean invasion was supported, perhaps directed, by the Soviet Union to further Soviet expansionist ambitions in Asia, quickly made the decision to intervene militarily. The U.S. objectives were not only to defend South Korea against Communist aggression, but to contain the spread of Communism without provoking a confrontation with the Soviets that could lead to World War III with its dangerous potential of nuclear catastrophe.

Caught by surprise by the Chinese intervention in the Korean War, U.N. Commander General Douglas MacArthur wanted to undertake military initiatives against China. He ran up against the civilian proponents of limited war who insisted on confining the U.N. forces to the Korean battlefield.[3] MacArthur and his supporters chafed at the restrictions placed on the U.N. forces, while their Chinese adversaries freely used their homeland for logistical support, aircraft bases, and sanctuaries.

A dispute over the objectives for which the Korean War was being fought lay at the core of the conflict between MacArthur and Truman. MacArthur wanted to inflict a major defeat on China and liberate all of Korea from Communism. Truman sought the limited political objective of restoring the status quo, of ensuring the survival of a non-Communist South Korea below the

38th Parallel. His overriding concern was the avoidance of a confrontation with the Soviets, then aligned with China. Truman relieved MacArthur of his command when MacArthur publicly criticized the Truman administration's limited war strategies. This dispute between civilian and military leaders, which erupted during the Korean War over strategies and objectives, foreshadowed similar conflicts that occurred during the Vietnam War.

Following the end of the Korean War, a decade would pass before America would again resort to limited war in order to contain the spread of Communism in Asia. But, in Vietnam, American limited war strategists came up against a sophisticated revolutionary war strategy employed by the North Vietnamese and the NLF. In the Korean War, the U.S. forces had only engaged in conventional war against the North Korean and Chinese armies. During 1962 and 1963, President Kennedy cautiously pursued a small-scale, low-intensity limited war policy in Vietnam, based on furnishing the South Vietnamese government with diplomatic, economic, and military assistance, accompanied by the use of covert operations, counterinsurgency tactics, and the deployment of thousands of U.S. military advisers. Following Kennedy's assassination, Lyndon Johnson immediately embraced the limited U.S. commitment in Vietnam.

During the first half of 1965, to stave off the imminent collapse of the South Vietnamese government, Johnson rapidly escalated the conflict, first by bombing North Vietnam, and when that strategy quickly proved ineffective, by sending large numbers of U.S. ground combat forces to fight the VietCong and PAVN forces in southern Vietnam.

At the time that Johnson made these escalatory decisions, he could not know that he had committed the U.S. forces to a long, costly, and ultimately losing war. One of the many causes of that eventual disaster would be defects inherent in the U.S. concept of limited war, as well as in its application to Indochina. Washington's efforts to fight a limited war in Vietnam were also complicated by disputes among Johnson's civilian and military advisers over how best to implement military strategy.

In August 1965, an operations study prepared for the Joint Chiefs defined four major U.S. objectives in Southeast Asia. They included enabling the GVN to extend its control over all of that country lying south of the 17th Parallel, defeating the PLAF and NVA forces fighting in South Vietnam, forcing Hanoi to withdraw its forces from the South and renounce its support of the southern insurrection, and deterring Chinese expansion into Vietnam, Indochina, or anywhere in Southeast Asia.[4]

However, the U.S. policy makers never developed the strategies to accomplish most of these objectives. One reason for their failure was their unwillingness to order a total mobilization of U.S. human and economic resources. Vietnam would be a limited war for limited ends, using limited assets.[5] Another cause of failure lay in the incompatibility of U.S. military strategies in Vietnam. Johnson limited the American military effort in Vietnam so as not to provoke Chinese or Soviet military intervention.

The goals were to sustain the South Vietnamese government's survival long enough and put sufficient pressure on DRV to persuade the North Vietnamese leaders to recognize South Vietnam as a sovereign entity. Although the American leaders had at their disposal the mightiest arsenal ever developed, including nuclear and thermonuclear weapons, their controlling strategic assumption was that the full extent of that vast power was not required, indeed could never be used. Having limited the use of U.S. military power to avoid war with China and a possible nuclear confrontation with the USSR, and having seriously underestimated the enemy's capacity to resist the applied U.S. power, Washington "did not confront the crucial question of what would be required to achieve its goals until it was bogged down in a bloody stalemate."[6]

When the United States was eventually forced to curtail the air war and gradually withdraw its ground combat forces from Vietnam because public opinion would no longer support a war that involved sustaining massive American casualties and costs for an indeterminate period of time, the GVN remained totally dependent on the U.S. economic and military aid, military advisers, and air and logistics support for its survival. After the U.S. aid programs were reduced and military support was withdrawn, PAVN forces overwhelmed the demoralized GVN army and quickly extinguished the government of South Vietnam.

Having surrendered the formulation of limited war strategy to civilian analysts, Johnson's military advisers had no choice but to go along with it. But his military advisers resented the restrictions civilian officials imposed on the air war against North Vietnam, restrictions they believed prevented them from inflicting enough damage to force Hanoi to stop supporting the southern insurgency. The Joint Chiefs continually pressured Johnson to intensify the air war against North Vietnam. He did gradually expand the air war, particularly during the summer and fall of 1967, although never as fast as the military chiefs desired.

Other than confining the ground war to the territory of South Vietnam, the president left the framing of strategies for its conduct to the Joint Chiefs and to General Westmoreland.[7] Initially, Johnson's military advisers accepted these geographic limits imposed on the ground war because Westmoreland did not have enough combat forces or a sufficiently developed logistics support system for conducting operations within South Vietnam and simultaneously undertaking cross-border operations into Laos, Cambodia, and southern North Vietnam. In time, military leaders would also challenge some of the civilian restrictions imposed on the ground war, which they viewed as needlessly delaying the achievement of U.S. objectives in Southeast Asia.

The Strategy of Attrition Warfare

General William Westmoreland served as the Commander of the Military Assistance Command—Vietnam (**COMUSMACV**). He held tactical

command over the American war that began in the summer of 1965. He and his staff devised the strategy of attrition warfare that was in place from July 1965 until President Nixon supplanted it with Vietnamization in August 1969. Westmoreland has been called the "inevitable general."[8] From the outset of his military career, he appeared destined for distinction. Westmoreland compiled a superb World War II record, serving as an artillery officer with the 9th Infantry Division, which saw extensive action in North Africa, Normandy, and Germany. He also fought in Korea, where he reached the rank of brigadier general at the relatively youthful age of 38. After Korea, he continued to advance his career with "fast-track" assignments, including a tour as the superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy. Westmoreland assumed command of U.S forces in Vietnam in June 1965. The Vietnam War proved to be a difficult and frustrating experience for the inevitable general. He became a controversial figure, often the target of criticism, most often from doves, but also from hawkish critics who believed that his strategy of attrition could never produce victory in Vietnam.[9]

Westmoreland quickly decided on an attrition strategy. Attrition played to the American strengths (firepower and mobility), and it minimized the U.S. casualties. Westmoreland believed that the American people would never support a war fought with large numbers of young conscripts if they sustained heavy casualties and did not attain victory within a comparatively short time frame. Attrition warfare also promised an opportunity for winning the war more quickly than protracted counterinsurgency operations. Denied by the exigencies of the American limited war policy of an opportunity to wage a war of annihilation by invading North Vietnam, Westmoreland believed that attrition campaigns in South Vietnam were the next best available strategy. Westmoreland also felt that he had no choice but to use an attrition strategy, because North Vietnam was committing its **main force** units to the war in South Vietnam.[10]

Westmoreland's attrition strategy was quickly endorsed by Army Chief of Staff Harold Johnson, by the Joint Chiefs, and by civilian leaders, including Secretary of Defense McNamara and President Johnson. But "the Army applied the doctrine and force structure it had developed for conventional contingencies in Europe and Korea against insurgent forces practicing a form of revolutionary warfare."[11] A major reason for the failure of the Americans to gain more than a military stalemate in the Vietnam War after years of large-scale warfare was their reliance on a conventional strategy against adversaries who employed unconventional war strategies that enabled them to fight a protracted war and avoid defeat at the hands of a much more powerful army. The strategy of gradual escalation forced the U.S. forces to fight a lengthy and indecisive war of attrition, the kind of war for which Hanoi's strategy of protracted warfare was precisely suited.

As Westmoreland and his staff planned it, his strategy of attrition was to unfold over three phases, anticipating a decisive U.S. victory by the end of

1967. During Phase One, the U.S. troops would be used to protect the developing American logistics system—military bases, air fields, roads, and lines of communication. Westmoreland also believed that the U.S. combat forces would have to be committed to battle during this first phase, because enemy main force units operating in the vicinity of Saigon and in the central highlands continually attacked GVN forces. Westmoreland viewed the military situation in the summer of 1965 as precarious. The VietCong controlled half the territory and population of South Vietnam. VC offensives were destroying ARVN units at the rate of one battalion per week and the insurgents were overrunning many district headquarters. The PAVN offensives in the central highlands sought to take control of that vital region and threaten the coastal cities. Typically, political chaos reigned in Saigon. A South Vietnamese political collapse and a VietCong victory before the end of the year both appeared possible. Westmoreland's objectives during Phase One were to protect the populated areas, thwart enemy operations, and halt the downward slide of the war in the South.[12]

Assuming that the military situation could be stabilized by the end of 1965 and that the South Vietnamese would have stopped losing by then, Westmoreland's planners called for Phase Two to begin. The U.S. forces would take the initiative and, wherever possible, eliminate the enemy's base camps and sanctuaries. These large-unit sweeps into enemy basing areas were to be the tactical operations that came to be known as **"search and destroy"** missions. Westmoreland assumed that by attacking key enemy basing areas, he could force the VietCong main force units to fight, giving the U.S. soldiers the opportunity to use their superior firepower to "find, fix, and finish the enemy." The U.S. forces would also provide security for an expanded pacification effort. Westmoreland assumed that the back of the insurgency would have been broken by the end of Phase Two.

Phase Three would begin in 1967; it would essentially be a mopping-up exercise. Remaining insurgent forces would be annihilated or pushed back to remote areas, where they would pose no threat to village security or GVN forces. During Phase Three, the pacification program would be extended throughout South Vietnam.[13]

The U.S. planners assumed that the tasks of pacification, which referred to providing the myriad of services required to build popular support for the government and a sense of nationhood among the villagers, would be pursued during all three phases. ARVN forces would also be rebuilt.

MACV planners expected that by the time the U.S. war of attrition was completed, most of the people of South Vietnam would be living in secure villages, free of VietCong pressure. They also assumed that the GVN military forces would be strong enough to handle any lingering security threats to South Vietnam. With the VC forces neutralized and PAVN units forced back into North Vietnam, Hanoi would have to negotiate a settlement on the U.S. terms. American combat forces would be withdrawn.[14]

As Westmoreland began deploying the U.S. combat units during the summer of 1965, his operations were hampered by inadequate logistical support systems. President Johnson's failure to mobilize the Reserves and National Guard and to rely completely on increased draft calls and enlistments to meet the expanding manpower needs of the rapidly escalating war created serious problems for Westmoreland. The regular U.S. Army had few engineering, logistics, and service units on active duty. Military planners had assumed that in the event of war, Reserve and National Guard units would be mobilized to provide these crucial support services. When Johnson, ignoring the advice of the Joint Chiefs, refused to call the Reserves or National Guard to active duty for political reasons, many units found their ammunition in short supply.[15] Other combat units arrived under strength and without all of their weapons, equipment, or supplies.

When the American war in Vietnam began during the summer of 1965, South Vietnam possessed only one deep-water port, the commercial docks located 50 miles inland at Saigon. Since warehouse and storage areas were not equipped to handle the massive influx of war materiel, military supplies piled up on Saigon docks. VietCong sappers destroyed huge quantities of the arriving U.S. supplies. South Vietnamese workers stole equally large quantities of material for their use, for sale on the black markets, or to sell to the VietCong. For the rest of 1965, Westmoreland had to delay the tactical deployment of maneuver units because of inadequate logistics support.[16]

Working under adverse conditions, the Seabees, the Army Corps of Engineers, and civilian contractors constructed additional deep-water ports, warehouses, jet-capable air fields, roads, and bridges. The world's most productive economy was soon sending a cornucopia of equipment and supplies over 9,000 miles to its warriors fighting in Vietnam. The 1st Logistical Command developed a superb supply system that not only kept American soldiers supplied with ammunition, weapons, tanks, and planes, but also with toilet paper, shaving lather, fresh socks, beer, pizzas, soft drinks, and ice cream.[17] Within a year, Westmoreland had accomplished "what has properly been called a logistics miracle. The Americans who fought in Vietnam were the best fed, best clothed, best equipped army that the nation, or any nation, had ever sent to war."[18]

But serious problems inhered in the logistics success story. The supply system was expensive and wasteful. Sometimes soldiers expended enormous amounts of ammunition to kill one enemy soldier. The promiscuous use of firepower was also responsible for many accidental deaths. A large number of troops were killed by "friendly fire" from the U.S. aircraft, artillery, mortars, and machine guns. Other U.S. troops were also killed in the numerous accidents involving the storing, handling, transporting, and guarding of ammunition. The effort necessary to make the U.S. Army the best-supplied in the history of warfare also tied up large numbers of military personnel in noncombat activity.[19]

Figure 6.1 Corps areas of responsibility. *Public domain.*

Initial Search-and-Destroy Operations

Although General Westmoreland had few battle-ready combat units and the U.S. logistics were still in a chaotic state, he felt he had to attack VietCong units operating in some areas in order to take the pressure off beleaguered ARVN forces that were verging on disintegration. On June 27, troops of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the first U.S. Army unit to see combat in Vietnam, climbed aboard helicopters at the Bien Hoa Air Base on the outskirts of Saigon. Westmoreland was sending the 173rd on the war's first search-and-destroy mission. Accompanied by a battalion of Australian soldiers and several battalions of ARVN infantry, the 173rd and its Allies were flown into War Zone D, a jungle-infested area 35 miles northwest of Saigon, which had long been a VietCong stronghold. But the VietCong chose not to engage the green U.S. sky troopers or their Allies on that operation. After two days of inconclusive skirmishing, the troops returned to Bien Hoa. "This American foray 27 June locked the United States into a ground war in Asia."[20]

The 173rd Airborne Brigade made several more incursions into War Zone D during the ensuing months, each of them ending much like the first: withdrawal after a few days of skirmishing with an elusive enemy not much interested in a real fight.

In early November, the troops of the 173rd once more helicoptered into War Zone D. One of the soldiers gave the operation the sarcastic name of HUMP. ("Hump," "humping," and "humping the boonies" were the soldiers' terms for long and exhausting marches over rugged jungle-covered terrain in hot, humid weather under the heavy weight of rucksacks crammed with

Figure 6.2 173rd Airborne Brigade loading the wounded onto a UH-1D helicopter (dubbed Huey) for evacuation. The 173rd was the first U.S. Army unit to see combat in Vietnam, June 1965. *dpa picture alliance/Alamy Stock Photo.*

extra rations, water, and ammunition.) But Operation HUMP turned out to be a fierce and brutal campaign. At about 8:00 A.M. November 8, in a remote region of War Zone D about 30 miles northwest of Saigon, several Airborne platoons were ambushed by a large force of approximately 1200 VietCong hiding in the thick jungle. The combat was intense, including savage hand-to-hand fighting. The noise level from rocket, machine gun, and automatic rifle fire was so high that American officers and noncoms had to convey orders to their men by hand signals. Both forces sustained heavy casualties in a daylong battle that ended when the VietCong broke contact and disappeared into the jungle. 48 Americans were killed and the VC lost an estimated 400 men. Lawrence Joel, a medic who risked his life countless times during the battle to save many American lives, was the first African American to win the U.S. Medal of Honor in modern times.[21]

The first big battle of the developing American war involving the U.S. Marines occurred in I ("Eye") Corps, the northernmost combat sector, which was the responsibility of the 3rd Marine Amphibious Force, commanded by General Lewis Walt.[22] On August 15, 1965, Marine intelligence learned from a VietCong deserter the exact location of the 1st VietCong Regiment. It was holed up in hamlets on the Batangan Peninsula, 15 miles south of a new Marine base at Chu Lai in the Quang Ngai province. General Walt concluded that the regiment posed a threat to Chu Lai, and he ordered the Marines to attack it.[23]

Quickly, the Marines organized a large-scale amphibious assault, code-named Operation STARLITE on the VietCong positions. An assault battalion of the 3rd Marines landed on the sandy peninsula to pin the enemy against the sea. Another battalion came ashore in the enemy's rear. The two Marine battalions slowly worked their way forward over several days, squeezing the VietCong between them. As the Marines advanced, aircraft strafed and naval gunfire bombarded the VC positions. The VietCong Regiment was destroyed; about 700 enemy troops were killed. The Marines lost 50 dead and 150 wounded.[24]

Ia Drang: The Battle That Transformed a War

Operations STARLITE and HUMP served as preliminaries for the most important battle of Phase One of the war of attrition. One of the defining battles of the U.S. Vietnam War occurred in a remote region of the central highlands between October 18 and November 24, 1965. Westmoreland's chief worry during the summer of 1965 was that a PAVN offensive would conquer the central highlands, drive to the coast, and sever Saigon from the northern provinces, in effect cutting the country in half. He planned to counter the NVA drive with the 1st Air Cavalry Division (air mobile) based at An Khe in the foothills. Westmoreland wanted the Air Cavalry to beat back the PAVN thrust and keep open Route 19, the main highway running from Pleiku in the central highlands to the coastal city of Qui Nhon, a major agricultural and fishing center 160 kilometers away.

Under the command of Major General Harry W. O. Kinnard, the 1st Air Cav arrived in August and September. Air cavalry brought a new concept to warfare; it combined infantry, artillery, and aviation functions into one unit consisting of 15,000 men possessing 435 helicopters. Because rugged terrain and remote locations posed no obstacles for the Air Cavalry, they appeared to be the best force to blunt the PAVN offensive. The stage was set for the first battle of the war pitting North Vietnamese regulars against an elite American combat force.[25]

By early October, General Giap had committed three NVA regiments to the campaign, code-named the B-3 Front on NVA maps, the 32nd and 33rd, with the 66th held in reserve in Laos. These units were joined by some crack VietCong main forces, including the H-15 Battalion. On October 19, the 32nd Regiment surrounded and lay siege to a U.S. Special Forces camp at Plei Me on the Cambodian border. Although they could have easily destroyed the 12-man American A-Team and the company of Montagnard mercenaries at the camp, the NMVA forces dangled them as bait, trying to lure an ARVN relief force out of Pleiku and into an ambush set by the 33rd. The ARVN commander did not take the bait. Instead, he contacted the Air Cav headquarters, which supported the ARVN relief force with air and artillery attacks. The U.S. firepower inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy, broke the siege of Plei Me, and sent both regiments withdrawing toward the Ia Drang River.[26]

With their opening gambit checked and the PAVN forces in retreat to the west. Westmoreland ordered the 1st Air Cavalry to search out and destroy the NVA forces. He was taking a gamble. The air mobile concept had never been tested in combat. The 1st Cavalry was under strength. Many of its soldiers were weakened from bouts with malaria, and many of their helicopters were not operational. The Air Cavalry would have to operate in unfamiliar and rugged terrain dominated by jungle-shrouded mountains. Even the open spaces between the jagged peaks were covered with shrubs and elephant grass as high as a man's head. The search area, the Ia Drang Valley, covered about 1,500 square miles of desolate country inhabited only by a *Montagnard* tribe, the Jarai.[27]

The first phase of the Battle of the Ia Drang lasted from late October to November 14. It consisted of searches punctuated by brief and violent clashes whenever the Americans located NVA units. The largest of these battles occurred on November 6, when two Air Cavalry companies ran into an NVA ambush. Both sides were bloodied in a brief but brutal firefight.[28] Another week of sporadic clashes preceded the most significant battles of the Ia Drang campaign.

By November 10, the PAVN forces had eluded their Air Cav pursuers and had made their way to the sheltering crevices of the Chu Pong massif, a 2,400-foot-high mountain range at the southern end of the Ia Drang Valley near the Cambodian border. There, they planned to regroup for another assault on the camp at Plei Me. As the NVA forces took refuge in the Chu Pong Mountains, Major General Kinnard, the Air Cavalry commander, ordered air searches of the area around the massif. After aerial reconnaissance,

Kinnard ordered the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Harold G. Moore, Jr., to attack the largest landing site in the valley at the foot of the mountains, code-named "Landing Zone X-ray." The 1st Battalion helicoptered in on November 14. From their sketchy intelligence, the Americans thought that there might be a regiment of enemy soldiers holed up in the area. Inadvertently, the 1st Air Cavalry had launched its attack right in the midst of an NVA staging area. The PAVN commander, General Chu Huy Man, had three North Vietnamese regiments in the vicinity of the clearing, the equivalent of a division of very good light infantry soldiers. General Man instantly ordered two of his regiments, the 66th and 33rd, to counterattack. The climactic phase of the Battle of the Ia Drang was joined.[29]

Within a few hours, the 1st Battalion was engulfed "in fighting as fierce as any ever experienced by American troops."[30] Lt. Col. Moore brought in air strikes and artillery support. Moore also urgently requested reinforcements. The NVA rained rocket and mortar fire on Landing Zone X-ray **(LZ)** in an effort to deny the 1st Battalion its reinforcements. Despite heavy fire, another battalion landed at Landing Zone X-ray to join the fight. For three days, fighting raged in the vicinity of Landing Zone X-ray, an area about the size of an American football field. The two U.S. battalions beat back repeated attacks by one of the NVA regiments trying to overrun their perimeter. The combat was intense, "resulting in savage, close quarter fighting, sometimes in hand-to-hand combat. One U.S. soldier was found dead, his hand clutching the throat of a dead enemy infantryman."[31]

Air Cavalry pilots flew in and out of the landing zone under heavy fire, bringing in ammunition and supplies, and hauling out wounded and dead soldiers. Air Force pilots bombed and strafed enemy positions. Artillery, hauled to nearby firebases by powerful CH-47 Chinook cargo helicopters, rained thousands of rounds on the North Vietnamese. B-52 strategic bombers flying out of Guam, each carrying a 36,000-pound payload, used for the first time in support of ground operations, pounded the NVA positions.[32]

The battle of the Ia Drang ended on November 17 when the North Vietnamese withdrew from the major battle sites and retreated into Cambodia. Forbidden by the rules of engagement then in place from pursuing a retreating enemy into neutral territory, General Kinnard had no choice but to let them go. Over the next few days, occasional firefights ensued between the air cavalrymen and straggling NVA units, the last occurring on November 24. Soon afterward, the Americans also withdrew from the river valley and were flown back to their base at An Khe.

Four days and nights of bloody warfare resulted in a stunning butchers' bill for both sides. Up to the time of the battle for the Ia Drang, some 1,100 Americans had lost their lives in the America's slowly deepening involvement in the Vietnam War. But in those four days and nights from November 14 through 17, 234 men had been killed. Another 71 had died in smaller skirmishes that led up to the Ia Drang battles, making a total of 305 U.S. soldiers

killed during the five weeks of fighting. The casualty lists were much larger for the North Vietnamese regulars: an estimated 3,500 of them had been killed and thousands more wounded.[33]

The U.S. forces won a significant victory at Ia Drang. General Westmoreland and his chief of operations, General William Depuy, both strongly committed to an attrition strategy, found confirmation for their views in the favorable ratio of the U.S. to enemy losses which they fixed at 12:1. Both generals were convinced that search-and-destroy missions would eventually defeat both the VietCong and PAVN forces fighting in South Vietnam. Seasoned in the meat-grinder battles of World War II, Westmoreland and Depuy were convinced that they could bleed the enemy to death over the long haul of attrition warfare. They believed that they could soon achieve the "cross-over point," when they would be killing North Vietnamese soldiers at a faster rate than they could be replaced. The Battle of the Ia Drang locked the attrition strategy in place for nearly four years.[34]

But Westmoreland's and Dupuy's attrition strategy never achieved the "cross-over-point." In no year of the long war did the North Vietnamese death toll come close to equaling, much less exceeding, the natural birth rate increase of the population. Every year, far more babies were born in northern Vietnam than NVA soldiers killed fighting in southern Vietnam. Each year of the war, a new crop of soldiers arrived as replacements for the dead. The total number of NVA soldiers fighting in southern Vietnam increased during all the years that Westmoreland employed his attrition strategy.[35]

The Ia Drang campaign also vindicated the air mobile concept; henceforth, helicopter assaults would be the mainstay of U.S. tactics in Vietnam. Over the years of the long, over a million soldiers would ride into battle aboard **Huey** helicopters, and the familiar "whup, whup, whup" of their whirling rotors would become the most enduring soundtrack of the Vietnam War.

But military analysts concerned themselves with some of the implications of the Battle of the Ia Drang. They wondered about the accuracy of the estimates of enemy casualties that, according to some skeptical soldiers on the scene, were merely WEGs (wild-eyed guesses) that probably inflated the numbers.[36] They also wondered why the 1st Cavalry so quickly abandoned the Ia Drang Valley after a month of hard fighting, leaving the region vulnerable to future PAVN infiltrations. The Army's explanation that the valley had no strategic significance and that the chief purpose of the operation had been to kill as many enemy soldiers as possible was not reassuring.

The Ia Drang campaign signaled that the Vietnam War was entering a new phase; it had evolved into two parallel wars. The long-standing conflict between the GVN forces and the VietCong guerrillas for control of the countryside continued. "Superimposed on the older war was the more recent and more conventional struggle between the NVA and the Allied forces."[37] Future battles would require more U.S. forces and would portend higher U.S. casualties. "A major part of the war in Southeast Asia had thus become Americanized, as vividly demonstrated by the Ia Drang campaign."[38]

The Battle of the Ia Drang also revealed that the Air Cavalry could have serious tactical limitations. Once out of their helicopters and on the ground, the U.S. combat units were immobilized. The lightly armored NVA troopers used their foot mobility to outmaneuver the Americans. Only if the NVA attacked could the Americans engage them in battle, and only then could the Americans, using their far greater firepower, inflict more casualties than they took. But if the enemy chose to elude the U.S. assault units, as the VietCong troops had done repeatedly in War Zone D earlier in the year, and as the retreating NVA troops did for two weeks in the Ia Drang River Valley, the Air Cavalry troops could not force a fight because they were not willing to leave their landing zones to go plunging off into the jungle in pursuit of the enemy. Throughout the Ia Drang campaign, the NVA had retained the tactical initiative. If the PAVN forces wished to evade the U.S. forces or engage in brief, small-scale firefights, they had the maneuverability to do so. However, once engaged, VC and NVA soldiers discovered that they could "grab their belts," that is, they could close with the Americans, thus neutralizing their formidable advantage in firepower because the U.S. artillerymen would hold their fire, and aviators would not drop bombs lest they kill their own soldiers. How could the U.S. search-and-destroy missions attrite a mobile enemy that could retain the tactical initiative, control the terms of engagement, and avoid devastating losses of manpower?[39]

Senior NVA commanders in Hanoi also took note. Their infantry had gone up against the most modern weapons systems the high-tech superpower could throw at them and they had survived. They could use their foot mobility to evade the U.S. firestorm and could retreat to the Cambodian sanctuaries to avoid annihilation. The outcome of the Battle of the Ia Drang also convinced General Giap and his associates that North Vietnam would win the war eventually. Protracted warfare, the people's war strategy, would inevitably defeat air mobile tactics. The NVA would avoid taking unsustainable casualties. They would be patient; they would retain the tactical initiative. They believed that they could eventually wear down the Americans and break their political will. The war would become unpopular with the American people, and the U.S. soldiers would have to leave South Vietnam—just like the French had been forced to leave previously. Once the Americans were gone, the NVA and VietCong forces would then quickly dispatch the puppet forces of the GVN and victory would be theirs.[40]

Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara also derived lessons from the Battle of the Ia Drang. What he grasped was the most important message coming out of that crucial battle: Vietnam was going to be a long and difficult war. "The Vietnam War had just exploded into an open-ended and massive commitment of American men, money, and materiel."[41] McNamara drafted two secret memos for President Johnson in which he stated that in the aftermath of the Ia Drang battle, the United States had two options in Vietnam: it could arrange for a negotiated settlement and withdraw, or it could drastically increase the number of U.S. combat forces currently in

Vietnam to try and win the war. If America opted for escalation, there could be 600,000 U.S. troops fighting in South Vietnam by 1967 and the U.S. casualties could exceed 1,000 per month. (He was wrong about the death estimate; the American death rate topped out at over 3,000/per month in 1968.) Even so, in McNamara's estimation, the chances of defeating the North Vietnamese and VietCong forces would be no better than one in two or one in three. If America opted for escalation and sent massive numbers of troops, all they would probably achieve was a military stalemate at a much higher level of violence.[42]

The secretary of defense, having observed the failure of the gradualist bombing campaign against North Vietnam and having grasped the full implications of the Battle of the Ia Drang, was fast losing any expectations of a relatively quick and easy victory. As 1965 ended, McNamara, the chief architect of the American Vietnam War, was losing faith in the war. Not so President Johnson. After consulting with a range of senior advisers and a group of former high U.S. officials dubbed the "Wise Men," LBJ decided to continue the U.S. force buildup in Vietnam.

America Escalates the War on the Ground

As 1965 ended, General Westmoreland had achieved the objectives of Phase One of his strategic war plan. The military situation had stabilized. He had 184,000 U.S. troops in South Vietnam and more were on their way. The VietCong found that they could not sustain the momentum they had built up earlier in the year. The PAVN offensive in the central highlands had been blunted. The ARVN forces had stopped losing the war. In an era before electronic media, blogs, and the internet were available, most Americans did not have access to major daily newspapers and the television networks did run Vietnam War stories as part of their daily newsfare. Most Americans gleaned what information they had about the war in Vietnam from newsweeklies such as *Time, Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report.* These magazines reported mostly favorable accounts of the war and usually underreported the activities of small but growing antiwar movements. Polls consistently showed that the war enjoyed widespread popular support. *Time* named General Westmoreland its "Man of the Year" for 1965.

If it was true that the Allies had stopped losing by year's end, it was also true that they were far from winning the war. Even as security in South Vietnam had been strengthened in many areas, enemy infiltration had increased. About 20,000 NVA troops were fighting in South Vietnam, constituting one-third of the enemy's combat-effective troops. The U.S. intelligence officials put the total enemy strength at year's end at 221,000, far more troops than ever before. The VietCong/PAVN forces had matched every U.S. escalation. American intervention had saved the GVN from imminent collapse, but had also transformed a revolutionary conflict into a prolonged and lethal international war.[43]

There were few major battles in South Vietnam during 1966, although there were many small-scale firefights all over the country. Although fighting occurred everywhere, it was concentrated in the areas where the Vietminh and their successors in the NLF were strongest: in the northern provinces and in the areas northwest of Saigon near the Cambodian border, and areas of the Mekong Delta to the south and west of the capital city. In the northern sector, the U.S. Marines engaged frequently in combat operations against VietCong forces and also defended the region just below the DMZ from NVA attacks.

Westmoreland could not implement Phase Two of his attrition strategy according to the planned schedule for 1966 primarily because manpower shortages delayed his buildup of combat forces. The policy of limiting soldiers to a one-year tour in the combat zone also delayed the U.S. buildup and was a continuous source of manpower instability throughout the war. Further, most of the arriving troopers and their officers had never experienced a moment's combat. Their training in the states before arriving "in country" had not prepared them for the rigors of warfare. Westmoreland spent most of the year acclimating, training, and building up the U.S. combat force levels. He was preparing his troops for the large-scale operations that would characterize the fighting during 1967.

President Johnson's refusal to mobilize reserve and National Guard troops was another reason Westmoreland's buildup for Phase Two had to be stretched out. Given the absence of mobilization of reserve forces, the military was forced to rely more heavily on the draft. In 1966, draft calls jumped from 10,000/month to 30,000/month. Only 16 percent of American battle deaths in 1965 had been draftees. In 1966, they increased to 21 percent and in 1967 exceeded 33 percent. Further, both the Army and Marine Corps had to pull detachments away from active forces in order to cobble together provisional support units for engineering, construction, logistics, transportation, and the myriad of other tasks that would normally have been performed by the reserves.[44]

The U.S. troops also had to adapt to the unique conditions of the Vietnam battlefield. Unlike World War II or Korea, the Vietnam conflict was a frontless war. There were no territorial objectives to be taken. There was no vital center of enemy resistance to be destroyed; all of South Vietnam became a fluid battlefield. Military operations had to be highly mobile and non-directional. Battles occurred throughout the entire country. They could occur wherever and whenever the VC or PAVN forces picked a fight. They could occur in remote, sparsely populated highlands or borderlands, or amid the populous Mekong Delta and coastal regions.

The American objective in these sporadic encounters was to attrite as many of the enemies as possible while using their superior air mobility and firepower to minimize their own casualties. Because Westmoreland never had enough combat effectives to occupy an area after a battle, the U.S. forces would be withdrawn after a campaign had ended. Enemy forces often returned to these areas soon after the Americans pulled out because there were no available

ARVN forces to secure and pacify these areas, or because the ARVN forces available were ineffective in securing and pacifying these areas from which the enemy had been cleared. In such a formless war, the only measures of "winning" were statistics: the numbers of enemy soldiers killed, captured, or persuaded to surrender; the numbers of enemy weapons captured; and of enemy equipment, ammunition, supplies, and food stores destroyed. It was a war of numbers, numbers that never added up to a U.S. victory before popular support for the war collapsed and time ran out.

In the fall of 1966, the United States mounted its largest search-and-destroy mission, Operation ATTLEBORO, which prefigured the big-unit war of 1967. General Westmoreland sent a large Allied force consisting of the 1st Infantry Division, two brigades from other Infantry Divisions, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, a large contingent of ARVN troops, and a 500-man Nung reaction force into War Zone C, a sparsely populated region of Tay Ninh Province just south of the Cambodian border, about 60 kilometers northwest of Saigon. The area had been a Viet-Cong stronghold for years.

The operation was divided into two phases. Initial fighting was light. In late October, the U.S. 196th Light Infantry Brigade and the 1st Battalion of the 27th Infantry Regiment engaged the 9th VietCong Infantry Division, which developed into a fierce three-day battle with heavy casualties on both sides. The most significant fighting occurred on November 8 when the VC attempted to overrun a U.S. Special Forces base at Suoi Da. The assault was defeated by the U.S. artillery and air strikes, and an NVA infantry regiment fighting with the VC 9th was decimated. During the next two weeks, with the VietCong forces driven, the Allies discovered a large enemy base camp. The U.S. forces seized 2 million pounds of rice, much of which was returned to the local villagers from whom it had been seized. American forces also confiscated a huge cache of weapons, ammunition, clothing, petroleum products, and miscellaneous food items.[45]

Operation ATTLEBORO concluded November 25 after a month of fighting. During the battles, the 22,000-man Allied force, supported with B-52 strikes and artillery, killed an estimated 1,016 enemy soldiers before driving their adversaries across the border into Cambodia. 155 Allied soldiers, mostly Americans, were killed and 494 were wounded during the campaign. The U.S. commanders declared ATTLEBORO to be a victory, citing the 15:1 kill ratio they achieved and the confiscated stores. (Captured documents later pegged VC/NVA losses at about half of what the Americans claimed.) PAVN commanders noted that while their forces were depleted, they were not annihilated. They also noted that their forces retained the tactical initiative, controlled the fighting, and broke off engagements when they sensed they were taking unacceptable casualties. They could also retreat to their sanctuaries in Cambodia where the Allies could not go and where they could rest, regroup, and replace their losses. Most importantly, North Vietnamese commanders understood that Allied search-and-destroy operations, while destructive, did

not permanently deny them the use of basing areas. As soon as the Allies withdrew, and the bombing and artillery bombardments ceased, because the Americans did not have the manpower to permanently occupy the area and the ARVN forces could not provide security and pacification services for the villagers, the Communists returned. If ATTLEBORO could be called an Allied victory, it was only temporary and limited.

The DRV Escalates the War on the Ground

Six months after President Johnson, in consultation with his senior civilian and military advisers, made a series of fateful decisions in the spring and early summer of 1965 to drastically escalate the U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam by expanding the air war and taking over the bulk of the fighting on the ground, the DRV leaders meeting in Hanoi made a series of decisions to significantly expand its military efforts in southern Vietnam. Both the NVA and the PLAF forces fighting in South Vietnam were upgraded and expanded.

At meetings of the Twelfth Plenum held in late December, 1965, the Vietnamese Communist Party Central Committee, dominated by Le Duan and his chief Allies, made a series of fateful decisions that determined the future course of the DRV's military campaign against the Allies fighting in southern Vietnam. They decided to prepare for the possibility of protracted war while simultaneously proposing to concentrate both the NVA and VC forces to try to win a decisive victory within a relatively short time frame. Le Duan and his colleagues probably had something like General Giap's decisive victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 in mind. North Vietnam would match the American buildup; they would escalate in kind. Le Duan and the other hardliners apparently were convinced that no matter how many troops the U.S. sent to South Vietnam and no matter their high-tech weaponry and other materiel, the combined forces of the NVA and PLAF could win the war in the South. The hardliners cited some of the larger battles of 1965, especially the savage warfare during the climactic phase of the Ia Drang campaign, as proof that the NVA/VC forces could stand up to the worst the Americans could throw at them and that they could match the U.S. escalation. Le Duan wrote a letter to the COSVN commander, General Nguyen Chi Thanh, expressing his confidence that North Vietnam's more aggressive war policies would not provoke any disastrous consequences. He told Thanh that the United States would not invade North Vietnam because that would risk intervention by China and the Soviet Union. He also reminded Chanh that the United States was a global power with numerous military obligations elsewhere, but with only finite resources. Surely, the United States did not consider an insignificant backwater like South Vietnam a vital strategic interest. If the combined forces of the DRV and the NLF shattered the ARVN forces and bloodied enough American noses, surely the Americans will cut their losses and go home.[46]

The NVA expanded rapidly, reaching 400,000 troops in 1966. It added artillery and tank regiments to what had been primarily an army of light infantrymen. The Ho Chi Minh trail was significantly improved. It was transformed from a primitive collection of trails, tracks, and camps into a system of roads and bases. Truck convoys replaced bicycles as the major means of conveying men, weapons, ammunition, and other supplies to the southern war zones. Bases were equipped with vehicle maintenance facilities and anti-aircraft defenses. DRV leaders meeting at the Twelfth Plenum in December of 1965 concluded that despite the rapid U.S. buildup of forces, the NVA would be able throughout 1966 to deploy enough NVA regiments south to maintain the balance of forces there. The scale of the U.S. air effort to interdict the men and materiel coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex was larger than Operation Rolling Thunder during the year.[47]

The Big-Unit War, 1967

As 1967 dawned, Westmoreland was more convinced than ever that large-scale search-and-destroy missions such as Operation ATTLEBORO provided the means for the destruction of North Vietnamese regular forces and VietCong main force units. He believed that subsequent ATTLEBORO-type operations would lead to eventual Allied victory. Big-unit operational plans became the dominant pattern of strategy for the upcoming year. Even so, hundreds of small-scale operations would continue all over South Vietnam during the year and account for over 90 percent of the combat operations involving the U.S. forces.

Westmoreland had at his disposal 390,000 U.S. soldiers, including seven divisions, two airborne and two light infantry brigades, an armored regiment, and a Special Forces group. They were supplemented by "third country" forces from South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. In addition, ARVN, which had expanded rapidly in 1966, could field 11 divisions. Total Republic of [South] Vietnam Armed Forces (**RVNAF**), in addition to the ARVN units, included territorial forces, security forces, local troops, and irregulars. Westmoreland's Combined Campaign Plan for 1967 assigned RVNAF the tasks of securing and pacifying areas under their control, while the U.S. forces carried the brunt of the fighting against the Communist regular forces. MACV's multiple tactical objectives included securing South Vietnam's borders and beating back NVA attacks across the DMZ, neutralizing the VC forces in War Zones C and D, eradicating VietCong sanctuaries in the vicinity of Saigon, defending the strategic central highlands against NVA incursions, driving the VC and PAVN forces back from the populated regions so they could be attacked with artillery fire and aerial, bombardment, and providing security for the populated regions of South Vietnam.[48]

The first of the 1967 big-unit campaigns occurred in a strategic region sandwiched between War Zones C and D called the Iron Triangle, located 15 miles north of Saigon. The Iron Triangle had been a major VietCong

stronghold for years and served as a staging area for attacks against GVN installations in the vicinity of Saigon. Bounded on two sides by rivers and on a third by a jungle, the area incorporated about 50 square miles of nearly impenetrable territory covered by trees, vines, and shrubs. Underneath the dense growth lay miles of tunnels, caverns, and chambers, some of which dated from the Vietminh campaigns against the Japanese during World War II. Thousands of insurgents could inhabit this subterranean labyrinth, an inviolable sanctuary, seemingly immune from counterattacks or efforts at destruction. On the fringe of the region, nestled in a loop of the Saigon River, lay the village of Ben Suc, many of whose 3,500 residents had been VietCong or VietCong supporters for years.[49]

Wanting to eliminate once and for all the threat to the Saigon regime posed by the VietCong redoubt buried within the recesses of the Iron Triangle, General Westmoreland in early January 1967 launched a massive operation, codenamed CEDAR FALLS, lasting three weeks and involving 30,000 U.S. and ARVN forces.[50] The first phase of the operation was to dispose of the threat posed by the villagers of Ben Suc. If, according to VietCong doctrine, the people are the "sea" in which the guerrilla "fish" must swim, MACV strategists concluded that permanently eliminating the threat posed by the VietCong forces marshaled in the Iron Triangle necessarily involved "draining the sea" by removing the villagers and razing the village, leaving the VC "fish" to flop about and perish.

On January 8, 1967, an armada of U.S. transport helicopters suddenly descended upon Ben Suc. Instantly, a force of hundreds of American and ARVN soldiers surrounded the village. They met with little resistance from the sullen villagers. Although the arrival of the helicopters caught them by surprise, most of the VietCong fighters in the village at the time escaped. Most of the inhabitants of Ben Suc and of surrounding villages, some 6,000 individuals, two-thirds of them children, were rounded up and transferred to a refugee camp at Phu Loi, near Phu Cuong, 15 miles downriver. After the deportation of the villagers, Ben Suc was systematically erased by specially trained U.S. destruction teams. Giant caterpillar tractors, called Rome plows, fitted with wide bulldozer blades, cleared huge swatches of jungle, exposing the tunnel complexes. Demolition teams destroyed the houses above the ground and the tunnel complexes below. Within a few days, "the village of Ben Suc no longer existed."[51]

After the deportation of the villagers and the demolition of Ben Suc, General Jonathan Seaman, the II Field Force commander, initiated Phase Two of the battle plan. Following saturation bombing and artillery fire, the 1st Infantry Division, along with the 173rd Airborne Brigade and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, began their search-and-destroy operations ranging across the Iron Triangle. Because the VC commander chose not to engage the American forces, most of the VC fighters scattered and fled, retreating into Cambodia.

OPERATION CEDAR FALLS officially ended January 26, 1967. During its three weeks of action, the U.S. military claimed that about 700 VietCong

were killed and another 700 were either captured or turned themselves in under the ***Chieu Hoi*** (open arms) program, run by the GVN, which granted amnesty to VietCong defectors. The U.S. casualties were relatively light, 72 killed and 337 wounded. Allied forces captured weapons, ammunition, documents, and tons of rice, enough to feed 13,000 troops for an entire year; the U.S. forces also destroyed enemy structures and equipment. Volunteers from the 1st Infantry Division's special chemical unit, nicknamed the "tunnel rats," combed the nearly 12 miles of tunnels that were exposed at various locations in the Iron Triangle. Among their discoveries were a fully equipped field hospital, a weapons factory, and a regional PLAF headquarters (MR-4).[52]

The entire region was then bombed, shelled, strafed, and burned to destroy any remaining structures or tunnels that could be of use to the VietCong. In an effort to deter VietCong reentry into the Iron Triangle, the area was declared a "**free fire zone**," which meant that artillery and air strikes could be made in the region without prior approval of GVN officials and without warning to its inhabitants. As the Allies departed the Iron Triangle, they were convinced that they had dealt the VietCong a devastating setback. They had ruined one of the enemy's long-time staging areas and had severed the VietCong connections with the people inhabiting its vicinity.

Clearly, the Allies inflicted severe short-term damage on the VietCong. However, the VietCong quickly returned to the Iron Triangle. They rebuilt and resupplied their base and once again threatened the region around Saigon. When the combined NVA/VC forces launched their surprise attacks on cities and towns all over South Vietnam during their Tet-68 Offensive, the Iron Triangle served as a major staging area for their attacks on Saigon. The mass deportation of the villagers proved to be counterproductive. Some of the villagers were killed and others were brutally treated by ARVN soldiers while relocating them. Most of the villagers lost their homes, their ancestral lands, and all of their possessions except for what they could carry with them. Each family was allotted only ten square feet of living space in hastily constructed shelters. Critics of Westmoreland's Big-unit war strategy often cite OPERATION CEDAR FALLS as a prime example of how not to fight the Vietnam War. If the major objectives were to provide greater security for the Saigon area and to tie the villagers to the regime (win their hearts and minds), it failed to achieve either. About the only long-term achievement of the operation "was a devastated forest and a horde of hostile refugees."[53]

On February 22, about a month after CEDAR FALLS ended, Westmoreland launched a larger operation in War Zone C called JUNCTION CITY. The main objectives of General Seaman's battle plan were to engage General Thanh's main force units, which included elements of the VC 9th and the 101st NVA Regiment, to eliminate COSVN's headquarters, and destroy as many enemy base camps and installations as they could. Not knowing the exact locations of the targeted enemy main force units or of the COSVN headquarters, Seaman's staff prepared for a series of wide-ranging assaults into an area consisting of approximately 300 square miles of flat, partially

forested terrain in Tay Ninh Province lying just south of the Cambodian border. The massive operation involved 22 ground combat battalions, many of which came from the 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions. Fire support for OPERATION JUNCTION CITY came from 17 artillery battalions and over 4,000 Air Force **sorties.**[54] (One sortie is the combat mission of a single plane from takeoff to the return to its home field.)

Launch date was February 22. B-52 airstrikes pounded enemy positions all across the targeted area. Fleets of helicopters flew in troops from the 196th Light Infantry Brigade. During Junction City operations, the 173rd Airborne Brigade carried out the only major parachute drop of the entire Vietnam War. Several crack ARVN units also participated in the assaults. The operation had been launched smoothly and efficiently. But for a week, General Thanh's forces and COSVN could not be found. However, on Day 8 the combat action dramatically escalated because General Thanh went on the attack. The NVA 101st ambushed a 1st Infantry Company and inflicted heavy casualties. Over the next several days, battles occurred, usually when VC or NVA units attacked American forces. Some of the bloodiest venues of the Vietnam War occurred during Junction City. One of the fiercest battles occurred when two battalions of the VietCong 272nd Regiment attacked a U.S. artillery support base, Firebase Gold, near Suoi Tre, about 11 miles south of the Cambodian border. When VC soldiers penetrated the perimeter of the firebase, the gunners lowered their barrels and fired several beehive rounds at point-blank range shredding the attackers. (Each beehive round contained thousands of small, nail-like projectiles that were ejected in all directions when the round exploded.) Another wave of VC attackers who made it inside the perimeter of Firebase Gold were incinerated by a USAF F-100 Super Sabre that laid canisters of **napalm** on them. (Napalm in the most common form used in the Vietnam War consisted of a mixture of jellied petroleum products that ignite on contact and burn at temperatures ranging from 800 to 1,200 degrees Celsius.) Other intense battles exacted a high casualty toll on both sides. After about a month of heavy fighting, General Thanh abandoned his aggressive tactics; he had taken the COSVN headquarters and most of his troops into Cambodia beyond the reach of the Americans and ARVN forces. By mid-April, most of the Allied forces had departed the war zone.[55]

The aggressive tactics employed by both sides exacted a bloody toll, especially on the VC/NVA forces because of the vastly greater American firepower. MACV estimated enemy losses at 2,728 killed. The Americans lost 282 killed in action (KIA). Analysts of this phase of the war have concluded that all Generals Westmoreland and Thanh had been able to achieve with their attrition strategies was a bloody stalemate. The VC/NVA could not defeat the Americans or force them to withdraw from Vietnam. The Americans could not defeat the VietCong forces nor could they deter Hanoi from pouring more and more its resources into the southern insurgency that had become a revolution. Hanoi continued to use havens in Laos and Cambodia to rest and protect the VC and NVA forces, hide COSVN, and move essential supplies

and replacement personnel down the Ho Chi Minh trail. While OPERATION JUNCTION CITY was still raging, General Westmoreland traveled to a high-level conference on Guam. On March 20, he told President Johnson that while it might be possible to suppress the VietCong in South Vietnam via enlarged pacification and rural development programs, unless he could be allowed to attack Hanoi's forces in Laos and Cambodia and cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the DRV would simply wait until the Americans left and then send enough NVA forces south to conquer South Vietnam.[56] Johnson refused to modify the rules of engagement in effect since the Americanization of the war. He would not grant Westmoreland permission to send the U.S. ground combat forces into either Laos or Cambodia because that would amount to waging war illegally against two neutral nations.

Waging War in the Central Highlands and Northern Provinces

While Operations CEDAR FALLS and JUNCTION CITY were being conducted in III Corps Tactical Zone in the vicinity of Saigon, to the north, in II Corps Tactical Zone, battles for control of the central highlands raged. Units of the 4th Infantry Division under the command of Major General William R. Peers, operating out of their base camp at Pleiku, battled forces from the 1st and 10th NVA Infantry Divisions. In Kontum province, small units from both sides engaged in fierce firefights of short duration amid some of the worst tropical terrains on the planet. There, among huge trees, as tall as 250–300 feet, where little sunlight filtered through a triple-canopied jungle even at midday, PAVN regulars chose where and when to attack the U.S. forces. The Americans counterattacked, trying to kill as many of the enemy as they could, often sustaining heavy losses themselves. During the periods between battles, American troopers were killed and maimed by mines, booby traps, and hidden snipers.

In other action in the central highlands, General Peers deployed elements of his 4th Division along the South Vietnamese border in western Pleiku. His major objective was to deny invading PAVN forces access to South Vietnam's strategic heartlands. From April to October, the U.S. and NVA troops fought a series of battles in the rolling tropical plains of western Pleiku near the Cambodian border. The hard-fighting U.S. forces succeeded in beating back numerous NVA thrusts. By October, General Peers discerned that the major Communist push would be an invasion of Kontum province, directly north of Pleiku.[57]

There, one month later, occurred the Battle of Dak To, the site of a U.S. Army Special Forces camp set amid towering mountains in central Kontum province. The camp lay in a valley ringed by 6,000-foot peaks and ridges. Fighting had begun during the summer, when NVA forces had entrenched themselves in bunker complexes along the ridgelines above the camp. For months, grueling battles took place in the vicinity of Dak To between forces from the 24th NVA Division and Allied forces that included the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division and some elite ARVN ranger units. In early

November, a battalion of the 173rd Airborne and a brigade from the 4th Infantry Division were flown in to join the battle.

During the first two weeks of November, the U.S. patrols made contact with the NVA units. The Americans called in artillery barrages, tactical fighter-bombers, and high-flying B-52s to pound the enemy positions. On November 17, the fighting around Dak To intensified when a patrol from the 173rd Airborne Brigade came upon the 174th NVA Regiment entrenched in bunker complexes running along the eastern slope of a peak known on American maps as Hill 875. Hill 875 lay 12 miles west of the Special Forces camp, about two miles from the point where the borders of South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos merge.[58] "The fight for Hill 875 would ultimately climax the Battle for Dak To, as well as the 1967 campaign for the highlands."[59]

The 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry, of the 173rd Airborne was ordered to move in and clear the enemy from Hill 875. It took five days of hard fighting to secure the mountain. During the battle, the paratroopers of 2nd Battalion lost so many men that another airborne battalion and units of the 4th Infantry Division had to be brought in by helicopters. On November 23, the Americans reached the summit of Hill 875, only to discover that the defenders had abandoned their positions during the night. The NVA 174th had accomplished its mission, which had been to cover the withdrawal of the NVA forces retreating into Cambodia and Laos.[60]

The taking of Hill 875 ended the Battle of Dak To (Figure 6.3). The U.S. officials estimated that during the months-long campaign, the North Vietnamese lost about 1,400 **KIA** compared with 289 American and 49 ARVN dead.[61] The Battle of Dak To was also the last of the border campaigns in the central highlands for the year. The Allied forces had repulsed the NVA invaders; the central highlands remained under South Vietnamese control.

While the border battles raged in Pleiku and Kontum provinces for control of the central highlands, General Westmoreland demonstrated a special

Figure 6.3 U.S. soldiers destroy enemy bunkers after assault on Hill 875 during the Battle of Dak To, November 22, 1967. *U.S. Marines Photo / Alamy Stock Photo.*

concern for I ("Eye") Corps Tactical Zone, which included the northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. The **DMZ (The Demilitarized Zone)** provided the NVA with an avenue into the vulnerable northern provinces of the GVN and the porous mountainous borderlands enabled northerners to freely infiltrate. 1 Corps was defended by the Marines who held the line against efforts by the NVA units to infiltrate across the DMZ into northern South Vietnam. As he received more troops, Westmoreland inserted the U.S. Army units into what had hitherto been a Marine preserve,

Along Route 9, a dirt road that ran east-west across the country's northernmost province of Quang Tri, from the sandy coastal plains to the mountainous border with Laos, the Marines had constructed a series of fire support and patrol bases at Dong Ha, Cam Lo, Khe Sanh, and Lang Vei. The facility at Khe Sanh already served as a Special Forces camp. Teams of *Montagnards*, involved in the secret war in Laos that sought to interdict enemy supplies coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, operated out of Khe Sanh. Route 9 roughly paralleled the DMZ, and most of the Marine firebases lay 10–15 miles south of the DMZ. Forward of these firebases, perched on a hill three miles south of the DMZ near Con Thien (Hill of Angels), the Marines had constructed their most important firebase.[62]

Sporadically, artillery batteries from the NVA 325th C Division shelled the northern firebases. In April 1967, a regiment from the 325th occupied several hills in the vicinity of Khe Sanh apparently in preparation for an attack on the camp. The Marines, in a series of vicious hill fights, drove the PAVN forces from the heights and ended the threat to Khe Sanh.[63] In September, NVA forces besieged Con Thien. Artillery and rocket barrages on Con Thien and a nearby base at Gio Linh were followed by infantry assaults that tried but failed to overrun the Marine perimeters.

The U.S. forces eventually broke the sieges of Con Thien and Gio Linh with a combination of massed firepower and aggressive ground tactics. A combination of artillery and naval gunfire, tactical aircraft strikes, and B-52 bombings hit the enemy positions along the DMZ. Marine troopers, using claymore mines, machine guns, and automatic rifles, beat back the PAVN charges, inflicting severe casualties. The hellish Battle of Con Thien ended on October 20. American estimates of NVA losses for that battle were 2,000 KIA. Over 200 Marines died in the conflict.[64] At year's end, the Marines still retained all of their forward bases. They had withstood sieges, repelled infantry assaults, and blocked all NVA efforts to infiltrate units across the DMZ.

Within a few months, the Americans would discover that the bloody campaigns initiated by the NVA forces at Dak To and Con Thien in the fall of 1967 were part of the DRV's strategic plan to lure American forces into remote border regions in central and northern South Vietnam away from the population centers in preparation for the VC/PAVN assaults on the country's cities and towns during the Tet campaign of early 1968.

The Limits of Attrition Warfare

Westmoreland's attrition strategy during 1967, the year of big-unit warfare, had accomplished major objectives. The U.S. troopers had pushed many of the VC main force units and guerrillas away from populated areas, forcing them to flee to remote regions of the country, or seek refuge in Cambodian sanctuaries to avoid destruction. VietCong-controlled areas in South Vietnam had been significantly reduced. The VietCong discovered that they no longer had any safe havens inside South Vietnam; nowhere were they safe from the reach of American firepower.

The NVA forces were driven out of the central and northern border provinces of South Vietnam, often with heavy casualties. As 1967 ended, American officials estimated that 180,000 enemy soldiers had been killed since 1965. After allowing for a sizable official inflation of body counts, it is clear that the U.S. forces had inflicted severe losses on the enemy while keeping their own losses comparatively light. The number of PLAF volunteers declined, forcing the NLF to rely on conscription, which many villagers resented. The U.S. combat forces and Westmoreland's aggressive tactics had prevented a VietCong victory over the ARVN and a GVN collapse, both of which probably would have occurred before 1965 ended, if not for the massive American intervention.

But the U.S. attrition strategy had limits and it was grounded on some dubious assumptions. Westmoreland assumed that the U.S. forces would be able to use their superior firepower and mobility to destroy enemy forces at a greater rate than they could be replaced, at the same time keeping the U.S. casualties low. But despite Westmoreland's big-unit campaigns of 1967, the war remained essentially one of small-unit warfare. For these small-unit battles, the VC and NVA forces usually retained the tactical initiative. They determined where and when they wanted to fight and for how long. If their casualties reached unacceptable levels, they broke off battles and melted into the jungle. The U.S. forces could use their massive firepower to inflict heavy casualties, but they could not annihilate their enemies. For the duration of the American war in Vietnam, "the pace of fighting was dictated by the North Vietnamese and by the Vietcong, not by the United States."[65]

The VC and NVA also exploited the restrictions placed on the U.S. forces. They knew that the U.S. troops could not pursue them and that the U.S. aircraft could not strike them whenever they sought the safety of their cross-border sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos. They also took advantage of the weather, when heavy rains, thunderstorms, and thick fog hampered the U.S. air operations. When they were trapped or cutoff, and knew that retreat was impossible, both the VietCong and PAVN troops found that they could nullify the U.S. firepower advantage by swiftly closing with the American troops and fighting at close quarters.[66]

The MACV staffers responsible for developing operations to implement the attrition strategy did not anticipate the remarkable ability of the Communists

to absorb huge manpower losses and continue the war. Despite suffering proportionately far greater casualties than the armies of most nations that lost wars in the twentieth century, the VietCong and NVA forces carried on the fight year after year. The MACV planners also did not foresee that their pursuit of victory via the strategy of attrition amounted to an open-ended U.S. military commitment that might eventually require more forces than President Johnson would find politically acceptable to send to Southeast Asian battlefields. Finally, they failed to anticipate that rising U.S. casualties, although far lower proportionately than the losses of either the NLF or PAVN forces, would become the major cause of the Vietnam War's growing unpopularity in the United States.[67]

As 1967 ended, the U.S. soldiers had won all of the major battles fought since the Battle of the Ia Drang, but they had not won the war nor were they anywhere near to winning the war. In the summer of 1965, General Westmoreland had estimated that the war could be won by the end of 1967. By the end of 1967, he had nearly 500,000 soldiers fighting a stalemated war. Despite substantial losses, the VietCong and NVA forces not only survived, but increased in numbers. They matched all of the U.S. escalations of the conflict. The U.S.-ARVN forces never reached the cross-over point, or even came close. VietCong guerrillas retained their capability of operating within the populated regions. NLF political cadres retained their ties to the villagers.

Attrition warfare also had several adverse consequences that hindered the U.S. effort at nation-building in South Vietnam. Aerial bombing and artillery fire disrupted the South Vietnamese rural economy, diminished rice production, inadvertently killed civilians, and generated millions of refugees. The refugees were herded into squalid camps or else they fled to the suburbs and cities, where they survived as an uprooted fringe population representing potential VietCong fifth columns.[68] During the long American war in Vietnam, between 4 and 5 million people, representing 25–35 percent of the South Vietnamese population, became refugees. Many suffered from serious diseases, among them malaria, tuberculosis, and dysentery. Others suffered wounds that left them permanently disfigured or disabled.

The disintegration of their traditional ways of life coupled with the often desperate circumstances of the refugees angered and embittered many Vietnamese, who yearned for an end to the war that was shattering their families. There was a growing sense that the Americans were ruining the lives of the people they had come to help. The U.S. war weakened the social fabric of a fragmented nation and further alienated people from a fragile government that had never enjoyed the support of much of the rural population. The American takeover of the war represented an implicit expression of U.S. officials' lack of confidence in the South Vietnamese military forces, and it further undermined the resolve of the ARVN troops.[69]

Figure 6.4 Map of South Vietnam. *Public domain.*

Rolling Thunder: The Air War against North Vietnam, 1965–67

ROLLING THUNDER, the strategic air war waged by the U.S. Air Force, the air attack arm of the U.S. Navy, and the **VNAF (The Vietnam Air Force)** against North Vietnam began on March 2, 1965. With sporadic pauses of varying lengths, it would endure until November 2, 1968. The majority of strikes during Rolling Thunder launched from four Air Force Bases in Thailand: Korat, Takhli, Thani, and Ubon. Navy air strikes launched from aircraft carriers of Task Force 77 cruising at Yankee Station, a point in the Gulf of Tonkin about 190 kilometers due east of Dong Hoi at 17 degrees 30 minutes North Latitude. Shortly after Rolling Thunder flight operations began, in order to eliminate air space conflicts between Air Force and Navy strike forces, North Vietnam was divided into six target regions called "route packages." Each of these route packages was assigned either to the Air Force or to the Navy, into which the other was forbidden to fly. Since Naval aircraft, which had shorter ranges and carried lighter bomb loads than Air Force tactical bombers, approached their targets from seaward, they were assigned route packages covering mostly coastal targets and targets in the southern provinces of North Vietnam.

The first mission of Rolling Thunder struck an ammunition storage facility near Xom Bang. On the same day, 19 VNAF A-1 Skyraiders attacked the Quang Khe Naval Base. Initially, the air war against the North was a strictly limited affair. President Johnson himself selected the targets on a weekly basis, allowing air commanders to choose the specific times for the raids during that time span. During the first weeks of ROLLING THUNDER, attacks were confined to military targets mostly south of the 20th Parallel, the southern panhandle region of North Vietnam. Airstrikes were forbidden within 60 kilometers of Hanoi and 20 kilometers of Haiphong, North Vietnam's major port. A 60 kilometer buffer zone also extended the length of the Chinese frontier.

The air war against North Vietnam gradually evolved in phases. "During each phase, a different emphasis was placed upon targets, and the scope and intensity of the attacks varied as well."[70] During the first phase implemented in the spring and summer of 1965, Allied planes attacked infiltration routes in North Vietnam just above the DMZ to try to destroy the ability of the North Vietnamese to infiltrate men and supplies into South Vietnam in support of the VietCong insurgency.

But it quickly became evident to the planners of ROLLING THUNDER that the gradualist bombing campaign of limited scope had failed to reduce appreciably North Vietnam's ability to infiltrate men and supplies into South Vietnam. Hanoi also gave no indication that it was ready to negotiate an end to the war on anything like American terms. Conceding the air war's ineffectiveness, General Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, advised President Johnson to intensify the aerial campaign, order more sorties, and strike at key North Vietnamese military and industrial targets. After a brief debate

in July 1965 among senior administration officials in which George Ball, the hawks' nemesis, was the only adviser to oppose escalating the air war, Johnson ordered major increases in the number of air strikes. He also expanded the target list. For the rest of 1965, Johnson and McNamara gradually expanded the air war against North Vietnam, although they refused to order attacks on **SAM** sites or military airfields as called for by the Joint Chiefs and Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, the commander of ROLLING THUNDER.[71]

During the last months of 1965, the expanding air war targeted supply routes from China into North Vietnam. SAM sites, airfields, and a power station that generated 15 percent of the DRV's total capacity were attacked. Even as the air war expanded north and the U.S. aircraft attacked a greater variety of targets, including important military and industrial targets, the restrictions against bombing targets near Hanoi, Haiphong, and the Chinese border remained in place. The DRV took advantage of these restrictions by placing SAM sites and war industries inside the protected zones.[72]

As 1965 ended, it was evident to both the U.S. civilian and military leaders that the air war had failed to accomplish its strategic goals, even though it had evolved into a large-scale operation involving thousands of sorties monthly. Leaders of the DRV gave no indication that they had any intentions of seeking a negotiated settlement of the war. Intelligence data confirmed that Hanoi was infiltrating more men and supplies into southern Vietnam than ever before, and North Vietnam also continued its strong backing of the southern insurgency. Further, the U.S. intelligence sources showed that the bombing, far from hurting the morale of the North Vietnamese people, had united them with their government.[73]

Johnson's military advisers blamed the continuing failure of the air war on the self-imposed restrictions of civilian leaders. But Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara remained confident that at some point the gradually escalating bombing campaign would reach a point where Hanoi would stop supporting the southern insurgency rather than continue to absorb punishment. President Johnson still believed in the air war as a means to secure his political goals in Vietnam, but he realized that bombing could not bring him the relatively quick victory that he had anticipated.[74]

After Johnson ordered a bombing pause from December 24, 1965, to February 1, 1966, in a half-hearted and barren effort to get negotiations going, both the air war and the debate over it resumed. Once again, the Joint Chiefs pressured McNamara to escalate the bombing, but they changed their plan from interdiction to bombing North Vietnam's **POL** (petroleum products, i.e. gasoline, oil, and lubricants) storage facilities located near the cities of Hanoi and Haiphong. The Joint Chiefs understood oil to be the vital element in North Vietnam's ability to infiltrate men and materiel into South Vietnam. By early 1966, the U.S. intelligence estimates had placed five NVA regiments in South Vietnam. Supplying these forces required the DRV to expand its truck fleet. By destroying North Vietnam's oil supply, the Joint Chiefs reasoned that they could stop the trucks from supplying the NVA and NLF forces fighting

in South Vietnam. Since North Vietnam possessed no oil wells and no refineries, all their oil was imported, most of it via Soviet tankers that docked and offloaded their cargoes at the port of Haiphong. Prior to distributing it, most of the oil was stored in giant tank farms on the outskirts of the city. The Joint Chiefs insisted that destroying these storage tanks and those near Hanoi would cripple North Vietnam's ability to sustain the revolution in South Vietnam. Admiral Sharp concurred.[75]

Pentagon analysts studied the POL bombing proposals for months. Since the sites were located near cities, there was a high risk of civilian casualties. The oil storage areas were also defended by antiaircraft batteries, SAMs (surface-to-air missiles), and North Vietnamese air force fighters. The danger of heavy U.S. aircraft losses was great. Johnson also worried that such a major escalation of the war might provoke Hanoi to expand the war in South Vietnam, or worse, it might bring the Chinese and the Soviets into the conflict.

After months of discussion, Johnson's military and civilian advisers finally convinced him that raids on North Vietnam's POL facilities were necessary. Johnson approved them, although he retained misgivings. On the day, the first attacks were carried out, a distraught president, fearful that they might somehow go wrong, told his daughter, Luci, "Your daddy may go down in history as having started World War III."[76]

On June 29, 1966, Navy fighter-bombers from USS *Ranger* on YANKEE STATION in the Gulf of Tonkin and Air Force fighter-bombers flying out of bases in Thailand struck three POL sites "in the heart of North Vietnam."[77] The U.S. officials considered these initial attacks highly successful. They were the first air strikes near Hanoi and Haiphong, and they caught the enemy by surprise. Facilities near the two cities accounting for about 60 percent of North Vietnam's POL storage capacity were destroyed, with the loss of only one American plane. Polls showed the American public strongly backed the POL raids, and Johnson's popularity rating jumped 12 points, from 42 percent to 54 percent. America's European Allies were less enthusiastic about the POL raids, and Prime Minister Harold Wilson of Great Britain publicly dissociated himself from the attacks.[78] The Soviet Union and China both condemned the air strikes and promised increased aid to North Vietnam, but made no gestures toward intervention.

Delighted with the bombing results and the public's response to them, and relieved that the Chinese and Soviets reacted moderately, Johnson ordered additional POL strikes. During July and August 1966, Navy and Air Force planes attacked oil storage facilities in the North Vietnamese heartland. By September 4, the POL campaign had ended, having destroyed 75 percent of Hanoi's oil storage capacity. Soviet-Bloc tankers that hauled in Hanoi's POL supplies could no longer offload their cargoes in Haiphong because American bombers had destroyed the port's pumping equipment.[79] But North Vietnamese air defenders made American pilots and air crewmen pay a high price for the July and August POL campaigns. Antiaircraft batteries and SAMs downed over 70 U.S. aircraft during those two months. Hoa Lo Prison in

Hanoi, given the ironic nickname of the "Hanoi Hilton" by the U.S. flyers, became the residence for years for dozens of American pilots and crewmen shot down over North Vietnam while flying POL missions.

Prior to the U.S. air attacks on their POL sites, the North Vietnamese had decentralized their POL supply systems. Stored in 50-gallon drums in small camouflaged sites near major transportation arteries, dispersed POL supplies proved hard to find and extremely costly to destroy. Although the air strikes knocked out a high percentage of Hanoi's oil storage capacity, they destroyed a lesser amount of their POL stores. POL imports via rail from the Soviet Union through China replaced the losses. Analysts also discovered that only a small percentage of North Vietnam's POL requirements were needed to keep the supply trucks rolling south, and the NVA had more than enough oil and gasoline for themselves.[80]

At the conclusion of the U.S. POL campaign, a joint CIA–DIA (Central Intelligence Agency–Defense Intelligence Agency) report found that Hanoi retained "the capability to continue support of activities in South Vietnam at even increased combat levels."[81] McNamara also commissioned a study of the second phase of ROLLING THUNDER by the Institute for Defense Analysis (IDA), an independent agency from outside of the government, composed of 47 distinguished American scientists. The IDA report, known as the Jason Summer Study, was bluntly critical of strategic bombing. Whatever damage ROLLING THUNDER had done to North Vietnam's facilities and equipment had been more than offset by the increased flow of economic and military aid from the Soviet Union and China. IDA scientists were skeptical that any amount of strategic bombing could either appreciably reduce North Vietnam's infiltration of men and supplies to the southern war theater or induce Hanoi's leaders to call off their support of the revolutionary war in South Vietnam.[82]

The strategic failure of the POL raids ended Robert McNamara's advocacy of increased bombing. He viewed the Vietnam War as stalemated and became convinced that President Johnson should seek a negotiated end to the conflict. He believed that no amount of military pressure the United States could conceivably apply could break the political will of the North Vietnamese and force them to abandon their support of the revolutionaries in southern Vietnam. For the remainder of his tenure as the secretary of defense, McNamara refused or scaled back the military's subsequent requests for additional troops.[83] He began to identify with the small but growing number of Washington officials who were becoming disenchanted with the U.S. war policy in Vietnam.

McNamara's dovish turn set off another debate in Washington over the effectiveness of the bombing campaign against North Vietnam in the spring of 1967. The Joint Chiefs, convinced that if enough bombing were done against enough targets soon enough it would be effective, continued to call for escalating the air war against North Vietnam. Since the POL raids had failed to diminish North Vietnam's ability to supply its forces and the VietCong

fighting in the South, the military leaders shifted their advocacy. They called for a vastly expanded bombing campaign to destroy North Vietnam's electrical industry, port facilities, and locks and dams. General Westmoreland, in Washington to build popular support for the war during a time of rising domestic opposition to it, added to the escalatory pressures applied to Johnson by other senior military advisers.[84]

McNamara assumed the leadership of the advocates of scaling back the bombing campaign. Johnson was caught in the middle of his advisers' intramural dispute. On April 27, 1967 came the showdown before the president between McNamara on one side, and Westmoreland and other senior military advisers on the other. These sessions, held in the Cabinet Room, also included the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, Walt W. Rostow, who was an ardent advocate of escalation. The showdown over whether to scale back or escalate ROLLING THUNDER expanded to include intense discussions of other important dimensions of the Vietnam War. General Wheeler called once again for the mobilization of reserves. Westmoreland requested more troops, the equivalent of six more divisions. He also sought permission to invade Laos and use ground forces to cut off men and materiel coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and to clear out the VC/NVA sanctuaries. President Johnson asked questions about increasing the combat effectiveness of the ARVN forces. The dramatic highlight of these wide-ranging discussions occurring at the highest level came when Walt Rostow called for an invasion of North Vietnam by American and South Vietnamese ground forces. He proposed making amphibious landings in the vicinity of Vinh, a city near the coast located about 150 miles above the DMZ. He told President Johnson and the other assembled officials that he did not believe that the Chinese would intervene if Allied forces stayed below Vinh (Vinh lay at 21 degrees 30' of N. Latitude); he stated that he had intelligence estimates to support his claim. No one, including Westmoreland, the other assembled generals and admirals, other senior civilian officials, and the President, supported Rostow or spoke in favor of invading North Vietnam. Historian John Prados states that April 27, 1967 was a watershed day for the Vietnam War. It was the day that President Johnson lost any interest he may have had in invading either Laos or North Vietnam. Johnson also revealed that he had no intention of either mobilizing the reserves or sending anything close to the additional number of troops that Westmoreland had requested. (After putting off the decision for several months, LBJ approved sending another 45–50,000 troops.)[85]

But Johnson, dismissing McNamara's arguments for scaling back the war, sided with his military advisers. He escalated the air war. ROLLING THUNDER entered its third phase, which included air strikes against hitherto exempted major industrial targets: electrical production plants and North Vietnam's only steel factory. The U.S. aircraft also mined North Vietnamese harbors and estuaries and bombed previously off-limits targets near the Chinese border. Polls showed that the American public strongly supported the expanded air war that aimed to destroy North Vietnam's nascent industrial economy.[86]

For the rest of 1967, the U.S. aircraft attacked industries supportive of the war effort, including electrical-generating plants, petroleum storage facilities, military installations, transportation support facilities, and air defense systems. ROLLING THUNDER spared few North Vietnamese targets of any economic or strategic consequence. The air war raged at peak intensity as measured by the availability of aviation assets, the scope of permissible targets, numbers of sorties flown, and bomb tonnage dropped. Johnson had granted the Joint Chiefs and Admiral Sharp permission to hit most of the targets that they had been demanding to attack since ROLLING THUNDER began in March 1965. Reconnaissance bomb damage assessment flights showed that the DRV was forced to devote a significant amount of its civilian resources to repairing military and industrial facilities, and to repairing transportation and communication infrastructures.[87]

President Johnson, many of his civilian advisers, the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Sharp, and the air commanders all believed that the damage inflicted by the expanded air war, coupled with the success of Westmoreland's big-unit war in South Vietnam, would eventually "cause Hanoi to yield to American terms."[88] The third phase of ROLLING THUNDER continued until April 1, 1968, when, in the throes of a political crisis created by the VC/NVA Tet-68 campaigns, President Johnson deescalated ROLLING THUNDER. Thereafter, until its end in November 1968, bombing raids into North Vietnam were confined to targets below the 20th Parallel.

The Tet-68 Offensive mounted by the VietCong and PAVN forces proved dramatically that the bombing campaign "to interdict the flow of men and supplies to the South had been a signal failure."[89] The resources necessary for the enemy to mount and sustain a large-scale campaign had flowed down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, despite the bombing of North Vietnam and Laos for three years. The magnitude of the Tet-68 Offensive stunned the advocates of ROLLING THUNDER and challenged their conviction that the air war had significantly curtailed North Vietnam's ability to infiltrate men and materiel to the South and weakened their will to fight.[90]

Most analysts of ROLLING THUNDER have concluded that it was a strategic failure. It failed to interdict North Vietnamese supply routes to the South. It failed to weaken significantly either North Vietnam's fighting capabilities or its determination to support the war in South Vietnam. Admiral Sharp and Air Force General John P. McConnell went to their graves believing that political restrictions imposed by civilians had caused ROLLING THUNDER to fail. Perhaps, but the reality is not so clear. During the third phase of the air war, most of the targets in North Vietnam that the Joint Chiefs claimed to be of economic or military significance were either destroyed or severely damaged before Tet-68 occurred. ROLLING THUNDER, even when waged at its maximum intensity for nearly a year, neither stopped the flow of goods and fighters to South Vietnam nor broke Hanoi's will. The North Vietnamese, while absorbing immense damage and losses from the sustained U.S. air war waged against it, not only continued their war effort in southern Vietnam,

but also expanded it. They infiltrated some 35,000 troops south during 1965, the first year of the aerial war. During 1967, when ROLLING THUNDER included the highest number of sorties and raged at its most destructive levels, North Vietnam sent 90,000 soldiers into South Vietnam.[91]

Johnson's military advisers have also insisted that had the bombing campaign been intense from the outset, North Vietnam would not have had time to develop its air defenses, disperse its industries and POL stores, or prepare its people to withstand the destruction and terror of the air war. Hanoi would have been forced to abandon its support of the southern revolution or risk national extinction. It is possible that an all-out effort from the start might have rendered ROLLING THUNDER more effective. But it is also true that when ROLLING THUNDER began, Hanoi's leaders quickly mobilized all of their resources to defend against an unrestricted air war. They also prepared for an American invasion of North Vietnam and for a protracted war. In other words, they prepared for far worse than they ever got or that the Joint Chiefs and Admiral Sharp ever proposed delivering, and never did they indicate that they were prepared to end their support of the southern rebels or that they could not infiltrate the supplies and people into South Vietnam that the war in that region required. Further, an all-out air assault or an invasion of North Vietnam that threatened to destroy the nation could have provoked Chinese or even Soviet intervention. Had either or both the major Communist powers intervened militarily, it could have meant World War III, a remote possibility perhaps, but one which Johnson or any other responsible leader would not risk.

ROLLING THUNDER

> was not designed to win the war in South Vietnam; rather, its main strategic objective was to make it impossible for the DRV to continue supporting the war in the South and to force it to seek a peaceful resolution.[92]

To achieve its objective, the air campaign would have to terminate or at least significantly reduce the military aid the DRV received from third countries, especially China and Russia. It also required that ROLLING THUNDER sorties destroy the North Vietnamese industrial, transportation, and communication infrastructures used to support the war in southern Vietnam. Most importantly, the air war would have to interdict the movement of supplies and personnel supporting the war in the South. Over the course of the aerial campaign, the USAF, the USN, and the VNAF had partial successes in all three of these dimensions. It did force the DRV to alter its strategy south of the 17th Parallel; it did, at times, reduce the flow of supplies and personnel into southern Vietnam. But it failed to achieve its main strategic objective.[93]

There were three major reasons why the effort to interdict Hanoi's supply efforts failed: (1) the minimal needs of the NVA and NLF forces fighting in South Vietnam, (2) North Vietnam's excess resupply capabilities, and (3) the supplies pouring into North Vietnam from China via rail and from the Soviet

Union and Eastern Bloc countries via ship.[94] Destroying North Vietnam's rudimentary industrial economy had no discernible effect on either its capacity or its will to wage a guerrilla war against the RVN. An all-out air war waged indefinitely could never have seriously hindered Hanoi's resupply capability, given the small needs of the troops fighting in the South and Hanoi's huge excess resupply capacity made possible by Chinese and Soviet assistance.

Military analysts have suggested an additional reason for the failure of ROLLING THUNDER besides the political controls clamped on the U.S. air operations over North Vietnam by civilian officials. Those air operations exposed serious internal problems within the aviation services that hindered their effectiveness. A key issue was the command and control arrangement in Southeast Asia. There was no centralized control of all air assets; the Air Force, Navy, Marines, Army, and VNAF all operated according to their own systems with little coordination among them. The U.S. 7th Air Force ostensibly commanded air operations over North and South Vietnam. But the 7th Air Force was under the command of MACV, Army General William Westmoreland. Also, the 7th Air Force, whose planes mostly flew out of bases in Thailand, had a dual command structure. The Navy's Task Force 77, on station in the Gulf of Tonkin, took its orders from **CINCPAC** (Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command), a Navy admiral based in Hawaii. Both the Air Force and Navy commanders insisted on controlling their own air assets to accomplish their missions. They could not be persuaded to integrate their air operations over North Vietnam. The command and control complexities exposed by ROLLING THUNDER grew more tangled when commanders divided the air war effort into four competing operational areas (South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and North and South Laos). This bizarrely divided structure within a single combat theater created a complicated chain of command through which strike requests had to move that seriously delayed and limited the effectiveness of air operations everywhere in Southeast Asia.

A typical request to strike targets in North Vietnam originated within a squadron of the 7th Air Force or from an Air Group on board an aircraft carrier cruising on Yankee Station. But it had to make its way up a complicated chain of command before eventually being approved (or rejected) by civilian officials. The strike request first went to MACV, who relayed it to CINCPAC, who, in turn, relayed it to the Joint Chiefs at the Pentagon. After inputs from the State Department and the CIA, the request then proceeded to the White House. There at those famed Tuesday luncheons, President Johnson and his senior advisers decided which air strike requests to approve for the following week.

ROLLING THUNDER grew from 25,000 sorties flown in 1965 to 79,000 in 1966 and to 108,000 in 1967. During that time, the U.S. aircraft dropped 643,000 tons of bombs and inflicted an estimated $600 million worth of damage on North Vietnam.[95] It crippled the country's nascent industrial sector and disrupted its agriculture. Several cities in southern North Vietnam were leveled, and others sustained severe damage. The government diverted

thousands of people from agricultural work to air defense activities. To keep its transportation system functioning, an estimated 100,000 people were recruited to repair roads, railroads, and bridges. Women workers made up more than half of the people in work brigades and repair crews, which were continually at work for the duration of the air war against North Vietnam.

It was also vitally important for Hanoi to keep the railroad links to China open. An estimated thousand tons of supplies came daily from China. Over 100,000 Chinese soldiers worked alongside their Vietnamese Allies to keep the railroad open and the supplies flowing to Vietnam. Food supplies diminished, and only extensive aid from the USSR and China enabled millions of North Vietnamese to maintain even a subsistence-level diet. The quality of available education and health care in North Vietnam declined. Although Washington never adopted a policy of directly targeting civilians, the bombing campaign nevertheless claimed approximately 50,000 civilian casualties out of a population of 17–18 million.[96]

ROLLING THUNDER eventually proved to be exceedingly costly. Before Johnson ordered the bombing of North Vietnam halted on October 31, 1968, America lost 950 planes costing about $6 billion. A Pentagon study found that in addition to manpower and aircraft losses, every dollar's worth of damage inflicted on North Vietnam cost the American taxpayers $9.60 in 1966.[97] There were other costs: captured U.S. pilots and air crewmen provided Hanoi's leaders with a bargaining chip that they later used in negotiating with American officials. ROLLING THUNDER also gave the Communists a propaganda advantage that they exploited to influence world and American public opinion. Robert McNamara, disillusioned by the failure of the air war, wrote in a memo to President Johnson:

> The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 noncombatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny, backward nation into submission, (is not a pretty one).[98]

Although opinion polls showed that a large majority of Americans consistently supported the air war against North Vietnam for its duration, the growing number of domestic opponents of the war seized on ROLLING THUNDER. Doves denounced it as expensive, futile, and wrong. They denounced the extensive damage done to homes, small businesses, and schools, and the loss of civilian lives. Administration spokesmen claimed that precision bombing destroyed only military targets. They dismissed Hanoi's claims that thousands of civilians were being killed by the bombing as so much Communist propaganda.

North Vietnamese officials invited the U.S. journalists to come and see for themselves. In December 1966, Harrison Salisbury, a prominent journalist, traveled to North Vietnam. Just after Christmas, the *New York Times* published a series of his dispatches, which highlighted collateral damage, the civilian

casualties, and widespread destruction to civilian structures. Salisbury's reports were widely read and fueled the growing antiwar movement.

Arc Light: The South Vietnam Air Campaigns, 1965–67

While ROLLING THUNDER unfolded against North Vietnam, the United States simultaneously waged a large-scale air war against the VietCong and NVA forces fighting in southern Vietnam. Air operations in South Vietnam were an integral part of the U.S. war strategy. The southern air war reflected the same logic that underlay the aerial campaign against North Vietnam: that America would use air power extensively to force Hanoi to stop its aggression in South Vietnam. The air war in South Vietnam was also much larger, lasted far longer, and was much more diversified than the bombing campaigns against North Vietnam. It also connected with air wars waged in Laos and Cambodia.

Strikes against guerrilla bases and supply routes constituted two-thirds of the U.S. air operations undertaken in southern Vietnam. These preplanned attacks, based on aerial reconnaissance and intelligence reports, attempted to deny the VietCong "safe havens where they could train and rest troops, store ammunition and food, and plan offensive operations."[99] Giant B-52 Stratofortresses from the Strategic Air Command **(SAC)** often participated in these air strikes against guerrilla strongholds and supply lines. Code-named ARC LIGHT, the flights of B-52s, initially flying from Andersen Air Force Base on the U.S. island territory of Guam, 2,800 miles away, approached their targets at altitudes varying from 30,000 to 36,000 feet. The NVA/VietCong had no defenses against the high-flying B-52s and usually had no warnings of an impending attack until it had begun. The giant bombers combined the element of surprise with devastating power. A flight of three B-52s, each plane capable of carrying 50 750-pound bombs and using a carpet bombing technique in which all of the bombs from all three planes were released according to a predetermined pattern, provided extraordinary firepower in support of the U.S. and ARVN ground troops. The ARC LIGHT strikes often caused enormous destruction and heavy casualties. The B-52s were the most feared weapon in the hi-tech U.S. arsenal deployed. After surviving a B-52 assault, a terrified VietCong guerrilla called carpet bombing "the chain of thunders."[100]

If the U.S. air strikes were scheduled for populated areas or sites near populated areas, clearance had to be granted by South Vietnamese officials, either by the province chief or by the military commander responsible for the area. Friendly populations were supposed to have advance warning that the area in which they resided had been designated a target area. Advance warning was not always provided and not always understood when furnished.[101] Although the U.S. officials denied it, air attacks in or near populated areas often claimed civilian casualties, as proven by examinations of hospital admissions

records. Subject to approval by South Vietnamese officials, areas known to be controlled by the VietCong were designated "**free fire zones**." These areas could be bombed without clearance from local officials or without warning to any inhabitants who might be in the area.[102]

After the preplanned strikes against guerrilla sanctuaries and supply lines, the most frequent kind of missions flown in South Vietnam were close air support operations carried out by VNAF, Air Force, Marine, and Army pilots, who usually flew out of air fields in South Vietnam. These strikes added tremendous fire power for ground combat forces engaged in battle with VietCong units. Air power allowed the Army to use fewer troops in operations because the added firepower served as a multiplier to the troops in the field.[103] These missions also helped keep down the U.S. casualties. These close-in attacks were called in by ground commanders or forward air controllers **(FACs)** flying over combat areas. The FACs would mark the location of enemy forces with smoke flares to guide the pilots as they roared in to fire rockets, 20-mm cannons, air-to-ground missiles **(AGMs),** or to drop iron bombs, phosphorous bombs, or napalm canisters on their targets.

Along with its preplanned strikes and close support missions, the Air Force also conducted an extensive campaign of aerial defoliation, code-named OPERATION RANCH HAND, in South Vietnam to deprive the guerrillas of their forest cover and to destroy VietCong food crops. Initiated on a small scale in 1961, operations lasted until 1971, when Ranch Hand was permanently discontinued. During that more-than-a-decade span of time, nearly 20,000 Ranch Hand sorties sprayed an estimated 20 million U.S. gallons of defoliants and herbicides over rural areas in South Vietnam. Lesser amounts were also sprayed in rural areas of Laos and Cambodia.

Defoliation was a counterinsurgency program begun by President Kennedy after much discussion among his advisers. The debate swirling inside the administration concerned its military effectiveness and the Cold War political fallout that might arise. No one raised any moral or ethical issues and no one questioned the effects that crop destruction might have on the hearts and minds of South Vietnamese villagers in whose name the war was being fought. No one voiced any concern about possible health hazards to Vietnamese villagers or to the U.S. military personnel handling the chemical agents who might be exposed to their toxic effects. Both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations periodically fretted over the politics of defoliation and crop destruction as they escalated the Vietnam War during the mid-1960s. Senior military officials insisted that the military effectiveness of the spraying outweighed any negative political or diplomatic consequences. Among civilian officials, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was a strong advocate of Ranch Hand operations.[104]

As the war escalated, Operation RANCH HAND expanded rapidly. The U.S. Air Force C-123s, specially fitted with 1,000-gallon tanks and bars of spray nozzles attached to the undersides of their wings, flew thousands of sorties during the years 1965–1968. Over the door of the RANCH HAND,

briefing room at Tan Son Nhut Air Base hung a plaque with the sardonic inscription, "Only You Can Prevent A Forest."[105]

Crews aboard the RANCH HAND C-123s used a variety of herbicides on their missions. The different types of herbicides were identified by color-coded bands encircling the 55-gallon drums containing the chemicals. The defoliants include agents Orange, White, Purple, Pink, Blue, and Green. Agent Orange proved to be the most versatile, effective, and widely used herbicide. It contained an extremely toxic chemical agent, 2,4,5-T (Dioxin). One C-123 could haul 11,000 pounds of Agent Orange that it dispensed over a 300-acre target area in about four minutes. Within a few weeks, all of the plants, shrubs, and trees in the sprayed area had withered, turned brown, and died. Lush, green forests turned quickly into barren, brown moonscapes following RANCH HAND sprayings. Agent Blue, a mix of cacodylic acid and sodium cacodylate, was primarily used against food crops. Rice paddies on the verge of being harvested withered and died within weeks after being sprayed with Agent Blue.

During 1967, the peak year of Operation RANCH HAND, Air Force crews sprayed about 1.5 million acres, 40 percent of which were croplands. Criticism of the controversial program in an increasingly controversial war was also peaking both within the government and among the public. The RAND Corporation, a think tank concerned with military strategy and intelligence issues, issued critical assessments of the herbicide program in general and crop destruction in particular. Operation Ranch Hand had been a well-kept secret since its inception. Only in the late 1960s, when a few scientists and antiwar activists expressed concerns about the potential dangers of dioxin, was the full scale of the program revealed to the public.[106]

Before the defoliation campaign ended, millions of pounds of chemicals were sprayed over millions of acres of South Vietnamese forests and crops. Operation RANCH HAND destroyed about one-half of South Vietnam's timberlands and left behind unknown human costs. On April 15, 1970, the Defense Department suspended the use of Agent Orange. The last RANCH HAND mission, using other herbicides, flew from Tan Son Nhut Air Base on January 7, 1971.

The Air War in Laos, 1964–68

Another facet of the U.S. air wars in Indochina entailed air operations within Laos, a neutral country. The air war in Laos was an inevitable outgrowth of the long U.S. involvement in that country that dated back to Eisenhower's presidency. Following the 1962 Geneva Accords that created a neutral Laos, the United States provided substantial military and economic assistance to the royalist government headed by Prince Souvanna Phouma. Meanwhile, the Pathet Lao continued its war against that government. The ongoing war in Laos got intertwined with the larger war in Vietnam because the Ho Chi Minh Trail ran through the mountainous regions of eastern Laos. The North

Vietnamese stationed troops in this remote region to assist in the movement of troops and supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail; they also armed and trained the Pathet Lao forces. Washington, while publicly supporting the government of Souvanna Phouma, also used the CIA to train Hmong (Meo) tribesmen to fight the Pathet Lao.

In addition to fighting a secret war in Laos using indigenous proxies, the United States began an extensive bombing campaign in that country in 1964. At the beginning of 1965, the southern panhandle of Laos, which shared a 450-mile-long border with Vietnam, had been turned into a major supply corridor supporting VietCong military operations in South Vietnam. A few months before ROLLING THUNDER began against North Vietnam, President Johnson ordered the U.S. aircraft to interdict traffic coming south along the components of the Ho Chi Minh Trail running through the Laotian corridor. The bombing campaign in Laos gradually expanded until it reached a volume of 3,000 sorties per month during the fall of 1967. From 1964 through 1967, the U.S. aircraft dropped an estimated 450,000 tons of bombs in Laos.[107]

Bad flying weather and rugged jungle-covered mountainous terrain continually hampered the U.S. air operations. Because the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos consisted of a vast web of small roads and trails, most of which were invisible from the air, the U.S. pilots could only interdict a portion of the weapons, military supplies, and soldiers coming into South Vietnam. Enemy countermeasures and self-imposed restrictions on the bombings further reduced the effectiveness of the air war in Laos. At the height of the U.S. aerial campaign against the segments of the Ho Chi Minh Trail running along the Laotian corridor, despite suffering sizeable losses of trucks, bicycles, and personnel, the North Vietnamese were infiltrating more supplies and personnel into South Vietnam than ever before.

Notes

1 James Clay Thompson, *Rolling Thunder: Understanding Policy and Program Failure* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 10–11; Summers, *On Strategy*, 18.

2 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 337.

3 Ibid., 338.

4 Clarke, *The Final Years*, 106.

5 Thompson, *Rolling Thunder*, 11.

6 David L. Anderson, “The Vietnam War and Its Enduring Historical Relevance,” in David L. Anderson, ed., *The Columbia History of the Vietnam* War (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 46; Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 145.

7 Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 165; Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America’s Military Role in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 174–77.

8 Ernest B. Furguson, *Westmoreland: The Inevitable General* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1968).

9 Ibid., Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 369–86; essay in Harry G. Summers, Jr., *Vietnam War Almanac* (New York: Facts on File, 1985), 357–59.
10 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 186–93.
11 Krepinevich, *Army and Vietnam*, 164.
12 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 187–88; Clarke, *The Final Years*, 102.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Shelby L. Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965–1973* (New York: Dell, 1985), 21.
16 Ibid., 23.
17 Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet* (New York: Ballantine, 1978), 111–13.
18 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 151.
19 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 23; Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 169–70. The ratio of noncombat to combat troops within the U.S. force structure in Vietnam was six to one. In early 1969, the U.S. troop levels in Vietnam peaked at 543,000. At the time, only about 75,000 of these troops directly engaged in combat.
20 Quoted in Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 349–50; Doyle et al., *America Takes Over*, 40; Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 44.
21 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 45–46.
22 General Walt, in turn, was under COMUSMACV's (Westmoreland's) command authority. South Vietnam was divided into four combat sectors: I ("Eye") Corps, II Corps (the central highlands), III Corps (Saigon and vicinity), and IV Corps (the Mekong Delta). MACV directly controlled the U.S. combat operations in Corps II, III, and IV. The South Vietnamese army also had a corps commander in each zone and the U.S. Army and ARVN generals and their staffs coordinated operations in each corps zone.
23 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 34–35.
24 Thomas D. Boettcher, *Vietnam: The Valor and the Sorrow* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1985), 317–19; Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 34–39.
25 Joseph Abodeely, "Air Cav," *Vietnam Magazine* (December 2012): 23–27; Harry G. Summers, Jr., "The Bitter Triumph of la Drang," *American Heritage Magazine* (January/February 1984): 56–58.
26 Joseph Galloway, "Ia Drang: How the Stage Was Set for a Decade of Debacle." *Vietnam Magazine* 23, no.4 (December 2010): 26–27.
27 George C. Herring, "The 1st Cavalry and the Ia Drang Valley, 18 October–24 November 1965," in Charles E. Heller and William A. Stofft, eds., *America's First Battles* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 313–14. Ia was the Jarai word for "river"; Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Harold G. Moore, Jr., and Joseph Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once and Young: Ia Drang—The Battle That Changed the War in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1992), 29–34.
28 Heller & Stofft, *America's First Battles*, 315.
29 Galloway, "Ia Drang," 26–27; Summers, "The Bitter Triumph of the Ia Drang," 53.
30 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 204.
31 Herring, "The 1st Cavalry and the Ia Drang Valley," 318; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 204–05; and Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 360–62.
32 Morrocco, *Thunder from Above*, 88–93; Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 128–30; Moore and Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once*, 124–39.
33 Herring, "The 1st Cavalry and the Ia Drang Valley," 319; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 204; Moore and Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once*, 402–3
34 Harry G. Summers, Jr., "The Bitter Triumph of Ia Drang," 58, suggests that, ironically, the victorious campaign at Ia Drang contributed to the eventual American defeat in Vietnam. It gave American soldiers a sense of

invincibility; after Ia Drang, they believed that all they had to do was to keep fighting battles and they would inevitably win the war.

35 Galloway, "Ia Drang," 29–30; Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 168–69; Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 57–58; Morrocco, *Thunder from Above*, 171.
36 Herring, "The 1st Cavalry and the Ia Drang Valley," 323.
37 Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 140.
38 Clarke, *The Final Years*, 124.
39 W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzel, eds., *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1977), 73–74; Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 323.
40 Moore and Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once*, 399.
41 Ibid., 400.
42 Ibid., 400–1.
43 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 239; Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 66.
44 Prados, Vietnam, 151–2; Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 76–77.
45 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 234; Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 190–91.
46 Warren Wilkins, "When the Die Was Cast." *Vietnam Magazine* 25, no. 1 (June 2012): 40–43.
47 Prados, *Vietnam*, 152–54.
48 Ibid., 126. MACV officials estimated total enemy combat strength at 285,000 at the end of 1966.
49 Schell, Jonathan, *The Real War* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), 59–74; Morrocco, *Thunder from Above*, 172; Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 168–71.
50 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 268–69.
51 Schell, *Real War*, 86–121; Doyle et al., *America Takes Over*, 105.
52 Ibid., 107–8.
53 Schell, *Real War*, 133–88; quote is from Doyle and others, *America Takes Over*, 108.
54 Rogers, *Cedar Falls–Junction City*, 154–57; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 269; Rod Paschall, "Dark Clouds Over Junction City," *Vietnam Magazine* 25 no. 6 (April 2013): 24–26.
55 Paschall, "Dark Clouds Over Junction City," 29–32.
56 Ibid., 32–33.
57 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 161.
58 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 313. Hills on the U.S. Army maps are designated according to their height in meters. Hill 875 was 875 meters high (2870 ft.).
59 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 164.
60 Ibid., 165–68; Doyle et al., *America Takes Over*, 182.
61 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 312–13; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 469.
62 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 170–71.
63 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 263–64.
64 Ibid., 265–66; Doyle et al., *America Takes Over*, 160–61; O'Ballance, *Wars in Vietnam*, 107.
65 Thompson, Robert, *No Exit from Vietnam* (New York: David McKay, 1969), 135; Gibson, *Perfect War*, 109, cites a National Security Council study stating that throughout 1966 and 1967, 75 percent of all battles were the enemy's choice of time, place, and duration.
66 Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 167. Krepinevich believes that the fatal flaw of Westmoreland's attrition strategy was that it could not force the enemy to engage in big-unit fights.
67 Mueller, John E., "The Search for a 'Breaking Point' in Vietnam: The Statistics of a Deadly Quarrel," *International Studies Quarterly* 4 (December 1980):

497–519. General Giap has estimated PAVN manpower losses for the war at 600,000 soldiers killed. If his estimate was accurate, North Vietnam lost about 3 percent of its prewar population. For America to have sustained an equivalent loss, its battle deaths would have had to reach about 7 million, a figure that would have been completely unacceptable to any rational American. One of the major reasons for the failure of the U.S. attrition warfare strategy in Vietnam was because North Vietnam was willing to absorb huge personnel losses and still continue the war.

68 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 155–56. By 1968, the American war in the countryside had created an estimated 5 million refugees. The urban population of South Vietnam swelled from 15 percent in 1964 to 40 percent by 1968.

69 Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 31–32; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 155; Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 193–94.

70 Thompson, *Rolling Thunder*, 35; Clodfelter, *Limits*, 63–64.

71 Frankum, *Like Rolling Thunder*, 30–31.

72 Ibid., 33.

73 Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 156–57.

74 Thompson, *Rolling Thunder*, 45–48; Clodfelter, *Limits*, 71–72.

75 Clodfelter, *Limits*, 92–93.

76 Quoted in Morrocco et al., *Thunder from Above*, 127.

77 Ibid., 128; Peter B. Mersky and Norman Polmar, *The Naval Air War in Vietnam* (New York: Kensington, 1981), 118–21.

78 Clodfelter, *Limits*, 98.

79 Morrocco et al., *Thunder from Above*, 130–31.

80 Clodfelter, *Limits*, 99.

81 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Documents 261 and 262, 466–70, "Intelligence Memoranda by the Directorate of Intelligence, CIA," May 12 and 23, 1967. Gallucci, *Neither Peace nor Honor*, 64–70; Thompson, *Rolling Thunder*, 51–53.

82 Sheehan and others, *Pentagon Papers*, Document 117, 506–7, "Vietnam Bombing Evaluation by Institute for Defense Analysis."

83 Clodfelter, *Limits*, 99–100.

84 Ibid., 101.

85 Sheehan, et al., "Westmoreland Cable to Joint Chiefs on Troop Needs," March 28, 1967, *Pentagon Papers*, Document 123, 560–65; "Joint Chiefs' Report to McNamara on Troop Needs," April 20, 1967, Document 124, 565–67; "Notes on Johnson's Discussion with Wheeler and Westmoreland, April 27, 1967, Document 125, 567–69; and Prados, *Vietnam*, 184–190.

86 Clodfelter, *Limits*, 105. A Harris poll taken February 13, 1967 showed that 67 percent of the American public supported ROLLING THUNDER.

87 Frankum, *Like Rollling Thunder*, 59.

88 Quote is from Ibid., 112.

89 Thompson, *Rolling Thunder*, 64; Clodfelter, *Limits*, 84.

90 Clodfelter, *Limits*, 112.

91 Prados, *Vietnam*, 208–9.

92 Frankum, *Like Rolling Thunder*, 64–65.

93 Ibid.

94 Clodfelter, *Limits*, 117–18. ROLLING THUNDER destroyed 65 percent of North Vietnam's oil storage capacity, 59 percent of its power plants, 55 percent of its bridges, 9,821 vehicles, and 1,966 railroad cars. In the fall of 1967, when the air war raged at its most intense level, there were about 55,000 NVA troops in South Vietnam and about 250,000 VietCong forces. These

forces engaged in battle infrequently and the PLAF got much of its required supplies from southern villagers. The NVA and VietCong required 34 tons per day of supplies from North Vietnam. Seven 21D 2-ton trucks could haul that daily requirement, which represented less than 1 percent of the daily tonnage imported from China and the Soviet Union by rail and by sea.

95 Ibid., 134–36.

96 Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 95–96.

97 Enthoven, Allen C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much Is Enough? Shaping the Defense Program, 1961–1968* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); Coldfelter, *Limits*, 131. Hastings, Max, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945–1975* (New York: Harper Collins), 335. One of the major operational controls that limited the effectiveness of ROLLING THUNDER missions was the formidable air defense system gradually developed by the North Vietnamese. It included 200 SAM missile sites, 7,000 antiaircraft guns, and 80 MIG fighters. American aviators had to operate against the most sophisticated and deadliest air defense system ever erected in the history of aerial warfare.

98 Sheehan and others, "Secretary McNamara's Position of May 19 on Bombing and Troops," *Pentagon Papers*, Document 129, 580.

99 Morrocco et al., *Thunder from Above*, 84.

100 Ibid.

101 Thayer, *War without Fronts*, 129–32.

102 Ibid.

103 Frankum, *Like Rolling Thunder*, 68–69.

104 Edwin A. Martini, "Hearts, Minds, and Herbicides, *Vietnam Magazine* 25, no. 6 (April 2013): 34–36.

105 William A. Buckingham, Jr., *Operation Ranch Hand: The Air Force and Herbicides in Southeast Asia, 1961–1971* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982).

106 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 151; Boettcher, *Vietnam*, 258–59; Morrocco et al., *Thunder from Above*, 180; Frankum, *Like Rolling Thunder*, 88–90; Martini, "Hearts, Minds, & Herbicides," 37–40. Rf. Section in Ch.13 that covers the health issues encountered by veterans exposed to dioxin.

107 Frankum, *Like Rolling Thunder*, 111–31.

7 The Politics and Diplomacy of War, 1965–67

General Ky Takes Charge in South Vietnam

While rapidly escalating the Vietnam War and transforming America's advisory role into a full-scale military effort to suppress the NLF insurgents and to discourage their North Vietnamese backers, the U.S. officials strongly supported the Ky regime's efforts to build a new nation in southern Vietnam. Ky's performance as the prime minister pleasantly surprised Washington. He managed to survive in office, and the chronic instability that had plagued South Vietnamese politics since the anti-Diemist coup of November 1963 subsided. The June 1965 coup that brought Ky to power proved to be South Vietnam's last. In February 1966, to escape from the growing opposition to the Vietnam War among senators led by J. William Fulbright, who was holding hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on all aspects of the administration's war policy, Johnson traveled to Honolulu with his senior advisers to meet with General Ky and other South Vietnamese officials on February 6, at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel.

Johnson publicly embraced Ky and urged him to emphasize what Johnson called "the other war" in South Vietnam: building a South Vietnamese nation, developing the South Vietnamese economy, improving the lives of the Vietnamese people, and winning the allegiance of the villagers.[1] Ky, who had been briefed by the U.S. officials before coming to Hawaii, made a speech replete with ambitious plans for revitalizing South Vietnam's economy and ensuring a prosperous and free nation. Johnson, delighted by Ky's speech, wrapped his arm around the South Vietnamese leader and told him, "Boy, you speak just like an American!"[2] At the conclusion of the conference, Johnson and Ky pledged to work for the welfare of the ordinary people and to bring about the end of poverty, disease, and ignorance in South Vietnam. It gave pacification, what a powerful momentum that lasted for the duration of the American war in Vietnam.[3]

Ky, emboldened by Johnson's public show of support at Honolulu, returned to Vietnam determined to strengthen his grip on the South Vietnamese government. Backed by the U.S. officials, Ky persuaded the Military Directorate to dismiss a powerful rival, one of the triumvirs, General Nguyen Chanh Thi, the commander of I Corps, which included Danang and Hue, South

Vietnam's second and third largest cities. Ky's firing of Thi provoked a major political crisis in South Vietnam, the Buddhist Crisis of 1966, resulting in a brief civil war among factions of South Vietnamese that occurred inside the insurrection already raging in that turbulent country.

The Buddhist Revolt: The Struggle Movement, 1966

As a result of their victories over the Diem regime, Buddhist antiwar activists had emerged as a powerful opposition group within South Vietnamese politics. The only other political group to challenge the GVN internally was the Communist-controlled NLF. By 1964, Buddhist leaders saw that most of South Vietnamese people did not want war and they worked to end the conflict and expel the Americans. Unsuccessful in finding any of the weak, unstable governments that came briefly to power during the "coup season" that might be interested in negotiations with elements within the NLF that could lead to a peaceful and neutral South Vietnam, Buddhist peace activists, many of whom were women, watched in horror from the political sidelines as the Americans sent ground combat forces into their country.[4]

General Ky's removal of General Thi from power energized the Buddhists, led by Thich Tri Quang, who had formed a loose confederation of dissidents called the Struggle Movement. Originating in Saigon, in which approximately 80 percent of the population were nominally Buddhists, their revolt quickly spread to Danang and Hue. The Buddhists also revived their demands for free elections and a restoration of civilian rule. Other disaffected groups joined their movement, including students, trade unionists, religious sectarians, and even dissident army and police elements. Eight Buddhist monks and a nun committed self-immolation by fire in support of the movement.

Although they were careful not to make their ultimate political goals explicit, the Buddhists hoped that the elections would bring a coalition government to power in South Vietnam that would end the war, negotiate a settlement with the NLF, and expel the Americans. Sizeable numbers of ARVN soldiers stationed in Hue and Da Nang joined the uprising. This internal ferment created by Buddhist activists and their allies was the most serious non-Communist threat to the GVN in its 20-year existence. It was a massive rebellion and for a time the GVN verged on collapse.

Henry Cabot Lodge, having replaced Maxwell Taylor, returned to Saigon for another stint as the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam. Lodge feared that free elections could bring a neutralist government to power that would proceed to negotiate an end to the war and throw the Americans out. Lodge endorsed Ky's efforts to suppress the Buddhists and their supporters, as did General Westmoreland and President Johnson. They wanted the civil war-within-a-war suppressed as quickly as possible before South Vietnam completely unraveled.

When the Buddhists had risen against the Diem regime three years earlier, the U.S. officials had supported them, mainly because the Kennedy

administration had perceived Diem and his brother Nhu as being uncooperative. The Ngo brothers had rejected American advice and had been unwilling either to reform their government or to fight the PLAF aggressively. But in the spring of 1966, with the U.S. stake in the Vietnam War far greater than it had been during the Diem era, the U.S. officials backed the generals, who had strongly supported the American military buildup. The U.S. officials feared that if the Buddhists or Buddhist-supported political leaders came to power, they would seek negotiations with the NLF and possibly the North Vietnamese.

With help from General Westmoreland, Ky moved against the Buddhists. On the morning of April 5, 1966, the U.S. C-130 transports flew 2,000 ARVN troops into the Danang air field. Ky, personally leading two battalions of ARVN Marines, announced that he had come to "liberate Danang." Ky's show of force was designed to overawe his opponents but it only provoked them. General Thi and the local ARVN commander, General Nguyen Van Nhuan, joined the rebels. General Nhuan used his troops to confine Ky's forces to the Danang Air Base. He also warned Ky that if he tried to move his troops out of the air base, there would be fighting.

Ky was forced to back down. He announced that he would withdraw his troops from Danang and seek a rapprochement with the Buddhists. After meeting with Buddhist leaders, General Thieu, Ky's chief of state, announced that elections for a constituent assembly would be held within a few months and that civilian government would soon be restored. Ky and Thieu's retreat exceedingly discomfited Washington. The U.S. officials retained few illusions about the legitimacy of Ky's military regime, but there is no evidence that they seriously considered abandoning Vietnam or curtailing their escalating war.[5]

Reacting to these concessions from the military government, Tri Quang and the other Buddhist leaders called off their protests. By canceling their protests, the Buddhists played into the hands of the wily Ky and Thieu, who never intended to keep their promises. Confident of U.S. support, they were stalling for time until they could mount a larger effort against the rebels. On May 15, 1966, Ky launched another assault on Danang. With the U.S. aircraft again providing logistic support, Ky sent in larger forces armed with tanks, artillery, and other heavy weapons. Ky's forces took control of the mayor's office, Danang's one radio station, I Corps headquarters, the police station, and key military installations.[6] There followed two days of fighting in the streets of Danang, during which hundreds of soldiers and protesters were killed. Ten more Buddhist monks and nuns killed themselves in fiery acts of self-immolation. Ky's armed forces, aided by the U.S. soldiers, crushed the revolt.[7] His forces also suppressed the dissident movement in Saigon, but Hue, the center of the Buddhist resistance movement, remained in rebel hands.

The Struggle Movement's actions took on a decidedly anti-American coloration in Hue. Angered by the U.S. backing of Ky, mobs of students sacked the U.S. consulate and burned the United States Information Service **(USIS)** library there, destroying 10,000 books. They also unfurled banners demanding

the ouster from Vietnam of all foreign influences. Soon thereafter, Ky's forces assaulted the dissident positions in the former imperial capital. By June 19, Hue was once again under government control. Tri Quang was arrested along with hundreds of bonzes, students, and other protesters. The Buddhist political movement was crushed. Ky and Thieu, rescinding their promises to hold elections within a few months, announced that the military junta would remain in power until elections took place sometime in 1967. The Ky-Thieu regime, with strong support from the U.S. officials, had proven too powerful for the Struggle Movement to bring down.

Both American and GVN spokesmen denounced Thich Tri Quang and other Buddhist leaders as Communists or Communist sympathizers. However, there is no evidence to sustain that charge. Most Buddhists regarded Communism with contempt. They considered it to be a Westernized ideology unsuited to Vietnamese or Asians generally. Some Buddhists within the Struggle Movement had hoped to work with non-Communist elements within the NLF to create a coalition government in South Vietnam designed to end the war and expel the Americans. But the Buddhist revolt had little impact on the continuing war between the RVNAF and PLAF. The VietCong did not support the Struggle Movement, although the insurgency surely benefited from the political instability and mass disaffection from the Saigon regime it helped to create.

The suppression of the Buddhist uprising signaled the end of the Buddhists as a major factor in South Vietnamese politics. The ARVN generals had defeated their last major political rivals; the possibility of a non-Communist civilian alternative to military rule in South Vietnam no longer existed. After three years of political conflict that had begun with the coup that brought down the Diem regime, during which none of a succession of governments could provide even the rudiments of political leadership, a measure of stability was returning to South Vietnam's civic life under the leadership of General Nguyen Cao Ky. Following the suppression of the Struggle Movement, the Vietnamese people living under the control of the RVN perceived that the rule of the generals could not be challenged as long as the Americans maintained such a powerful presence in their country and backed the military rulers.

The middle ground that the Buddhists had been building up between the Saigon Generals and the NLF was cut away and prospects were destroyed for anything resembling a viable "third force."[8] Politics in South Vietnam had been polarized. There could be no peaceful, neutral civilian government. The people's real-world choices were reduced to either rule by the ARVN generals or by the NLF-Hanoi forces, a prospect that had no appeal for millions of South Vietnamese Buddhist citizens who were neither supporters of Communists nor military dictators.

Pacification Efforts in South Vietnam

Following the suppression of the Buddhist Struggle Movement, both the U.S. and South Vietnamese officials tried to implement effective

"nation-building" programs among the rural population of South Vietnam. For the U.S. officials, pacification had become the favored term to describe the "village war," the continuous fierce, essentially political struggle for the loyalty and support of the 80+ percent of the inhabitants of South Vietnam who resided in villages and hamlets. This was the struggle for "hearts and minds" to which Presidents Kennedy and Johnson frequently referred. Pacification could also refer to the myriad of civilian programs that provided the rural population of South Vietnam with schools, health services, and economic assistance—whatever might improve the quality of their lives, wean them from the allure of the NLF, and bind them closer to the government of South Vietnam (Figure 7.1).

In accordance with General Westmoreland's strategy of attrition warfare, the U.S. ground combat forces sought to engage the NLF main forces, while the South Vietnamese armed forces, both ARVN and territorial troops, were assigned major responsibility for pacification support. In practice, pacification support usually meant using local South Vietnamese forces to provide area security for the villagers. Although Westmoreland was reluctant to station any of his ground combat troops permanently in any specific populated area, Marines, especially those assigned to I Corps, sometimes provided area security for the villagers.

Responding to American pressure, the GVN established the Ministry of Rural Reconstruction headed by General Nguyen Doc Thang.[9] With funding and expert advice provided by the U.S. officials, the Ky government implemented a Revolutionary Development program (RD). The U.S. officials

Figure 7.1 Soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division perform pacification operations in a hamlet north of Saigon. Two soldiers help a boy learn how to hit a baseball. *Everett Collection Historical/Alamy Stock Photo.*

embraced the Revolutionary Development concept and sought to apply it nationwide. Consciously imitative of the NLF cadres, 59-person Revolutionary Development Cadres (**RDC**) were sent into South Vietnamese villages. Team personnel were trained to provide physical security for the villagers, assist in government reorganization and political development, establish schools and literacy programs, and aid in social and economic development. They lived among the people and "carried out hundreds of tasks to build popular support for the government and to undermine the VietCong."[10]

As had been the fate of previous pacification efforts under Diem, Revolutionary Development often failed. Cadres were hastily trained, and there were never enough teams available to service all of South Vietnam's hamlets and villages. District officials sometimes undercut the RD teams' efforts; sometimes, troops extorted money from the villagers and stole their pigs and chickens. The most serious problem was the absence of physical security. Since the U.S. troops were preoccupied with the war against the VietCong main force units, providing village security devolved upon the ARVN forces or local militia. But these local forces were often poorly trained and armed; in many areas, they could not supply adequate security. In some locales, rogue militia were the security problem. In insecure areas, the VC terrorists kidnapped and murdered thousands of RDC in 1966 and 1967. Often, the villagers were gathered and forced to watch the murders of local officials often done with extreme brutality. Neither RD nor any other component of nation-building could begin to work until the VietCong were cleared out of targeted villages and hamlets.[11]

The failure of RD also raised three fundamental questions about the RVN's approach to pacification:

1. Pacification could not succeed as long as corrupt officials and rogue militia continued to prey upon the villagers.
2. Given the peasant preoccupation with landowning, land reform would have to form the heart of any long-range pacification program that hoped to win the allegiance of the peasantry. Ky's lack of commitment to land reform and his subservience to the interests of large local landowners ensured the continuing failure of Revolutionary Development.
3. To overcome the fragmentation of South Vietnamese society and the alienation of the rural masses from the ruling urban elites that controlled the GVN, villagers would need to develop a sense of participation, to have an active involvement in the government, for pacification to work. The peasants would have had to see people from their villages rising to positions of authority within the government system to identify with the GVN, to connect its operations to their interests and welfare. Ky's government never tried to breach the profound divisions existing within the South Vietnamese social structure by recruiting district or provincial officials from the villages. His paternalistic approach to governance worked from the top down, not from the villages up.

In April 1967, President Johnson, to promote pacification, folded it into Westmoreland's command (MACV). All civilian and military agencies involved with pacification now came under the administrative control of a hybrid agency called Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (**CORDS**). The MACV deputy placed in charge of CORDS was Robert W. Komer, an energetic civilian bureaucrat nicknamed "Blowtorch" because of his aggressive management style. Komer reorganized and revitalized the American approach to pacification. He improved the liaison with South Vietnamese civilian and military officials responsible for pacification programs.[12]

Political Reform in South Vietnam, 1967

Having brought a measure of political stability to the country following its suppression of the Buddhist Struggle Movement, the military regime pursued pacification, particularly what the Americans called Revolutionary Development in the villages and hamlets of southern Vietnam. The ruling generals also implemented democratic political reforms, but in carefully limited fashion to ensure that they retained control of the government. Pressure for drafting a constitution and holding elections came mainly from the Johnson administration. Washington wanted to legitimatize the South Vietnamese government in American eyes in order to bolster domestic support for the expanding war at a time of diminishing public support. In May 1967, a Gallup poll showed that for the first time, support for the administration's war policy had dropped below 50 percent.

In early 1967, South Vietnamese voters elected a constituent assembly. The newly elected assembly, assisted by the U.S. constitutional scholars, drafted a new constitution modeled on the American Constitution. It created a bicameral legislature, but it granted the executive branch most of the powers of government and permitted the president to assume dictatorial powers in the event of an emergency that could be declared at his discretion. Further, the president needed only to obtain a plurality of the votes to be elected. This provision prevented opposing candidates from joining together in a runoff to defeat the government's candidate.

Elections under the new constitution were held in September 1967. The most serious political conflict that occurred during the campaign pitted the supporters of General Ky against the supporters of General Thieu to see which man would head the government ticket. The showdown occurred when they attended an intense two-day caucus consisting of 48 ARVN generals. For two days, the generals did what they did best—they engaged in emotional, often tumultuous politicking. When the last speech had been made, the last deal consummated, and the last threat delivered, Thieu emerged the victor. The U.S. officials had put tremendous pressure on the generals to support Thieu. Ky, who did not believe that Thieu could beat him, decided at the last minute to return to the VNAF, conceding the presidential candidacy to his rival. After much pleading from the generals and some American officials, Ky grudgingly agreed to be Thieu's vice-presidential running mate.[13]

Communists and neutralists were barred from seeking office, Buddhists boycotted the election, and the opposition consisted of obscure men with local followings. South Vietnamese political culture lacked even the rudiments of a democratic infrastructure. There were no political parties. The seven civilian candidates who challenged the generals, all obscure men with local following, announced their candidacies, staked out positions on a few issues, and appealed to their supporters. Thieu and Ky were running under conditions that made their defeat extremely unlikely. Both the CIA, which hired political consultants, and the U.S. embassy staff served up a steady barrage of political propaganda designed to win support for the Thieu-Ky ticket. The Generals themselves manipulated the election law to maximize their chances. The most formidable opponents, including General Duong Van Minh, a Buddhist who had assumed power following the overthrow of the Ngo family regime in November 1963, were not permitted to run. Even so, the Thieu-Ky ticket received only 34.5 percent of the vote. They were embarrassed by the electoral performance of a political unknown, Truong Dinh Dzu, a wealthy lawyer running on a platform calling for an end to the bombing and negotiations with the National Liberation Front, who came in second with 17 percent of the vote. Dzu and the candidate who finished third, Phan Kac Suu, both claimed that the election had been rigged to ensure a plurality for General Thieu.[14]

Their slender electoral victory did not give the Thieu-Ky regime a broader political base or greater legitimacy in Vietnamese eyes. Two-thirds of South Vietnam's carefully circumscribed electorate preferred alternatives to Thieu and Ky. It is possible that if all of the South Vietnamese people had been permitted to vote in a free election, they might have registered a preference for a government that would have sought to negotiate an end to the war and to expel the Americans. Thieu and Ky survived in power not because their government was popular or intrinsically powerful, but because it had the backing of the American military forces fighting the VietCong and NVA, strong support from the American embassy and CIA, and lavish economic aid from several U.S. government agencies.

The U.S. officials convinced themselves that the September 1967 election was a success. It demonstrated that the generals had made a transition from government by decree to at least a quasi-democracy. In the provinces, local officials, cadre teams, and the U.S. advisers worked hard to ensure that elections occurred in every secure village and hamlet. Security forces guarded the polling places. In none of the provinces, even in fiercely contested districts, did the NLF try to disrupt the elections or harass the villagers. Local officials and the U.S. advisory personnel working with them were surprised and delighted by NLF inaction, but puzzled as to why they had let the elections occur unchallenged.[15]

Most South Vietnamese voters understood that they had participated in a carefully staged political show mainly to please their American patrons. They viewed the election as an American-directed performance with a Vietnamese

cast. The U.S. officials had tried to keep a low profile; they had endeavored to let the South Vietnamese develop their own version of democratic elections. But in the end, the Americans interfered enough to poison the whole political process. The new government neither validated democracy nor respected the rights of its opponents. Nor did the election move pacification forward. But the Thieu-Ky victory, however dubious it might appear to be within a Vietnamese political context, meant that the military junta would remain in power, Americans would remain in South Vietnam, and the war would go on. Behind the democratic facade and the U.S. officials' spin, the South Vietnamese leaders continued to provide inefficient authoritarian governance. They also continued to lack a broad popular base of support, and continued to lack any real legitimacy.

From mid-1965 to the end of 1967, while the Americans escalated both the air war against North Vietnam and the ground war in South Vietnam, the South Vietnamese government failed to eliminate its underlying political weaknesses. Pacification floundered, and the Thieu-Ky regime remained a narrowly based military directorate dependent on continuing American support to remain in power. The large-scale U.S. military effort could not compensate for the continuing failure of the South Vietnamese to erect a stable government and build a viable nation. The American war proved either irrelevant to nation-building or exacerbated its problems.

The impact of the U.S. war—with its half-million troops, thousands of civilians, and billions of dollars—strained and disrupted the South Vietnamese economy.[16] Saigon became a boomtown whose prosperity was based on a single industry, war. The former "Paris of the Orient" became a crowded, noisy metropolis, its streets clogged with traffic and its hotels, restaurants, bars, nightclubs, casinos, and brothels teeming with American soldiers, civilian advisers, journalists, and tourists. Many Saigonese found work providing services to the Americans and to their fellow Vietnamese who profited from the war economy. Corruption became a way of life for many South Vietnamese officials. They siphoned off large amounts of the U.S. aid in a variety of ways. In many cases, the U.S. agencies paid millions of dollars for imaginary goods and services that were never provided. The black market became a big business trafficking in huge amounts of stolen American consumer goods, weapons, and illegal currency exchanges.[17] For years, one could buy anything in Saigon, anything, that is, but hearts and minds, victory, or peace.

As the U.S. presence in South Vietnam expanded, tensions between the Americans and Vietnamese increased. Because of their profound cultural differences, the Americans and Vietnamese had to struggle to understand each other across a vast chasm of mutual ignorance and misperceptions. The exigencies of fighting a war and building a nation exacerbated the already tense relations between the two allies. Because the VietCong had infiltrated every echelon of both the government's civilian agencies and its armed forces, security leaks posed chronic problems. The U.S. commanders were forced to keep all Vietnamese off of their major bases and to withhold details of

major military operations from their ARVN counterparts in order to maintain security.

"The paradox arose of the Americans fighting on behalf of an army (and a government) that they treated with disdain, even contempt."[18] The U.S. soldiers often spoke openly and derisively of their South Vietnamese allies. They wondered why the enemy's soldiers often seemed braver and fought harder than the ARVN forces. A stark contradiction evolved between the official political objectives for which Americans were fighting in Southeast Asia—the freedom and independence of the South Vietnamese people and the reality of a war in which Americans often bypassed both the RVN and its military forces as they designed and carried out the U.S. campaigns aimed at defeating the VietCong and the NVA units fighting in the South.

The apparent indifference of many Vietnamese to the welfare of U.S. soldiers who were dying in battle trying to protect them infuriated American troops. The uncanny ability of the villagers to avoid mines and booby traps that killed and maimed the U.S. soldiers led many troops to assume that these people cooperated with the enemy or that they were the enemy. The U.S. soldiers, upon entering a village after taking fire from it or its vicinity, unable to tell which of its inhabitants were "friendlies" and which were VietCong or VietCong sympathizers, tended to assume that all of the villagers were either real or potential enemies. Over the course of a long war, these resentments, fears, and suspicions would yield a toxic harvest.[19]

Diplomatic Charades, 1965–67

As the American war in Vietnam expanded, pressures for a negotiated settlement of the conflict also escalated. From early 1965 until the end of 1967, White House officials estimated that as many as 2,000 individual efforts were made to begin peace talks between Washington and Hanoi. President Johnson claimed in his memoirs that he personally followed 72 negotiation initiatives.[20] Neither side could ignore the many diplomatic efforts initiated by third parties concerned with bringing together American and North Vietnamese negotiators to halt the war, but they consistently refused to make the concessions necessary to initiate serious peace talks. The more both sides invested in the conflict, the less willing they were to consider negotiating. The escalating military stalemate bred a diplomatic impasse as both sides maneuvered to score "PR" points with the international community and world public opinion.

Hanoi repeatedly denounced the U.S. involvement in Vietnam as a violation of the 1954 Geneva Accords. North Vietnamese leaders insisted that the United States would have to cease all acts of war against Vietnam, dismantle its bases, and remove all of its military forces before any talks could begin. They further insisted that the political destiny of South Vietnam would be determined in accordance with the program of the NLF. The Saigon regime would be replaced by a coalition government dominated by the NLF. Hanoi's

leaders clearly indicated that they considered the question of Vietnam's unity to be fundamental and nonnegotiable: "The unity of our country is no more a matter for negotiations than our independence."[21]

According to the view from Hanoi, there was no role for the United States to play in determining the political destiny of South Vietnam. America would have to withdraw all of its troops from that country, after which the RVN would doubtlessly collapse or be overthrown. Hanoi would then proceed to unify Vietnam under its control. DRV leaders believed that great power diplomatic interests and the U.S. intervention in South Vietnam after Geneva had deprived the Vietminh of the political dividends that should have accrued from their military victory over the French, which was control of a unified country with a sovereign government.

The Communists were determined never to entrust their political future to others again. This time, they would determine the political outcome of the Vietnam War, that is, the outcome of the current phase of a war that had been going intermittently since 1946. Hence, they made American withdrawal from Vietnam a precondition for negotiations and declared the unity of Vietnam to be a nonnegotiable item. Given the battlefield realities existing during the 1965–67 period, Hanoi's diplomatic stance did not represent the negotiating position of a nation seriously concerned with a diplomatic resolution of the Vietnam War. It reflected the diplomatic posturing of leaders who were determined to win the war and confident that in time they would.

Even as the Johnson administration transformed the war during the first six months of 1965 from a civil war between factions of Vietnamese into an international conflict in which U.S. air and ground forces waged war against both the NLF and DRV, many sources initiated efforts to negotiate an end to the fighting. Some of these peace feelers emanated from the Johnson administration itself. In February 1965, UN Secretary-General U Thant told the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson that Hanoi would be willing to send negotiators to meet with the U.S. envoys in an unaligned country. The offer was rejected by President Johnson. In May 1965, Johnson ordered a bombing pause and accompanied it with a peace feeler, given the code name Project Mayflower. He sought to have Soviet officials tell the DRV leaders that the bombing pause signaled Washington's desire for a peaceful resolution of the war. Apparently, Hanoi never got the message. The most concrete proposal came from France. Mai Van Bo, the DRV ambassador to Paris, told French officials that Hanoi would be willing to consider its stated position a subject for negotiations rather than a set of preconditions. The French promptly relayed this information to Washington, which ignored it. Several more peace feelers occurred before the end of the year. None even came close to getting negotiations started.[22]

Washington promulgated its negotiating position at the beginning of 1966, mostly for propaganda purposes. Johnson was more concerned with the appearance than the reality of actually starting negotiations. The President, planning to escalate the air war against North Vietnam, halted the bombing

during the Christmas holiday. He combined the bombing halt with a diplomatic offensive, sending administration officials around the world and across America to explain that the United States was ready to negotiate with Hanoi without insisting that they meet any preconditions. But the United States offered to halt the bombing of North Vietnam only after Hanoi had stopped infiltrating men and supplies into South Vietnam. Washington would withdraw all of its troops from South Vietnam only after an "acceptable political settlement" had been reached. That is, Washington showed no interest in a negotiated solution not on its own terms.

While agreeing that the political destiny of South Vietnam would have to be worked out by the South Vietnamese themselves, Washington refused to allow the NLF to join any South Vietnamese government. They would allow their views to be represented, but only after Hanoi stopped all "acts of aggression." "Beneath these ambiguous words rested a firm determination to maintain an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam."[23] Johnson's insistence that he favored unconditional negotiations masked a U.S. diplomatic stance that was no more acceptable to Hanoi than its positions were to Johnson. McNamara also acknowledged that part of Johnson's motivation for halting the bombing was to prepare American and world public opinions for more escalations. Johnson did not expect Hanoi to accept his overtures.

Hanoi promptly denounced the U.S. bombing pause as a sham and rejected Johnson's terms for negotiations. They dismissed as a species of political fiction Washington's claim that a sovereign nation with a legitimate government existed in the southern half of Vietnam. They sharply differentiated between what they regarded as illegitimate American interventions into the affairs of their country and their own legitimate involvement in the RVN's internal affairs. Hanoi refused to consider performing any reciprocal acts to get the Americans to halt the bombing and insisted that only their negotiating positions offered a basis for a correct political settlement of the war.[24] Johnson, anticipating the rebuff, resumed the air war against North Vietnam on January 31, 1966.

Even though both sides remained far apart and neither country appeared willing to make the kinds of concessions that might have brought them closer to negotiations, various third parties tried to bring Hanoi and Washington to the bargaining table. One of these initiatives involved the Polish diplomat Januscz Lewandowski. He persuaded the U.S. officials to offer North Vietnam a proposal that he claimed would circumvent Hanoi's refusal to consider reciprocal actions in return for a bombing halt. In exchange for the United States halting the bombing, Hanoi would only have to give private assurances that they would stop their infiltration into South Vietnam within a reasonable time. When the U.S. officials could verify that the infiltration had in fact stopped, Washington would freeze its combat forces at current levels, and negotiations between the two sides could begin.[25]

Lewandowski's initiative, code-named MARIGOLD, never had a chance. A few days before the Polish envoy was scheduled to meet for talks with

Communist leaders in Hanoi, Johnson ordered the U.S. aircraft to bomb rail yards near the center of the capital. Some of the planes inadvertently bombed nearby residential neighborhoods and caused civilian casualties. Hanoi, assuming that Johnson was combining a new negotiating proposal with an expanded bombing effort, refused to meet with Lewandowski. It is unlikely that Hanoi was prepared to accept the Polish diplomat's formula had the air attacks not occurred. But the bombing killed whatever prospects MARIGOLD may have had, because the North Vietnamese refused to be pressured into negotiations, or to give the appearance of being pressured into negotiations. Lewandowski had to abandon his efforts, and "the Polish initiative ended in fiasco."[26] In 1967, a peace initiative developed by British Prime Minister Harold Wilson that attempted to employ the good offices of Soviet President Alexei Kosygin met a similar fate.

During the period when both sides were escalating their war efforts, all third-party initiatives, however well-intentioned or balanced, were destined for failure. Starting negotiations between Washington and Hanoi depended mainly on the willingness of the belligerents to compromise. Neither was prepared to do so because each side remained confident that it was going to win the war and that it would then be in a position to force the other side to make concessions that would be tantamount to accepting political defeat. Leaders in Washington and Hanoi both strove to appear responsive to all serious peace proposals. They also tried to exploit those proposals for propaganda purposes to make it appear that their adversary was the one pressing the war, was not interested in genuine negotiations, and was the aggressor.

During the summer of 1967, as both international and domestic pressures for a negotiated settlement intensified, each side became slightly more flexible. Johnson sent a Harvard professor of international relations, Henry Kissinger, to Paris to meet with French intermediaries who had long-standing personal connections with North Vietnam's two principal leaders, Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong. The two Frenchmen, Herbert Marcovich and Raymond Aubrac, had previously met with both leaders in Hanoi. Both Ho and Dong denounced the United States, but appeared to hold out hope for a diplomatic resolution of the conflict and suggested that reunification might occur over an extended period of time. In secret meetings, code-named Pennsylvania, with the Frenchmen, Kissinger was sufficiently encouraged to relay an administration offer to the Communist leaders: Washington would stop the bombing with the understanding that a pause would lead promptly to the start of productive talks between the U.S. and North Vietnamese officials. While the secret talks occurred in Paris, Johnson, in a major speech delivered in San Antonio, Texas, on September 29, indicated that he would stop the bombing if it would lead to the start of productive peace talks.

For the next two months, both sides danced around the issue of when a U.S. bombing halt should occur, what reciprocal acts would be required of the North Vietnamese, and what negotiations might achieve. Johnson, not trusting the North Vietnamese and responding to the concerns of his more hawkish

senior advisers, continued the bombing. The North Vietnamese leaders, not trusting the Americans, reverted to their long-held position that the United States would have to halt all bombing of North Vietnam unconditionally and then perhaps talks could begin.[27] The Pennsylvania talks collapsed. Johnson remained committed to maintaining a pro-Western government in power in South Vietnam. Hanoi remained committed to unifying all of Vietnam under its control. Negotiations could not begin to bridge that gulf in 1966 or 1967.

There is no reason to assume that any of the peace initiatives could have succeeded no matter how adroitly they were handled, given the unwillingness of the belligerents to make concessions. Both countries continued to try to win the war to control the political destiny of South Vietnam. By early 1967, Le Duan, despite facing considerable opposition to his aggressive policies coming from senior officials within the Politburo, had decided to forego negotiations and pursue a decisive military victory. Toward the end of the year, far from responding positively to any peace initiatives, Duan was preparing to launch large-scale attacks on cities and towns all across South Vietnam.[28]

"The search for negotiations with Hanoi between 1965 and 1968 is one of the most fruitless chapters in U.S. diplomacy."[29] All the diplomatic initiatives undertaken during those years were destined for failure.

Cracks in the Cold War Consensus, 1965–66

At the time the Johnson administration made its fateful decisions during the spring and summer of 1965 to mount an air war against North Vietnam and to send ground combat forces to fight in South Vietnam, decisions that committed the United States to fighting a major war in Southeast Asia, a large majority of American families enjoyed a life of unprecedented material abundance and comfort. The affluent, mostly white middle class created by the post-World War II economic expansion maintained an abiding faith in American institutions. A wide consensus that cut across most political, economic, and social lines believed that the United States had successfully waged the Cold War against the Soviet Union and its clients. The Communist threat to the Free World had been contained. Nearly all Americans were accustomed to supporting their political leaders and trusted them to make the right foreign policy decisions and to keep the citizenry informed of their actions.[30]

Within a few years, controversy over the Vietnam War, linked to the Civil Rights movement and other insurgencies, had fundamentally altered the American social and political landscapes. Almost every institution was affected—universities, Congress, the presidency itself, the major political parties, the armed forces, the media, trade unions, and the churches. The Cold War consensus had been shattered irretrievably. Americans were profoundly divided, confused, and distressed. By the summer of 1967, public opinion polls revealed that large numbers of Americans no longer trusted their political leaders or believed that they were waging the Cold War effectively.[31] A majority of Americans had become disenchanted with the Vietnam War and

called for its speedy conclusion; however, they disagreed vehemently among themselves about how to end the controversial war.

The Johnson administration, by taking the nation to war in Vietnam, had also simultaneously called forth domestic opposition to its war policies. A diverse peace movement, recruited from left-wing radical and liberal groups that had coalesced in the mid-1950s to try to defuse the Cold War and to ban atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons, formed the core of the emerging opposition to the Vietnam War. Between 1963 and 1965, peace advocacy in this country was reoriented from "ban the bomb" rallies to protesting the growing U.S. war in Vietnam.

To call the various organizations and activities constituting the opposition to the expanding war in Vietnam during 1965–67, a "movement" can be misleading, for the term implies a coherency of organizational structures and a congruency of tactics, strategies, goals, and ideologies that never existed among the many diverse antiwar groups. Typically, they were action-oriented gatherings of people committed to ending the war in Vietnam and often were involved in other reform causes such as civil rights and women's liberation. Some organizations, such as the SDS, generated a sophisticated political analysis and ideological rationale for their antiwar activities, but most antiwar activists did not. Few antiwar protesters had well-defined institutional affiliations or embraced a coherent ideology or politics. However, all protesters felt a strong personal commitment to the cause, and it was that passionate commitment that gave the antiwar movement what political cohesion it possessed. Antiwar organizations did not usually recruit members, nor did citizens affiliate with them in any formal sense.

> There was no way to join; you simply announced or felt yourself to be a part of the movement—usually through some act like joining a protest march.[32]

It was this sense of belonging to a community organized for political action that attracted young people, many of them enrolled in the nation's colleges and universities, to become involved in antiwar activities.

A schism quickly appeared between liberal and radical antiwar activists and persisted for the duration of the movement. Protesters divided over both strategies and goals. Liberals sought to strengthen the U.S. international leadership for peace in the world; radicals indicted the United States as the major source of war and injustice in the world. Liberals called for the rule of international law and the strengthening of the United Nations; radicals wanted to liberate and empower poor people, both at home and abroad. Liberals sought to change American foreign policy; radicals wanted a fundamental transformation of the structures of power and wealth within the United States and the world. Liberals were committed to political action, to working within the established political system via electoral action and citizen lobbying; radicals were committed to direct action and acts of civil disobedience against

an unjust society. Liberals sought a negotiated settlement of the Indochina conflict—a settlement that would end the fighting, phase out the American involvement, and restore political stability to that part of the world. Radicals demanded an immediate U.S. disengagement from Indochina: "America—Out of Vietnam—NOW!" became their rallying call.[33]

At a deeper level, the divisions within antiwar ranks between liberals and radicals turned on a debate over American values and institutions, and over the meaning of American culture itself. Could American institutions be reformed? Radicals thought not. They believed that American politics had to be radically transformed; some radicals thought that it was time for a second American revolution that would be part of a global revolution. In combination with angry African Americans, radicalized students, and others, militants sought to create new political structures and build a new political movement outside of the mainstream political institutions. Just as the VietCong, whom they supported, were resisting illegitimate authority in the jungles of Southeast Asia, domestic radicals would liberate the American people from homegrown tyrannies. The radical antiwar movement was an integral part of the cultural revolution that swept America during the late 1960s. Domestic political and cultural upheavals, and radical antiwar activism reciprocally energized one another.

Liberals, by contrast, believed that the problem was not with American culture, but with the U.S. Vietnam War policy. Liberals did not want to remake America; they wanted to end a war they believed was futile and unnecessary. They did not take sides in the war, but sought to end it. Liberal antiwar activists did not try to restructure American politics. They tried to work within a political system they regarded as sufficiently flexible and open, which could be used to bring about a change in the government's Vietnam War policy.[34] Liberal antiwar activists, who were always far more numerous than their radical counterparts, considered the radical analysis of American culture and politics seriously flawed. They also considered radical calls for a new American revolution as unnecessary and quixotic. For their part, militants considered liberal pacifists naive believers in a bankrupt political system that caused wars and exploited poor people within "Amerika" and the Third World.

As the American war in Vietnam expanded, hawkish critics of Johnson's war policies occupied a prominent place in the developing debate over the war. Hawks, a mix of conservative Republicans, southern Democrats, and Cold War liberals, all devout believers in the containment ideology, viewed the conflict in Vietnam as a crucial component of the global struggle with Communism for control of the planet's political future. Hawks felt strongly that America must hold the line against Communist aggression, lest an important ally in Southeast Asia succumb to the Red tide. Hawks believed that if South Vietnam fell to the Communists, the Soviets and Chinese would press their advantage elsewhere in that strategically important region. Additional allies and neutral nations would fall to Communism, and the security of America itself would be undermined in time. Hawks, convinced that the United States

possessed the military power to demolish the VietCong and North Vietnamese forces if the wraps were removed, were frustrated by the restraints that civilian leaders had clamped on the U.S. military forces. They demanded that President Johnson "do whatever was necessary to attain victory."[35]

During the first three years of the American war in Vietnam, 1965–67, Johnson was much more responsive to hawkish critics of his war policies than he was to dovish protesters. He viewed hawks as more influential politically and more likely to reflect mainstream public opinion than liberal and radical antiwar protesters.

Opposition to the war took various forms from 1965 to 1967. The earliest protests were the aforementioned teach-ins and the first antiwar demonstration staged in the nation's capital by SDS in the spring of 1965. It was the bombing of North Vietnam that aroused antiwar activists more than any other aspect of the government's war policy. During that year, there were comparatively few antiwar activists and few protest demonstrations. Public opinion polls taken during the first year of the American war in Vietnam consistently showed strong popular support for the conflict. Most Americans still expected a U.S. victory; no one imagined a Communist victory.

Polls also reflected intense popular resentment of the antiwar protesters.[36] One factor that provoked intense negative responses to antiwar demonstrations was the participation of youthful adherents of the 1960s counterculture in some of the protest movements. These "hippies," with their outlandish costumes and bizarre forms of protest, added a satirical quality to the antiwar movement, sometimes turning it into a street theater of the absurd. Hippies sometimes disrupted antiwar demonstrations, provoked police reprisals, and further alienated the peace movement from the American society they proposed to change. Administration officials and the prominent media focused on these countercultural protesters, inflaming the already intensely negative popular response to the fledgling antiwar movement.

Beginning in late January 1966, and lasting for six days, Senator William Fulbright, angry at the President whom he believed had misled him and concerned about the expanding war, used his Foreign Relations Committee to held televised hearings on all aspects of the administration's war policy. By holding the hearings, Fulbright dramatically broke with a president of his own party and transited from Cold War liberal to active dissenter. Fulbright and colleagues grilled administration defenders such as Secretary of State Dean Rusk and General Maxwell Taylor. They also provided a significant platform for prominent critics of the administration's war policies, including George Kennan and Retired General James Gavin. Kennan, one of the principal architects of America's Cold War foreign policy who in 1946 had coined the term "containment," scathingly dismissed Vietnam as one of the most marginal regions in the world and of utterly no consequence for the U.S. foreign policy makers. He observed that the United States could best serve its national interests and strengthen its standing among its major allies by liquidating its military involvement in Southeast Asia as rapidly as possible. General Gavin,

the famed commander of the 82nd Airborne during the World War II Normandy Invasion, was critical of the administration's rapid escalation of both the air and ground wars without having a coherent strategic plan.

Kennan and Gavin, breaking ranks with the foreign policy elite and the uniformed services, undermined Johnson's insistence that all knowledgeable citizens supported his war policies. An estimated 22 million people watched part or all of the week-long hearings. A book-length publication of all transcripts of the hearings became an instant best-seller. A Gallup poll taken shortly after the hearings ended showed a significant drop in public support for Johnson's war policies. Most importantly, Fulbright's hearings altered the public image of opponents of war. They also provided antiwar sentiment with a legitimacy that it had previously lacked and strengthened the ranks of the critics of the U.S. Vietnam War policy.[37]

Johnson's war policies also generated schisms within liberal ranks. Most obviously, there was a split between Cold War liberals who continued to support the expanding American war in Vietnam with varying degrees of enthusiasm and liberal peace advocates who sought a negotiated settlement of the conflict. Peace liberals organized for political action during the 1966 elections. In the Democratic primary election for the Seventh Congressional District of California, a party stronghold encompassing parts of the cities of Berkeley and Oakland, antiwar activist Robert Scheer challenged Jeffery Cohelan, a liberal Democratic congressional incumbent who supported the war. Cohelan easily won reelection, but Scheer did receive 56,000 votes. Through 1965–1966, the antiwar movement continued to operate at the political margins and had no measurable impact on public opinion, Congress, or on administration war policy. The movement remained small, internally divided, local, diverse, and diffuse.[38]

The big winners in the fall 1966 elections were the Republicans, coming back from the debacle of 1964. Republicans picked up 40 seats in the House and gained seven senators. In California, a newcomer to electoral politics, former screen actor and television host Ronald Reagan, was elected the governor by a landslide margin. Reagan, formerly a new deal liberal Democrat turned Goldwaterite Republican, attracted enthusiastic popular support by running on an ideologically conservative platform that called for victory in Vietnam and condemned black militants, student radicals, antiwar protesters, and hippies. Vietnam was rarely an explicit issue in most 1966 election campaigns. What hurt the Democrats most was the white backlash against the urban riots by African Americans during the summers of 1965 and 1966. White working-class voters, many of them trade union members, deserted the Democrats in droves. They opposed civil rights legislation and antipoverty programs, and they loathed the urban rioters and antiwar protesters.

For most of the American people during 1966, the Vietnam War was not yet a major cause for concern. It was still a faraway war that was financially profitable, and it gratified the American penchant for anti-Communist crusades. The U.S. economy was booming, living standards for most Americans

had never been higher, and few Americans had to make any sacrifices for the war. American youngsters were much more involved with rock 'n' roll music than a war in some faraway Southeast Asian country most had never heard of. A large majority of Americans united in support of the war to maintain an anti-Communist government in Saigon, although they disagreed over whether the goal could be better achieved by military escalation or negotiations.[39] But as 1966 was ending, signs of war weariness appeared, and there was growing dissatisfaction with the government's war policy.

War at Home

By the spring of 1967, any illusions Americans had about achieving a quick and easy victory in Vietnam had largely receded. America found itself mired in an escalating military stalemate in Indochina. Nor could the United States get an acceptable political solution to the conflict, given the battlefield realities, the grave political weaknesses of the RVN, and the negotiating stance taken by Hanoi. The U.S. casualties announced on March 10, 1967—232 killed in action **(KIA)** and another 1,381 wounded **(WIA)**, over 1,600 casualties in all—were the highest yet for any week of the war. A few days later, Congress passed a $20 billion supplemental appropriations bill to pay for the rapidly escalating costs of the war.[40] At the time, polls showed that a majority of the American public was still supportive of the war, and the prominent national media continued to back the government's policy.

As 1967 unfolded, opposition to the war increased rapidly and public support for the conflict eroded. Mainstream press coverage of the war was becoming more independent of government influence and more critical of the U.S. policy. Antiwar rallies, marches, and demonstrations increased in size, occurred more frequently, and developed more militant tactics during 1967, the first year of significant nationwide protest against the Vietnam War. On April 15, the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, called "The Mobe" for short, a coalition of liberal and radical protest leaders, staged large antiwar demonstrations in San Francisco and New York City. About 50,000 people participated in the San Francisco demonstration and as many as 200,000 people converged on New York's Central Park for an afternoon of speeches and music.[41] Protesters gathered daily in front of the White House to chant, "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids have you killed today?" and "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, [the] NLF is going to win."[42]

The most prominent civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., joined the antiwar ranks during the spring of 1967, adding greatly to the peace movement's sense of growth and momentum. In a sermon delivered at New York's Riverside Church on April 4, 1967, the Nobel laureate established himself as a leading spokesman for the peace cause. He blamed America for the war and called for a speedy end to the fighting. He urged all men of humane conviction to protest the war in whatever way was appropriate. He declared that Vietnam was "a symptom of a far deeper malady" that caused the United

States, in the name of anti-Communism, to oppose the rightful demands of oppressed people everywhere who were seeking freedom and dignity. King claimed that anti-Communism had caused America to stray from its commitments to brotherhood and peace, and he called upon his country to return to its rightful home.[43]

Another prominent African American also defied the government's war policy. Heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, who had joined the Nation of Islam sect, refused induction into the Army on religious grounds. Ali, who had avoided the draft in 1964 when he failed a qualifying psychological test, was reclassified as 1A under the Army's lowered standards, making him eligible to be drafted. However as a Muslim, Ali believed that only Allah could command him to go to war. He announced that he would not serve in Vietnam. He appealed for an exemption, claiming that he was entitled to conscientious objector status because of his religious faith. Government attorneys argued successfully that "Black Muslims" were not eligible for conscientious objector status because they did not oppose all wars, only particular wars. Ali's draft board pronounced his religious views "insincere" and refused his request for a deferment. Ali replied:

> It would be no trouble for me to accept on the basis that I'll go into the armed services boxing exhibitions in Vietnam, or traveling the country at the expense of the government, if it wasn't against my conscience to do it. I wouldn't give up the millions that I gave up and my image with the American public, if I wasn't sincere.[44]

On April 28, 1967, after three appeals for conscientious objector status were denied, Ali was forced to appear at an induction center in Houston. When he was ordered to step forward symbolizing induction, he refused. Two months later, a Houston jury convicted him of draft evasion. He was sentenced to five years in federal prison and fined $10,000, the maximum penalties allowed under the law. He would also be stripped of his passport and heavyweight title, and was banned from fighting in the United States. He stayed out of prison while his conviction was on appeal. He spoke out against the war and the treatment of people of color within the United States. He became one of the iconic personalities of the Vietnam War era, admired by opponents of the war and reviled by its supporters. In Clay aka Ali v. The United States, decided June 28, 1971, the Supreme Court overturned his conviction, ruling 8-0 that Ali had met all the requirements for obtaining conscientious objector status. Later that year, he returned to boxing and fought Joe Frazier for a record purse of $2.5 million.

Alarmed by the rising antiwar protest activities taking place in the country, "America's internal security services, including local police, the Federal Bureau of Investigation ((FBI), and even military intelligence, initiated efforts to subvert the peace movement in the guise of gathering information about it."[45] The Secret Service, the IRS, and the Justice Department were also involved in probing protest organizations and prominent war opponents.

Johnson ordered the CIA in violation of its charter, to investigate prominent antiwar organizations and individuals. Although the CIA later reported to Johnson that its agents could find no evidence that either foreign or domestic Communists controlled the antiwar movement, the president falsely claimed that they had. According to the CIA report to Johnson, many of the peace activists had close Communist associations but they did not appear to be under Communist direction. Despite the report, Johnson met with a bipartisan congressional group, including House minority leader Gerald Ford, and told them that he had a "secret" report that documented Communist control of major antiwar organizations. Although Johnson did not possess any hard evidence to substantiate his belief, he was utterly convinced that the peace organizations were controlled by Communist organizers in the service of Moscow, Beijing, and Hanoi.[46]

The FBI infiltrated many antiwar organizations. Surveillant agents collected an extensive file of documents on individuals and organizations involved in various antiwar activities, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Mario Savio, and the National Council of Churches.[47] FBI agents often employed illegal wiretaps and staged break-ins of the offices and homes of antiwar activists. The FBI also used *agents provocateurs* to provoke violent confrontations with police and to take other violent actions that discredited antiwar organizations in the public's eyes. The massive efforts made by the U.S. officials amounted to repression of American citizens trying to exercise their constitutionally protected rights to protest actions taken by their government, which they opposed.

The government's public relations strategy was to try to diminish the significance of the antiwar demonstrations by emphasizing how few people were involved in protest activities and by depicting them as a radical fringe of hippies and Communists. Most of the national new media followed the government's lead in redbaiting and belittling the antiwar movement.

By the summer of 1967, public opinion polls were getting harder to read. Polls also revealed both mass citizen apathy and ambivalence concerning the war. Nearly half of the citizens polled did not know enough about the Vietnam War to express an informed opinion. Although still supportive of the war effort, a majority of Americans no longer expressed confidence in Johnson's leadership nor expected the war to end any time soon. For the first time, a majority of respondents said that the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War was a mistake. More and more Americans revealed a yearning for an end to the war and liked the idea of turning the conflict over to the South Vietnamese.[47] Most Americans in the summer of 1967 were neither hawks nor doves: "If any bird symbolized the growing public disenchantment with Vietnam, it was the albatross." A housewife succinctly expressed the contradictory attitudes generated by the war: "I want to get out but I don't want to give up."[48]

Media editorials and congressional leaders increasingly voiced criticisms of the U.S. Vietnam policy. Polls registered a widening "credibility gap," as a pervasive mistrust of government spread through the body politic. Some

Americans saw the Vietnam War as only the most dramatic symbol of a spreading malaise infecting American society, a society increasingly marked by race riots, street demonstrations, and violent crime. The Vietnam War was coming home during that long hot summer of 1967. As the American consensus fractured and civility disappeared from public life, people feared that the Great Society was becoming a sick society.[49]

Fighting the Vietnam-Era Draft

One of the earliest forms of antiwar protest was expressed in opposition to the draft. Attacking conscription offered protesters a dramatic way to show how the war directly touched American families. Radical pacifists staged the first public draft card burning ceremony in New York's Foley Square on October 28, 1965.[50] As the Vietnam War expanded in 1966 and 1967, the size of monthly draft calls grew larger, and the number of young conscripts being sent to fight in Vietnam increased. The number of young people resisting conscription also increased. Voluntary associations offering draft counseling proliferated. A new do-it-yourself literary genre appeared: manuals and handbooks instructing readers how to apply for conscientious objector status and other kinds of deferments and exemptions from military service. A radical historian, Staughton Lynd, emerged as a leader of the militant antidraft movement, urging young men to oppose conscription and support draft resistance. The SDS also supported draft resistance as an effective means of attacking the Vietnam War.[51]

The draft had become a generational obsession by 1967. The success of millions of mostly middle- and upper-middle-class young men in evading the conscription system either legitimately or illegitimately highlighted a fundamental reality: the conscription system in place during the Vietnam War era was riddled with inequities. The basic source of all draft inequities derived from a fact of political demography—the potential pool of draft-eligible young men between 1964 and 1973, an estimated 27 million people, vastly exceeded the number of soldiers needed by the armed forces, whether they enlisted or were conscripted.

About two-thirds of the young men, who came of draft age during the Vietnam War era, avoided military service. Between August 10, 1964, when President Johnson signed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution formally making the Vietnam conflict an American war, and March 28, 1973, when the last American soldier exited Vietnam, 18 million draft-eligible young men avoided military service. Most of these evaders found legal means of avoiding the draft. They obtained deferments or exemptions by exercising their legitimate rights under the prevailing conscription system. Others manipulated the system to achieve their deferments or exemptions. Motivated primarily by a desire to avoid the Vietnam-era draft, they went to college, got married and fathered children, or obtained jobs in "critical" (exempted) occupations. Medically fit young men, aided by draft counselors and sympathetic doctors, found ways to obtain deferments, often on psychological grounds. Of the 18 million draft-eligibles who avoided military service, 11 million obtained deferments

or exemptions, 4 million drew high lottery numbers during the two years that the lottery draft operated, and another 3 million young men avoided military service because Selective Service lost or mishandled their files.[52]

Aware that all the branches of military service required far fewer men than the available pool could provide, the director of the Selective Service, General Lewis Hershey, designed a system of "channeling" men into certain occupations and professions. Using the draft as a lever, Hershey pressured young men to remain in colleges and universities, to enter certain critical occupations, which were often linked to the military-industrial complex, or to enter professions that served national health and safety interests.[53]

Hershey's system worked well enough during the period of peace following the end of the Korean War in 1953 until the American takeover of the war in Vietnam during the summer of 1965. During that time, all military manpower needs were mostly met by volunteers, and draft calls were comparatively low, averaging from 8,000 to 12,000 per month. Only the Army used the draft, although the other military services benefited from enlistees, who, facing the draft, figured that they could do better by volunteering for service in the Navy, Marines, Air Force, or Coast Guard. But there were always hidden class inequities structured into the vitals of the conscription system that were exposed when the Vietnam War became controversial, draft calls rapidly expanded, and casualties mounted.

The dilemma of who served when only a comparative few were needed was resolved by complex processes that permitted most middle- and upper-middle-class young men to avoid military service if they were determined to do so. These processes necessarily shifted the burden of fighting the Vietnam War to youths from lower-middle-class, working-class, minority, and poor backgrounds. The vast majority of U.S. conscripts who fought in the Vietnam War were drawn from the lower rungs of the American social ladder. They were the young men who were either too poor, too uneducated, too unskilled vocationally, or whose families were too lacking in political clout to avoid the war. The draftees who had to fight the U.S. Vietnam War were a cross section not of the entire society, but of its lower-income and disadvantaged classes. Going to the Vietnam War was the price paid by many young men who lacked the connections and resources to avoid conscription.[54]

Other draft-eligible young men chose drastic methods of avoiding the draft and the war. Thousands of young men refused to register for the draft upon turning age 18. Hundreds of thousands refused induction when called. About 40,000 fled the country, mostly to Canada, to avoid military service. Some, in desperation, maimed and mutilated their bodies to disqualify themselves from military service. A handful of young men, adopting the protest method of South Vietnam's Buddhist monks and nuns, publicly immolated themselves.[55]

Many draft-age young men joined the Reserves or the National Guard to avoid active duty and a possible tour in Vietnam. But during the peak years of the war, when monthly draft calls ranged between 30,000 and 50,000 selectees, nearly all Reserve and National Guard units had filled up and most had

long waiting lists. Applicants usually needed political connections to get into one of those draft sanctuaries.

It was always possible that the Reservists and National Guardsmen could be called to active duty and be shipped off to Vietnam. But President Johnson, rejecting the advice of his senior military advisers and Secretary of Defense McNamara, refused to activate most of these forces. His refusal accorded with his desire to fight a limited war that would have a limited domestic impact. Had he activated the Reserves and the National Guard, he would have provoked a firestorm of protest from many influential citizens and lost the support of many members of Congress. Most Reserve and National Guard units remained havens for affluent draft evaders for the duration of the war. A high percentage of draft-eligible college graduates and professional athletes could be found in the ranks of the Reserves and the National Guard during the Vietnam War.[56]

Several draft-eligible young men who became prominent American political leaders in the decades following the Vietnam War used various strategies to avoid a possible combat assignment. A future vice president, J. Danforth Quayle, was one of the many affluent young men who obtained a coveted National Guard assignment and sidestepped a possible tour of duty in Vietnam. A future president, George W. Bush, benefiting from his family's political connections, joined the Texas Air National Guard. Another future president, Bill Clinton, manipulated the conscription system to avoid military duty altogether.

In California, several antiwar organizations planned a Stop the Draft Week for mid-October 1967. On Monday, October 16, as newly drafted young men arrived in buses for their physical examinations and induction into the Army, a peaceful sit-in was held at the entrance to the Oakland, California Induction Center at 5:00 A.M. After the group refused orders to leave, the police moved in and arrested over 100 demonstrators. The next day, by 6:00 A.M., 3,500 militants, many affiliated with the SDS, surrounded the entrance to the induction center. After refusing police orders to disperse, they were attacked by the police. The entrance to the induction center was cleared within a few hours. Scores of demonstrators were injured and over 20 people were hospitalized. On Friday, perhaps 10,000 militants showed up and for hours blocked the entrance to the induction center. They were confronted by a force of over 2,000 police. Some demonstrators blocked streets, fought with police, and disrupted traffic over a 20-block area of the city. Many demonstrators and police were injured during the daylong melee.[57]

A week after the demonstrations at the Oakland Induction Center, the nation witnessed the largest yet antiwar demonstration. Held in Washington, D.C., the demonstration was planned and organized by the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam that had organized the demonstrations in New York's Central Park and San Francisco in April. On October 21, the Mobe and other antiwar organizations staged a rally in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., attended by an estimated 100,000 people. It was a warm and sunny fall afternoon and the atmosphere was festive. Many people gave speeches; bands played and people sang. One of most effective speeches came from Dr.

Benjamin Spock, world famous for his book on baby and child care. He told the large crowd that he felt betrayed by President Lyndon Johnson. Spock had campaigned for LBJ in 1964 because he had promised not to escalate the war in Vietnam.

After the speeches, an estimated 30–40,000 demonstrators marched slowly across the Arlington Memorial Bridge and down a service road to a large parking lot north of the Pentagon where they held a second rally. A group of perhaps 4,000 militant protesters attempted unsuccessfully to "invade" the Pentagon, the nerve center of the U.S. war effort. They were stopped by a phalanx of 2,500 federal troops and 200 U.S. marshals. Demonstrators who got past the lines of troops were arrested by the marshals. Most of the demonstrators were disinclined to engage in civil disobedience and disruptive tactics, or to provoke confrontations with soldiers and police. About 200 young militants tried to run up a vehicle ramp going into the building and were surrounded and removed. A few others tried to enter the Pentagon through an unguarded door used by the press and they were thrown out. When the permit expired at 7:00 P.M., approximately 1,500 young people decided to spend the night at the Pentagon. Some youngsters tried to talk to the soldiers facing them with sheathed bayonets, some confronted and taunted them, and a few put flowers in their gun barrels. As the night wore on, government troops attacked the remaining militants in the parking lot and reclaimed the area. Hundreds of protesters were arrested and scores were hospitalized.[58]

Administration officials were well aware of the march and made elaborate plans long in advance for handing what they knew was going to be the first significant national protest demonstration against the Vietnam War. They planned their response as if it were a military campaign. They infiltrated spies into the Mobe to gather intelligence. The Army Security Agency was assigned the important task of monitoring all Mobe communications. A huge security force was marshaled, provided by the FBI, the Secret Service, the U.S. Marshals, The Department of Justice, local police jurisdictions, and numerous military units. Backing up this formidable security force were National Guardsman and 7,861 regular Army troops stationed inside the Pentagon, and just in case they were needed, another 2,485 soldiers from the 82nd Airborne were placed in the Pentagon's inner courtyard. All across the Eastern United States, thousands more federal troops were put on alert.[59]

Most Democratic and Republican Party leaders fiercely assailed the demonstrators as did most news media commentators. President Johnson ostentatiously attended Sunday church services October 22, the morning after the night of rioting at the Pentagon. Polls taken at the time showed that Americans overwhelmingly agreed that antiwar demonstrations hurt the U.S. war effort, aided the Communists, and harmed the antiwar cause. Even though the antiwar movement remained comparatively small and marginal, there was little prowar enthusiasm. Administration officials had tried to organize simultaneous prowar demonstrations without success. Most Americans did not like antiwar activists, but they increasingly did not like the Vietnam War either, and they were pulling away from it.[60]

Lyndon Johnson Promotes the War in Vietnam

Although Most Americans agreed that antiwar demonstrations harmed the war effort, polls showed that increasing numbers of Americans were growing weary of the conflict. As public support for the war declined, more and more newspapers shifted their editorial positions from support to opposition or to raising serious questions about the rightness and efficacy of administration war policy. In the fall of 1967, *Time* and *Life*, two of the nation's most widely read and influential magazines, switched from strong support for the war to expressing serious misgivings about it. The three major television networks—CBS, NBC, and ABC—were becoming more critical and less supportive of the war effort. A survey of 205 members of the House of Representatives taken in the fall of 1967 revealed that 43 Congressmen had recently stopped supporting the war. Within the senate, 40 senators spoke out against the war. What is quite remarkable about the growing number of Congressional opponents of the Vietnam War is that most came from Democratic Party ranks. LBJ, who had won a huge electoral mandate in November 1964, whose party enjoyed large majorities in both houses of Congress, found that his most vocal congressional critics came from his own party. Most Republicans either continued to support the war or kept a prudent silence. Opposition to Johnson's war policy was not a partisan issue; however, it did reflect growing tensions and schisms within the Democratic Party between Cold War hawks and the doves who sought to end the war.[61]

Responding to the October 21 protest and other indicators of growing opposition to his war policy, President Johnson mounted a vigorous a public relations campaign designed to bolster popular support for his war policy. He believed that the U.S. forces were winning the war. The reports Johnson received from MACV headquarters constantly reported news of progress: of the large numbers of the enemy killed, of the supplies captured, and of the villages pacified. Johnson discounted the critics of the war among the Congress, the media, the antiwar groups, and the general public. He regarded them as uninformed, lacking in nerve, and, in the case of antiwar activists, disloyal. Johnson tended to personalize criticisms of his war policy, and he deeply resented them. He believed that if his critics only understood what he was trying to do, they would support him enthusiastically.[62]

Presidential aides formed a citizens committee headed by former presidents Truman and Eisenhower to rally public opinion behind the war. President Johnson, seeking to shore up his position, invited former top officials—generals, diplomats, and senior political advisers—to the White House November 2 to meet with him and render their opinions about his Vietnam War policy. This informal advisory group, dubbed the "wise men," endorsed Johnson's war policy, although they voiced concern about spreading public disenchantment with the war.[63]

Johnson also brought Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and General Westmoreland home to make optimistic speeches about Vietnam. Ambassador Bunker provided the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with an upbeat assessment of the war. General Westmoreland told a National Press Club audience, "We

have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view." He believed that America could begin phasing down the level of U.S. forces and turn more of the fighting over to the ARVN. Soon after Westmoreland's speech, Johnson held a press conference, insisting that America must honor its commitments and stating that the U.S. forces were making progress. He exhorted the American people to hang tough—that victory was in sight. Westmoreland, back in Vietnam, announced that the enemy had suffered such severe losses that it could no longer mount an offensive anywhere in Vietnam. Appearing on the CBS television program *Face the Nation*, Ambassador Bunker delivered a line that quickly joined the ranks of classic misstatements: "I think we are beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel."[64]

As government officials appealed for support of the Vietnam War and told Americans that victory was coming, dovish critics, mostly academic experts, attacked the government's war policy. In lectures, speeches, essays, articles, and books, they unrelentingly indicted a war policy they thought was wrong, counterproductive, and not serving the U.S. national interest in Southeast Asia. They constantly proposed alternatives: halt the bombing of North Vietnam, recognize the National Liberation Front, and seek a negotiated solution to the problem of who should rule in South Vietnam.

Although publicly vowing to continue to press for victory in Vietnam and exhorting his fellow Americans to stay the course, Johnson privately was not so optimistic. He read top-secret CIA reports that noted that the NLF and NVA forces had adapted their tactics to the expanded U.S. war effort and showed no signs of being defeated or discouraged. He began to consider a change in his Vietnam strategy during the fall of 1967. Influenced by McNamara, other civilian advisers, and some of the more cautious "wise men," Johnson began to reappraise his war policies with an eye toward reducing the U.S. casualties and transferring greater responsibility for the ground war to the South Vietnamese armed forces. He remained committed to saving South Vietnam from a Communist takeover, but his thoughts pointed toward a different strategy, which an official in President Nixon's administration would years later call "Vietnamization."[65]

President Johnson, whatever may have been his private doubts and anxieties, in all of his public appearances and pronouncements concerning his war policies remained invariably optimistic and strongly committed to winning the American war in Vietnam. On December 23, 1967, he made a quick trip to Vietnam. At Cam Rahn Bay, addressing a gathering of U.S. military commanders, including General Westmoreland, Johnson vowed that Americans would fight until they accomplished their mission. On New Year's Day 1968, Johnson stated that the enemy knows he cannot win a military victory. In his State of the Union message on January 17, he told his fellow Americans that the United States will persevere. He declared that 1968 "would be the year of victory in Vietnam."[66]

Even though it was cracking at the edges, Johnson's centrist consensus still remained in place at the beginning of the year.[67] But the American people would continue to support the war only as long as President Johnson could convince them that victory was nigh. Neither the president nor the people

could know that for six months the Communists had been planning a major offensive designed to destroy the ARVN, provoke popular uprisings against the RVN that would bring down the Thieu government, and force the Americans out of that country. The Tet-68 Offensive would be the most important military campaign of the American war in Vietnam. It would shatter all hopes of imminent American victory, transform the American political scene, and provoke a major crisis in Washington.

Notes

1 Sheehan et al., "Johnson's Remarks to Officials of U.S. and Saigon at Honolulu," *Pentagon Papers*, Document 111, 495–96.
2 Quoted in Karnow, *Vietnam*, 444.
3 Blaufarb, *Counterinsurgency Era*, 232–33.
4 Kahin, *Intervention*, 413–14; Clarke, *The Final Years*, 128–29; Topmiller, Robert, "The Buddhist Antiwar Movement," in David L. Anderson and John Ernst, eds. *The War That Never Ends.* Lexington, KT The University Press of Kentucky, 2007, 143–49.
5 Kahin, *Intervention*, 423–25; Topmiller, *"Buddhist Antiwar Movement,"* 150–51.
6 Doyle et al., *America Takes Over*, 78–79; Clarke, *The Final Days*, 136.
7 opmiller, "Buddhist Antiwar Movement," 163.
8 Kahin, *Intervention*, 432.
9 Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era*, 225–29; Eric Bergerud, "The Village War in Vietnam, 1965–1973," in David L. Anderson, ed., *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 279–80.
10 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 158.
11 Eric Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 147.
12 Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era*, 229–31; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 159; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 431–32; Clarke, *The Final Years*, 209–12.
13 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 159–60; Prados, *Vietnam*, 209–10.
14 Karnow, *Vietnam*, 451–52; Prados, *Vietnam*, 210.
15 Robert Shaplen, *The Road from War: Vietnam, 1965–1971* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 151; Bergerud, *Dynamics of Defeat*, 177.
16 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 161.
17 Ibid., 162; Hess, *Vietnam*, rev. ed., 99. In 1961, Saigon had a population of 1 million. In December 1967, the U.S. officials estimated that 2,200,000 people lived within the city and another 1 million in the suburbs.
18 Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 31–32. Interviews with soldiers recorded on videotape, "America Takes Charge, 1965–1967," from the television series *Vietnam: A Television History.*
19 Ibid.
20 Goodman, Allen E., *The Lost Peace: America's Search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 23–26.
21 Quoted in Gareth Porter, ed., *A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam, and the Paris Agreement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 29; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 165.
22 Prados, *Vietnam*, 144–47.
23 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 166.
24 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 167.

25 Turner, *Lyndon Johnson's Dual War*, 191–98; Doyle et al., *America Takes Over*, 136–37; Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 250–52.
26 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 215.
27 Ibid., 215–16.
28 Nguyen, Lien-Hang T., *Hanoi's War*, 92–103. Nguyen had access to DRV archival sources and interviewed former high officials within Hanoi's government.
29 Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 24.
30 Ibid., 117.
31 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 170.
32 DeBenedetti, *American Ordeal*, 119–27, 135–36; Melvin Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 31–33. Polls consistently showed that most Americans viewed the protesters as aiding the enemy and undermining American troops fighting in Vietnam. They especially resented male university students who joined the ranks of antiwar activists, considering them to be a privileged elite of cowards and traitors.
33 Doyle et al., *America Takes Over*, 141–52; Prados, *Vietnam*, 164–67.
34 DeBenedetti, *American Ordeal*, 151–52, 157; Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves*, 75.
35 DeBenedetti, *American Ordeal*, 162.
36 Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 49.
37 DeBenedetti, *American Ordeal*, 175–76.
38 Quoted in Herring, *America's Longest War*, 173.
39 King's April 4, 1967, sermon was published as "A Declaration of Independence from War," *Ramparts* 5, no. 11 (May 1967): 33–37.
40 George Moss, "The Vietnam Generation, 1964–1973," unpublished essay, 1984, 13; Lawrence M. Baskir and William A. Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, the War, and the Vietnam Generation* (New York: Random House, 1978), 63, 79, 97.
41 Prados, *Vietnam*, 168–69.
42 Both quotes are from Herring, *America's Longest War*, 174.
43 Don Oberdorfer, *Tet! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 79–81; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 174–75; Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, 112–13. Three times during 1967, the Gallup poll asked people: do you think the Johnson administration is or is not telling the public all it should know about the Vietnam War? Each time, only 21–24 percent answered yes; 65–70 percent answered no.
44 DeBenedetti, *American Ordeal*, 128–29.
45 Prados, *Vietnam*, 167–68.
46 Charles DeBenedetti, "A CIA Analysis of the Antiwar Movement: October 1967," *Peace and Change* 9 (Spring 1983): 31–41; Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 186–89.
47 Prados, V*ietnam*, 168–69.
48 Both quotes are from Herring, *America's Longest War, 174.*
49 Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, 112–13. Three times during 1967 the Gallup poll asked people: do you think the Johnson administration is telling the public all it should know about the Vietnam War? Each time only 21–24 percent answered yes; 65–70 percent answered no.
50 Debenedetti, *American Ordeal*, 128–29.
51 Ibid., 165–67.
52 Moss, *Vietnam Generation*, 3–7.
53 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 238–39.
54 Ibid., 5–6; Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, 8–10.
55 Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, 62–90.

56 Moss, "The Vietnam Generation," 9.
57 Thomas Powers, *Vietnam: The War at Home* (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1973), 236–38; DeBenedetti, *American Ordeal*, 196.
58 Powers, *Vietnam: The War at Home*, 238–40; DeBenedetti, *American Ordeal*, 197–98.
59 Prados, *Vietnam*, 203–205.
60 DeBenedetti, *American Ordeal*, 198–99. Americans, by a 3:1 margin, thought that antiwar demonstrations were acts of disloyalty against American boys fighting in Vietnam and that the demonstrations encouraged the Communists to fight harder. Some 70 percent thought the demonstrations hurt the antiwar cause.
61 Robert J. MacMahon, "Turning Point: The Vietnam War's Pivotal Year, November 1967–November 1968," in David L. Anderson, ed., *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 192–193.
62 Oberdorfer, *Tet!*, 98–99.
63 George Ball, the only "wise man" who opposed Johnson's escalatory policies, excoriated some of the others whom he claimed did not know what they were talking about.
64 Westmoreland is Quoted in Karnow, *Vietnam*, 514; Schlandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 62; Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves*, 120–24. Bunker's statement about seeing the light is quoted in Prados, *Vietnam*, *219.* An often-heard rejoinder was: *"What if the light you see at the end of the tunnel is an onrushing train?*
65 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3rd ed., 200–201.
66 David F. Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 75–76.
67 Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves*, 178. Polls showed a 6 percent increase in public support for Johnson's war policy at year's end.

8 The Tet Offensive, January 30 to March 31, 1968

The Military Campaigns That Changed the Course of the Vietnam War

The Tet Offensive, in Vietnamese commonly called ***Tet Mau Than*** (Tet, year of the Monkey), was the largest and most important military campaign of the American Vietnam War, and it also changed the course of that war. Taking advantage of the cease-fire called to celebrate Tet, the beginning of the lunar new year and Vietnam's most important holiday, some 84,000 PLAF and NVA soldiers launched simultaneous attacks during the early morning hours of January 31, 1968,[1] extending from the demilitarized zone in the north to the Ca Mau peninsula in the south. They attacked five of the six largest cities, including Saigon, 36 of 44 provincial capitals, and 64 of 242 district capitals. Within South Vietnam's beleaguered towns and cities, ARVN forces, supplemented by regional and local militia, their ranks depleted by the absence of many soldiers who went home for the holidays, fought to defend governmental and military installations, the major targets of the enemy assaults. The offensive caught the Allied command by surprise. Convinced that any enemy assaults would occur on the northernmost provinces and the Marine base at Khe Sanh, the Allied leaders "could not conceive of an attack of the magnitude of what occurred during the Tet holiday."[2]

Although caught by surprise, RVN and U.S. troops quickly recovered and counterattacked effectively. Nearly everywhere they repulsed the attackers, using their superior firepower and mobility, usually inflicting severe losses. Almost nowhere did the attackers have time to secure their positions, and they did not receive any significant support from the residents. MACV commander General William Westmoreland quickly judged the Communist offensive to be a complete military failure.[3]

But news of the Tet *coup de main* broke like a thunderclap across America (Figure 8.1). The fact that the enemy could mount a major military effort all over South Vietnam and catch the Allies by surprise shattered all illusions of impending American victory in the war. Tet suggested that all the years of bombing, attrition warfare, pacification, body counts, and computer printouts that claimed, by all quantitative measures, that the United States was winning the war, had not meant a thing. In the wake of Tet, Americans realized that the United States had involved itself in a stalemated war in Southeast Asia.

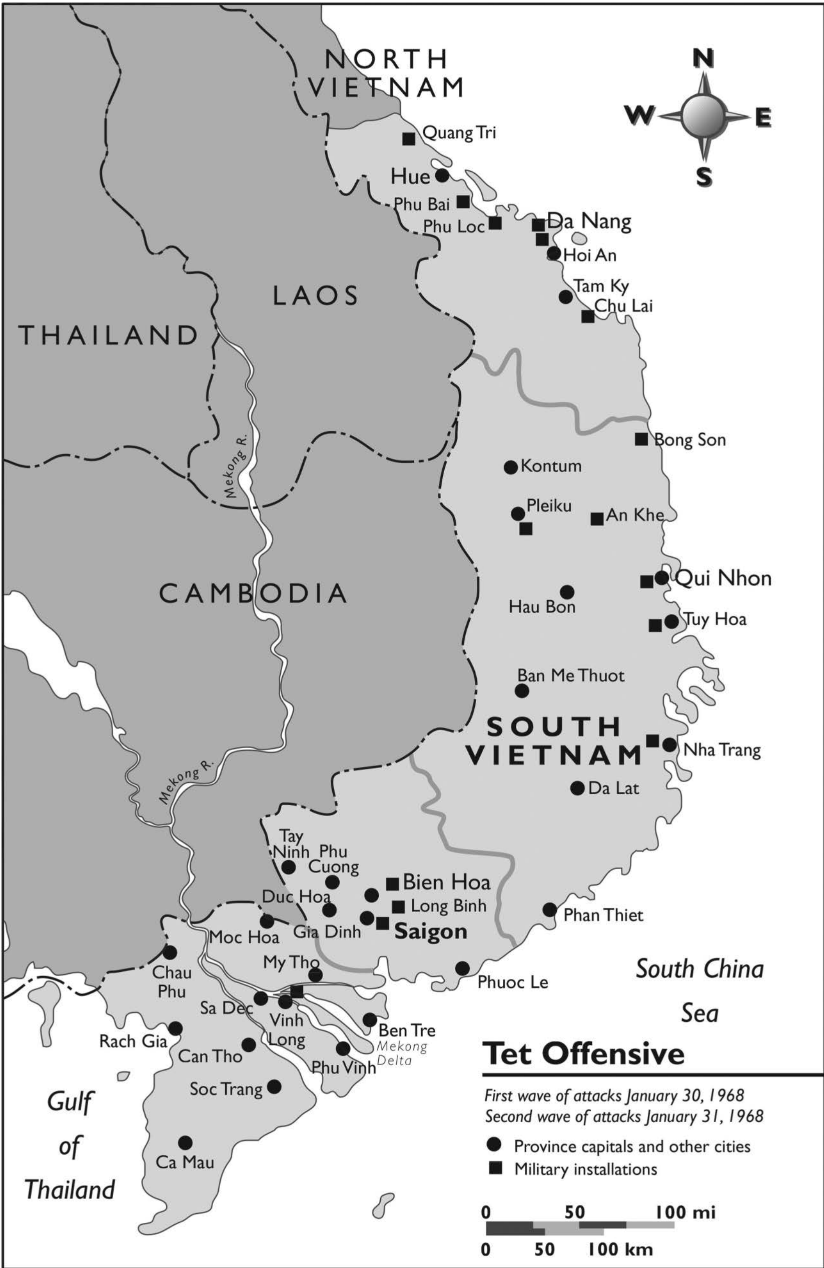

Figure 8.1 The Tet-68 Offensive. *Public domain.*

Tet constituted a major turning point in the Vietnam War. Two months after Tet-68, President Johnson felt compelled to scale back the bombing of North Vietnam and put a ceiling on the number of U.S. ground combat forces committed to South Vietnam. The Communist offensive forced Washington to confront the reality that it was fighting a war that it was not winning, nor was likely to win at any reasonable cost. Because President Johnson was eventually forced to abandon the strategy of graduated escalation in order to resolve a number of military, economic, and political crises, the first few months of 1968 are the most important in the entire history of the long U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Hanoi Plans a General Offensive

Planning for *Tet Mau Than* began in early 1967 and continued into January 1968. Although the offensive caught the Americans and South Vietnamese by surprise and represented a major turning point in the Vietnam War, much about Hanoi's strategic deliberations leading up to the attacks has remained unclear to American historians of the Vietnam War. What were the DRV leaders' major concerns as they worked out the details of their overall strategy and military operations? Why did they launch a general offensive against the towns and cities of South Vietnam? What were their primary goals? Vietnamese official histories cite the failure of the Americans to achieve a quick victory over the insurgents as the prime factor in Hanoi's decision to launch their attacks. The failures of the U.S. war of attrition and of Rolling Thunder, reinforced by Hanoi's perceptions of growing popular disillusionment with Johnson's war policies, encouraged Hanoi to move the revolution to a higher stage and seek a decisive victory.[4]

Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, an American historian of Vietnamese descent, has interviewed former senior officials in the Politburo who were involved in the deliberations that went on for a year as the leaders devised their war plans, and she also has had access to official documents. Her account of those deliberations differs dramatically from Vietnamese official versions. Nguyen has found that planning for *Tet Mau Than* occurred within a context characterized by internecine political battles among senior officials who had to deal with grave domestic and international issues. Le Duan remained firmly in control, but his strong commitment to achieving a "decisive victory" through big-unit warfare, which resulted in many tactical defeats and severe manpower losses for both the PLAF and NVA forces, provoked challenges to his authority not only from moderates within the Politburo, but also from Hanoi's major Allies, China and the Soviet Union. Nguyen has discovered that Hanoi's *Tet Mau Than* deliberations did not represent the bold decisive actions of a unified leadership; rather, they were "incremental, contested, and improvisational."[5]

Throughout 1966 and into 1967, General Nguyen Chi Thanh, the aggressive commander of **COSVN (Central Office for South Vietnam)**, the

Communist headquarters for the southern insurgency, had implemented the Politburo's strategy of protracted warfare, which amounted to countering Westmoreland's strategy of attrition with an attrition strategy of his own. He aimed at keeping the tactical initiative, keeping pressure on both the American and GVN forces, and inflicting a high level of costs and casualties on both.[6]

The Communists incurred severe losses, while attaining few desirable strategic or political results. The U.S. and RVN forces won all the major battles. The U.S. troop levels continued to increase, and Westmoreland aggressively pursued his big-unit style of attrition warfare. The U.S. antiwar movement had no discernible impact on Johnson's determination to bomb North Vietnam or on his decision to fight a gradually escalating ground war. Thanh's strategy also failed to induce Washington to seek a negotiated solution. The GVN, with all of its deficiencies, appeared to be more stable in the spring of 1967 than when Hanoi had implemented its protracted war strategy. Many VietCong units and some NVA units fighting in South Vietnam had been decimated. Others had been driven out of South Vietnam into Cambodia or Laos, or were forced to take refuge in sparsely populated peripheral areas in the central highlands. The NLF infrastructure controlled fewer villages and less territory in South Vietnam than it had prior to the DRV's decision to fight attrition with attrition.[7]

Le Duan, confronting the disastrous results of his version of attrition warfare, ordered General Thanh to revert to protracted guerrilla warfare to cut his losses. While the Communist military commanders in the south were adjusting their strategy, a group of moderate senior officials in the Hanoi Politburo, led by General Vo Nguyen Giap, launched a public attack on Thanh and his aggressive strategy. Giap and his Allies wanted a permanent reversion to a primarily guerrilla strategy against the U.S. and ARVN forces. These debates inevitably contained an important foreign policy dimension because the DRV was totally dependent on external aid from the Soviet Union and China to carry on its revolutionary war. The Soviets backed the moderates led by Giap. They encouraged Hanoi to seek a negotiated end to the war, but they also supplied the NVA with modern weapons, enabling them to engage in conventional warfare. The Chinese, however, opposed negotiations and wanted the North Vietnamese to conduct a protracted guerrilla war on the Maoist model. On July 27, 1967, Le Duan and his Allies, in order to suppress Giap and his supporters, and to reaffirm the autonomy of the DRV vis-à-vis its two major Allies, ordered the arrests of hundreds of party moderates, military officers, and intelligentsia aligned with the moderates. Duan's harsh, decisive actions cleared the way for his hard line of no negotiations, abandonment of guerrilla warfare, and with the focus on the impending general offensive in the towns and cities.[8]

General Thanh took charge of planning Tet *Mau Than.* He traveled north to Hanoi to brief the Politburo about his progress. Early in the morning of July 7, 1967, General Than suffered a fatal heart attack after a night of drinking

and partying. Planning for the general offensive continued under Thanh's successor, General Pham Hung. By the fall of 1967, Hanoi's leadership convinced itself that the political situation in South Vietnam had evolved to a point where a revolutionary uprising could occur in response to a successful Communist offensive. They viewed the Buddhist revolt that had taken place in Danang and Hue during the spring of 1966, and the continuing criticism of the government in the Saigon media as indicators that the Saigon government was ripe for overthrowing. The results of the 1967 election in South Vietnam in which the Thieu-Ky ticket had received only about one-third of the popular vote reinforced Hanoi's belief that the South Vietnamese government was unpopular and vulnerable. Final approval of the General Offensive–General Uprising was given at the Lao Dong's Fourteenth Plenum, in December 1967.[9]

The Communist leaders expected the military victories achieved during the upcoming offensive to trigger an uprising that would be led in the towns and cities by VietCong cadres. If the general uprising succeeded, the RVN would be overthrown. It would be replaced by a coalition government dominated by the NLF. There would be a cease-fire and the Americans would be forced to withdraw from South Vietnam. The country could then proceed toward reunification and complete the national revolution the Vietminh had begun in 1945.[10]

The DRV leaders believed that their offensive strategy had a reasonable chance of success. Even if it fell short of total victory, they expected it to shake the foundations of the RVN by undermining the faith of the South Vietnamese people in the ability of their government to protect them.[11] By taking the war out of the jungles into the cities, they would show that there were no safe havens and no one was immune from attack. The Communist leaders saw their strategy of the General Offensive–General Uprising (*Tong Cong Kich–Tong Khoi Nghia,* or *TCK–TKN*) as a calculated gamble. It would replace the strategy of protracted warfare that had achieved little more than a bloody stalemate after two years of hard fighting.

The Communists had previously launched Phase One of *TCK–TKN* in October with a series of diversionary attacks in the border areas of South Vietnam. They struck at Song Be and Loc Ninh near the Cambodian border, at Dak To in the central highlands, and at Con Thien, just south of the DMZ. Their goals were to inflict casualties and draw the U.S. forces away from populated areas to these sparsely populated border regions, which would leave the urban populations of South Vietnam unprotected from the Tet assaults planned for Phase Two. These peripheral attacks were powerful, fighting was fierce, and casualties were heavy on both sides. In every area, the Communists were beaten back and forced to retreat to their cross-border sanctuaries. Communist losses, though substantial, achieved their purpose; they induced Westmoreland and the ARVN commanders to move a large number of U.S. and ARVN forces away from populated areas.[12]

By late fall 1967, the U.S. military command in Saigon, noting that the rate of infiltration down the Ho Chi Minh Trail had increased sharply, suspected

that the Communists were preparing for a major offensive early in 1968. Captured enemy documents and interrogations of VC and NVA defectors confirmed these suspicions. Westmoreland concluded that the main enemy offensive would occur in I Corps, just south of the DMZ. He believed that the Communists would try to capture the two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam, Quang Tri and Thua Thien, which were separated from the rest of South Vietnam by mountains reaching to the sea. Westmoreland strengthened the U.S. forces at Khe Sanh and other forward bases near the DMZ. He did not consider Saigon or the other cities of South Vietnam to be facing any serious dangers. As a show of confidence in the improving South Vietnamese forces, the MACV had entrusted the defense of Saigon and other urban areas to ARVN.[13]

On January 10, Lieutenant General Frederick Weyand, commander of III Corps, warned Westmoreland that intelligence data indicated that the enemy was shifting his forces from the border regions to Saigon and to other cities in South Vietnam. Weyand's views were confirmed by General Philip Davidson, the head of the MACV's intelligence division. In response to these warnings, Westmoreland moved some U.S. forces to the vicinity of Saigon and placed others in the corridors running from the Cambodian border toward the capital. He also persuaded General Thieu to keep half of his ARVN forces on duty during the Tet holidays. These precautionary moves possibly saved Saigon from an enemy takeover during Tet. But Westmoreland remained convinced that the major enemy push would come in the north and that it would occur before the Tet holidays.[14] Despite all of these advance warnings, the Allies were surprised by the scale and scope of the Tet Offensive.

Surprise Attacks!

On new year's eve (January 30, 1968), General Tran Van Tra, the new head of COSVN, had prepared his forces for Phase Two: the largest and most important Communist offensive of the Vietnam War. The first wave of attacks began shortly after midnight on January 30, when PLAF/NVA forces struck all five provincial capitals in II Corps and also hit Da Nang in I Corps. These forces joined with local cadres who served as guides to lead the soldiers to particular targets within the cities. These operations were not well coordinated at the local level and by morning almost all of the Communist forces had been driven out of the cities. Alerted by what proved to be a kind of preliminary Communist offensive, all U.S. and South Vietnam forces were placed on maximum readiness.

At 3:00, the following morning of January 31, Communist forces launched the main event, a massive wave of attacks against cities and towns all across the country. An estimated 84,000 Communist troops participated in the attacks with thousands more standing by as reinforcements.

Saigon was the focal point of *Tet Mau Than.* The defense of Saigon was primarily a South Vietnamese responsibility. It was initially defended by eight

ARVN infantry battalions and local security forces. Within days, these defenders were reinforced by additional ARVN units plus the U.S. Army forces, including the 716th Military Police Battalion, seven infantry battalions, and six artillery battalions.

One of the Communists' principal targets in Saigon was the U.S. embassy, a massive six-story building in downtown Saigon situated within a four-acre compound. Recently completed, it stood as a massive emblem of the power and wealth of the mighty nation that had thrust itself into Vietnam. At 2:45 A.M., a squad of 15 VietCong sappers blasted a hole in the 8-foot-high wall surrounding the U.S. embassy compound and then entered the courtyard. From their position inside the compound, they could threaten the embassy's main buildings. The U.S. reinforcements arrived quickly and a fierce battle was joined. Six and one-half hours later, all of the VC soldiers were killed or captured. By 9:00 A.M., the embassy was secure. During the long shoot-out scores of TV and press reporters from around the world gathered nearby to describe the dramatic events unfolding a few hundred yards from their hotel rooms.

At 9:30 A.M., standing amid the rubble and litter of bodies, General Westmoreland held an impromptu press conference attended by scores of journalists. The General did not impress the hordes of journalists he addressed. He insisted that the Allied forces had everything under control; Communists all over South Vietnam were being beaten back and slaughtered. Some journalists wondered how Westmoreland could be so confident of victory when VietCong sappers had managed to get inside the U.S. embassy, the Citadel of American power in Vietnam and supposedly the most secure place in the whole country. Although it was of no tactical consequence and it resulted in a quick defeat for the VietCong, the firefight inside embassy walls had a dramatic impact in the United States. Americans were shocked to learn that an enemy supposedly on its last legs could bring the war to the symbolic heart of American power within South Vietnam's capital. Westmoreland asserted that the attack on the embassy was diversionary. The main Communist thrust would come in Quang Tri Province located 600 miles north of Saigon, lying just below the DMZ. Peter Braestrup, an American journalist watching the action at the embassy, demanded to know how any Communist attack against downtown Saigon could be considered diversionary. General Westmoreland, standing amid the shards of battle inside the embassy compound, insisting that he had everything under control, became one of the enduring images of the Tet-68 Offensive.[15]

Within hours of the embassy assault, other VietCong forces attacked targets in or near Saigon, including the Presidential Palace, the headquarters of both the MACV and the South Vietnamese joint general staff (**JGS**) at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, the RVN's radio station, the Long Binh Naval Headquarters, and the U.S. Air Force base at Bien Hoa (Figure 8.2). In addition, squads of VietCong fanned out across the city to attack various homes and offices of civil servants, military officers, and security personnel. Provided

Figure 8.2 Fire trucks rush to the scene of fires set during VietCong surprise attacks in downtown Saigon during the Tet holiday, January 31, 1968. *American Photo Archive/Alamy Stock Photo.*

with "blacklists" by cadres who had infiltrated Saigon in previous weeks, they rounded up and executed anyone they could find.

On February 1, General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, chief of the South Vietnamese National Police, publicly executed VietCong officer Nguyen Van Lem. A photographer and film cameraman recorded the execution of Lem who was wearing civilian clothes. The summary execution of Lem became another of the iconic images of *Tet Mau Than*.

General Tra had committed a total of 35 battalions to attacking Saigon. Within hours, defenders had driven most of the attackers from the city center. However, severe fighting between VC and ARVN forces erupted in the Chinese neighborhood of Cholon around the Phu Tho race track in the southwest sector of the city. Jockeys had to steer their mounts through salvos of artillery shells that fell on the race course. Intermittent battles, sometimes bitter and destructive house-to-house fighting, occurred in the area for weeks. ARVN Rangers finally defeated the last contingent of VC troops still in the Cholon area March 7.

The Saigon component of *Tet Mau Than* amounted to a major tactical defeat for the Communists. Several ARVN units, under severe pressure, fought

effectively. They were reinforced by the U.S. troops, who inflicted severe casualties on the outgunned VietCong. Nothing remotely resembling a popular rising occurred in or around Saigon.[16]

However, the attacks left Saigon's inhabitants shocked and dazed. The offensive shattered their sense of security, their feeling that they were safe from a remote conflict that only engulfed the countryside. The fighting within the city did extensive damage to sections of Saigon, especially in the Cholon sector where sporadic fighting went on for weeks. Thousands of families were left homeless in the wake of the fighting that had saved them from a possible Communist takeover.

Everywhere in South Vietnam, local VietCong units attacked urban centers in force. In Nha Trang, a coastal city north of Saigon, enemy soldiers attacked a naval training center. The VietCong forces struck targets in Kontum and Pleiku, two central highlands cities. At Danang, ARVN and U.S. forces, alerted by a VietCong defector that an attack was imminent, met the enemy on the outskirts of the city. In none of these assaults did the attackers accomplish their missions. They were driven back everywhere, often with heavy losses.[17]

In the Mekong Delta, that vast watery expanse that constituted South Vietnam's rice bowl and comprised the heart of the southern insurgency that had become a revolution, the VietCong attacked 13 of 16 provincial capitals and many of the district capitals. The ARVN forces generally performed ineffectively in the delta region, and the U.S. forces had to be rushed to many towns and cities to drive out the attackers. An estimated 5,000 VietCong were killed and hundreds were captured during the fighting in the delta. Most of the local guerrillas and political cadres were wiped out.[18]

The ferocity of the fighting during Tet-68 climaxed at Hue. In a battle lasting a month, two NVA regiments and two VietCong elite battalions battled eight U.S. and 13 ARVN battalions in one of the most savage battles of the war. "The furor of the Tet-68 Offensive would become symbolized by the catastrophic destruction incurred in this grim city struggle."[19]

At the time of the Tet-68 Offensive, Hue, located near the coast midway between Danang and the DMZ, had an official population of 100,000, swollen by the influx of thousands of war refugees. The Perfume River runs through the city, with two-thirds of the population living north of the river, mostly within the walls of the Citadel (Old City), and one-third residing south of the river in the Westernized New City. Until Tet, both sides had considered Hue an open city.[20] There was a sizable U.S. presence in Hue, and many other foreigners lived and worked there. It was the most beautiful of Vietnam's cities, with its unique blend of traditional and cosmopolitan cultures (Figure 8.3).

On a foggy morning January 31, about 7,500 VC/NVA fighters, achieving complete tactical surprise, overwhelmed the ARVN defenders and quickly took control of the Citadel, once the home of the Nguyen emperors, and much of the New City as well. Two U.S. Marine companies from Phu Bai, a few miles south of Hue, joined with ARVN forces to counterattack the next

Figure 8.3 U.S. Marines advance down a street in Hue February 21, 1968. *Everett Collection Inc/Alamy Stock Photo.*

day. The counterattack stalled in the face of determined resistance. Over the next few days, both the Americans and South Vietnamese augmented their forces in Hue. Starting on February 5, naval gunfire from ships of the Seventh Fleet, positioned offshore, pounded targets inside the Citadel from a range of 15 miles. Both VNAF and the U.S. aircraft napalmed and strafed targets within the Old City. In a misty drizzle, the U.S. Marines from the 1st Marine Division and soldiers from the 1st ARVN Division and Marine Corps cleared the city street by street and house by house.[21]

By February 9, the Marines had reclaimed the sectors of the city lying south of the river, and the ARVN units had reclaimed much of the Citadel. But in the southeastern sector of the Citadel, including the Imperial Palace, the Communist forces held a series of strong points. They inflicted heavy casualties on the attacking South Vietnamese. The hard-pressed ARVN troops were joined by elements of the 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment, U.S. Marines, on February 12. For days, the carnage of close combat took a deadly toll on both the ARVN forces and the U.S. Marines. On February 24, elements of the 3rd ARVN Regiment raised the RVN flag over the Citadel and the battered remains of the Palace of Perfect Peace. It took the Allies another week of scattered fighting to crush isolated pockets of resistance and round up NVA/VC stragglers. The Battle of Hue ended on March 2, 1968.

During the weeks of intense fighting, over 8,000 soldiers on both sides were killed. Approximately 6,000 civilians had lost their lives during the month-long battle and 116,000 were left homeless out a population that had swelled to 140,000. “The beautiful city was a shattered, stinking hulk, its streets choked with rubble and rotting bodies.”[22] Hue had been saved, but destroyed.

Concurrent with the Battle of Hue, the Communists had occupied Gia Hoi, a sector of the city lying north of the Perfume River and east of the walled Citadel. Within Gia Hoi, the Communists established a provisional government and set about implementing their revolution. Cadres organized groups of students, workers, and teachers into administrative units.

After the South Vietnamese had regained control of Hue, the discovery of several mass graves of South Vietnamese civilians sparked a controversy that has never been resolved. The victims had all been brutally murdered, either clubbed or shot to death, or buried alive. The official Allied report of the massacre of civilians at Hue claimed that the occupying NVA forces had liquidated anyone they could apprehend who had an affiliation with the Saigon regime. Roving "hit squads" summarily executed about 3,000 people, and included officials of the national government, city officials, civil servants, community leaders, military personnel, police, priests, and teachers. Foreign victims included many Germans, Filipinos, and Koreans.[23]

Subsequently, as the massacres at Hue came under closer scrutiny by journalists and scholars, a more confusing picture emerged. Press reports showed that South Vietnamese "revenge squads" had also been at work. They searched out and executed citizens who had cooperated with or supported the Communists. North Vietnamese spokesmen claimed that NVA forces had rounded up "reactionary" captives for transport to the North, but battlefield commanders, under the stresses of battle, had ordered them to be executed. General Truong, commander of the 1st ARVN Division, believed that the Communists had killed their civilian captives in order to protect the identities of local VC cadres whose covers had been exposed. Several scholars who have examined the evidence pertaining to these grisly events have each managed to generate a different number of deaths and reach different conclusions about what really happened. Some scholars believe that at most a few hundred civilians were executed; others place the total between 3 and 6,000. It may never be possible to determine precisely how many civilian inhabitants of Hue were killed, by whom, and for what reasons. Even though officials, journalists, and scholars have muddied the waters, it is crucially important to be clear about a brutal reality of the Battle for Hue: perhaps thousands of civilians were deliberately murdered by soldiers who committed war crimes.

Siege at Khe Sanh

The opening act of *Tet Mau Than* occurred at Khe Sanh, located in a remote corner of the Quang Tri province, 60 miles northwest of Hue. On January 21, 1968, an NVA regiment attacked Hill 861, one of the outlying strong points protecting the U.S. Marine Base at Khe Sanh. The next day, two elite NVA divisions, the 304th and the 325-C, under the command of Major General Tran Quy Hai, himself a member of the Polituro, began an artillery bombardment of the central Marine Base. The base, perched on a plateau near the corner formed by the DMZ and the Laotian border, blocked enemy infiltration along

Route 9. Four battalions of the 26th Marines, under the command of Colonel David E. Lownds, reinforced by one battalion of ARVN Rangers, 6,000 men total, defended the main base and surrounding strong points at Khe Sanh. They faced an estimated 20,000 PAVN troops.[24]

The Battle of Khe Sanh received extensive media coverage within the United States. Americans feared for the lives of the Marines, who were crowded into their isolated outpost, subjected to intensive artillery and mortar bombardments, and seemingly in danger of being overrun. Journalists noted uneasily that Khe Sanh resembled Dien Bien Phu, the French fortress the Vietminh had isolated and overrun in May 1954. The fall of Dien Bien Phu had been a catastrophic defeat for the French and it had destroyed their will to continue the First Indochina War. Would history repeat itself at Khe Sanh? Would the United States suffer its first major defeat of the Second Indochina War? If such a military disaster occurred, would it be the end of the American Vietnam War? General Westmoreland and his chief of intelligence General Phillip B. Davidson, interpreting the extensive intelligence data available to them, concluded that the main thrust of the coming Communist offensive would be to besiege Khe Sanh and then overrun it, a Dien Bien Phu in reverse. President Johnson fretted that Khe Sanh could be lost to the Communists. Asserting that he did not want "any damn Dinbinfoo" on his watch, Johnson anxiously raised the possibility of using tactical nuclear weapons to save Khe Sanh if the enemy verged on overrunning it.[25]

The fears of the journalists and President Johnson were exaggerated. Khe Sanh bore only a superficial resemblance to Dien Bien Phu. There was never any serious danger of the NVA forces overrunning the base or driving out the Marines. General Vo Nguyen Giap had been able to defeat the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 for two major reasons: he had had superior firepower, and he had been able to cut the aerial lifeline to the fortress. But, at Khe Sanh, the combination of American air power and artillery fire gave the Americans a vast superiority over the NVA forces, and Hai's forces could not interdict Westmoreland's air supply system to the base. In fact, one of the reasons Westmoreland had installed the Marines at Khe Sanh was because he hoped to lure the Communists into a set-piece battle. Confident that the Marines, supported by artillery and air power, could hold the base against whatever forces the NVA committed to battle, Westmoreland viewed Khe Sanh as the ideal place to call the formidable U.S. firepower into play. If Hai's forces took the bait and tried to overrun Khe Sanh, Westmoreland believed that they would be cut to pieces by artillery fire and bombing.[26]

The Battle of Khe Sanh developed as a conventional battle fought between two national armies in an important arena of the war. The **I Corps Tactical** Zone (**CTZ**), consisting of the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam, was the largest and most complex combat area in South Vietnam. Within that region, the enemy mounted a potent mix of insurgent and conventional tactics that often put severe pressures on the Allied forces. During 1967, the fighting

in I Corps accounted for half of the Communist KIAs, and the Marines suffered half of the U.S. KIAs for that year.[27]

Westmoreland reacted to the siege of Khe Sanh by executing Operation NIAGARA, which had been prepared for use against the NVA in the event they attacked the base. Operation NIAGARA represented a mighty concentration of firepower composed of B-52s, tactical aircraft, and artillery directed at the enemy positions.[28] As the Battle of Khe Sanh unfolded, artillery duels between NVA and Marine gunners, round-the-clock air raids on the NVA positions, and vicious firefights whenever enemy units attacked one of the surrounding strong points were daily occurrences (Figure 8.4).

On February 7, a Special Forces camp at Lang Vei, south of Khe Sanh, was destroyed by NVA forces using Soviet PT-76 light tanks. It was during the Khe Sanh campaign that the Communists deployed armor for the first time in South Vietnam. The loss of Lang Vei enabled the NVA to put more pressure on the Marines defending Khe Sanh. Three weeks later, the key battle of the Khe Sanh campaign took place. Following the heaviest enemy artillery barrage of the campaign, a regiment of the NVA 304th attacked Khe Sanh from the east. But American artillery and bombers decimated the regiment before any of its units could reach the base perimeter.[29]

The destruction of the 304th regiment marked the turning point in the battle. Although there were harassing attacks made by the enemy over the next several days, the NVA mounted no more major assaults on Khe Sanh. On March 11, the Communist forces began withdrawing. Hai apparently decided to pull his forces back from Khe Sanh because of the failure of the Phase Two campaigns everywhere across South Vietnam, and because he had concluded

Figure 8.4 U.S. Marines defend one of the perimeter bunkers protecting the base at Khe Sanh from NVA artillery and mortar fire February 29–March 1, 1968. *CPA Media Pte Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo.*

that the U.S. forces could not be beaten at Khe Sanh. There would be no replication of Dien Bien Phu, if that had ever been Hanoi's objective. Scattered fighting occurred in the vicinity of the base until the end of the month. A relief expedition (Operation Pegasus) reached Khe Sanh on April 8, allowing Colonel Lownds and his troops to leave the base. The siege of Khe Sanh lasted 77 days. The U.S. officials estimated that NVA losses exceeded 10,000 killed or wounded. 730 Americans were killed and another 2,642 were wounded.[30]

One of the enduring debates about the *Tet Mau Than* has been whether Hanoi's main objective was the general offensive to provoke a popular uprising against the Thieu-Ky regime, or to besiege and then overrun Khe Sanh in an effort to break the will of the Americans as Giap had broken the will of the French at Dien Bien Phu, and take control of the five northern provinces of South Vietnam. General Westmoreland and the senior members of his staff, as well as President Johnson and most of his senior advisers, were all fixated on Khe Sanh. Even as fierce battles raged in Saigon and Hue, and it was evident that the VC/NVA forces were mounting a country-wide general offensive against most of the towns and cities of South Vietnam, General Westmoreland claimed that the enemy was trying to draw everyone's attention away from Khe Sanh and the northern part of 1 Corps, where he believed lay the greatest threats.

Most analysts have concluded that Hanoi's primary goal was the General Offensive–General Uprising. North Vietnamese sources refer frequently to a general offensive, but never to an all-out attack on Khe Sanh. General Hai's forces were directed to draw in and pin down as many enemy forces as they could. The Communist siege tactics at Khe Sanh, which rained mortar and artillery fire on the Marines, punctuated by sporadic efforts to overrun the outlying strong points, took its deadly toll over the weeks. If one of Hai's objectives was to kill as many of the defenders as he could without mounting an all-out effort to take Khe Sanh, he succeeded. The role of Khe Sanh was important, but it was subordinate to the primary objective, the general offensive against the cities of South Vietnam.[31] Even so, it is believable that had it been possible, Hanoi would have been delighted to score a Dien Bien Phu-like victory at Khe Sanh.

As the Tet-68 Offensive ran its course, President Johnson proclaimed it "a complete failure." In addition to their losses at Khe Sanh, the mostly futile country-wide assaults on cities and towns often cost the attackers severe casualties. From January 30 through March 31, 1968, combined VietCong and PAVN losses may have exceeded 58,000 KIA. The PLAF main force units had to be reconstituted, often using NVA regulars who infiltrated south down the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the next six months. Compared to the catastrophic losses sustained by the Communists during *Tet Mau Than*, the U.S. and ARVN casualties were light, altogether about 3,400 killed and wounded.

In many South Vietnamese provinces, the VietCong cadres had come out into the open to organize the uprisings that were expected to follow the assaults on the towns and cities. The expected uprisings never materialized,

and the exposed VietCong cadres were often eliminated or neutralized. The VietCong attackers were not welcomed by the South Vietnamese people, nor did any defections from GVN political or military ranks occur. Many of the ARVN forces regrouped and fought well, despite being caught by surprise initially.

Le Duan and his senior colleagues in Hanoi were disappointed and dismayed that they had failed utterly to achieve the primary goal of *Tet Mau Than*: igniting a general uprising of the urban populations of South Vietnam that would bring down the Thieu-Ky regime. There were several keys to the gravest tactical defeat suffered by the Communist forces since the insurgency began. The generals who devised the strategy seriously underestimated the strategic mobility of the Allied forces, which enabled them to deploy quickly to threatened areas. General Tran Van Tra, who led the attack on Saigon during the Tet Offensive, admitted that he and his senior staffers had underestimated the enemy's capabilities. He also acknowledged that the requirements *Tet Mau Than* were beyond the available strength of his forces.

The Communist general offensive was much too complex and impossible to coordinate effectively. Neither COSVN nor the general staff of the NVA had ever attempted an operation as large and complicated as the country-wide general offensive. Some VietCong units did not get their instructions and orders until just hours before the offensive began. Thousands of Communist soldiers, primarily VC units, were decimated in hopeless assaults on well-defended Allied positions. The Communists made a serious error when they vastly exaggerated the potential for a popular uprising against the South Vietnamese government. In Saigon, which was the focus of the offensive and where the NLF anticipated they would have the greatest chance of igniting a general rising of the populace, they failed to take over the U.S. embassy and the Presidential Palace. These failures, plus the failure to take over the National Radio Station, ruined whatever slim chance the Communists might have had to provoke an uprising. The Communists were betrayed by a lethal combination of incomplete planning, inadequate command and control capabilities, and poor communication.

Stalemate

The scope, scale, and intensity of the Tet-68 Offensive shocked most Americans, who had been told by President Johnson, General Westmoreland, and Ambassador Bunker that the VietCong were about finished. Nightly, television news beamed the sights and sounds of fierce battles in the streets of Saigon and Hue into American living rooms. Viewers watched VietCong sappers fighting inside the American embassy compound; they watched General Westmoreland's impromptu press conference held in the embassy courtyard amidst the rubble; and they witnessed the summary execution of a VietCong terrorist by General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, chief of South Vietnam's National Police, on a cobblestone street in Saigon. Daily press reports filed from cities

all over South Vietnam highlighted the surprise attacks and the extensive destruction that they caused. Initial wire stories, later corrected, exaggerated the Communist successes and contributed to the confusion and widely shared sense that Tet had been an Allied disaster.[32]

On February 7, Air Force Major Chester I. Brown conducted a press tour through the shattered Mekong Delta town of Ben Tre. The VietCong attackers overwhelmed the ARVN defenders and had occupied the town. The U.S. troops were called in to reclaim the town. To eject the VietCong, the Americans used heavy artillery and helicopter gunships that leveled most of the town's buildings and killed many of its civilian inhabitants. Surveying the remains of Ben Tre, Brown matter-of-factly told AP reporter Peter Arnett, "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it."[33]

Major Brown's Orwellian phrase encapsulated a basic contradiction of the U.S. war effort in South Vietnam. Americans were fighting in Vietnam to protect the freedom of the South Vietnamese people and enable them to build a nation. But American weaponry was destroying part of the South Vietnamese social fabric in the process of trying to liberate its people. The military means overwhelmed the political ends. For many of the residents of Ben Tre, the only real alternative to rule by the VietCong was death and destruction at the hands of their would-be saviors. Major Brown's remark "seemed to epitomize the purposeless destruction of the war."[34] The phrase gained wide currency in the United States and became one of the staples of antiwar discourse for years.

On February 11, Walter Cronkite, America's most respected television news anchor, spent two weeks in Vietnam reporting the war. Upon his return to New York, Cronkite hosted a news special on Vietnam. At its conclusion, he faced his vast audience and offered his analysis:

> To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic . . . conclusion. . . . It is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could.[35]

While Cronkite talked to the people about a stalemated war, official cables to Johnson and other leaders in Washington presented a different account of Tet-68. Johnson knew that the VietCong had suffered severe casualties and the urban populace was not rallying to the NLF banner. Johnson tried to counter the sensational media coverage and reassure the American people.[36] He held a press conference to pronounce the Communist offensive a complete failure. Administrative officials appeared on public affairs programs and made speeches around the country to convey the message that Tet was a great Allied victory and a disastrous Communist defeat.

The Johnson administration's public relations efforts to salvage popular support for the U.S. Vietnam War policy in the aftermath of the Tet assaults

failed. Much of the press and the public continued to regard Tet as a disaster. What administration spokesmen apparently did not grasp was that the main issue was not that journalists or the American people thought Communists were actually winning the Tet battles. Rather, the public was shocked that the Tet Offensive could occur at all. *Tet Mau Than* exploded all of the official reassurances that the United States was winning the war, the VietCong were on their last legs, and the war would end soon. To many Americans, Tet confirmed what they already suspected that the United States had locked itself into a stalemated war that was consuming ever-rising numbers of lives and dollars. Public opinion polls showed that popular discontent with the war and Johnson's leadership increased sharply in the aftermath of the Tet-68 Offensive.[37]

Despite their outward show of confidence, Johnson and his senior advisers had been shaken by the Tet-68 Offensive. They were also alarmed by the prospect of further offensives in South Vietnam and by Communist initiatives in other parts of the world. On January 23, just before Tet, the North Koreans had seized an intelligence-gathering ship, the USS *Pueblo*, operating near their coast, after having tolerated such espionage operations for years. At about the same time, South Korean police discovered an assassination plot against South Korean President Chung Hee Park that had been masterminded in North Korea. CIA operatives warned that the Soviets might provoke another crisis over Berlin, a perennial Cold War flash point. Washington also received reports of increased unrest in the Middle East.[38] Johnson worried that the Tet-68 attacks, including the siege at Khe Sanh, could be parts of a worldwide Communist effort to take advantage of the fact that American military assets around the globe had been stretched thin by the strategic requirements of the Vietnam War to score easy Cold War victories over the United States and its Allies.

U.S. Military Leaders Propose to Widen the War

Johnson's military advisers responded to Tet by proposing to widen the war. The Joint Chiefs wanted to expand the bombing campaign against North Vietnam. But Johnson, concerned above all with holding Khe Sanh, refused to take any additional military actions against North Vietnam. He asked General Westmoreland if he needed any additional troops to prevent a defeat at Khe Sanh. Westmoreland replied that he did not. But he was concerned about his logistic ability to support the forces that he had committed to I Corps, and he requested some additional airlift and helicopter support.[39]

In early February 1968, Army General Earle Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, had much on his mind besides the war in Vietnam and *Tet Mau Than*. In Johnson's willingness to send Westmoreland whatever additional forces he might need to avoid a politically damaging defeat at Khe Sanh, General Wheeler saw an opportunity to rebuild the American strategic reserve and augment the U.S. military forces stationed elsewhere in the world. The

deployments to Vietnam had not been based on the military demands of the situation, but on the forces available without calling up the Reserves and the National Guard. The NATO forces assigned to Germany and the forces committed to South Korea had all been stripped of their best officers and noncoms in order to send more troops to the Vietnam War.[40]

Faced with Communist threats in North Korea and Berlin, and perhaps elsewhere, the Joint Chiefs had concluded that the U.S. strategic assets had been stretched too thin by Vietnam. General Wheeler, believing that the Communist Tet-68 Offensive would force Johnson's hand, thought that he could persuade the president to take the politically risky step of mobilizing the Reserves and of putting the country on a full-war footing. Wheeler maneuvered Westmoreland, who had initially declined Johnson's offer of more combat troops, into requesting additional forces. Then, the Joint Chiefs put pressure on Johnson to provide the additional forces not only for Vietnam, but to restock the stateside strategic reserve, so the military would be better positioned to meet Communist threats to the U.S. national interests elsewhere. They were especially concerned that American NATO commitments not be sacrificed on the altar of Vietnam.[41] They were disappointed when Johnson deferred their request to mobilize the Reserves and agreed to send General Westmoreland a token force of only 10,500 troops, which could be provided without calling up the Reserves.

However, Wheeler continued to pursue his goal of a mobilization of the Reserves, which he believed was necessary to enable the United States to meet the military demands of the Vietnam War and to fulfill its other strategic commitments in a dangerous world, which appeared to be growing ever more menacing. Wheeler obtained Johnson's approval to travel to Vietnam to assess General Westmoreland's immediate and future manpower needs. After conferring, Westmoreland and Wheeler came up with a planned troop request designed to meet both the MACV's Vietnam needs and defend other U.S. interests in the world. The troop request consisted of three force packages: the first increment of 108,000 men would be sent to Vietnam by May 1, 1968. Additional increments of 42,000 and 56,000 men would be sent by September 1 and December 1, respectively, 206,000 men total. But only the first increment would be sent to Vietnam for sure. The other two increments would constitute the strategic reserve in the United States, which was not to be deployed in Vietnam unless the North Vietnamese mounted a successful offensive.[42]

Wheeler presented the troop request to Johnson on February 28, 1968. He accompanied his report with a pessimistic appraisal of the military situation in Vietnam that contradicted General Westmoreland's previous optimistic appraisals. Wheeler told Johnson that the initial Tet attacks nearly succeeded in a dozen places, that the ARVN forces had been thrown on the defensive, and that pacification had suffered serious setbacks. "In short it was a very near thing."[43] Wheeler also told Johnson and his civilian advisers that Westmoreland would need to augment his forces significantly if he was to respond effectively to the challenges posed by Tet-68: to counter the enemy offensive,

to eject the NVA forces fighting in I Corps, to restore security to the towns and cities, to restore security in the populated regions of the countryside, and to regain the initiative with a counteroffensive of his own. To accomplish all of these objectives, Wheeler insisted that Westmoreland would require large numbers of additional troops.[44] By accentuating the negative aspects of the military situation in Vietnam, Wheeler tried to pressure Johnson into supporting a call-up of the Reserves, part of which would be used to replenish depleted U.S. force levels elsewhere.

The magnitude of the troop request stunned Johnson and his top civilian advisers, and Wheeler's pessimistic assessment of Tet alarmed them. Departing Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, the *bête noire* of the hawks to the end, "in his valedictory meeting as a member of the cabinet," strongly opposed sending more U.S. troops to Vietnam. McNamara said that feeding another 200,000 soldiers into combat would merely be doing more of the same. The North Vietnamese, as they had previously, would simply match the American escalation with their own. McNamara pointed out that bombing had consistently failed to impair the Communists' ability to infiltrate whatever men, weapons, and supplies they required into South Vietnam. He believed that the key to improving the situation in South Vietnam was not to send more U.S. troops but to increase the resources and responsibilities of the South Vietnamese army.[45]

At the February 28 meeting, General Wheeler confronted the president with two bitterly unattractive choices. If Johnson met the Army's request for an additional 206,000 troops, it would mean transcending the parameters of limited war that the president had set. The Reserves would have to be mobilized to provide the manpower, and the economy would have to be put on a war footing to meet the vastly increased expenditures. That would mean tax increases and economic controls. Worse, Johnson would have to take these politically unpalatable actions in an election year and at a time of rising domestic opposition to the war. But if he refused the military's request for increased troop levels in Vietnam, he would be sending a clear signal to friends and foes alike that the upper limit of the U.S. military commitment in South Vietnam had been reached. He would be acknowledging that American strategic goals had either been abandoned or pushed far into the future.[46] Further, with the U.S. military forces stationed around the world having already been stretched dangerously thin to provide the 536,000 troops currently in Vietnam, failure to meet the Army's request for 206,000 additional soldiers might render the U.S. government incapable of responding effectively to threats to its vital national interests elsewhere.

The Clifford Task Force

Johnson, shocked by General Wheeler's report, refused to make such a critical decision on the spot. On February 29, he asked his new secretary of defense, Clark M. Clifford, who had attended the meeting, to head a task force that

would examine all facets of the troop request and to make its recommendations to him by March 4. He told Clifford that this was to be an "A to Z" reassessment of the U.S. strategy in Vietnam. The president wanted alternatives examined and, if possible, recommendations that reconciled emerging military, economic, political, and public relations problems.[47]

Johnson's directive to Clifford inaugurated the most important debate over what action to take in Vietnam ever undertaken within any administration during the long U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. For the first time, there would be a critical reappraisal of all aspects of the U.S. Vietnam War policy. During the reassessment period, hawks and doves waged a bureaucratic war for the heart and mind of Lyndon Johnson. Everyone at the meeting that day sensed that a decisive moment in the Vietnam War had arrived. They also knew that Clark Clifford, more than any other adviser, would determine on which side of the historic divide President Johnson would choose to walk. Would Johnson decide to escalate or would he take the first steps toward phasing down the U.S. involvement in Vietnam? The outcome of a major war turned on that decision.

Clifford was a seasoned Democratic Party insider. He had helped manage Harry Truman's 1948 campaign when the feisty president had scored his famous upset over the consensus favorite Thomas Dewey. Clifford also had been a valued adviser of President Kennedy. Prior to appointing him to replace McNamara, Johnson had often sought Clifford's advice on a whole range of issues.[48] Clifford was an establishment centrist who had embraced the Cold War ideology characteristic of his generation of political leaders. He had supported Johnson's Vietnam War policy since its inception. Johnson brought Clifford on board as McNamara's replacement primarily because he had assumed that his new defense secretary would loyally continue to back his war policy.

Unbeknownst to Johnson, Clifford had already begun to have doubts about the validity of the domino theory, which was the chief ideological rationale for the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. In September 1967, Johnson had sent Clifford to accompany Maxwell Taylor on a trip to Asia to persuade several of the U.S. Allies in that region to increase their troop commitments in Vietnam. Clifford was surprised to learn that the leaders of Thailand, the Philippines, South Korea, New Zealand, and Australia neither wished to send more troops to Vietnam nor felt particularly threatened by the fact that North Vietnam had over 100,000 troops in South Vietnam. Clifford asked himself, if these Asian and Pacific island nations proximate to the Vietnam War felt no fear of Communist expansion, could it be that the U.S. officials had exaggerated the potential threat to the stability of these countries posed by the Communist revolution in Vietnam?

Clifford also had kept in touch with influential friends in corporate board rooms and law offices across the land. Until Tet, these powerful men had generally supported the administration's war policy. Reacting to the Tet Offensive, many had turned dovish. Worried about the stalemated war, growing

political disunity, and signs of economic decline, they opposed any further escalations of the war. Their opinions had an impact on Clifford.[49]

Clifford quickly formed a task force, which included several of the president's most senior civilian and military advisers: Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of the Treasury Henry H. Fowler, Undersecretary of Defense Paul Nitze, CIA Director Richard Helms, National Security Adviser Walt Whitman Rostow, General Wheeler, and General Maxwell Taylor. The Clifford Task Force turned immediately to examining the Army's request for 206,000 additional troops, as well as the means by which it could be met. The major problem was that all previous troop requests had been fulfilled without mobilizing Reserve forces. But it was precisely this political barrier that would have to be broken to meet the military's latest manpower demands. Such a large troop increase also would have an adverse impact on the economy and require large cuts in Great Society programs. Foreign aid would be gutted.[50] Several task force members pointed out that in their judgment sending large numbers of additional troops to Vietnam would probably be futile. North Vietnam would match the U.S. escalation with one of their own, as they had previously.

As the task force members studied the troop request, officials from the Defense Department, the CIA, and the State Department systematically challenged the rationale for the Joint Chiefs' troop request and began to challenge the Vietnam War policy itself. A Department of Defense official, Alain Enthoven of Systems Analysis, called the troop request another "payment on an open-ended commitment." In his view, sending additional U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam would not bring an earlier end to the war, attrite the enemy, or erode Hanoi's will to fight.[51]

Clifford began to ask fundamental questions about the American Vietnam policy, many of which Johnson had never raised, questions that were exceedingly difficult to answer precisely. To Clifford, the most important question was not how to send 206,000 more troops to Vietnam, but rather should America continue on its present course in Vietnam? Clifford raised other fundamental questions about the U.S. war policy and discovered that senior officials either could not provide answers or furnished him with inadequate answers[52]:

1 Will 200,000 more troops win the war? No one could be sure.
2 If not, how many more will be needed to win and when? No one knew.
3 Can the enemy respond with a buildup of their own? They could and they probably would.
4 What would be involved in committing 200,000 more men to Vietnam? A Reserve call-up of up to 280,000 men, increased draft calls, and an extension of tours of service for most men on active duty.
5 How much would it cost to meet the latest troop request? An estimated $2 billion per month.
6 What would be the impact on the economy? Credit restrictions, tax increases, and probably wage and price controls. It would also worsen the balance of payments and weaken the value of the dollar.

7 Can the bombing stop the war? No, not by itself.
8 Would stepping up the bombing decrease the U.S. casualties? Very little, if at all.
9 How long must we keep sending the U.S. troops and carrying the main burden of combat? Nobody knew. The ARVN forces were far from ready to replace the U.S. forces.

During his review, Clifford asked General Wheeler for a presentation of the military plan for attaining victory in Vietnam. General Wheeler told him that there was no military plan for victory. Astonished, Clifford asked him why. Wheeler told him that there was no plan because the U.S. forces operated under three major political restrictions: they could not invade North Vietnam because such action would possibly bring the Chinese into the war. They could not mine Haiphong, North Vietnam's principal port, because Soviet ships might be sunk. They could not pursue the enemy into Laos and Cambodia because such initiatives would widen the war. Clifford then asked, given these restrictions, how could America hope to win the Vietnam War? Wheeler replied, without enthusiasm, that eventually the enemy would reach a point when it would decide that it could not continue the war because it could no longer tolerate the damage that the strategy of attrition was inflicting. Clifford then asked General Wheeler how long he thought it would take for the current attrition strategy that was in place to induce Hanoi to abandon the insurgency in South Vietnam. Wheeler would not even attempt to give an estimate.[53]

Clifford concluded his review with a series of observations that starkly demonstrated the failure of the U.S. strategy of limited war in Southeast Asia to achieve any of its major objectives:

> I could not find out when the war was going to end; I could not find out the manner in which it was going to end. I could not find out whether the new requests for men and equipment were going to be enough, or whether it would take more and, if more, how much; I could not find out how soon the South Vietnamese forces would be ready to take over. All I had was the statement, given with too little self-assurance to be comforting, that if we persisted for an indeterminate length of time, the enemy would choose not to go on. And so I asked, "Does anyone see any diminution in the will of the enemy after four years of our having been there, after enormous casualties, and after massive destruction from our bombing?" The answer was that there appeared to be no diminution in the will of the enemy.[54]

Clifford concluded that the most probable outcome of sending 206,000 more troops to Vietnam would be to raise the level of combat and casualties. Sending more troops would further Americanize the war and leave the United States further than ever from its goal of achieving an independent South Vietnam. Clifford therefore recommended that the United States send no more troops to South Vietnam. Instead, the American goal "should be to level off

our involvement and work toward gradual disengagement."[55] Having made his decision, Clifford set out to try to convince President Johnson that he had to abandon his policy of gradual escalation because it was not working, nor did it show any promise of ever working. It also limited America's ability to meet strategic commitments elsewhere in the world, weakened the economy, and divided the American people.

Johnson Agonistes

Johnson received the Clifford Task Force's report on March 4. It contained General Wheeler's recommendation that the troop request should be met. But to achieve the goal of sending 206,000 additional troops to Vietnam during 1968, the report made clear to Johnson that he would have to call 262,000 Reservists to active duty, increase draft calls, and extend the tours of most men currently serving on active duty.

More significantly, the task force's report also called for a reassessment of the U.S. Vietnam policy, especially in relation to the U.S. global strategic interests. It hinted that America would have to establish a limit for its involvement in Vietnam and abide by it. The report also asserted that no amount of additional U.S. troops in Vietnam could achieve American objectives there unless the South Vietnamese government achieved a broader popular base and the ARVN fought more effectively.[56] Clifford hoped that the report would cause Johnson to focus on the fundamental questions of U.S. Vietnam policy raised by the Wheeler-Westmoreland troop request. He also hoped to sow seeds of doubt in Johnson's mind about the wisdom of continuing to escalate the war.

The president carefully read and pondered over the report for several days. He discussed what he should do in Vietnam with several advisers, including members of the task force. Rostow urged him to go all out and make a maximum effort to win the war. Johnson's initial reaction to the Communist Tet Offensive had been to do just that. The surprise offensive had infuriated him and he wanted to strike back. Johnson also believed that an aggressive post-Tet counteroffensive, coupled with an intense bombing campaign, could break Hanoi's will. He felt ready to mobilize the Reserves, not only for Vietnam, but also to strengthen the overall American strategic posture in the world.

However, Johnson was persuaded to make any further commitment of U.S. forces to Vietnam contingent upon the South Vietnamese government improving its capabilities for governing and fighting. The President agreed that the South Vietnamese leaders should be informed that continued American support for their cause would depend on their willingness to assume a greater burden of the fighting. Johnson's willingness to send the message to Thieu and Ky that they would have to do more of the fighting indicated that a number of his officials had embraced the concept of Vietnamization that would later be officially adopted by the Nixon administration.

Johnson knew that Westmoreland was already taking the offensive against the enemy with the U.S. forces he had on hand.[57] MACV did not appear to have an immediate need for additional forces to take the fight to the Communists and hold Khe Sanh. Johnson also responded positively to a suggestion from Secretary of State Dean Rusk that a partial bombing halt might offset some of the domestic opposition to the war, and it could even elicit a favorable response from the North Vietnamese that would move both sides closer to negotiations.[58] By March 7, Johnson was moving toward two new positions: setting a troop ceiling for Vietnam and ordering a partial bombing halt.

Whatever possibility remained of Johnson, sending large numbers of additional troops to Vietnam diminished when *New York Times* reporters Hedrick Smith and Neil Sheehan broke the story on March 10 that Johnson was considering an increase of 206,000 troops for the Vietnam War.[59] The impact of the *Times*' scoop, which penetrated the veil of secrecy Johnson had draped over the top-secret deliberations, was dramatic. White House spokesmen unconvincingly denied that the president was considering such a large troop request from General Westmoreland. Johnson's credibility gap widened. A storm of public criticism erupted. If Tet were such a great Allied victory, people demanded to know, why did General Westmoreland need 200,000 more troops? Other influential print and electronic media voices editorialized against the proposed troop increase and called for changes in the Vietnam War policy. The day after the *Times* broke the sensational story, Senator Fulbright, on live television, grilled Rusk for hours about the administration's plans for sending more troops to Vietnam. Fulbright ended his interrogation by warning Rusk that any further escalations of the war had better be cleared with Congress.

Deepening Political Troubles

Dramatic evidence of flagging Congressional support for the Vietnam War surfaced shortly after the *Times* story broke. Clark Clifford and General Wheeler conferred with hawkish leaders of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees. These mostly conservative Cold Warriors who had been staunch supporters of the war effort to date told Clifford and Wheeler that they could not support a Reserve call-up or a large increase in the number of U.S. troops fighting in Vietnam. Richard Russell, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, a close friend of President Johnson, and one of the most powerful senators on Capitol Hill, made a profound impression on Clark Clifford when he told him and General Wheeler that he believed the United States had made a serious mistake by involving itself in Vietnam in the first place.[60]

"The Tet Offensive . . . legitimated the Vietnam War as a political issue . . . [and] liberated politicians, journalists, and commentators from their previous commitments to the war."[61] The search for alternative war policies became a major, even obsessive political preoccupation. Because 1968 was a presidential election year, the war became an integral part of the electoral process.

The search for a way out of a war that had become unpopular and seemingly unwinnable—indeed, unpopular mainly because it appeared unwinnable—had become the leading issue of the embryonic presidential race.

Normally, a sitting president easily secures his party's nomination for another term if he wants it. But *Tet Mau Than* changed that for Lyndon Johnson. A liberal Democratic activist Allard Lowenstein started a "Dump Johnson" movement. He tried initially to recruit New York Senator Robert Kennedy to run against Johnson but Kennedy turned him down. Lowenstein then sought to recruit Senator George McGovern of South Dakota, who also refused to run. However, an obscure Democratic senator from Minnesota, Eugene McCarthy, accepted Lowenstein's offer. McCarthy had no money, no organization, and no serious ambition to be president. He was an introspective, philosophical personality, more comfortable writing poetry or discussing profound questions of human existence with close friends than campaigning for votes. But McCarthy offered his presidential candidacy to opponents of the Vietnam War as a conduit through which their opposition to that war could flow into the developing presidential election. When he entered the New Hampshire presidential primary, scheduled for March 12, the pundits wrote off his quixotic challenge. They expected the upstart maverick to be crushed by the master politician in the White House who, despite his credibility gap and the albatross of war, retained all of the powers of presidential incumbency and possessed the consummate political skills to use them.[62]

President Johnson had a comfortable lead over McCarthy in the polls for the New Hampshire primary; however, the news story in the *New York Times* about the large troop increases for the war being considered by the administration appeared on March 10, two days before the election. Johnson's poll numbers sank. On election day, McCarthy, running on the single issue of opposition to Johnson's Vietnam War policy, surprised everyone with a strong showing in New Hampshire. Aided by hundreds of young volunteers who went door-to-door in the snow on his behalf, McCarthy came within 230 votes of defeating President Johnson in a state where the electorate had hawkish inclinations.

McCarthy's surprise showing came as a political revelation. Analysts read the New Hampshire results as evidencing far greater public dissatisfaction with the war and with Johnson's leadership than anyone had realized. The hawks of New Hampshire voted for the dovish McCarthy, either because he was the only protest candidate running and they did not care about his ideology, or, more likely, simply because he was *not Lyndon Johnson.* These angry New Englanders voted for McCarthy because it was the best way they could send a message repudiating Johnson's war policy. McCarthy exposed Johnson's political vulnerability at the outset of the presidential campaign. If a political lightweight like McCarthy could almost beat President Johnson in a hawkish state, what might a more formidable antiwar candidacy do nationwide?[63]

A few days after McCarthy's strong showing in New Hampshire, Senator Robert Kennedy, having perceived Johnson's vulnerability, declared his candidacy. Kennedy had plenty of money, an experienced and savvy campaign organization, name recognition, and a vast personal following among the American electorate. With Kennedy's entry into the 1968 Democratic presidential race, Johnson knew that he now faced a long and divisive battle for his party's nomination. Even if he managed to beat back Kennedy's formidable challenge and win renomination, Johnson would be taking a badly divided Democratic Party into the general election against Richard Nixon, the probable Republican nominee. Nixon could be expected to make the increasingly unpopular war and the growing divisions within American society the leading issues.

After New Hampshire would come the Wisconsin primary, set for March 19. All three candidates' names would be on the Wisconsin ballots. Johnson's political advisers informed him that recent polls taken in that Midwestern state showed both McCarthy and Kennedy positioning themselves to beat him. The Wisconsin voters, more dovish than New Hampshire's electorate, viewed McCarthy and Kennedy as peace candidates and saw Johnson as a war candidate. His political advisers told the president that if he wanted to retrieve his candidacy, he would have to make a dramatic gesture toward peace in Vietnam.

Economic Crises

In addition to rising political challenges, serious economic problems deepened the crisis atmosphere in the Johnson White House. The inflation rate was rising because of increased war spending coupled with Johnson's refusal to increase taxes or curtail domestic spending to pay for the escalating expenses of the Vietnam conflict. The consumer price index in 1967 rose more than it had in any year since the Korean War. Increased federal spending for the Vietnam War also exacerbated the nation's spiraling balance-of-payments deficit.

A gold crisis loomed during late 1967 and into 1968, when investors and currency speculators at home and overseas exchanged their dollars, for gold causing a run on the gold markets. By mid-March, over $2 billion worth of gold had left the United States. Johnson was warned that a continuing run on gold could lead to a crisis of confidence in the dollar that could result in an international contraction of liquidity and put pressure on other countries to adopt restrictive economic policies to preserve their gold holdings.[64] A financial crisis was averted only by an emergency joint effort by the treasurers and central bankers of several countries, who created a system of monetary exchanges that temporarily curtailed gold selling on the free market.[65]

The jittery international money market sent a signal to Treasury Secretary Henry Fowler. Fowler told Johnson that if the United States were to send 206,000 additional troops to Vietnam as requested, it would cost $2.5 billion in 1968 and $10 billion in 1969. These war expenditures would add another

$500 million to the balance-of-payments deficit, require a major tax increase, and force deep cuts in funding for many Great Society and foreign aid programs. He warned the president that if the requested troops were sent to Vietnam and Congress did not take the painful political medicine of major tax increases and deep spending cuts in an election year, the United States would be risking the collapse of the dollar and a serious international financial crisis. International trade would be disrupted. The U.S. economy and those of its major trading partners could suffer serious damage. It could bring on a recession or depression.[66]

By mid-March, a combination of strategic, political, and economic considerations convinced Johnson that he could not approve the deployment of 206,000 additional troops to Vietnam. Meanwhile, Allied forces were holding their own. The NVA assault on Khe Sanh was ending, Hue had been reclaimed, and intelligence data indicated that there was little likelihood of further PLAF/NVA assaults against South Vietnamese cities. Domestic opposition to any large increase in the U.S. forces in Vietnam was both widespread and deeply entrenched, even among many hawks.

President Johnson continued to consult with his advisers, including Rostow and Rusk, who supported his war policy. On March 17 and March 18, Johnson made two speeches in which he defended his war policy and attacked his critics. He stated his determination to press on, to win the war, and he urged all Americans to support the U.S. soldiers fighting in Vietnam. The two speeches failed to elicit any noticeable popular support. Johnson's political advisers told him that the two speeches had probably damaged his reelection prospects in Wisconsin and that he must make some conciliatory gestures toward peace if he hoped to salvage his presidency. Johnson and his speech writers also worked on a major speech to be delivered to the American people on March 31, in which he would announce his decision on the troop request and inform the nation of his policy for the post-Tet phase of the Vietnam War.

The "Wise Men" Opt Out of the War

Meanwhile, most of the "wise men," who included some of the principal architects of America's Cold War foreign policy based on containing Communism, had decided that Johnson's Vietnam War policy was threatening to harm seriously the national interest. These elder statesmen had given Johnson a vote of confidence at their November 2, 1967 meeting. But the Tet-68 Offensive had convinced them to press for disengagement from Vietnam before the war did irreparable harm to the nation's global security interests.

The most influential of the "wise men"—Dean Acheson, Averell Harriman, and Paul Nitze—wanted a "review of Johnson's war policy within the larger context of America's global national security concerns."[67] These old Cold Warriors, all Europeanists, believed that Washington had committed too many assets to an area of only peripheral importance and was in danger of neglecting vital U.S. national interests in Europe. The limited war in Vietnam had gotten

out of control. It was time to phase down our commitments and, better yet, get out. It was time to refocus on our top priorities—ensuring the strategic security and continuing economic prosperity of Europe. It was time to restock the U.S. NATO forces, save the dollar, and stabilize the European gold markets. These elder statesmen joined forces with Clark Clifford, and together they worked behind the scenes to try to change administration war policy.

Johnson was also inclined to move in two new directions: send to Vietnam only token U.S. troop increases that could be raised without necessitating a major Reserve call-up, and take actions to build up the military forces of South Vietnam. On March 22, the president officially rejected General Westmoreland's request for 206,000 troops. For the first time, Johnson put a cap on the number of American forces he would commit to Vietnam, closing the open-ended commitment he had made in July 1965. On March 24, Johnson approved sending Westmoreland 13,500 additional troops. They would turn out to be "the last increment of American military manpower committed to the Vietnam War."[68] Saigon generals responded to the U.S. pressures. Draft calls were raised; General Thieu announced that ARVN forces would be augmented by adding 135,000 men.

The president also announced that he was recalling General Westmoreland from the field. He was bringing him back to Washington to become the Army's new Chief of Staff. To replace him, Johnson appointed General Creighton W. Abrams, Westmoreland's deputy, as the new MACV commander. Although Johnson's removal of Westmoreland from his command was widely construed as a dismissal, it was not. In fact, Johnson had promoted Westmoreland. He would henceforth be the most senior general in the U.S. Army. Although Westmoreland had come under criticism for his prophecies of victory and for failing to anticipate the Communist Tet-68 Offensive, he still retained Johnson's trust and respect. Having placed limits on the number of troops he was willing to commit to the war, Johnson's removal of Westmoreland, the general who wanted a large increase in combat forces and who wanted to undertake an offensive campaign designed to win the war, was inevitable. Johnson's removal of Westmoreland from the war zone put an exclamation point on his decision to end the policy of gradual escalation. It signaled that a major policy shift was imminent.

Clark Clifford, convinced that the United States could never win the Vietnam War because of the powerful political and economic forces that were imposing limits upon the U.S. military activity, was determined to set the United States on a deescalatory course in Vietnam. Clifford was also alarmed by the growing domestic unrest and loss of support for the war among the nation's legal and financial elite with whom he customarily socialized. Clifford worked with Acheson and Harry McPherson, Johnson's head speech writer. Together, they "waged an unrelenting battle for the president's mind."[69]

On March 25, the "wise men" gathered at the State Department. They had come to try to salvage America's global foreign policy, which they had constructed in the years following World War II. It was an elaborate network of

military bases around the world, regional alliances, and global commitments. It had been stretched to the breaking point by the war the United States was waging in Vietnam. The Tet-68 Offensive and gold crisis had exposed American vulnerabilities and defined limits to American power to order world affairs. The "wise men" spent the day in meetings with Rusk and Rostow from the State Department, with CIA Director Richard Helms, and with Generals Wheeler and Depuy. These officials briefed the "wise men" on the current diplomatic, military, and nation-building dimensions of the Vietnam War. The wise men were told that Tet had not been a brilliant strategic victory for the Allies, pacification was going slowly, and Saigon politics were dysfunctional. As historian John Prados has put it: "If one day has to be chosen as the tipping point for U. S. policy, it would be March 25, 1968, the day those data stunned the Wise Men."[70]

The next day, the "wise men" assembled for lunch in the White House to present their views to Johnson. The president had previously met with their most influential member, Dean Acheson. Acheson, who previously had held extensive discussions on the war with Clifford and some of Johnson's other senior advisers, told the president that neither the time nor the assets were available to accomplish American military objectives in Vietnam. The force of 500,000-plus Americans currently in South Vietnam could neither expel the NVA nor subdue the VietCong. Acheson also told the president that public opinion would never support an expanded war effort, nor would it support the present level of military activity indefinitely. Acheson further stated his judgments that the ineffective ground war had to be changed, that the bombing of North Vietnam had to be halted, and that the war must be ended as soon as possible without sacrificing the American commitment to South Vietnam.

The president went around the table, holding frank conversations with many individual "wise men" at the March 26 luncheon. While a few still supported Johnson's war policy, most sounded variations on Acheson's themes: they were convinced that action had to be taken to reduce the U.S. commitments in Vietnam and find a way out. They agreed that a troop increase would be folly and that the South Vietnamese military must shoulder a greater burden of the fighting. They told the president that they believed that the war was stalemated and that the United States could not afford to commit any more assets to Vietnam without doing serious harm to its national economy and global interests. They also told him that neither Congress nor most of the American people would support any further escalations of the conflict.[71] Following their individual conversations with the president, McGeorge Bundy, acting as *rapporteur* for the group, then summed up the collective wisdom of the "wise men" for Johnson:

> The majority feeling is that we can no longer do the job we set out to do in the time that we have left. . . . We must begin to take steps to disengage. When we last met, we saw reasons for hope. We hoped then there would be slow steady progress. Last night and today the picture is not so hopeful.[72]

Johnson was shaken by what he heard at lunch that day. The "wise men," all of whom had supported his policy as recently as last November, had mostly spoken against it. *Tet Mau Than* and the gold crisis had transformed the once-hawkish U.S. foreign policy establishment into a flock of cooing doves. They now saw Johnson's war policy as hopeless and advised him to cut his losses and get out. The Republic of South Vietnam would have to learn to defend itself. The American foreign policy elite was attending its last hurrah. It was abandoning not only the Vietnam War, but also its role in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy. Walt Rostow pronounced the American establishment dead. Lyndon Johnson put it more crudely: "The Establishment bastards have bailed out."[73]

For Johnson, who had become personally involved in this profound political crisis, the remarks of the "wise men" came as excruciating revelations. When they had first gathered, he expected them to support his war policy and urge him to carry on as they always had previously. But most had turned against the war. They advised him to phase out the U.S. involvement and turn the war over to the South Vietnamese. During the final week of March, Johnson had to shoulder personally the responsibility for the greatest American foreign policy failure in the nation's history.

Johnson's dramatic meeting with the "wise men" on March 26 finally persuaded him to accept the realities that he had resisted for weeks: the Tet Offensive had significantly increased opposition to the war in America among elite groupings, including emboldened clergy, prominent laymen, influential media editorial writers, and members of Congress. Further escalation of the war was politically impossible. The gold crisis of March 1968 convinced Johnson that further escalation of the war could bring economic and financial disaster. It could unhinge the dollar and undermine trade between the United States and its major European partners. Johnson would either have to scale back the war or court political and economic disaster.[74]

The Speech, March 31, 1968

Following the March 26 meeting, Johnson worked on his speech, which was scheduled to be delivered to the nation on March 31. Clifford played a key role in determining both the content and tone of the most important speech about the Vietnam War Johnson ever delivered.[75] Johnson spoke to the American people on Sunday evening, March 31, from the Oval Office. He spoke more slowly and more softly than usual. The weary president announced four major decisions that changed the course of the Vietnam War and had a decisive impact on American political life.

1. Johnson offered to halt all bombing of North Vietnam whenever that action would lead to productive negotiations. As a conciliatory gesture and as a first step to deescalate the Vietnam War, Johnson announced an unconditional partial bombing halt. All bombing north of the 20th Parallel would be stopped immediately.

2 Johnson announced his decision to send only 13,500 additional support troops to Westmoreland over the next five months. He was rejecting Westmoreland's request for a major troop increase.
3 Johnson stated that the U.S. effort in Vietnam would henceforth focus on expanding and improving the military capabilities of South Vietnam's armed forces and that they would gradually assume a greater responsibility for defending themselves.
4 As Johnson approached the end of his speech, he acknowledged that there was disunity in the country. He warned Americans of the perils of disunity and then concluded his speech with a stunning pronouncement, which he said he hoped would restore unity:

> With America's sons in the fields far away, with America's future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world's hopes for peace in the balance every day, I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office. . . . Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president.[76]

Even though Johnson had been seriously considering retiring from office for more than a year, he had not discussed that possibility with any of his associates, friends, or journalists. He had suffered a near-fatal heart attack in 1955, and he knew that heart disease ran in his family on his father's side. The president, if he were to seek reelection and win, feared that he would not live out his second term. He had no desire to join the bruising battle for renomination with Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy that would divide the Democratic Party. He also had no desire to join the even more brutal battle with Richard Nixon, the likely Republican Party nominee, which would exacerbate the deep divisions within the nation created by the controversial war and other divisive issues. But he had kept these thoughts and misgivings to himself. Almost no one anticipated his resignation. Whether they were delighted or dismayed by the prospect, everyone had simply assumed the inevitability of his candidacy for reelection. Johnson had caught the pundits, the politicos, the nation, indeed the world, by surprise.

On April 4, the Pentagon formally denied Westmoreland's request for 206,000 more troops and placed a ceiling of 549,500 on the U.S. troop deployments to South Vietnam.[77] The JCS officially closed the open-ended military commitment.

On the same day, Hanoi declared its readiness to have its delegates make contact with American representatives so that they could both decide how and when to end all bombing and other acts of war against the DRV. Although surprised by Hanoi's prompt response, Washington responded positively to the DRV's gesture. Talks between Washington and Hanoi opened in Paris on May 13.

Turning Point

Tet-68 was the turning point of the American Vietnam War. In its wake, there occurred a fundamental shift in the U.S. war policy that brought the first steps toward the deescalation of American involvement in Indochina. Johnson's dramatic change of direction had been brought about by domestic political developments, by economic and financial considerations, and by the efforts of Clark Clifford and the "wise men," who persuaded him to change course. Tet-68 had forced the U.S. foreign policy-making elite to confront the stark reality that their limited war strategy of graduated escalation could not achieve the U.S. objectives in Southeast Asia. They understood that the Vietnam War could not be won at any reasonable price that the American public was willing to pay. They also saw that if the administration were to continue to escalate the conflict, serious and permanent damage could result, both to the American economy and to the U.S. global foreign policy based on containing Communism. "March 31, 1968, marked an inglorious end to the policy of gradual escalation."[78]

The combination of Johnson's March 31 speech and the opening of negotiations with the Communists in Paris six weeks later gave many Americans the sense that the war in Vietnam was coming to an end. No doubt they expected that there would be more battles and that negotiations would be strained at times. Peace would not occur immediately. Nor would the troops be coming home that spring. But a subtle shift in thinking occurred. Americans began to talk about the war in the past tense; they began to think of the Vietnam conflict as history. Public approval of Johnson's conduct of the war rose sharply in the wake of his speech. He appeared to have joined the ranks of his dovish advisers and now sought peace in Vietnam rather than military victory. That he had also announced his intention to retire at the end of his current term and not seek reelection reinforced the spreading of public perception that the end of the American war in Vietnam was coming.

But Lyndon Johnson did not see himself as abandoning the U.S. goals nor as initiating any fundamental policy changes. He remained powerfully committed to what he understood to be stopping North Vietnamese aggression and to achieving a viable independent non-Communist state in southern Vietnam. He viewed the partial bombing halt, the leveling off of the American military role in South Vietnam, and the building up of the South Vietnamese armed forces as being steps toward the achievement of the U.S. goals in South Vietnam, while at the same time placating public opinion at home. He was seeking a politically sustainable war policy.

Johnson viewed his actions announced in the March 31 speech as political accommodations that were needed to buy time for his policies to work. Johnson was repositioning himself politically to persevere in a righteous cause that he believed protected the vital security interests of the United States in Southeast Asia. For the remainder of his presidency, despite what he may have said or implied in his March 31 speech, Johnson prosecuted the war as vigorously

as he could in a continuing effort to win a military victory. In tandem with the "wise men," Clark Clifford had persuaded Johnson to alter his war policy on March 31, but they failed to shake his commitment to a U.S. military victory in South Vietnam or to undermine his belief that his strategy of limited war would one day achieve it.

Johnson did not understand that his March 31 decisions set in motion a process that eventually "unraveled our Vietnam commitments."[79] After Tet, a U.S. military solution was no longer possible in South Vietnam, primarily because the American people no longer had the patience or willingness to continue furnishing the vast resources still required to attain it. Although Johnson did not realize it, after Tet, only a political solution to the Vietnam War was possible.[80] Johnson's partial bombing halt also initiated a diplomatic process that would one day bring an end to the American war in Vietnam, a denouement that would open the door to an eventual Communist victory.

At the time Johnson made his fateful decisions to end the policy of graduated escalation of the Vietnam War, the United States retained over 1 million troops stationed abroad in more than 40 countries. Since 1945, America had enmeshed itself in a global network of treaties and military alliances. By March 1968, the military forces required to defend the U.S. strategic interests around the globe had been stretched dangerously thin in order to send 536,000 troops to South Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs were especially worried about the military's ability to meet its NATO commitments, which remained the key American world strategic interest.

The powerful U.S. economy that sustained both American global commitments and the war in Vietnam showed signs of decline. The gold crisis threatened to undermine the value of the dollar and disrupt world commerce. Even though America's per capita gross domestic product (GDP) was at least 100 times larger than that of Vietnam, which was one of the poorer countries in the world, the practical limits on the total military assets that the world's richest nation-state could afford to commit to its limited war in Southeast Asia had been reached. March 1968 was the pivotal month of the entire war.

In addition to the restrictions imposed on the U.S. military forces fighting the war, competing global strategic commitments, economic and financial strains, rising domestic opposition, and the refusal of America's SEATO Allies to commit more troops to the Vietnam cockpit during the fall of 1967 further limited the U.S. Vietnam War effort.

The inefficient and class-biased conscription system strained to furnish the 40,000–50,000 young men that were required monthly for military service in 1968 because of the exemptions and deferments factored into the Selective Service and because of the wholesale draft avoidance and resistance occurring at the time. The number of soldiers provided by the draft was insufficient to meet the replacement needs of the U.S. Armed Forces stationed around the world in 1968, much less to continue a large-scale military buildup in South Vietnam had one been ordered in the aftermath of Tet.[81] The insufficiencies of the draft, combined with Johnson's refusal to mobilize the Reserves,

deprived the American military services of the manpower needed to meet its global strategic commitments and simultaneously expand a large-scale war raging in Vietnam.

Although its thermonuclear arsenal had the capability to obliterate Vietnam and its people within a matter of hours, the United States could not use nuclear weapons to augment its conventional firepower. Its leaders feared both the domestic and worldwide reactions to their use on a nation whose population consisted mainly of poor Asian peasants who posed no direct threat to the U.S. security interests. American public opinion polls showed consistent popular opposition to resorting to nuclear weapons in Vietnam. Even during the time when there was widespread public concern about the possibility of the base at Khe Sanh being overrun and numerous discussions about whether Johnson might order the use of tactical nuclear weapons to save the lives of thousands of Marines serving there, a Harris poll found that 55 percent opposed and about 25 percent supported using nuclear weapons in Vietnam. General Westmoreland did not see any need to use nuclear weapons at Khe Sanh because of the adequacy of the conventional weaponry at his disposal. Another inhibition on the possible use of nuclear weaponry was the desire not to alarm or anger the Soviets and Chinese, who might feel compelled to intervene militarily in Vietnam, or worse, to respond in kind. No doubt, any kind of Soviet or Chinese nuclear retaliation represented an extremely remote threat, but it was one that could not be absolutely discounted.

In March 1968, a confluence of powerful historical forces forced Washington to abandon its policy of graduated escalation in pursuit of military victory in Vietnam. Given the limits imposed on the size of the war effort America could mount in Vietnam in the spring of 1968 and after, and given the politico-military strategy employed by a resourceful and resolute enemy supported by China, the Soviet Union, and the Eastern Bloc, a military victory in Vietnam appeared to be beyond America's available strength.

Notes

1 Tet is a celebration of the beginning of the lunar new year. It is the most important Vietnamese holiday. During the Vietnam War, it was customary for both sides to observe a 36-hour cease-fire during Tet, and 1968, the Year of the Monkey, was to be no exception.

The term "Tet Offensive" usually refers to the January-February 1968 offensive, but can also include the so-called "mini-Tet" offensives of May and August 1968. As planned and implemented by the DRV leaders in Hanoi, all three campaigns were components of their strategic plan to inflict a decisive defeat on the Americans, destroy the ARVN forces, overthrow the government of South Vietnam, and force the Americans to leave.

2 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 220. Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Five War: America's Role in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 78–79. One of the reasons MACV was surprised by the size of the enemy forces involved in the Tet-68 attacks was because their intelligence reports had underestimated both enemy strength and the rate of infiltration into South Vietnam. Samuel Adams, "Vietnam Coverup: Playing with Numbers," *Harper's* (May 1975): 41, accuses

Westmoreland of deliberately undercounting the VietCong in order to deceive civilian leaders in Washington into thinking that America was winning the Vietnam War. A CBS video documentary, "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception," broadcast January 23, 1972, leveled the same charge. In response, General Westmoreland filed a libel suit against CBS that was eventually settled out of court.

3 Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 34.
4 Nguyen, Lien-Hang, *Hanoi's War*, 88–89.
5 Ibid., 89–90.
6 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 263–64; Oberdofer, *Tet!* 42–43.
7 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 268, 477–80, "Directive from Province Party Standing Committee to District and Local Party Organs on Forthcoming Offensive and Uprisings," November 1, 1967. This document shows that the Communists were not depending on spontaneous risings of the people in the towns and cities at the time of the Tet-68 General Offensive. The directive reveals detailed plans for coordinating military attacks on RVN offices with an organized political activity by cadre leaders.
8 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 264–65.
9 Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 237–38; Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 265–66.
10 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 411–16.
11 *Vietnam*, 20, no. 5 (February 2008) published a special 40th anniversary issue devoted entirely to the Tet Offensive. It contains many excellent articles, one of which James K. Willibanks, "Drinking Your Own Bathwater: Tet Intelligence Failures," 14–21, 61–63, calls attention to intelligence failures by the VC/NVA forces as well as the better known failures of the U.S. intelligence to read correctly the abundant evidence of an impending offensive against the cities of South Vietnam.
12 Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 2–40; Olson and Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, 184.
13 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 208–16.
14 Ibid., 228–33; Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 122–31.
15 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 231–33.
16 Quote is from Ibid., 221.
17 Summers, *Vietnam Encyclopedia*, 199–200.
18 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 228. Hasting, *Vietnam an Epic Tragedy*, 459–60.
19 Quote is from Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 228–29.
20 Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 250; Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 232.
21 Prados, *Vietnam*, 227–30.
22 Johnson is quoted in Robert Pisor, *The End of the Line; The Siege of Khe Sanh* (New York: Ballantine, 1982), 100, and 121–22; Westmoreland, *Soldier Reports*, 444–45; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 564–66. All discuss the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons at Khe Sanh. See *Vietnam*, 13, no. 5 (February 2001): 27–32: Shortly after the Communists launched the Tet-68 Offensive, General Walter T. Kirwan assembled an MACV staff team to considerable possible uses of tactical nuclear weapons.
23 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 552–53.
24 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 235–38; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 552–53.
25 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 558–59.
26 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 238–42.
27 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 559–61; Pisor, *End of the Line*, 233–38.
28 Pike, Douglas Pike, *War, Peace, and the Vietcong* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969), 125–27; Prados, *Vietnam*, 229–30.
29 Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 158–71; Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 80–81.
30 Quoted in Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 184; Alexander Kendrick, *The Wound Within: America in the Vietnam Years, 1945–1974* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1974), 251.

31 Quote is from Herring, *America's Longest War*, 192.
32 Cronkite quote is taken from Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive*, 111–12.
33 Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 83.
34 Hess, *Vietnam*, 109.
35 Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 382–86.
36 Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 92–97.
37 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 492–96.
38 Ibid., 497–98; Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 313–15.
39 Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 105–11; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 497–505.
40 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 279, 501–04, "Report of the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle G. Wheeler, on the Situation in Vietnam," February 27, 1968; Sheehan et al., *Pentagon Papers*, 615–21.
41 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 279, 501–4.
42 Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 118–19. The quoted material is on 119.
43 Ibid., 120.
44 Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive*, 117; Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 392.
45 Ibid., 235–36.
46 Clark M. Clifford, "A Viet Nam Reappraisal: The Personal History of One Man's View and How It Evolved," *Foreign Affairs* 47 (July 1969): 606–7.
47 Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 138–40.
48 Alain Enthoven's quote is found in Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3d ed., 213.
49 Questions and answers are taken from Clifford, "A Vietnam Reappraisal," 610–11.
50 Ibid., 611.
51 Ibid., 611–12.
52 Ibid., 613.
53 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 230, 505. "Memorandum for the President from the Clifford Group" (extract); Schandler, *The Unmaking of the President*, 167–76, contains a detailed description of the draft memo written by William Bundy and Paul Warnke for the president.
54 Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 396–98.
55 Ibid., 398–401.
56 Neil Sheehan and Hedrick Smith, "Westmoreland Requests 206,000 More Men, Stirring Debate in Administration," *New York Times*, March 10, 1968, 1. The person or persons responsible for leaking this news have never been identified.
57 Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 211.
58 Both quotes come from Ibid., 220.
59 Eugene J. McCarthy, *The Year of the People* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 67–72; Theodore H. White, *The Making of a President, 1968* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 83–85.
60 Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 223.
61 Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive*, 112–16.
62 Robert M. Collins, "The Economic Crisis of 1968 and the Waning of the American Century," *American Historical Review* 101, no. 2 (April 1996): 396–422. See also Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 314–18.
63 Collins, "Economic Crisis of 1968," 407–18; Paul Joseph, *Cracks in the Empire: State Politics in the Vietnam War* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981), 265–66.
64 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3rd ed., 223.
65 Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 236.
66 Clifford, "A Vietnam Reappraisal," 613–14; Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 243–46, 251.

67 Prados, *Vietnam*, 249.
68 The "wise men" present at the decisive March 25 White House meeting included Dean Acheson, George Ball, McGeorge Bundy, Douglas Dillon, Cyrus Vance, Arthur Dean, John J. McCloy, General Omar Bradley, General Matthew Ridgway, General Maxwell Taylor, Robert Murphy, and Henry Cabot Lodge. Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 313–20.
69 McGeorge Bundy quote was found in Olson and Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, 192–93.
70 Johnson is quoted in Roger Morris, *An Uncertain Greatness: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 44.
71 Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 417–18; Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 721–22; and Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 318–20. Melvin Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves*, 129–61, finds that the activities of the antiwar movement strongly influenced Johnson's decision to abandon his strategy of graduated escalation.
72 Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 420–21.
73 Johnson's March 31 speech is printed in *Public Papers of the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968–1969,* vol. 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 469–76. Key passages, with analysis, are in Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 282–87.
74 Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President*, 288–89; Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 333–37. When the Communist leaders realized that the Tet-68 Offensive had major political impacts within the United States, they were euphoric. They also perceived that they had been lucky—the timing of the attacks coinciding with the dollar crisis that together with political and military crises caused most members of the American political establishment to end their support for the war and to persuade the President to abandon his policy of graduated escalation.
75 Quote is from Herring, *America's Longest War*, 207.
76 Schandler, *The Unmaking of the President*, 319.
77 Henry Kissinger, "The Vietnam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs* 47 (January 1969): 214–16.
78 Moss, "The Vietnam Generation," 6–8, 10–12.

9 After the Tet Offensive, April–November, 1968

The First Televised War

Television coverage of some of the fierce Tet battles highlighted the fact that Vietnam was America's first televised war, the first war to be shown night after night in American living rooms. For years, color video had brought Americans the sights and sounds of men at war. The Vietnam War was also the first major war the United States had ever lost. Many prominent Americans believe that biased or distorted television news coverage of the war was a major cause of the U.S. defeat in Southeast Asia. That is, they believe that America lost history's first televised war precisely because it *was* televised.

President Johnson went to his grave convinced that even though the U.S. and ARVN forces won a major tactical victory over the VC/NVA forces during the Tet Offensive, "emotional and exaggerated" television news coverage of the battles convinced millions of American viewers that the Communists had won and the American and South Vietnamese forces had suffered a resounding defeat.[1] General Westmoreland made similar charges. He claimed that a golden opportunity to mobilize the U.S. military resources for a maximum effort to win the Vietnam War within a year or two was lost because television news coverage of the Tet campaigns turned the public against the war and prevented Johnson from escalating the conflict.[2]

Journalist Robert Elegant, who covered the war, has offered the most expansive version of the thesis that television news coverage cost Americans and their South Vietnamese Allies a war. According to Elegant, the United States won a major military victory during the Tet Offensive and had virtually won the war; yet, the war was ultimately lost because of "skewed reporting" that was "superficial and biased" and depicted the urban battles during Tet as American defeats. Political pressures generated by inaccurate television news coverage forced President Johnson to abandon his winning strategy of gradual escalation, which ultimately led to a withdrawal of U.S. forces and the fall of South Vietnam to the Communists.[3] Many other journalists followed Elegant's lead in blaming television news coverage for the loss of a war that America could have and should have won.

The thesis that the media, particularly television news, were responsible for losing the Vietnam War or were a major cause of the American defeat in

Vietnam, whether advanced by presidents, military commanders, journalists who covered the war, or many others, is untenable for a host of reasons. Most historians of the Vietnam War and most analysts of mass media coverage of the war dismiss it as being without merit.[4]

Television news coverage of the Vietnam War up to the time of Tet was overwhelmingly favorable; television reporters consistently represented American soldiers as fighting aggressively and winning every major battle en route to inevitable victory in the war.[5] During the first few years of television coverage of the war, remarkably little American blood got spilled on television prime-time news. Typical video sequences of combat action showed the U.S. troops moving across rice paddies or showed an air strike from a distance. Sometimes, one heard the muted sounds of rifle fire or the rhythmic "whup-whup-whup" of helicopter rotors. Often, the televised reports direct from the field were after-action accounts, stories filed after firefights had occurred. Americans watched a sanitized, edited version of war.[6]

The only public opinion poll that ever asked people how watching television news coverage of the Vietnam War influenced their attitudes toward the war found that 83 percent of the respondents said they felt more hawkish after watching the news.[7] At the time this poll was taken—July 1967—other polls showed that 50 percent of Americans believed that the U.S. entry into the war had been a mistake.[8] Opposition to the Vietnam War and to Johnson's war policy was growing despite, not because of, television news coverage, which was favorable at the time.

During the Tet-68 battles, for the first time, television news provided viewers with a steady diet of live-action coverage of the carnage. Viewers witnessed the destructiveness and brutality of war, of American soldiers fighting and dying in the streets of Saigon and Hue. Polls showed that television news coverage of the Tet Offensive had little impact on public opinion. But at a time when the media exaggerated the tactical gains made by the enemy, portrayed Tet as a great shock and disaster for America, and showed American soldiers being killed in combat, public opinion polls registered small, temporary rises in popular support for the war.[9]

Proponents of the thesis that television news lost the Vietnam War often cite Peter Braestrup's writings to substantiate their charges. Braestrup, a former Marine officer, Vietnam journalist, and media scholar, produced a massive study of the media coverage of Tet. He found that during the first few days of the Tet Offensive, the public was misled into thinking that the VietCong were winning, when in fact they were losing, and losing badly, almost everywhere. He has criticized journalists for their inaccurate and misleading stories. To General Westmoreland, Braestrup's critique proved that distorted media coverage misled Americans and turned a tactical victory into a major political defeat that eventually cost America a war it could have won.[10]

But a careful reading of Braestrup's study has shown that Braestrup himself did not embrace the thesis that television news lost the war and has challenged those who did.[11] He took pains to make clear that he did not charge either

print or television journalists with biased coverage during Tet. He has never said that Tet-68 coverage by either the print or television journalists, however deficient in the early stages, turned public opinion against the Vietnam War. In fact, he believed that such claims were impossible to substantiate: "No empirical data exist to link news coverage with changes in public opinion."[12]

Braestrup contended that skewed media coverage of the Tet campaigns exacerbated a growing political crisis in Washington that would have occurred even if those journalistic accounts had been clinically accurate. He believed that it was Johnson's indecisive leadership in the weeks following Tet that caused the decline of popular support for the war that occurred in March 1968. For Braestrup, changes occurring in public opinion of the Vietnam War in the weeks following Tet were caused by failures of political leadership, not by television news or other media coverage of the battles. The Army's official historian of media coverage of the Vietnam War concluded, "the gloomy reporting of the press had little effect on American public opinion."[13] Ironically, the administration's propaganda efforts in the fall of 1967, which were aimed at convincing Americans that the United States was winning the war, that the VietCong verged on defeat, and that the conflict would end soon, magnified the public shock and disillusionment that occurred during the Tet campaigns and widened the credibility gap.

Historian David Schmitz has shown that media coverage of the Tet Offensive was not a factor in the crucial decisions made by the U.S. officials in the weeks following Tet. Senior officials in the Johnson administration, most notably Clark Clifford, and key establishment figures, including a majority of the "Wise Men," were not influenced by public opinion nor were they influenced by television news coverage of the war. All of these officials, impressed by the reports they read and the briefings they received, reached their own conclusions about the war. They came to understand that the U.S. strategy of limited war in place for nearly three years had produced not victory, but only stalemate in Vietnam, nor was it likely ever to produce a victory at any reasonable cost within any reasonable time frame. They understood that any further escalation of the war could harm vital U.S. national interests and could permanently weaken the U.S. economy. These U.S. officials and the "Wise Men" with whom they consulted also understood that while the Communists had suffered devastating losses and paid an extremely high price for daring to attack the cities of South Vietnam during the Tet Offensive, the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces had not achieved a military victory in any meaningful strategic sense. The standard metrics in play at the time to measure progress in a war of attrition—KIAs, villages pacified, supplies and weapons confiscated or destroyed, and number of enemy recruited—turned out to be irrelevant. None of the strategic objectives for which the war had been waged had been attained nor had there been any indication that the attainment of any of them was near or even possible. The DRV had matched every escalation by the United States, continued to infiltrate men and materiel into South Vietnam, showed no sign that it was losing its will or capacity to support the

war in southern Vietnam, and did not give any indication that it was willing to negotiate an end to the war on terms that President Johnson could accept.[14]

Westmoreland's insistence that victory was within the U.S. grasp following Tet, if Johnson had only sent the requested troops and taken the other escalatory steps called for at the time, was dubious. At the time, Clark Clifford, most Pentagon analysts, and most of the "wise men" had concluded that Hanoi had both the political will and military assets to match any and all U.S. post-Tet escalations. Hanoi could also count on the Chinese, who might have intervened militarily if the North Vietnamese ever faced military defeat or national extinction. Had Johnson escalated the war after Tet, had he sent the 206,000 troops requested by the Pentagon, and had Westmoreland then ratcheted up the war, most likely Washington would only have attained a continuing military stalemate at a far higher level of costs and casualties. Such a continuing stalemate in Vietnam would probably have brought intensified domestic opposition, political polarization, and violent conflict within the United States that could have seriously undermined American political stability. It would also have raised taxes, jacked up the inflation rate, weakened the dollar, worsened the gold crisis, disrupted U.S. foreign trade, and seriously damaged U.S. global foreign policy interests, especially NATO.

What turned television coverage against the war after Tet-68 was growing antiwar sentiment among the U.S. soldiers serving in Vietnam, increasing numbers of public officials speaking out against the war, and growing disillusionment with the war among the American people. Johnson, Westmoreland, Elegant, and others, in their haste to make the media into a scapegoat, have inverted the relationship between television news coverage of the Vietnam War and public opinion concerning the war and presidential leadership. They failed to understand that public opinion influenced television news coverage of the war much more than television coverage influenced public opinion on the war.

As public support for the war dropped, television news coverage became more critical—that is, more accurate and balanced. But the news networks were only catching up to what their viewers were already thinking about the war and the U.S. leaders; they were not telling them what to think. When Walter Cronkite, the most popular and influential television anchor during the Vietnam War era, declared at the end of his newscast on the evening of February 27, 1968 that the war was a stalemate, the erstwhile supporter of the war was aligning his views with those of his Middle American constituents. Numerous public opinion polls show that Cronkite told Americans nothing that a large majority of them did not already believe.

Powerful political, economic, and strategic forces shaped the outcome of the Vietnam War and caused the eventual American defeat. The role of the media, including television news coverage, in influencing that outcome was inconsequential. Television news coverage of the war did not turn the American people against it. The stark statistics of death turned Americans against a stalemated war that by the time of the Tet Offensive had already killed over

15,000 young American men. And while Johnson and his advisers debated in the wake of Tet whether to escalate the war or to begin to deescalate it, one crucial dimension of the war escalated dramatically: the rate at which American soldiers continued to die in Vietnam. Americans also turned against the war because they no longer trusted Johnson or believed that he had a winning strategy.

Had the cathode ray tube never been invented, had censorship been imposed on Vietnam War news, and had all of the journalists covering the war in Southeast Asia been cheerleaders for the Allied side, public opinion would have turned against the Vietnam War just as it did against the Korean War. The Korean War was popular when the UN forces appeared to be rolling toward an easy victory over the North Koreans in the fall of 1950. Following the surprise Chinese intervention in late November 1950 and the subsequent stalemated warfare that went on for years, while thousands of U.S. soldiers continued to die, public opinion polls consistently showed that a majority of Americans did not support the Korean War. But television news was in its infancy during the Korean War, most U.S. households did not have television sets, war news from Korea was heavily censored, and the U.S. war correspondents were all supportive of the UN effort.[15]

All of the people who blame the television networks for the American defeat in Vietnam promulgate a myth that may serve hidden ideological agenda, but they do not explain why the United States lost a war.

The War Goes On

Despite the grave tactical defeat inflicted on the PLAF and PAVN forces by the U.S. and ARVN soldiers, *Tet Mau Than* profoundly altered the Vietnam War. The Communist offensive created a political crisis in Washington that forced President Johnson to abandon his limited war strategy of graduated escalation because he and his senior advisers realized that it could not achieve U.S. strategic objectives in Southeast Asia. They understood that the only realistic possibility was a negotiated settlement of the conflict. The failure of the Tet Offensive to achieve Hanoi's primary objective of provoking a popular uprising in the cities of South Vietnam that would bring down the Thieu-Ky regime also forced Le Duan and his main supporters to accept the necessity of beginning negotiations with the Americans.

However, neither President Johnson nor Le Duan was prepared to abandon their fundamental goals in Vietnam. President Johnson was determined to preserve an independent South Vietnamese nation-state. He viewed his policy moves in the wake of the Tet Offensive to be necessary adjustments while he sought a politically sustainable policy that protected vital U.S. security interests in Southeast Asia. For his part, Le Duan remained committed to overthrowing the South Vietnamese government and eventually unifying Vietnam under the rule of the DRV. He too changed tactics in order to preserve policies that had failed to produce the expected results.

Meanwhile, the war went on. From the perspective of the soldiers on the ground, not much had changed. Men on both sides continued to fight and die.

In April and May, General Westmoreland mounted the largest search-and-destroy operation of the war: 42 American and 37 ARVN armored and infantry battalions scoured the countryside around Saigon trying to locate and eliminate the VC and NVA units that had survived *Tet Mau Than.* The 110,000 Allied troops involved in the gigantic operation formed a ring of steel around Saigon.[16]

During the early morning hours of May 4, the Communists initiated what they called the second phase of their general offensive. (Americans called this second round of attacks a "mini-Tet.") VietCong and NVA forces struck 119 targets throughout South Vietnam, including Saigon. However, because the U.S. intelligence was much improved, the element of surprise was eliminated. Most VC and NVA forces were intercepted before they reached their targets. But several VietCong battalions managed to penetrate the allied steel ring around Saigon. Severe fighting occurred at Phu Lam and near Tan Son Nhut, and it took several days for the Allies to expel the Communist forces. On May 25, the VietCong launched a second wave of attacks on Saigon with the fiercest fighting occurring in the Cholon district. By May 30, Allied forces had once again driven the Communist forces from the city. During this second phase of the general offensive, the Communists did not attack any U.S. military installations or the American embassy in Saigon. They attacked areas where VC cadres believed that they had the best opportunity to foment a popular rising against the South Vietnamese government. These assaults provoked no uprisings, but they created chaotic conditions and brought more death and misery to the civilian inhabitants of Saigon. Hundreds were killed, thousands were wounded, and an estimated 90,000 were made homeless.

During this second phase of the Communist general offensive, the U.S. forces suffered their most serious defeat of the war. On May 10, two regiments of the NVA 2nd Division attacked a Special Forces camp near Kham Duc, a town located in a remote part of Quang Nam province. A force of 1,800 U.S. and South Vietnamese troops were isolated and came under intense attack. Kham Duc developed into a kind of Khe Sanh in reverse. General Westmoreland ordered that the soldiers be evacuated by air while under intense fire and Kham Duc abandoned to the NVA. The United States lost nine aircraft, and hundreds of soldiers were killed or wounded. With the abandonment of the Special Forces camp located close to the border with Laos in the central highlands, the NVA could more easily move personnel and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh trail.

By the end of July, the second phase of the general offensive had petered out. The Communist forces, particularly the VietCong elements, had once again incurred high casualties. Large numbers of VC had defected to the South Vietnamese under the *chiu hoi* program. There was no indication that urban South Vietnamese were interested in toppling the RVN government. Because the attacks during Phases One and Two of *Tet Mau Than* had focused

on the cities and towns, the southern insurgency had lost much of its base in the countryside. In addition, the Communist infrastructure, the VC cadres, had been badly damaged throughout South Vietnam.

Despite these severe losses, Hanoi was determined to go on the offensive once more, to seize the initiative in the hopes of taking control of Saigon and provoking a general uprising of the urban population. Consequently, the Politburo approved a third wave of attacks on the cities of South Vietnam, to be launched in August.

Phase Three of *Tet Mau Than* (what the Americans called another "mini Tet") began August 17 when Le Duan once again ordered Communist forces to defeat the ARVN and bring down the RVN. This third wave of attacks was the weakest and costliest of the series, and mostly involved NVA regular forces. Most of the initial attacks were in the northern regions of South Vietnam and focused on the border towns of Tay Ninh, An Loc, and Loc Ninh. Saigon was attacked once again but the well-prepared ARVN and American forces easily repulsed the Communists. The Allied forces were also supported by heavy bombing by B-52s, which ensured that the RVN capital would not fall to the Communists. Phase Three of *Twet Mau Than* was done by the end of September.

In five weeks of fighting, the NVA lost 20,000 troops (the Americans lost 700 soldiers during that time) and had not attained a single objective during what was supposed to be the decisive phase of *Tet Mau Than*. It was evident that the tremendous casualties sustained by the Communist forces during the three phases of *Tet Mau Than* had taken its toll. The PLAF was decimated and most of its main force units had to be restocked with NVA regulars infiltrated down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Much of the VC infrastructure had been exposed and eliminated. The combined Communist forces had made no significant military gains. All of the DRV's efforts to foment popular risings against the government of South Vietnam had failed. In the wake of all three phases of the general offensive, the South Vietnamese government was stronger and more stable than ever. It was only after the failure of Phase Three of *Tet Mau Than* that Le Duan abandoned his ruinous efforts to achieve a decisive victory and bring down the Saigon regime, and he began to take the diplomatic sphere of the war seriously.[17]

By the summer of 1968, MACV commanded approximately 535,000 soldiers, of which 70–75,000 were available for combat. Earlier in the year, General Thieu had ordered a general mobilization of South Vietnam's armed forces and increased draft calls, which brought nearly a million men into the ARVN.

Despite several large battles associated with the various phases of *Tet Mau Than,* during 1968, the American Vietnam War was characterized by hundreds of battalion-sized operations and thousands of actions involving companies and platoons. In countless small unit operations, the U.S. forces attempted to locate and destroy enemy forces all over South Vietnam. The U.S. ground forces were reinforced by intense aerial attacks and artillery barrages.

While these land battles raged, specially trained Army and Navy units waged riverine warfare against VietCong guerrillas amid the watery wastes of the Mekong Delta.[18]

Although the air war against North Vietnam had been curtailed, aerial warfare in South Vietnam reached a new intensity during 1968. The number of air strikes flown against guerrilla sanctuaries and supply lines increased as Air Force and Navy bombers that had been committed previously to raiding North Vietnam's military and industrial sites joined the air war in South Vietnam. After Tet, carpet bombing raids on enemy positions by cells of B-52s trebled. The U.S. planes also stepped up their bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. As the air war against North Vietnam diminished, the air wars in South Vietnam and Laos intensified.[19]

The U.S. military action also included assaults into the border regions adjacent to many of the South Vietnamese cities that the VietCong and PAVN forces had attacked during Tet. One of the most spectacular operations occurred in the I Corps Tactical Zone following the vicious fighting to reclaim Hue. The U.S. forces struck an NVA staging area in the A Shau Valley, which lay in the southwestern corner of the Thua Thien province adjacent to the Laotian border. Remote and rugged, the A Shau Valley had been a Communist stronghold for years. It was from that region that NVA forces had attacked the northern provinces as well as the city of Hue.

MACV officials feared that the NVA might use the A Shau to launch additional attacks, so they mounted an operation, code-named DELAWARE, to destroy the PAVN bases in the valley. Two battalions of the U.S. 7th Cavalry, the 1st and the 5th, flown in to attack the NVA, ran into fierce air defenses. Ten assault helicopters were shot down, and another 13 were severely damaged by deadly fire coming from antiaircraft batteries lodged in the hills and mountains that ringed the valley.[20] In addition to the air defenders of the A Shau, helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft pilots had to contend with dense fogs, thick clouds, and driving rainstorms generated by the summer monsoons, all of which often reduced visibility in the target areas to near zero.

Sweeps by the 7th Cavalry troops failed to find many NVA forces. The NVA had chosen not to fight and had slipped into cross-border sanctuaries in nearby Laos. But the Americans captured sizable amounts of food and stores the departing enemy had left behind. After the 7th Cavalry was pulled out, elements from Major General Melvin Zais's elite 101st Airborne, the famed "Screaming Eagles," air-assaulted into the A Shau Valley in an effort to catch the NVA returning to their bases. The 101st also failed to find many PAVN soldiers who wanted to stand and fight.[21] By the end of August 1968, the Americans had withdrawn from the A Shau Valley, and the North Vietnamese had returned.

In addition to action in the A Shau Valley, the U.S. troops also fought along the northern border in the vicinity of the DMZ. The Marines' main objective in this region, following their successful defense at Khe Sanh, remained sealing the border against enemy infiltration. Marine units patrolled Route 9,

attacking and counterattacking any North Vietnamese forces trying to infiltrate the northern provinces. One of the nastiest of many battles occurring in this area took place near Con Thien, on October 25. In a seven-hour fight, an armored company completely destroyed a North Vietnamese bunker complex.[22] The NVA suffered severe losses during the latter half of 1968 in the vicinity of the DMZ, but they nevertheless managed to achieve a stalemate as the year ended.

1968: The Bloodiest Year of the War

Because of Lyndon Johnson's fateful moves to deescalate the war made at the end of March, the number of U.S. forces deployed to Vietnam peaked in 1968 at 549,500. The number of NVA forces fighting in southern Vietnam during that year reached approximately 420,000. Consequently, more U.S. combatants fought in more battles that year than in any other. The stark metrics of death for both sides make dismal reading: during 1968, 16,592 American combatants were killed and 87,388 wounded, the largest numbers for any year of the American Vietnam War. The deadliest week of the war for the Americans came during Phase One of *Tet Mau Than*, specifically February 11–17, 1968, during which time 543 U.S. soldiers were killed in action and another 2,547 were wounded. For comparison—during the entirety of the war in Iraq, lasting from March 19, 2003 through November 14, 2011, 4,486 U.S. soldiers were killed and 31, 928 were wounded.

For 1968, the ARVN lost about 28,000 soldiers killed and 172,000 wounded. North Vietnamese records do not have yearly totals for casualties, although Communist estimates for casualties during Phase One of Tet-68, which lasted from January 30, 1968 through March 31, reached 90,000, including deserters, cadres killed, and defectors to the Allied side. MACV estimated combined PLAF and PAVN losses for the year at 191,000 to 208,000 killed in action.

The number of American battle deaths would have been far higher if it had not been for the remarkable medical support the U.S. combat soldiers received for the duration of the long war. American soldiers fighting in Vietnam received the best medical care in the history of warfare. The key to success in saving the lives of often severely wounded soldiers, many of whom would have died in previous wars, lay in the excellent support system the Army established and the extraordinary care provided by doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel. The helicopter medical evacuation system, known as aeromedevac or **medevac**, "evolved into a complex system of transporting critically wounded servicemen from a live battle site to a medical facility within as little as twenty minutes."[23] There, they would be treated for shock and infection, stabilized, and resuscitated. Their wounds would be stitched up, burns would be treated, and amputations would be performed if required. After a stay of three to five days, patients would be transferred to rear hospitals, which usually meant Japan.

Between 7,500 and 11,000 American women served in the Vietnam War, all of them volunteers. Eighty percent of these women served as Army, Air Force, and Navy nurses. About half of the 1,300 women who were given non-medical assignments were enlisted personnel. They served as clerks, air traffic controllers, photographers, and cartographers. Their tour of duty was usually for one year, and like all military personnel during the Vietnam War, they were rotated in and out of Vietnam on an individual rather than a unit-by-unit basis.

All nurses were officers, and they had to be at least 21 years old to be assigned to a combat zone. Although they were never legally assigned to combat roles, women serving as nurses in forward hospitals often came under enemy fire. Eight American servicewomen were killed in Vietnam, and dozens were wounded.

Working 12-hour shifts, six days a week, in trauma units at forward hospitals, the women immersed themselves in the carnage of war. Many found their initial experiences emotionally devastating. Many of the savagely wounded soldiers were 19-year-old boys just months removed from carefree civilian life in the States. Nurses often wept at the tragedy of youngsters burned, disfigured, and crippled before they had had a chance to enjoy the fullness of life. But the camaraderie of the trauma units and the understanding that they were helping young people in desperate need sustained and consoled the nurses.

Unlike many of the combat soldiers, who grew progressively disillusioned as the war went on, the nurses felt a strong sense of accomplishment. Their morale remained high. Military commanders valued their professional skills. MACV promulgated standing orders that in the event of an enemy attack on a forward hospital, the nurses were to be evacuated before the patients (Figure 9.1). Many nurses volunteered for multiple tours of duty in Vietnam. Years afterward, nurses occasionally reminisced about their war experiences. They surely did not miss the horrors of war, the agony of severely wounded soldiers, but they did miss the adrenaline rushes and the companionship. Above all, they missed the feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment that came from performing life-saving work under extremely stressful, often dangerous circumstances.[24]

Post-Tet-68 Enhanced Pacification Efforts

Under the aggressive leadership of Robert Komer, CORDS, originally known as Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, but renamed Civil Operations and Rural Development Support because of Washington's concern for South Vietnamese sensibilities, took charge of the American side of all the various components of pacification—advising village officials, land reform, economic development, medical care, providing social services, and rooting out the NLF cadres. (In mid-1968, Komer was replaced by his deputy director, William Colby.)

Figure 9.1 Members of the 101st Airborne Division carry a wounded man to a UH-ID Medevac helicopter during the assault on Hill 937 in the A Shau Valley. Photographer: Lieutenant Thomas Devine. *U.S. Army Photo.*

General Creighton W. Abrams Jr., the MACV deputy commander, succeeded General Westmoreland as the commander June 10. Abrams strongly supported all of CORDS pacification efforts and worked closely with Colby. Abrams also shifted the U.S. tactics to small-scale combat operations and he drastically reduced the use of artillery and air power in populated areas. While he formally played down the strategy of attrition warfare, he urged forces under his command to continue to engage and attrite the enemy wherever they could be located.

With negotiations underway in Paris, the U.S. and South Vietnam officials launched an accelerated pacification program to bring as many of South Vietnam's villages as possible under the control of the Saigon government. Abrams directed subordinate commanders to break down the U.S. forces into small units that would live with and train civilians to defend their villages from the guerrillas or NVA soldiers. Using these "clear and hold" tactics, the U.S. combat forces formed security shields to prevent VietCong forces from entering populated areas. Allied officials focused their efforts in the areas where the VietCong had suffered their worst losses and could not thwart the accelerated Allied pacification efforts.

The CORDS and South Vietnamese officials also stepped up the *Chieu Hoi* program that offered amnesty to VietCong defectors, and with assistance from CIA officers they implemented the **PHOENIX program**, an intelligence-gathering operation aimed at exposing and neutralizing the VietCong infrastructure.[25] Despite all the increased activity, pacification made little progress for the rest of 1968. Saigon controlled only a few more villages at year's end than it had before the Tet Offensive erupted, and there was no way to tell for sure whether all of the people living in designated "friendly" villages genuinely supported the GVN and the U.S. military effort.

Simultaneously with its enhanced pacification efforts, the United States expanded and modernized the South Vietnamese armed forces. Authorized force levels were increased from 685,000 to 850,000, and South Vietnamese soldiers were provided with more modern weapons. General Abrams also pushed for greater participation in combat operations by the ARVN, an early implementation of what would one day be called **VIETNAMIZATION.** There was noticeable improvement in the performance of the ARVN forces by the end of the year, but draft evasion and desertion remained both chronic and massive.

There was no discernible enthusiasm for Vietnamization on the part of South Vietnamese leaders. Having become quite comfortable with the U.S. soldiers doing most of the fighting and dying for them, Thieu and Ky appeared to be in no hurry to alter the situation.[26] Neither GVN political desires nor RVNAF military capabilities had anything to do with the U.S. decision to begin the process of Vietnamization. American domestic political exigencies forced Johnson to turn to Vietnamization.[27]

The surprisingly effective performance of some of the ARVN units during the Tet battles had given the U.S. leaders in Washington and Saigon some grounds for hoping that Vietnamization might work. But there was never any realistic basis for believing that the RVN could ever carry out Vietnamization successfully. The main reason American soldiers were fighting in Vietnam was because Washington did not believe that the South Vietnamese could defend themselves against the insurgency directed from Hanoi. Nothing had really changed since Tet.[28]

General Thieu's and Marshall Ky's power depended on maintaining the loyalty of a coterie of ARVN generals who held their commands because of their political reliability. The price that the leaders of the RVN would have had to pay for eliminating incompetence and corruption within their civilian and military bureaucracies would have been a fall from power. Insistence on reform would have amounted to committing political suicide. Because the South Vietnamese government and army remained rotten at their cores, and because American leaders neither had the leverage nor will to impose radical reforms on South Vietnam's leadership elites, no amount of U.S. economic and military support could ever make Vietnamization work well enough to defeat their implacable enemies.[29]

Despite the change in the U.S. tactics, the stepped-up ARVN military activity, the accelerated pacification program, and the beginnings of Vietnamization,

the military and political balance in South Vietnam had changed little as 1968 ended. The VietCong forces had suffered severe losses; they controlled fewer villages and a smaller portion of the South Vietnamese population than they had before the Tet Offensive. But much of the VietCong infrastructure remained intact. The U.S. military operations after Tet continued inflicting severe losses on the enemy, destroying staging areas, and disrupting supply lines, but most of the NVA/VC main force units remained intact, still formidable foes at year's end and still capable of maintaining the stalemate.

Historian Ronald Specter has noted of the Tet-68 campaigns and the fighting that continued throughout the year, "The battles of 1968 were decisive . . . because they were so indecisive."[30] Popular support for the war within the United States continued to decline: Congressional opposition grew stronger. Morale and discipline within the U.S. Army continued to erode. Simultaneously, the Communists largely rebuilt their military and their political infrastructure.

The Saigon government's performance improved somewhat during 1968. It was stronger and more stable after Tet than it had ever been. Many of the South Vietnamese people, angry at the Communists for violating the Tet truce and for attacking their cities, turned to the Thieu government. Many city residents, hitherto smug in their sense of safety from the ravages of war and apathetic toward the government, now felt vulnerable and understood that their security depended on the ARVN forces.

Thieu's government actively involved citizens in repairing the extensive damage incurred by South Vietnam's cities during Tet. His government also launched new programs to combat corruption and curb rampant inflation. But Thieu's anticorruption program was one-sided; it aimed chiefly at the corruption of Ky's supporters and ignored the corrupt practices of Thieu loyalists. Thieu gradually replaced cabinet members and province chiefs loyal to Ky with military men loyal to him. By mid-summer 1968, Thieu, with the U.S. support, had gained the upper hand over his archrival, General Ky. The local pundits, who frequented the sidewalk cafes of Tu Do Street, began calling Thieu "the little dictator."[31]

But chronic political weaknesses persisted in South Vietnam and grave problems were not addressed. Tet generated nearly a million new refugees to add to those already inhabiting the slums, back-alley labyrinths, and suburban hovels of Saigon and other cities. The massive needs of the war refugees went largely unattended. Land reform in South Vietnam stalled because Thieu favored large landowners. Corruption at all levels of the Saigon government and military persisted. The Buddhists, the sects, and other non-Communist political groupings refused to support the RVN. The Saigon regime, despite it making a few cosmetic gestures toward civilian rule, remained, in essence, a military dictatorship. The U.S. negotiations with Hanoi exacerbated tensions between American and Saigon officials. Many South Vietnamese feared and resented what appeared to them to be the U.S. efforts to impose a settlement on them and then get out, leaving the RVN at the mercy of the VietCong and the NVA.[32]

The 1968 Election: War at Home

"The Vietnam War played a central role in the 1968 election." The war had combined with domestic insurgencies to create profound schisms between white and black, affluent and poor, young and old, "hippies" and "straights," hawks and doves, practitioners of the "new politics" and members of the political establishment. Political and cultural warfare raged in the streets of many of America's largest cities. A generalized sense of a nation in crisis pervaded the land. Robert Kennedy, seeking the Democratic nomination as an antiwar candidate, and Richard Nixon, seeking the Republican nomination, both feared that the institutional framework of the world's oldest and most successful democracy might not be able to contain the powerful centrifugal forces threatening to spin out of control. The 1968 presidential election unfolded amidst a backdrop of the worst violence, social conflict, and political polarization seen in America since the Civil War.[33]

Racial tensions increased sharply during the first few months of 1968. More race-related disturbances occurred then than in any previous year, and authorities braced themselves for another summer of urban rioting. The Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), headed by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., began a Poor People's campaign to protest poverty, discrimination, and the Vietnam War, which was draining funds from civil rights and antipoverty programs. On the evening of April 4, King, the apostle of nonviolent social change and gentle critic of the Vietnam War, was assassinated as he stood on a balcony outside of a Memphis motel room. That night, the inner cities of America exploded in fury as news of King's murder reached them. Some 75,000 federal troops and National Guardsmen joined local police and sheriffs to suppress the uprisings in 130 cities. Forty-six people, mostly African Americans, were killed, shot by police and National Guardsmen, and thousands of people were injured. In Chicago, Mayor Richard Daley ordered police to "shoot to kill" arsonists and looters. In the nation's capital, the site of some of the worst rioting, looting, and burning, barbed-wire barriers and machine-gun emplacements surrounded government buildings to protect them from any attacks.[34] Machine-gun mounts on the steps of the nation's capital eloquently expressed the torment of profoundly divided people.

Until Tet-68, the large majority of the nation's nearly 7 million college students had been apolitical and unquestioningly pro-war. In its aftermath, many were in a rebellious mood. Demonstrations convulsed college campuses during the spring of 1968, most of them related to the Vietnam War. Students protested the presence of Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs. They picketed and harassed recruiters from the military services, the CIA, and corporations with Pentagon contracts.

The most violent uprising occurred in April at Columbia, one of the most distinguished universities in the country. On this prestigious Ivy League campus, black militants joined with antiwar radicals to protest both the university's complicity with the Vietnam War and its plans to construct a new gymnasium

in an area that would require the relocation of African Americans living in apartments on the building site. During the demonstration, students occupied campus buildings and refused orders to vacate them. University officials called in the New York City police, who forcibly removed the students. In the process, hundreds of students were arrested, and about 150 were injured. Following the police action, student protesters called a strike that forced the university to curtail its spring 1968 semester. Student uprisings also occurred in other countries. The largest occurred in France in May 1968. It began as a student protest and quickly morphed into the largest wildcat general strike in modern French history. At its peak, 11,000,000 workers were on strike. They virtually brought to a halt one of the world's largest industrial economies and almost caused the collapse of President Charles de Gaulle's government.[34]

From April to early June, Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy waged an increasingly bitter campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in the aftermath of Johnson's withdrawal speech. A third candidate for the Democratic nomination, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, entered the contest in April. Knowing that he had no chance against McCarthy and Kennedy in most of the 14 states that held primaries because he supported Johnson's Vietnam War policy, Humphrey lined up delegates from the 36 states that did not hold primaries. In these states, delegates were chosen by party bosses and trade union leaders, who often were one and the same.

Kennedy, passionate and charismatic, beat McCarthy in most of the primaries because of his remarkable ability to appeal to voters across class and cultural boundaries: African Americans, Hispanics, and the disadvantaged of all races, as well as to ethnic working-class voters and activist liberal intellectuals. Kennedy was the only prominent white politician in the country who had any credibility at all with African American citizens during those profoundly troubled times. McCarthy, cerebral, cool, and appealing mainly to well-educated, middle-class liberals who constituted the traditional reform elements in American politics, beat Kennedy only once, in the Oregon primary on May 25.

Next came the important California primary. After a hard fight, Kennedy won a narrow victory. But shortly after delivering a victory speech to his supporters in the ballroom of the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles in the early morning hours of June 5, he was assassinated by Sirhan Sirhan, an Arab nationalist who hated Kennedy because of his strong support of Israel.[35] Another senseless killing once again intensified widely shared fears that anarchy and civil conflict would overwhelm the American political process. With Kennedy's murder, the antiwar forces within the Democratic Party lost any chance to capture their party's presidential nomination.

Political violence in America during the tormented year of 1968 climaxed in Chicago at the time of the Democratic Convention. A kaleidoscopic variety of antiwar groups came to Chicago, with a variety of purposes and tactics. Among them was a small group calling itself the Youth International Party ("Yippies") who sought to ridicule the entire political system. They held a mock convention

and nominated a pig ("Pigasus") for president. A more serious group, which had organized the demonstration at the Pentagon staged in October 1967, the National Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam (MOBE) hoped to use nonviolent resistance to war to create a new Democratic politics. The demonstrations were timed to coincide with the Democratic Convention to be held during the last week of August. Chicago's Mayor Daley, the host of the Democratic Convention, vowed that antiwar demonstrators would not disrupt his city or its convention. The stage was set for the most violent confrontation between antiwar protesters and police of the entire Vietnam War era.

In the days preceding the convention, thousands of youthful antiwar activists filtered into Chicago, gathering mainly in Lincoln Park, far from the convention site at the International Amphitheater near the stockyards. To meet the anticipated threat to law and order, Mayor Daley mobilized his entire 12,000-man police force. In addition, the governor of Illinois assigned 5,649 members of the National Guard to round-the-clock duty in Chicago. Federal forces were also committed to the defense of the Democratic Convention. The Army established a command post near the amphitheater, which was linked to both the Pentagon and White House. 6,000 Army troops in full combat gear were airlifted to the area. The assembled police, National Guard, and the U.S. Army troops significantly outnumbered the protesters, whose numbers never exceeded 10,000–12,000.[36]

Tension built during the days of the Democratic Convention, which convened at the Amphitheater on Saturday, August 24. There were skirmishes in the parks between protesters and police. For several days, the police and National Guard succeeded in keeping the demonstrations miles from the convention site and nearby hotels, where the delegates were staying and where various candidates for the presidential nomination had set up their headquarters.

President Johnson used his control of the Democratic Party machinery to ensure that the convention was controlled by Humphrey's supporters. They easily defeated efforts by a coalition of antiwar delegates to adopt a peace plank for the party platform. After hours of emotional debate, the convention adopted a plank that endorsed President Johnson's Vietnam War policy. Humphrey was nominated on Wednesday evening, August 28. The major antiwar candidate, Senator Eugene McCarthy, finished a distant second in the balloting.

The Battle of Chicago erupted the night Humphrey was nominated. About 5,000 protesters gathered in Grant Park across the street from the Hilton Hotel, where most of the delegates were staying. Encircled by National Guardsmen, mobs of demonstrators broke through barriers at various points and fanned out into the nearby Loop. They were attacked by police using clubs, mace, and tear gas. The violent scene was illuminated by spotlights and recorded by television cameras and news photographers. Protesters taunted the police by shouting, "The whole world is watching, the whole word is watching." Some of the police chanted "kill, kill, kill" as they charged the crowds.

There is evidence that the Chicago police planted *agents provocateurs* among the protesters to incite them to more violent actions, thus incurring more

punishment from the police. Police also indiscriminately attacked luckless tourists and passersby caught in the melee, as well as television cameramen and newspaper photographers who were recording the orgy of violence. The entire Walpurgis Night of mayhem was telecast live to Americans watching in horrified disbelief. Senator Abraham Ribicoff, viewing the nightmare scenes on a television monitor inside the convention hall, condemned Mayor Daley's use of "Gestapo tactics." The forces of law and order won the war in the streets of Chicago, but both sides incurred casualties. The body count from several days of rioting: one person dead, over 1,000 injured, including 192 policemen, and 662 people were arrested.[37]

Some who witnessed the violence on television were fearful that American fascism might be wearing the dark-blue uniform of the Chicago police. A vastly larger number of viewers endorsed the police attacks on demonstrators, whose radical politics and countercultural lifestyles they perceived as intolerable threats to the good order and public morality of American civilization. The violence surrounding the Democratic Convention dramatized the ominous fact that there could be no peace in America until peace came to Vietnam. Journalist I. F. Stone observed, "The war is destroying our country as we are destroying Vietnam."[38]

The violent events in Chicago shattered the radical antiwar movement and strengthened political conservatives who had been making a comeback from the Goldwater debacle of 1964. The "Battle of Chicago" also played into the hands of Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon, who had been nominated at an orderly Republican convention that had gathered in Miami three weeks before the Democrats' tumultuous gathering. In his acceptance speech, a poised and confident Nixon had sounded the themes that would highlight his fall campaign. He zeroed in on the need for national unity, the demand for "law and order," and the urgent need for peace in Vietnam, although not peace at any price. He applauded the "forgotten Americans," the "non-shouters," and the "non-demonstrators" who were good and decent people.[39] These themes would resonate powerfully with millions of voters yearning for the return of social peace and for an end to a hated war.

A strong third-party candidate with a large popular following, former Alabama Governor George Wallace also entered the race for the presidency in 1968 as the nominee of the American Independent Party. Although he voiced hawkish sentiments, Wallace called for a negotiated settlement of the Vietnam War. He also championed traditional values and the work ethic. But his main issue was playing to white antipathy toward civil rights measures and antipoverty programs. Wallace had a sure talent for voicing the fears and resentments of working-class and lower-middle-class whites, especially young men. When the presidential campaign began in September, polls gave Nixon a commanding15 percent lead over Humphrey, and also showed that Wallace enjoyed substantial popular support.

The 1968 fall presidential campaign turned only partly on the issue of the Vietnam War. The conflict in Vietnam "was enmeshed in a web of racial

tensions and barely articulated discontents."[40] None of the three major candidates had a clearly defined stance on the war; all took carefully qualified and nuanced positions that ultimately differed little from one another. All favored a negotiated settlement of the conflict that would end the fighting and preserve a pro-Western government in South Vietnam. Neither the millions of hawks who favored more bombing and a more aggressive ground war nor the flocks of doves who favored an unconditional U.S. pullout from Vietnam had a candidate to vote for. Nixon, well ahead in all of the polls, refused to discuss Vietnam for fear of complicating the Paris talks. Nixon and especially his vice presidential running mate, Maryland Governor Spiro T. Agnew, spent much time calling for "law and order" and denouncing antiwar activists, black militants, and hippies.

Humphrey, whose candidacy had emerged from the political ruins of Chicago, appeared to have no chance when the electoral contest began. He headed the ticket of a party profoundly divided over the Vietnam War. He had little money and no national campaign organization. He was repudiated by the antiwar liberals who had been defeated at the Democratic Convention. These dovish politicos scorned his loyal support of Johnson's war policy. Humphrey wanted to take a more independent stance on the war; he favored a complete bombing halt, but Johnson refused to allow him to propose it. Humphrey's campaign slogan, "The Politics of Joy," sounded absurdly inappropriate to the joyless mood prevailing in the country. For weeks, his campaign floundered along.

As the 1968 election entered its final month, Humphrey's campaign suddenly sprang to life. Even though he did not seek Johnson's permission, Humphrey separated himself from the administration's war policy and called for a total bombing halt. Instantly, his poll numbers dramatically improved. Eugene McCarthy belatedly endorsed Humphrey, and many antiwar Democrats returned to the party fold. They preferred a flawed liberal to their nemesis, Nixon. As Humphrey's campaign gained momentum, Nixon's hitherto smooth-running campaign appeared to stall. Worried by Humphrey's late surge, Nixon hinted that he had a plan for ending the Vietnam War but claimed that he could not disclose its details lest he compromise its future effectiveness. He did not have any such plan, but he let the media convey the impression that he did. Wallace's popular support in the north declined as union leaders campaigned vigorously for Humphrey. Polls taken throughout October showed Humphrey steadily closing the gap, with Nixon stalled and Wallace fading.

There were also signs of movement in the negotiations between American and North Vietnamese representatives that had begun in Paris on May 13, 1968, but had been deadlocked almost from the moment they started. The American delegates refused to accept any cease-fire terms that would require the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Vietnam while allowing the Ho Chi Minh Trail to remain open and PAVN forces to remain in South Vietnam. The American negotiators also refused to consider any political settlement of

the conflict that did not guarantee the continued survival of a non-Communist government in South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese delegates quickly rejected the American demand for a reciprocal deescalation in exchange for completely stopping the bombing. Hanoi also rejected any cease-fire proposals that would limit its ability to support the war in South Vietnam and refused to consider any political solution that allowed the Thieu-Ky regime to survive.

Hanoi was using the Paris talks as part of a larger strategy of talking while fighting. DRV leaders intended to achieve a complete bombing halt, to highlight differences between the Americans and South Vietnamese in an effort to drive the Allies apart, and to exploit the antiwar sentiment within the United States that grew rapidly in the wake of Tet. They intended to achieve the bombing halt without having to make any meaningful concessions to the Americans. For the Communists, negotiations were not a means for ending the war, they were part of an integrated politico-military strategy designed to achieve their major objectives via negotiations that they could not achieve by fighting.

Johnson, who despised Nixon and knew that a dramatic peace gesture could put the Democratic candidate over the top, spoke to the American people on Thursday evening, October 31. The president announced a complete halt of all bombing of North Vietnam effective at midnight on October 31, five days before the election, and he implied that a peace settlement was coming soon. The Paris talks were scheduled to resume on November 6, the day after the election.

The Communists had indicated informally that they were prepared to begin serious peace discussions within a few days of a complete bombing halt and that they would also accept the Saigon government's presence at the Paris talks. The United States, in return, had agreed to accept representation from the NLF. General Abrams had assured President Johnson that a bombing halt would pose no threat to Allied forces in South Vietnam, especially since Johnson had promised Abrams that he would shift the aircraft engaged in bombing North Vietnam to the aerial war against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.[41]

Johnson's dramatic election-eve speech propelled Humphrey's candidacy forward. The President's calculated "October surprise" appeared to be working to beat back Nixon's bid for the White House. Public opinion polls taken over the final weekend before Tuesday's scheduled vote showed Nixon's lead had evaporated. The pollsters pronounced the election "too close to call." A Harris poll released on Saturday, November 1, three days before the election, showed that Humphrey had pulled ahead of Nixon by 43 percent to 40 percent. Humphrey appeared poised to pull off the biggest political upset since Harry Truman had defeated Thomas Dewey 20 years earlier.

But behind the scenes, complex (and probably illegal) political maneuvering appears to have thwarted Humphrey's belated drive for the presidency. Anna Chennault, the Chinese-born widow of General Claire Chennault, leader of the famed Flying Tigers, with Nixon's encouragement, contacted the South Vietnamese ambassador to the United States, Bui Diem. She told Diem to

advise General Thieu not to participate in any negotiations until after the elections because a Nixon presidency would negotiate better terms for South Vietnam than a Humphrey presidency.[42]

On November 1, General Thieu, aware that the unilateral U.S. bombing halt had not required any reciprocal deescalations by Hanoi, announced that South Vietnam would not attend the Paris talks. Thieu's rubber-stamp National Assembly condemned President Johnson's "betrayal of an ally." Americans realized sadly that Johnson's peace initiative was not going to halt the war. Another Harris poll, taken on Monday, showed Nixon had regained the lead. Although informed of the efforts of the Nixon camp to prevent the beginning of peace talks, Johnson chose not to publicize the connections between Thieu and Nixon, which might have given Humphrey a victory.[43]

Although it is impossible to calculate precisely the impact of the collapse of the peace initiative on the presidential vote, and no doubt a myriad of domestic issues influenced the outcome, Thieu's last-minute demurral may have given Nixon his thin margin of victory. Out of 73 million votes cast, his winning margin was a scant 510,000. Nixon received 43.4 percent of the vote, Humphrey 42.7 percent.

But it is unlikely that most American voters viewed the election as a referendum on Johnson's war policy. That policy itself was perceived, erroneously, by most voters as having become dovish in the aftermath of Tet. Voters could not discern much difference among Nixon, Humphrey, and Wallace's policy positions on the war. Nixon may have been narrowly preferred because he was viewed as being better qualified for the presidency and because the nation was becoming more conservative in the wake of the war and social disorder.

Following two weeks of intense U.S. pressure and promises of continuing support, Thieu reluctantly agreed to send a delegation to the Paris talks, which he feared and loathed. There followed a debate that went on for weeks over the shape of the negotiating table and the positioning of the four delegations at the table. By the time negotiations involving the four concerned parties began, Johnson's administration had entered its final days.[44]

Although it may have cost Humphrey his chance to win the 1968 presidential election, "It seems highly doubtful that South Vietnamese intransigence sabotaged an opportunity for a peace settlement."[45] Hanoi's new flexibility coming toward the end of 1968 did not extend beyond getting the bombing halted, which it managed without having to make any concessions in return. On the substantive issues, Hanoi would have probably accepted nothing less than a U.S. withdrawal and the end of the Thieu regime, both of which were unacceptable to Johnson. In the fall of 1968, neither Washington nor Hanoi was prepared to make the kinds of concessions that might have brought peace to Vietnam. The Tet Offensive and its violent aftermath had only hardened the diplomatic impasse over the key issues that had prevailed for years. The millions of Americans who expected the incoming administration of Richard Nixon to bring an early end to the war would be bitterly disappointed. They discovered that their Vietnam ordeal would endure another four years.

Notes

1 Lyndon Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963–1969* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 383.
2 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 427–28, 438–39, 471–72, 554–57; Jeffrey P. Kimball, "The Stab-in-the-back Legend and the Vietnam War," *Armed Forces and Society* 14 (Spring 1988): 438–39.
3 Elegant, Robert, "How to Lose A War: Reflections of A Foreign Correspondent," *Encounter* (August 1981): 73–76.
4 Many scholars from diverse disciplines have studied the media coverage of the Vietnam War. Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and George Donelson Moss, "News or Nemesis: Did Television Lose the Vietnam War?" in *A Vietnam Reader: Sources and Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991) both show that television news coverage of the Vietnam War did not turn the American people against the war. William Hammond, a historian at the Army's Center of Military History, has written two books about the military and the media: *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962–1968* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989) and *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968–1973* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996). Hammond believes that media coverage of the war, whether favorable or unfavorable, had only a minor influence on public perceptions of the war. David F. Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), in an elegant chapter, "The Meaning of Tet," 157–67, demolishes the myth that television coverage of the war either lost the war or was a major cause of the U.S. defeat.
5 Hallin, *Uncensored War*, 110.
6 Oscar Patterson III, "An Analysis of Television Coverage of the Vietnam War," *Journal of Broadcasting* 28 (Fall 1984): 401– 02.
7 The poll appeared in Newsweek, July 10, 1967, 20–24.
8 Mueller, *Wars, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, 88–89.
9 See Table 4.6 showing policy preferences in Vietnam appearing in Mueller, *Wars, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, 107. Public opinion polls taken in early February, immediately after the Tet attacks, showed that the number of people calling themselves hawks rose from 56 percent to 61 percent and the number calling themselves doves dropped from 28 percent to 23 percent.
10 See Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*, 2 vols. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977).
11 Peter Braestrup, "The Press and the Vietnam War," *Encounter* (April 1983): 92.
12 Peter Braestrup, "The Tet Offensive-Another Press Controversy: 2," in Harrison Salisbury, ed., *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 167–68.
13 William Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 122.
14 Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive*, 163–65. Schmitz exposes two widely held myths about the Tet Offensive—(1) that media coverage, particularly the way television news covered Tet lost a war that America could have won, and (2) that Tet was a major U.S. military victory.
15 Ibid., 23–114; Moss, *News or Nemesis*, 35–43.
16 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 259–60.
17 Nguyen, Lien-Hang T, *Hanoi's War*, 122–123.
18 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 255, 259, 262–63.
19 Morrocco, *Thunder from Above*, 184–86.

20 Clark Doughan, *Stephen Weiss, and the editors of Boston Publishing, Nineteen Sixty-Eight, The Vietnam Experience* (Boston, MA: Boston Publishing, 1983), 142–44; Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 248–49; Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 263–64.
21 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 249–50.
22 Ibid., 251–54.
23 Ibid., 35–40. Of the 97,659 soldiers who received serious wounds in Vietnam, the mortality rate was 2.5 percent, compared to 4.5 percent for World War II and 4.0 percent for Korea. Quote is from Hood, Jonathan Davis, and Buesseler, John Aure, Colonel. M.D., U.S. Army (ret.).
24 Kathryn Marshall, *In the Combat Zone* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 3–13; Elizabeth M. Norman, *Women at War: The Story of Fifty Military Nurses Who Served in Vietnam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 21–35.
25 Blaufarb, *Counterinsurgency Era*, 266–74; Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*, 81–97. The PHOENIX program that operated in South Vietnam 1968–72 to neutralize the VietCong political infrastructure in the villages became controversial. Its critics in testimony before congressional investigating committees accused the CIA and its South Vietnamese counterparts of operating an assassination program outside the framework of law, morality, and bureaucratic accountability. Andrade has challenged these charges. He concedes that there were plenty of abuses; people were often imprisoned, tortured, and murdered without cause. But he shows that the intent of the program was to identify and neutralize the VCI. In 1969 and 1970, the PHOENIX program achieved considerable success in eliminating or disrupting the revolutionary infrastructure in some districts of South Vietnam. But it was too small and never neutralized very many of the important cadres. Also, it never got the support it needed from RVN officials to significantly cripple the insurgency. Both William Colby and General Abrams conceded that project Phoenix (known as Phung Hoang to the South Vietnamese) never attained its desired goals.
26 Clifford, "Vietnam Reappraisal," 614; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 212–13.
27 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 208.
28 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 531.
29 Ibid., 532; Bluefarb, *Counterinsurgency Era*, 302–5.
30 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 213.
31 Quoted in Dougan et al., *Nineteen Sixty-Eight*, 126.
32 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 544–47. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 214–15.
33 Quote is from Melvin Small, "Hey, Hey, LBJ! American Domestic Politics and the Vietnam War," in David L. Anderson, ed., *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, 343; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, vol. 2 (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 930–31.
34 DeBenedetti, *American Ordeal*, 217–18; Moss, *America in the Twentieth Century*, 370.
35 Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 955–56.
36 Moss, *News or Nemesis*, 96–99.
37 Godfrey Hodgson, *America in our Time: From World War II to Nixon-What Happened and Why* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 370–72; DeBenedetti, An American Ordeal, 223–28. Immediately after they broadcast images of the violence taking place in the streets of Chicago, the three television networks were deluged by letters, telegrams, and phone calls by irate viewers. By an eight-to-one margin, the viewers condemned the demonstrators and what they perceived as biased television reportage favoring the protesters. During the ensuing two weeks, Mayor Daley received 75,000 letters from all over the country; 90 percent of them praised his police. Public opinion polls showed that 56 percent of the people approved of Daley's handling of the disorders and 71 percent thought that his security measures were justified.

38 Dougan et al., *Nineteen Sixty-Eight*, 175; Stone is quoted in DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 228.
39 WalterLaFeber, *The Deadly Bet: LBJ, Vietnam, and the 1968 Election* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 111.
40 Quote is from DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 235.
41 Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 513–29; Goodman, *Lost Peace*, 69–73.
42 Dougan et al., *Nineteen Sixty-Eight*, 180; LaFeber, *The Deadly Bet*, 161.
43 Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 32–33. Berman states that Johnson knew all about Nixon's (probably illegal) efforts to stymie the peace talks in order to prevent a probable Humphrey victory, but his sources of information were illegal wiretaps and surveillance, so he could not go public with them. FBI reports declassified years after the facts reveal the extent of Chennault's contacts with both the South Vietnamese government and the Nixon camp. Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 56–62, has the best brief analysis of Nixon's behind-the-scenes intrigues to sabotage the peace talks and ensure his victory.
44 Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 271–72; Hess, *Vietnam*, rev. ed., 112. President Johnson met with General Thieu in Honolulu in July 1968 to reassure him that the United States would never support the establishment of a coalition government in South Vietnam. Johnson also promised that South Vietnam would be represented in any negotiations.
45 Quote is from Herring, *America's Longest War*, 219.

10 Escalation and Withdrawal, 1969–71

Nixon Takes Control

When Richard M. Nixon assumed the office of President of the United States on January 20, 1969, the Second Indochina War, what the Vietnamese called the American war in Vietnam, had been going on for more than a decade. During the 1968 presidential campaign, Nixon had frequently criticized Johnson's gradualist use of military force in Vietnam because it had produced neither military victory nor a negotiated settlement of the war. In his first inaugural address, Nixon conceded that winning a military victory "over any other people" was no longer possible. But he vowed to end the war and win the peace. He would bring an end to the fighting while avoiding defeat; that is, he sought to maintain a non-Communist government in Saigon and prevent it from being replaced by a Communist regime. Achieving his goal in Indochina required that he win a military and political victory over the Communist forces in the Republic of South Vietnam **(RVN)** and a diplomatic victory over the DRV at the Paris negotiations.[1]

Nixon stressed the importance of ending the war honorably and in such a fashion that the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam would never be or even appear to be an American defeat. The political status of South Vietnam was a crucially important American commitment and a vital national interest because of its global implications. Preserving South Vietnam was necessary for the United States to maintain its credibility as a great power willing and able to protect its Allies from revolutionary upheavals. Keeping non-Communists in power in South Vietnam would also enable the United States to contain and influence the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. How America ended its war in Vietnam would determine if there would soon be another war or if the global order that the U.S. leaders wanted to protect would enjoy a generation of peace.[2]

Some of Nixon's ideas concerning the Vietnam War were similar to the views of Henry A. Kissinger, who became Nixon's national security adviser. Kissinger, while a professor at Harvard, had written extensively on foreign policy and national security issues. Kissinger's realist theories of international relations were favored by the foreign policy establishment, many of whose members distrusted Richard Nixon. Kissinger shared Nixon's view that the

first order of foreign policy business must be the phasing out of the American Vietnam War, that it had to be done in a relatively short amount of time and in an honorable fashion.

Both Nixon and Kissinger envisioned a world in which the major powers, including the Communist powers, maintained a stable world order, in which they would all have a vested interest. Nixon and Kissinger believed that they could provide the leadership and develop the policies that would enable the United States to maintain its primacy within this global order. The two American leaders sought to improve relations with the Soviet Union and to move toward normal relations with China, ending 20 years of hostility between the People's Republic and the United States.[3]

Nixon and Kissinger understood that Johnson's *modus operandi*, decision making by consensus, had been a slow and cumbrous process. They believed that to accomplish their major foreign policy goals they would have to concentrate the power to conduct American foreign policy into their hands. Achieving such power required bypassing the National Security Council and the bureaucracies in the Defense Department, the State Department, and the CIA. They believed that they possessed the requisite expertise to rise above bureaucratic consensus politics. They believed that only they could make the bold, decisive moves needed for ending the American war in Vietnam, reorienting the U.S. relations with China and the Soviet Union, and achieving a stable and peaceful world order that accorded with the U.S. diplomatic, economic, strategic, and ideological interests. Nixon told Kissinger, "You and I will end the war."[4]

Among all the factors accounting for Nixon's narrow electoral win in November 1968, his occasional references to a secret plan for ending the war in Vietnam probably contributed to his victory. As president in early 1969, both he and Kissinger privately assured select groups that they indeed had a plan for ending the war honorably and they were confident that it would work quickly. However, Nixon had developed only the outlines of strategies that he and his new security adviser thought would be effective. These features included negotiations with the Soviet Union and China, greater emphasis on pacification, withdrawing the U.S. soldiers, and threats of using greater force against both the VietCong insurgents and the North Vietnamese. Nixon and Kissinger did not have an overall plan to end the war and win the peace. What they had could more accurately be described as a series of improvisations that they believed might work.[5]

Just prior to his election, candidate Nixon had told Harrison Salisbury, the assistant managing editor of the *New York Times*, that he was going to end the war within six months. When Nixon took office on January 20, 1969, 540,000 U.S. military forces were serving in Vietnam. The war had cost $30 billion in fiscal year 1969. In 1968 alone, 15,000 U.S. troops had been killed. When Nixon assumed office, on average 300 U.S. soldiers were dying in Vietnam each week. Both Nixon and Kissinger came to power committed to ending the war in six months.[6]

They would, of course, fail to end the war in six months. Once in power, Nixon and Kissinger discovered that their options were more limited than they had supposed, and many of their assumptions and ideas proved invalid. They discovered that they had limited freedom of maneuver, even less than their predecessors, because of a multiplicity of factors: powerful domestic constraints, the stalemated war, Hanoi's protracted war strategy and absolute refusal to modify its objectives, Soviet unwillingness to prod Hanoi to end the war, and General Thieu's fears that any settlement that America might make with Hanoi threatened his country's prospects for survival.

Nixon's narrow victory in the November 1968 election carried with it no mandate whatsoever. Because of the presence of a strong third-party candidate George Wallace, Nixon won the presidency by only a plurality (with 43 percent of the popular vote). Fifty-seven percent of the voters preferred a candidate other than Richard Nixon for president of the United States. Congress remained firmly in the control of large Democratic majorities. Many liberal Democratic congressmen and senators were now freed from having to support Johnson's war. They could be expected to prod Nixon's administration to seek a negotiated end to the war and to challenge any initiatives he might undertake to expand the war.[7]

Public opinion polls taken in early 1969 showed that large majorities of Americans wanted a quick end to the U.S. war and favored an early withdrawal of all U.S. forces. But most Americans did not want to see the United States defeated in Vietnam, and they believed that it was important to stop the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia. They also wanted the South Vietnamese to take responsibility for their own defense and survival. The same people who wanted a quick end to a war also did not want to see it escalated. While wanting to stop the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia, they also exhibited little concern for the welfare of the South Vietnamese people or much regard for the survival of their government.[8] Such a tangle of views set limits to what Nixon and Kissinger could do as the two labored to forge a new U.S. strategy for Vietnam.

The new president and his chief adviser confronted a contradiction as they improvised a new U.S. Vietnam policy and the strategies required to make it work. Any terms acceptable to Hanoi for ending the war were unacceptable to them, to their Allies in South Vietnam, to the U.S. congressional majority, and to a majority of the American people. Domestic criticism of the war put pressure on the President to withdraw the U.S. troops, but unilateral American force withdrawals also encouraged Hanoi to refuse to make any concessions to achieve a settlement Nixon would accept.

It turned out that Johnson had passed on to his successor a war that could neither be won nor ended, except on terms that amounted to an American defeat. Because Nixon and Kissinger would not accept such an outcome in 1969, they could not phase out the war in six months or a year. The American people would endure four more years of war in Indochina before they could accept the unacceptable, accept what had been inevitable since Tet-68,

probably inevitable since the U.S. intervention in southern Vietnam in the summer of 1954: eventual strategic defeat. Washington finally accepted it in January 1973 only by disguising that defeat within the rhetoric of peace with honor. "Peace with honor glossed over the ineffable strategic reality of the American Vietnam war: American withdrawal from the war and the survival of the South Vietnamese government . . . had always been contradictory objectives."[9]

Vietnamization: Shifting the Burden of Fighting

As he had promised the American people, Nixon turned his attention immediately to Vietnam. He told his chief of staff, Harry R. "Bob" Haldeman, that he was not going to be like Lyndon Johnson and vowed "to end the war in Vietnam fast." After winning the 1968 election and before he was inaugurated, he directed Kissinger to commission a RAND Corporation study of the national security agencies views about the state of the war in Southeast Asia and what might be America's future options and prospects for victory. After receiving the RAND study, Nixon ordered the Joint Chiefs to develop a series of military operations that might coerce Hanoi into accepting America's proposals at the ongoing Paris negotations.[10]

The Nixon administration's primary goals remained the same as had animated all the U.S. presidents concerned with Southeast Asian foreign policy: keep a friendly, non-Communist government in power in Saigon, defeat or neutralize the NLF insurgency in southern Vietnam, and get the North Vietnamese troops out of South Vietnam, whether by force or diplomacy, or some combination thereof. Like his predecessor, the new president "feared the domestic upheaval that might accompany the fall of South Vietnam to communism." What had changed in the transition from the Johnson presidency to Nixon's was not the U.S. Vietnam policy, but the U.S. strategy. Although they spoke publicly of a U.S. disengagement from Vietnam, usually in the form of Vietnamization, troop withdrawals, and "peace with honor," Nixon and Kissinger privately sought to win the war by forcing Hanoi to accept their terms for ending the war. They had confidence in their strategies. They would succeed where their predecessors had failed.[11]

The long delay in ending the war arose from Nixon's preoccupation with how the war was to be terminated and with what consequences, domestic and international. The long delay in ending the war also ensued because for years the North Vietnamese leadership adhered to their goals of bringing down the South Vietnamese government, replacing it with one dominated by the Provisional Revolutionary Government (**PRG**), forcing the Americans out, and reuniting the country under their control. The aging revolutionaries in Hanoi never forgot the outcome of the Geneva conference in 1954 in which great power diplomacy deprived them of a victory they had won on the battlefields of Vietnam. They were determined to control their own political destiny, and they had no interest in negotiating an end to the war on any terms that Nixon

and Kissinger would accept. For four years, from January 1969 to January 1973, Nixon and Kissinger waged a slow, bitter American retreat from Indochina, and they called it "peace with honor."

Shortly after assuming office, Nixon sent a letter to the North Vietnamese leaders expressing his desire for peace. He proposed as a first step the mutual withdrawal of "external forces" (United States and NVA) from South Vietnam and the restoration of the DMZ as a boundary between the two countries of North Vietnam and South Vietnam. He also proposed, at Kissinger's suggestion, that the Paris negotiations follow a two-tiered approach, with Washington and Hanoi concentrating on mutual troop withdrawals, while Saigon's representatives and the NLF negotiated a political settlement of the civil war. At the same time Nixon sent his letter to Hanoi, he sent Kissinger to tell the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, that a peace settlement in Vietnam must precede any accommodation between the United States and the Soviet Union. That is, the American Vietnam War must end before *détente* could occur. To signal to both Hanoi and Moscow that his administration would not be bound by the old limits, Nixon accompanied these diplomatic initiatives with the bombing of VC/NVA sanctuaries in the eastern provinces of Cambodia bordering southern Vietnam.[12]

The bombing also represented a response to another Communist offensive carried out in many districts and provinces of South Vietnam in February 1969. The VC/NVA forces attacked scores of military installations, towns, and villages. The offensive mostly failed. The insurgents failed to inflict any serious damage to the ARVN forces or widen their areas of control over the rural population. The Communists also incurred large numbers of casualties because of the superior firepower of the ARVN and the U.S. forces. The bombings also fulfilled a long-standing request of the Joint Chiefs to strike at VC/NVA bases in Cambodia that lay beyond the reach of Allied troops. Johnson had always rejected the Joint Chiefs' request out of his fear of widening the war. The bombing operation, code-named **MENU,** began on March 18 with B-52s bombing the VC/NVA Cambodian sanctuaries in several locales.

The MENU operation began with BREAKFAST, when 60 B-52s bombed one enemy base area in the Fishhook region of Cambodia. As the war went on, the bombing of Cambodia continued. Each base was given its own code name, BREAKFAST was followed by LUNCH, LUNCH by SNACK, SNACK by DINNER, DINNER by DESSERT, and DESSERT by SUPPER. Nixon ordered intermittent bombing raids on Cambodia through August 1969. Sometimes, the bombing raids were followed by lightning cross-border raids by teams of Special Forces operatives. The air raids and ground attacks had the combined effect of driving the North Vietnamese deeper into the Cambodian interior. After August, the bombing continued on a regular basis until May 26, 1970, when air strikes in Cambodia began openly in support of Allied ground operations against North Vietnamese bases.[13]

Fearing an adverse reaction from Congress and the American people because the bombings occurred in a neutral country and represented a widening

of the war, both geographically and politically, the Nixon administration went to great lengths to try to keep them hidden. Air Force officials in charge of the bombings constructed elaborate systems of phony records of sorties supposedly flown against authorized targets in South Vietnam to account for the expenditures of fuel and ordnance used on the secret raids into Cambodia. An elaborate system of dual bookkeeping was set up, which made it appear that the bombs hitting the Cambodian sanctuaries of the enemy were instead falling on targets inside of South Vietnam.[14]

When William Beecher wrote an account of the secret bombing of Cambodia that appeared in the *New York Times* on May 9, 1969, Nixon suggested to Kissinger that the informant could have been someone on the National Security Council staff. Kissinger concurred. The next day, the president, with Kissinger's approval, ordered FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to wiretap the phones of 11 National Security Council staff members and four members of the news media whom he suspected of leaking information about the bombing to the *Times*.[15]

In May 1970, at the time of the American incursion into Cambodia, Nixon ordered the bombing of target sites in North Vietnam and also tried to keep this action secret. After another press leak, the *New York Times* ran a story about the renewed bombing of North Vietnam. Once again, Nixon ordered wiretaps put on the phones of officials and journalists that he suspected of leaking information to the paper. In July 1971, the *New York Times* began publishing the "Pentagon Papers," a secret Defense Department internal history of the long U.S. involvement in Vietnam, given to them by former Defense Department officials Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo. To stop further press leaks and to discredit Ellsberg, White House officials formed a special security unit, the "Plumbers."[16]

President Nixon, increasingly frustrated by his inability to end the Vietnam War and convinced that his policies, even his ability to govern, were under attack from his "enemies" in the federal bureaucracies, in Congress, in the media, and in the universities, ordered the "Plumbers" to take whatever actions were necessary to stop press leaks. Wiretapping had led to the formation of the "Plumbers." It was a natural progression from the actions of the "Plumbers" to the "dirty tricks" of the 1972 presidential election, one of which was the Watergate burglary and its attempted cover-up. The genesis of the Watergate scandals that eventually destroyed the Nixon presidency lay in Nixon's siege mentality arising from his inability to forge a rapid end to the Vietnam War, which led him to countenance illegal measures intended to squelch his political opponents. When Nixon ordered the wiretapping of the phones of NSC staffers and journalists in May 1969, he unwittingly began a process that would destroy his presidency and darken his historical reputation five years later.

None of Nixon's and Kissinger's initial efforts to end the Vietnam War produced any noticeable results. Neither the VC/NVA February offensive nor the secret U.S. bombing of Cambodia changed the military balance in

Vietnam. The stalemate on the battlefield was matched by a continuing diplomatic standoff in Paris. The Soviets did not cooperate as expected; they made no effort to persuade Hanoi to end the war. Both the North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese governments rejected the U.S. proposal for a mutual withdrawal of the U.S. and NVA forces from South Vietnam. The Saigon government refused to recognize or negotiate with representatives of the NLF. The war went on. "At the heart of the U.S.-North Vietnamese conflict remained the status of South Vietnam."[17]

Perceiving that his initial efforts to end the war had failed, Nixon used a televised speech on May 14, 1969 in which he called for a cease-fire throughout Indochina to be followed by the withdrawal of all U.S. and North Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam within a year. He proposed a comprehensive eight-point Vietnam peace plan that he hoped would break the diplomatic logjam. Most of the eight points referred to the proposed troop withdrawal and other military matters. The president also tried to resuscitate the two-tier formula, separating the military and political dimensions of the struggle, by stating that "the political settlement is an internal matter that ought to be decided by the South Vietnamese themselves."[18]

On June 8, Nixon followed his speech with a trip to Midway Island, where he met with General Thieu. After conferring with Thieu, Nixon announced the same day that he was immediately recalling 25,000 American troops from Vietnam. The U.S. disengagement from Southeast Asia had begun. The withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam was part of a new "Nixon Doctrine" of limited U.S. involvement in Third World revolutionary wars. Henceforth, the United States would provide economic and military assistance, but the host country would have to furnish its own troops. The United States would help, but the host country would have to defend itself. Implementing the Nixon Doctrine meant that there would be no more Vietnams. The Nixon Doctrine was primarily intended for a domestic audience. It was not a guide to a new foreign policy approach and it was not a major part of Nixon's unfolding Vietnam policy. Lest Hanoi or the Soviets read the wrong message into the troop pullout, Nixon followed his Midway Island pronouncements with several speeches attacking antiwar critics and affirming that his administration would keep America's commitments abroad.[19]

During the first six months of his presidency, Nixon set the pattern that would prevail for the next four years. He declared military victory to be unattainable, but also vowed that the United States would never leave Vietnam without a negotiated settlement that permitted the South Vietnamese government to survive. Beginning in June 1969, the withdrawal of U.S. troops, which Nixon linked to progress in negotiations and Vietnamization, did not please either hawks or doves, yet provided each side with some encouragement. The pace of withdrawal was too slow for doves and too fast for hawks, but gave some hope to doves that the U.S. war would eventually end and gave reassurance to hawks that there would not be a precipitate U.S. withdrawal followed by a collapse of the South Vietnamese government.

But these diplomatic and military moves also failed to extract the slightest concessions from Hanoi. The Communists could neither be pressured nor lured into altering their basic negotiating stance. They reiterated the peace terms they had maintained since talks had begun in May 1968: the total and unconditional withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Vietnam and the replacement of the Thieu government with a provisional government.[20]

On the battlefield, despite the failure of all the offensives undertaken by the NVA and the VietCong during 1968, Le Duan continued the DRV's aggressive war strategy. Various offensive operations occurring intermittently from February into the summer of 1969 did not inflict much damage on the ARVN forces nor give the VC/NVA forces control over more villages. They also failed to occupy or even mount a serious attack on any of South Vietnam's cities. After a year-and-half of failures to capture or hold any of South Vietnam's cities, the southern insurgency appeared to stall. The war went badly for the PLAF and the NVA. The ARVN, with its American advisers, superior firepower, supported by the U.S. artillery and air power, reclaimed many villages, particularly in regions of the strategic Mekong Delta. Discouraged by repeated failures and without calling attention to it, Le Duan reverted to the more cautious strategy promoted by General Giap. The war went on, although the scale and intensity of fighting declined during the year, casualties dropped, and Hanoi pulled some of its forces back across the DMZ. Acknowledging the deteriorating military position of the VC/NVA forces in southern Vietnam, Le Duan and other senior party leaders turned to the Paris negotiations to provide support for the military and political efforts in South Vietnam. The Politburo advised its Paris negotiators Le Duc Tho and Xuan Thuy to hang tough. They were to make no concessions to the American negotiators; they would continue to insists that all the U.S. troops must be withdrawn from Vietnam, and Thieu and his government must go before any peace agreement could be reached. The North Vietnamese were prepared to wait out the Nixon administration, confident that declining domestic support for the war would eventually force Washington to withdraw the U.S. forces, just as the loss of support at home had forced the French to withdraw their forces from Indochina during the previous war.[21] Hanoi's leaders understood that if the U.S. forces did not win, in time, they would lose; the North Vietnamese had only not to lose, and in time they would win.

By the summer of 1969, it was evident that the strategies Nixon and Kissinger had brought to Washington to end the American Vietnam War had failed to deliver the promised result. Nixon had never set a specific date for ending the war, but he and Kissinger expected that their mix of threats, secret back-channel diplomatic maneuvers, and efforts to involve the Soviets would bring an end to the American Vietnam War within six months to a year from the date they took office. But by the summer of 1969, congressional criticism of the continuing war was on the rise, and the peace movement, quiescent since the violence in Chicago, geared up for fall demonstrations.

Fearful that domestic discontent would undermine his efforts to get Hanoi to negotiate an acceptable agreement, Nixon turned to what he called his "go for broke" strategy, an all-out effort to end the war, either by a diplomatic agreement or by the use of military force. Through French intermediaries, the president sent a personal message to Ho Chi Minh urging a settlement, but with the added warning, amounting to an ultimatum, that if no progress were made by November 1, he would have no choice but to resort to "measures of great consequence and force."[22] Nixon also sent Kissinger to see Dobrynin again to warn him that there remained little time for a peaceful solution to the impasse at Paris.

Nixon also directed Kissinger to form a select National Security Council study group to develop plans for a "savage, punishing" blow aimed at North Vietnam.[23] Nixon and Kissinger sought that one decisive stroke that would destroy the will of the North Vietnamese to continue the war in South Vietnam. Kissinger told the select group at their first meeting in early September, "I can't believe that a fourth-rate power like North Vietnam doesn't have a breaking point."[24] By the end of the month, the group had developed a thick loose-leaf notebook of attack plans, code-named DUCK HOOK. DUCK HOOK included mining Haiphong Harbor, implementing a naval blockade of the North Vietnamese coast, and saturation bombing of both military targets and major cities. In addition, the planners considered more drastic operations such as invading North Vietnam, bombing the Red River dikes to flood the major rice-growing region of North Vietnam, and closing down the rail supply line to China. The DUCK HOOK planners also analyzed possible uses of tactical nuclear devices in North Vietnam.[25] Not averse to using press leaks himself if they could advance his policies, Nixon let journalists know that he was considering a range of military options. Nixon probably intended the leaks as warning signals to Moscow and Hanoi that the time left for diplomacy had grown short and that his patience had worn thin. Nixon also vowed to a congressional delegation that he would not be the first president to lose a war.[26]

Nixon's "go for broke" strategy also failed. Hanoi could not be intimidated, although the Communists did agree to hold secret talks with the Americans outside of the framework of the Paris negotiations. On August 4, 1969, Kissinger met privately with Xuan Thuy for the first of what would prove to be a long series of secret talks between Kissinger and DRV envoys, lasting until the Paris Agreement was negotiated in January 1973. At that first meeting, Thuy rejected all of Kissinger's proposals, dismissed Nixon's epistolary ultimatum to Ho Chi Minh, and repeated Hanoi's refrain that there could be no agreement until the United States had removed all of its troops from Vietnam and had sacrificed the Thieu government.[27] Although little was accomplished, this first meeting opened the door to the secret parallel negotiating meetings between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, a member of the DRV Politburo and chief North Vietnamese negotiator, that would soon begin. Henceforth, there would be two-track negotiating sessions in Paris: the official talks, the plenary sessions, with South Vietnamese officials present,

and the more substantive talks, the secret private sessions between the Americans and the North Vietnamese.[28] On August 15, Ho Chi Minh formally replied to Nixon's letter. The North Vietnamese leader ignored the ultimatum, rejected Nixon's overtures, and restated Hanoi's basic position, insisting that it was the only correct formula for peace. Hanoi radio infuriated the president by wishing the American peace movement splendid success with its upcoming demonstrations.[29]

By fall 1969, Nixon, angered by Hanoi's intransigence and by dovish antiwar critics whom he believed encouraged North Vietnam's resistance to his diplomatic overtures, faced stark choices: he could undertake a major military escalation of the war, or he could beat a humiliating diplomatic retreat. His gut reaction was to strike back at his enemies. He wanted to hurl the U.S. air power at the North Vietnamese and blockade their ports. But he was advised by Secretary of State William Rogers and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird not to escalate the war, because such action would doubtless arouse the doves in Congress, the press, the academies, and the streets. Additionally, Kissinger's select group of strategic planners concluded that air strikes and a blockade would probably not wring any concessions from Hanoi nor diminish its ability to support the war in South Vietnam. A strong U.S. military operation directed against North Vietnamese targets would also suggest that Nixon was trying for a military victory in a war that he had promised to phase out.

Discovering that military escalation would probably not be effective, unwilling to make concessions that compromised his notion of peace with honor, and facing rising domestic opposition and impending peace demonstrations, Nixon found himself without a Vietnam policy.[30] All of his secret plans for ending the war quickly had come to naught. The war went on and there would be five more years of war. Hanoi, despite suffering serious military setbacks, showed no signs of faltering or wanting to negotiate on terms that Nixon and Kissinger could accept.

Caught in a bind largely of his own making, Nixon could only fall back on Vietnamization, the policy he had inherited from Johnson. It was his only option. Having discovered that his and Kissinger's strategies could not end the war, Nixon convinced himself that Vietnamization could. The United States would withdraw its military forces from South Vietnam while continuing to provide substantial military and economic assistance to the GVN to build it up to a point where it could deflect the VC/NVA attacks and survive on its own. Nixon believed that if he could rally the American people behind him, accelerate the buildup in South Vietnam, and persuade Hanoi that America would never abandon Thieu, then he might be able to convince North Vietnam's leaders that it would be to their advantage to negotiate an acceptable settlement with the United States in the short run, rather than have to deal with a strong South Vietnamese government in the long run.

Vietnamization was attractive to Nixon and Kissinger as their fall-back route to an honorable peace. But the real-world consequences of Vietnamization would be three more years of war for Americans, with thousands of

additional U.S. battle deaths, additional multibillion dollar expenditures, and continuing domestic turmoil. For the Vietnamese, the results would be five more years of war that included extensive physical destruction, economic disruptions, a million more refugees, hundreds of thousands of civilian and military casualties, and continuing social misery, and in the end, the collapse of the South Vietnamese state and a victory for the NVA and VietCong. En route to those outcomes, Nixon's presidency would be destroyed, the second U.S. administration to fall victim to the war.

Project Phoenix: The Limits of Pacification

From 1969 into 1971, one aspect of nation-building appeared to be flourishing: the accelerated pacification program under the direction of William Colby, who had replaced Robert Komer as the head of **CORDS**. General Abrams strongly backed pacification and deployed the U.S. units to help provide village security. General Thieu also enthusiastically supported many pacification programs. Additional villages and hamlets were reclaimed from the VietCong. By the end of 1969, an estimated 80 percent of the rural population lived in secure or relatively secure areas. In many areas of South Vietnam, the threat posed by the insurgency receded. The number of VietCong defectors, both soldiers and cadres, rose significantly.

Project **PHOENIX** neutralized the VC infrastructure in some areas. Members of the clandestine VC apparatus were identified, imprisoned, often tortured during interrogations, and in many cases, killed. Both the number and quality of the VC/PAVN forces appeared to decline. Many villages developed their own local governments and self-defense forces. Traditional village councils were reinstated in many locales. Roads were opened, bridges were repaired, schools were established, and hospitals were built. Thieu instituted a major land reform program called "Land to the Tiller," which reduced the size of maximum holdings and redistributed thousands of hectares of land to landless peasants. New strains of livestock were introduced; peasants received tractors, steel plows, and other modern farm equipment. The rural economy improved; rice production increased in 1969 in South Vietnam for the first time in years.[31]

But a closer look at pacification during its heyday reveals its serious shortcomings and limitations. Much of the so-called progress in various pacification programs derived from inflated or phony statistics compiled by corrupt South Vietnamese bureaucrats. Hence, the number of villages considered under the control of the South Vietnamese government, the number of VC defectors, the amount of VC infrastructure neutralized, and the number of landless peasants given land were all exaggerated.

Pacification efforts from 1969 to 1971 suffered from two related problems: first, most programs represented belated efforts to achieve a quick fix. There was never enough time to implement programs designed to provide long-term solutions to fundamental problems. Second, there were never enough honest

and competent officials to make these programs work. Pacification programs were almost always vitiated by the corruption and incompetence that riddled the South Vietnamese bureaucracies.[32]

On the battlefield, the scale and intensity of fighting declined during 1969. General Abrams shifted the U.S. strategy from large-scale search-and-destroy operations to small-unit patrolling and pacification. Because Hanoi deliberately avoided large-scale combat, General Abrams assigned more of his forces to the tasks of pacification and to the support, training, and advisory missions involved in preparing the RVNAF forces to take over responsibility for defending themselves. The MACV commander also dismantled his divisions, breaking them down into small platoon and company-sized task forces in order to assign them patrol, reconnaissance, and territorial security missions. He ordered small-scale offensives mounted against enemy basing areas near the DMZ and along the Laotian and Cambodian borders. These offensives attacked PAVN supply depots and supply lines; their objective was to attrite the enemy's logistics system and thereby keep them on the defensive.

General Abrams succeeded in uniting the disparate dimensions of the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. He fused the war of attrition, previously a big-unit war aimed at destroying enemy bases and personnel, with Vietnamization and nation-building. For the first time since the American war in Vietnam had begun, the U.S. forces implemented an integrated strategy. They were fighting one war now instead of two.[33]

With a few significant exceptions, most of the fighting in the Vietnam War after 1969 consisted of small-unit combat occurring in the more remote and sparsely populated regions of South Vietnam, involving South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese forces. Because they retained the tactical initiative, the PAVN forces usually initiated most of the combat; they also controlled the scale and tempo of the fighting.[34]

Mobilizing against the Vietnam War, October–November 1969

While Nixon sought a Vietnam War policy, liberal antiwar activists organized the Moratorium and the New Mobilization, the largest antiwar demonstrations ever staged in America. The leadership of the Vietnam Moratorium Committee (VMC) was liberal; many of its organizers had worked for Eugene McCarthy or for Robert Kennedy during the 1968 Democratic presidential campaign. The VMC leaders like Sam Brown wanted to reach beyond the college campuses and into the cities, towns, and workplaces of America, hoping to mobilize the broadest possible coalition of antiwar citizens to get them to engage in legal and traditional protests all across the country. People were encouraged to take the day off from business as usual to discuss the war with fellow workers and what might be done to end it. Brown and his fellow organizers believed that the sheer size and variety of protests would put maximum pressure on the Nixon administration to bring the Vietnam War to a speedier

conclusion. Many leading intellectuals and prominent dissidents supported the Moratorium. Twenty-four Democratic senators and Averill Harriman added their support to the cause. The Moratorium also had the support of most of the peace movement, except for its most militant factions.[35]

On M-Day, on Saturday, October 15, 1969, demonstrations occurred all over the country. Between 500,000 and 1 million people participated; 100,000 citizens gathered on Boston Common to hear speeches and listen to music. In a large parade in Manhattan, Wall Street financiers walked alongside housewives, civil rights leaders, hippies, and disillusioned Vietnam veterans. Philadelphia hosted a myriad of antiwar events. The Moratorium was widely observed in the Midwest, largely ignored in the South. In Denver, 3,000 marchers braved falling snow and chilling winds to march on the state capital. In California, 20,000 citizens gathered on the sunny UCLA campus for a day of antiwar programs. The major Moratorium events around the country received generally fair media coverage. In Vietnam, groups of U.S. soldiers stationed at various sites wore black armbands to show their support for the Moratorium Day. For the first time, the antiwar movement had joined the war.[36]

To publicize his indifference to the Moratorium demonstrations, Nixon let it be known that he planned to spend Saturday afternoon watching a football game on television. He also canceled draft calls for November and December because his Vietnamization policy significantly reduced military manpower needs. He also dismissed General Hershey, the controversial doyen of the Cold War-era draft, replacing him with a civilian bureaucrat, Curtis Tarr.

Tarr acted quickly to defuse protests against the Selective Service. He ended most student deferments, supplanting them with a lottery draft system. The new system required several steps. First, a computer printed out every date in the year in random order and placed these dates in small capsules. (In this case 1970, the first year the lottery draft was implemented.) The computer then printed out numbers 1 through 365 in a random order and placed these numbers in other small capsules. The capsules containing the dates were loaded into one drum and the capsules containing numbers were loaded into another drum. Here's the way the lottery draft worked: a Selective Service official pulled one capsule from the drum containing dates and another from the drum containing numbers. For example, if the date drawn was July 4 and the number drawn was 76, then all men turning 20 years of age on July 4, 1970 would be the 76th group to receive induction notices. Meanwhile, the official kept drawing dates and numbers until all the dates were put into sequence. The lottery draft was in place for three years, from 1970 until it was canceled in January 1973. Since 1973, the U.S. has relied completely on an all-volunteer military force to provide security and to defend its national interests. If a draft is ever reinstated, it will most likely resemble the lottery draft that was in place from December 1, 1969, to January 1973, with two significant differences: any future lottery draft will include women and there will probably be an alternative civilian national service option available.

With television cameras rolling and prominent public officials and observers present, on December 1, 1969, Representative Alexander Birnie (R, NY), a World War II veteran, drew the first date and the first number of the newly implemented lottery draft. Since draft calls were declining because of Vietnamization, only men who got low numbers, say 1–50, were exposed to the draft. Those getting numbers between 51 and 100 might be exposed to conscription. Those who drew numbers 101 or higher generally avoided military service during the three years that the lottery draft was in place. The new, random system removed some of the class inequities from the draft, and it significantly reduced the ranks of young men likely to engage in antiwar activities. It also largely eliminated the draft as a source of protest for the remainder of the Vietnam War.[37]

In between the Moratorium and the New Mobilization, scheduled for November 13–15, the Nixon administration launched a counteroffensive against its antiwar critics. The president unleashed vice president Spiro T. Agnew, who went on the oratorical warpath. Agnew lambasted what he termed the "liberal establishment press," accusing the media of biased and negative coverage of Nixon administration activities and its Vietnam War policy. He labeled these newscasters "an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals."[38]

Nixon followed Agnew with a major televised address to the nation the evening of November 3. He timed the speech so it fell midway between the Moratorium and the New Mobilization. His chief goals were to declare war on the antiwar movement and to rally the American people in support of his Vietnam War policy. The president called his antiwar critics an irrational minority trying to thwart the will of the large majority of the American people. He defended the American Vietnam War. He cited the commitments to Vietnam made by three previous administrations, and he vowed to stay in Vietnam until America achieved an honorable and lasting peace.

Nixon also used the speech to spell out his Vietnamization policy. He insisted that it would produce an honorable peace by enabling the South Vietnamese to save themselves while he withdrew the U.S. forces and reduced American casualties. Citing the Communist mass murders at Hue during the Tet-68 campaign and the thousands of deaths in North Vietnam that had accompanied land reform during the mid-1950s as precedents, the president invoked the specter of a bloodbath facing the South Vietnamese, especially the 1.5 million Catholics among them, if the United States precipitously pulled out its forces and left the South Vietnamese people at the mercy of the Communists. He appealed powerfully to the American people's patriotism, to their sense of honor, and to the ideal of American greatness. He concluded his speech with a stirring call for support for Vietnamization by the mass of the American people, whom he called "the great silent majority," ending with "North Vietnam cannot humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that."[39]

With his speech, the president regained the initiative and put his critics in the Congress, the press, and the peace movement on the defensive. Nixon

sold the American people a policy that he claimed would produce an honorable peace and save American lives. By labeling the amorphous groups of American people he claimed supported his Vietnam policy the "silent majority," Nixon broadened his base of support and gave millions of Americans a new political identity. Pro-Nixon rallies appeared in a number of cities. Polls taken soon after his speech showed that 77 percent of the American people supported Vietnamization. Another poll showed that by a six to one margin, the American people agreed that antiwar demonstrations harmed prospects for peace in Vietnam.[40] Many antiwar senators and Congressmen climbed aboard the Vietnamization bandwagon. Nixon, delighted with his success, boasted that "we've got those liberal bastards on the run now; we've got them on the run and we're going to keep them on the run."[41]

Nixon and Agnew's successful counteroffensive complicated preparations for the New Mobilization. Organizers were further hindered by factional infighting among radical and liberal antiwar activists. Eventually, a slate of varied activities was scheduled to take place across the nation from November 13 to 15. One of the first demonstrations was the March Against Death. Marchers began near the Arlington National Cemetery, led by drummers playing a funeral roll. Solemnly marching across the Memorial Bridge, in single file, each participant carried a lighted candle and a placard inscribed with the name of one of the 40,000 American soldiers who had died in the Vietnam War. They marched to the White House; as they passed, each parader paused to shout the name of the dead warrior inscribed on his placard. The procession then continued down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol where each marcher placed his placard in a waiting coffin and blew out the candle. For 36 hours, the procession wound its mournful way until all 40,000 of the dead had been memorialized.[42]

In addition to the March Against Death, many other antiwar activities occurred from November 13 to 15 as the New Mobilization unfolded. The Reverend William Sloane Coffin led an ecumenical prayer service for peace at the National Cathedral in Washington. In San Francisco, an estimated 150,000 people paraded for peace. On Saturday, November 15, the largest protest demonstration in American history took place in the nation's capital. A huge crowd of perhaps 350,000 people gathered at the Mall behind the Lincoln Memorial. This human wave then flowed down Pennsylvania Avenue past the White House, which was barricaded by a huge circle of busses, and onto the grounds of the Washington Monument. This huge assemblage of mostly white, mostly young demonstrators appeared to pay fitful attention to a parade of speakers. The protesters were much more interested in the cast from the hit Broadway musical *Hair*, who showed up to sing a medley of their songs. The emotional highpoint of the demonstration occurred when the vast assemblage of humanity joined Peter, Paul, and Mary to chant John Lennon's haunting refrain, "All we are saying is give peace a chance." For more than 10 minutes, the huge crowd was caught up in the hypnotic power of the chant.[43]

Despite the large numbers of participants and the spectacular events themselves, the New Mobilization appeared to have a minimal impact on public

opinion and none on the war policy of the Nixon administration. Nixon's "Silent Majority" speech and Agnew's rhetorical assaults on the news media had their desired effect because there was no live television coverage of the events, and the events of the New Mobilization received limited coverage on the nightly network newscasts. Public opinion polls revealed that three-fourths of Americans disapproved of the protest demonstrations. Polls also showed that 60 percent of Americans agreed with President Nixon that antiwar demonstrations aided the enemy and made Washington's efforts to achieve peace in Vietnam more difficult.[44]

Most Americans, however frustrated and angry they might be with the war, resented antiwar demonstrators even more. Part of the popular disgust with antiwar activists was driven by the people's yearnings for an end to controversy. After nearly a decade of upheaval, most Americans longed for a return to domestic tranquility. Many of the protesters themselves were fatigued. They were weary from too many protests of a seemingly endless war and exhausted from challenging a government that harassed, rebuked, or ignored them. Many quietly resumed their private lives, abandoning what appeared to them futile efforts to influence public opinion, change government policy, and stop an unjust war.

The Battle of Hamburger Hill

One of the most notorious battles of the American Vietnam War occurred in late spring 1969. It has passed into history as the Battle of Hamburger Hill, a name apparently provided by one of the soldiers who fought it (Figure 10.1). In March, the MACV intelligence officers had noted that the NVA forces were again building up their logistics systems in the forbidding A Shau Valley, ostensibly preparing for offensive operations in I Corps. General Melvin Zais's "Screaming Eagles," the 101st Airborne (Air Mobile), were ordered back into the area to destroy them.

During April and early May, soldiers from units of the 101st that had been helilifted into the A Shau Valley found several new supply caches and other evidence of a PAVN logistical buildup taking place in the area.[45] On May 10, a combined force of U.S. Marines and the 101st Airborne's 3rd Brigade, 187th Infantry air assaulted into a rugged area of thickly jungled mountains along the west side of the A Shau Valley near the Laotian border. The next day, soldiers in B Company of the 187th Infantry discovered that the NVA forces had fortified a series of ridges cloaked in thick jungle. These ridges appeared on American maps as Hill 937 (Figure 10.2). Hill 937 was known to the Vietnamese as Dong Ap Bia (Mount Ap Bia). As B Company troops advanced up the slopes of Dong Ap Bia, they were hit by concentrated machine-gun fire coming from enemy bunkers dug into the crests of the montane ridges. B Company was forced to withdraw; artillery and air strikes were called in to pound the NVA positions. Thus began a fierce 10-day campaign for Dong Ap Bia, which Americans would soon know as the Battle of Hamburger Hill.[46]

Figure 10.1 Troops of the 101st Airbourne Division fighting at Dong Ap Bia, which became known as "Hamburger Hill," 5/18/69. *Center of Military History, U.S. Army.*

On May 13, two companies of the 187th's 1st Battalion tried to take the hill, only to be driven back by withering rocket and machine-gun fire from the bunker occupants, two battalions of the 29th NVA Regiment. The men of the 187th were reinforced, and they attacked again, only to be driven back once more. There was a pause in the fighting while the enemy bunkers were subjected to intensive artillery fire and air strikes for 36 hours. On May 18, two battalions made another assault of the hill, one going up the southern slope, the other up the northern slope. The hillside had been denuded of foliage by the artillery fire and bombing, and heavy rains turned it into mud. As they tried to advance up the mountain, the soldiers kept slipping and sliding back down the slopes. Finally, on May 20, following another sustained artillery and air bombardment of the enemy positions, a four-battalion force reached the crest of Dong Ap Bia, only to discover that the NVA troops had abandoned the bunkers. They had slipped away during the night. A few days after the hill had been taken, orders came down to abandon it.

The Battle of Hamburger Hill received extensive press coverage and quickly ignited public controversy. The men of the 101st had fought hard and taken many casualties for an objective that was quickly abandoned. Many troopers bitterly criticized the command decision that had required the seemingly pointless sacrifice of their comrades. Journalists vetted the soldier's complaints. Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts called the battle "senseless and irresponsible."[47] General Zais defended the action; he stated that the 101st Airborne's mission had been to seek out the enemy and destroy them wherever they were found. Zais pointed out that the enemy had lost an estimated 650 KIA during the 10-day fight, whereas the U.S. battle deaths at Dong Ap Bia totaled 56, a kill ratio of better than 10 to 1.[48]

Figure 10.2 Map of the Cross-Border Operations, May–June 1970. *Public domain.*

Hamburger Hill turned out to be the last campaign of the now-abandoned attrition strategy, and it was also the last battle of the Vietnam War in which victory was determined by the body count metric. In reaction to the controversy aroused by the battle, President Nixon ordered General Abrams to hold down American casualties in future battles. At the heart of the controversy over Hamburger Hill were not so much questions of tactics or casualties, but of what kind of war Americans were now waging in Vietnam and for what goals. The conflict was no longer a war of attrition. It had morphed into a war based on a new strategy of small-unit warfare aimed at destroying enemy logistics systems, fused with pacification and nation-building efforts. Also, the controversial battle occurred on the eve of Nixon implementing his Vietnamization policy. Given domestic economic and political realities, the U.S. officials were under tremendous pressure to reduce costs and casualties, and to lower the draft calls of men to fight an increasingly unpopular war. On June 8, President Nixon announced that he was immediately withdrawing 25,000 U.S. troops from Vietnam.

The Decline of the U.S. Army

"Not only were American troops leaving South Vietnam, but the offensive spirit was leaving the American army."[49] The bitterness expressed by some of the soldiers of the 101st Airborne over the fighting at Dong Ap Bia was a sign that America was beginning to reap a bitter harvest from its lengthy and inconclusive war in Southeast Asia—the progressive demoralization of some of the U.S. Army ground forces serving in Vietnam. Until 1968, the U.S. armed forces in Vietnam had fought well. The army that America sent to fight the Vietnam War was undoubtedly the best army in the world. The troops were the healthiest, the most intelligent, the best educated, and the best trained in the U.S. military history. They were equipped with powerful and effective high-tech weapons, and they were supported by a remarkable logistics system that made them the best-fed and best-supplied soldiers in the history of warfare. Wounded soldiers received life-saving medical treatment quicker than any soldiers who had ever fought a war. They were led by competent professionals at all levels, from sergeants to generals. Troops fought aggressively, with great tenacity, in pursuit of their objectives. Their morale was high, their discipline taut. They believed in the cause for which they fought, and they remained confident of victory. They won every major battle they fought, and they nearly always inflicted far heavier casualties on their enemies than they sustained.

The decline of the American army that began in 1968 and got progressively worse in 1969, 1970, and 1971 was caused by a multiplicity of factors and circumstances.[50] Nixon's Vietnamization policy contributed to the breakdown in morale and discipline. The President emphasized his commitment to seeking a negotiated peace, of not trying to win a military victory. The U.S.

troop withdrawals reinforced the notion that America was pursuing a no-win policy in a war that would probably end soon for the United States. Soldiers began asking themselves, Why fight? Why get wounded or killed in a war that the U.S. government is not trying to win? A sardonic rhetorical question gained wide currency after 1969: Who wants to be the last soldier to die in Vietnam? As they watched the U.S. troops being pulled out of Vietnam, many soldiers cared only about surviving their year in "'Nam" and returning to the "real world" (the United States) alive. "Short-timer's fever," especially among soldiers with a few weeks to go on their year's tour, had become widespread by 1969. Its symptoms included an acute fear of being killed or seriously wounded, a reluctance to engage in combat, a generally poor performance of all duties, a rebellious attitude toward military authority, and withdrawal from social activities with buddies.

By 1969, the class-biased Selective Service had delivered an army of conscripts to Vietnam who were pulled out of predominantly lower-middle-class, working-class, and disadvantaged backgrounds. The perception that most middle-class and upper-middle-class youths were avoiding the war was itself a source of resentment and declining morale among the troops in the field. Many of the soldiers manning rifle companies in Vietnam understood the price they were paying for being poor and poorly educated, for lacking employable skills, and being from families who possessed no political clout. They had to fight a war that most of their more affluent and better educated countrymen were avoiding. It also appeared to them that they had been drafted to fight a war that a majority of their fellow Americans no longer believed in, and that their government no longer was trying to win.[51]

By 1969, the quality of both the officer and noncommissioned officer corps had declined. In 1965, the officer corps had been made up mainly of career professionals and ROTC graduates. The unpopularity of the Vietnam War caused a severe reduction in ROTC enrollments, and, by 1969, dozens of ROTC programs had been expelled from college campuses. To make up the shortages, the U.S. Army turned to Officer Candidate School **(OCS)** products, who generally possessed lower educational attainments and leadership abilities.

The noncommissioned officer corps had severe shortages of experienced sergeants by 1969. Promising young privates were hurried through 20 weeks of stateside advanced training and given sergeants' stripes. These young, inexperienced buck and staff sergeants, called "Instant **NCOs**" or "shake'n'bakes," were then rushed to Vietnam and often thrown into combat. Platoons of **"grunts"** (the most frequently used nickname that Army and Marine combat infantrymen gave themselves) sometimes found themselves going into combat led by 22-year-old second lieutenants who were just out of OCS and inexperienced 20-year-old "shake'n'bake" sergeants who had just arrived from stateside.[52]

Army personnel practices during the Vietnam War era exacerbated problems created by assigning young and inexperienced officers and noncoms to

combat units. The Army wanted to build up a large pool of officers with combat experience; captains and majors were given six-month tours as company and battalion commanders. Many of these inexperienced officers proved to be ineffective leaders in combat; sometimes, their mistakes cost soldiers fighting under their commands their lives. Just about the time these officers had acquired battlefield experience and were becoming effective leaders, they were reassigned to rear-echelon desk jobs to complete their year's duty in Vietnam. Because of the constant turnover in company and battalion commanders, there was instability in these critical leadership positions. Worse, some of these officers were concerned only with advancing their careers, with "getting their tickets punched." These officers cared little about the welfare of the men they were assigned to lead. When ordering the men under their commands into combat situations, they hovered over the battlefield in command helicopters, safely above the fray. Soldiers sometimes refused to put their lives on the line for officers whose principal combat goal appeared to be compiling a good dossier.[53]

The growing unpopularity of the war and the activities of antiwar protesters also undermined the morale of soldiers serving in Vietnam. Most grunts loathed college antiwar protesters, viewing them as a privileged class of cowards and traitors. But the knowledge that millions of Americans no longer believed in the war or supported it with any enthusiasm caused resentment and confusion among many troops, who came to doubt the purpose of the war and whether the sacrifices they were making were worthwhile or even appreciated. They felt abandoned by a nation that was abandoning the war that they still had to fight. By 1969, some soldiers serving in Vietnam had turned against the war and wore on their uniforms love beads and peace medallions, the symbols of the stateside antiwar protesters. These antiwar warriors supported the large-scale protest movements that occurred during the fall of 1969. Some soldiers grew their hair long and sprouted full beards, in violation of military appearance codes that increasingly went unenforced in the field. Soldiers sometimes saluted one another with the two-fingered peace sign.[54]

The Army's switch from aggressive big-unit search-and-destroy missions to small-scale holding actions in support of Vietnamization and pacification in 1969 could also undermine soldiers' morale. They grew reluctant to expose themselves to danger on operations they knew were only intended to buy time until the South Vietnamese took over and the Americans went home. "Search-and-evade" operations were added to the tactical repertoires of some squads and platoons. Soldiers sent on patrols were careful to search only areas where they knew the enemy would not be found. Sometimes, they did not patrol at all, and they filed a faked report of a search that never took place. Combat refusals increased in 1969 and became more frequent in 1970 and 1971. Mutiny, that is a large-scale refusal to carry out orders, became probable. There are several documented incidents that could be characterized as mutinous. In August 1949, a company of the 196th Infantry Brigade refused to go on a dangerous patrol operation. Its commander was replaced. Dozens

of major combat refusals occurred during 1969–1972.[55] Military prisons filled up with soldiers sent away in an effort to impose better discipline. But the cumbersome and overloaded military justice system could not handle the increasing incidence of combat refusals in Vietnam. Punishment for refusing a lawful order to fight was often left to field commanders, who in many cases meted out light punishments or ignored the incidents.

From 1969 onward, the U.S. Army appeared to be at war with itself. As fighting capability declined, as morale and discipline ebbed, and as search-and-evade tactics and combat refusals increased in frequency, both officers and noncoms who took an aggressive approach to combat or who strictly enforced rules and regulations risked reprisals, even assassinations, at the hands of rebellious troops. Such assassinations had occurred in previous wars, but never so frequently as in the latter years of the American war in Vietnam. A new term came into use: **"fragging."** The word derived from the use of the fragmentation grenade, a weapon that was readily available, easy to use, lethally effective, and left no fingerprints or other incriminating evidence when used to kill an unpopular officer or a noncom. The Army reported 96 fragging incidents in 1969 and 209 incidents in 1970. In those two years, 75 officers and noncoms lost their lives to assassins who in most cases were never apprehended. Court-martials were held in fewer than 10 percent of fragging cases because of the lack of evidence and witnesses. Most soldiers who committed fraggings in Vietnam literally got away with murder.[56]

In addition to fragging, racial violence occasionally racked military installations in Vietnam. By 1969, Army life in Vietnam had become a racial pressure cooker. MACV created a special commission whose sole purpose was to try to manage the racial situation. Many African American soldiers, angry over the discrimination and prejudice they had encountered in civilian society and in the Army, often denounced white attitudes and sometimes denounced whites as well. Whites frequently replied in kind. Some black soldiers, influenced by black power doctrines, developed an African American style of appearance and behavior that white officers, often southerners with traditional racial attitudes, found threatening. Racial animosity was generally suppressed in combat situations, but in rear basing areas racial enmities sometimes exploded. Race riots, even racially motivated firefights, occurred.[57] Black-white racial conflict was a social pathology that the Army inherited from the civilian society it served.

Desertion was another indicator of decline. Thousands of Vietnam-era soldiers deserted in 1969, 1970, and 1971. Desertions were comparatively rare in combat areas, and very few American soldiers defected to the enemy. Neither the VietCong nor the NVA forces encouraged American soldiers to desert, nor did either usually offer deserters sanctuary.[58] The Communists wanted the Americans to get out of their country, not to join them.

But for every soldier who deserted, many more troops tried to escape through psychological withdrawal by using drugs. By 1969, drug abuse had become a serious problem for the Army in Vietnam. A Defense Department survey conducted in 1969 found that about 25 percent of U.S. soldiers serving

in Vietnam were using marijuana.[59] Far worse, the U.S. troops began using hard drugs in late 1969 and early 1970, particularly heroin. The heroin came from the mountainous region stretching across northern Laos, northern Thailand, and northeastern Burma, from an area known as the Golden Triangle.[60] High-grade heroin, 80–90 percent pure, flowed into South Vietnam via illicit conduits controlled by high officials in the South Vietnamese government. These officials garnered huge profits from selling the severely addictive drug to American GIs.

After trying unsuccessfully to get the South Vietnamese police to curtail the flow of drugs, the U.S. officials tacitly accepted the South Vietnamese officials' involvement in drug operations. South Vietnamese pushers aggressively sold the nearly pure heroin to soldiers for $2–$3 a vial, a fraction of the price that diluted heroin sold for on the streets of American cities. By 1970, an estimated 7 percent of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam used heroin regularly; by 1971, between 10 and 15 percent. The Army discovered that it had a heroin plague on its hands, with an estimated 25,000–37,000 addicted users.[61]

The gleaming American sword, honed to a keen edge, which had been thrust into South Vietnam in 1965, had become dull and corroded by 1971. The confusions inherent in Nixon's Vietnamization policy, the class-biased conscription system, the decline in the quality of officers and noncommissioned officers, dubious Army personnel policies, the antiwar movement and declining domestic public support for the war, racial tensions, and the contagion of drug use had combined to undermine morale, erode discipline, abrade unit cohesion, sap the Army's fighting spirit, and erode its capabilities.

Other branches of the U.S. Armed Forces serving in Southeast Asia—the Navy, the Air Force, the Marines, and the Coast Guard—also experienced declining discipline and morale, racial conflict, and drug abuse, but on much smaller scales. One of the reasons Nixon accelerated the recall of American forces from Vietnam in 1970 and 1971, over the protests of General Abrams and General Thieu, was because of his awareness that the U.S. fighting machine in South Vietnam was disintegrating.

My Lai and Other War Crimes

One of the most gruesome events of the war occurred on March 16, 1968, when the U.S. soldiers, using pistols, automatic rifles, and grenades, massacred an estimated 400–500 civilians who resided in two hamlets, My Lai and My Khe. Both hamlets composed part of Son My village, near the coast in the Son Tinh district of the Quang Ngai province. The soldiers who massacred the women, children, and old men of My Lai belonged to the 1st and 2nd Platoons of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, the 11th Infantry Brigade, which was attached to the Americal Division under the command of Major General Samuel Koster.[62]

From division down to platoon level, the Americal Division suffered from grave command and control problems, stemming from poor training and a lack of leadership. Some elements of its 11th Infantry Brigade were little better

than organized bands of thugs, with the officers eager participants in the body count game.[63]

After the perpetration of the atrocities, members of the brigade and divisional staffs succeeded in covering it up for a time. The American people did not learn of the hideous incident for over 20 months, until late November 1969, and then from independent media sources who exposed the Army's attempted cover-up.[64] An official U.S. Army board then conducted a thorough 16-month-long investigation of the incident and its cover-up. Fourteen officers were found to be complicit in covering up war crimes. Additionally, 13 soldiers (4 officers and 9 enlisted men) were charged with committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. Subsequently, all of the soldiers accused of war crimes either had the charges against them dropped or were acquitted, except Lieutenant William Calley. Calley's 1st Platoon was estimated to have killed over 200 of the villagers that lethal day in My Lai. A court-martial convicted Calley of mass murder.[65]

The mass murders at My Lai and My Khe were a grotesque consequence of many factors: lingering fears and frustrations deriving from the recent VC/NVA attacks during the Tet Offensive; the ongoing formless war of attrition in which military success was measured statistically by counting corpses; small-unit actions fought in populated regions against an enemy that relied on village support to sustain its insurgency; the frustrations of fighting a war that appeared both unpopular and unwinnable; race prejudice, which encouraged many U.S. soldiers to regard Vietnamese peasants as "gooks," as less than fully human; the fear, rage, and hatred arising from fighting an enemy who set deadly mines and booby traps that maimed and killed GIs; an enemy who after attacking melted into the jungle or merged into the rural population; paranoia arising from the inability of U.S. soldiers to tell friendly villagers from enemies and therefore to assume that they all were real or potential foes; and the poor leadership, inadequate training, lack of discipline, and thuggery that characterized the 11th Infantry Brigade.

After learning of the massacre, some Americans worried about how many other My Lais might have gone undetected. They feared that perhaps the only unique feature of the My Lai massacre was its discovery. Some also wondered if the U.S. military might have had a policy of targeting civilians suspected of aiding the enemy. In various forums, hundreds of Vietnam veterans claimed that they had participated in, witnessed, or heard of mass atrocities committed against civilians in South Vietnam. Some people found cold comfort in the fact that the many VietCong fighters were often guilty of systematic atrocities and the cold-blooded murders of thousands of civilians. There was also a troubling inconsistency in finding one young junior officer guilty of mass murder in a war where long-range artillery fire and aerial bombing had killed thousands of civilians, disrupted village life, and created millions of refugees since the Americanization of the war. In the eyes of many Americans, William Calley was more a scapegoat than a war criminal.

In the wake of the My Lai Massacre, the U.S. Amy established the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group **(VWCWG)** to try to determine the validity

of the many emerging claims that members of the U.S. armed forces had committed crimes and various atrocities against civilians. Hundreds of Army investigators working over several years compiled a huge file of sworn statements by witnesses, which demonstrated that hundreds of the alleged incidents had a factual basis. The substantiated cases included seven massacres in which at least 137 civilians were killed. Seventy-eight attacks targeted civilians resulting in at least 57 deaths. In one hundred and forty-one cases, the U.S. soldiers had sexually assaulted girls and women, and tortured civilian detainees with fists, bats, water, or electric shock. Despite this savage record of violent criminality in which over 800 alleged atrocities were investigated, only 23 soldiers were ever convicted on charges and most served sentences of less than a year. Most scholars and journalists who have independently investigated the extent of war crimes and atrocities believe that the VWCWG probably significantly undercounted the number of incidents and the extent of civilian casualties. While these numbers reveal a very dark dimension of the war, a dimension of which most people are not aware, except perhaps of the My Lai Massacre, despite the existence of a sizeable literature on the subject, it is important to understand that there is no evidence linking most U.S. soldiers who served in Vietnam with war crimes or atrocities against civilians.

According to available evidence and testimony, the U.S. soldiers frequently committed atrocities against Vietnamese civilians, and they became more frequent in the years after Tet as discipline and morale plummeted. War crimes were not confined to a few rogue units like the Americal Division. Every army division that had an active combat role in the war contained units whose members committed war crimes and atrocities against noncombatants. There is no way to count accurately the number of Vietnamese civilians who were killed, maimed, or tortured by the U.S. soldiers during the long war. Political scientist R. J. Rummel has estimated that the U.S. troopers murdered approximately 6,000 civilians. Although Rummel's numbers are only an educated guess, it is important to understand that small units (squads, platoons, elements of a company) committing face-to-face atrocities accounted for only a small fraction of total civilian casualties. Most civilians were killed by heavier firepower coming from long-range artillery and strategic bombers. Nick Turse, who has written the most thorough study of American war crimes in Vietnam, found that a relentless drive for higher body counts, widespread use of free-fire zones, rules of engagement where civilians who ran from soldiers or helicopters could be viewed as VietCong, and a widely shared contempt for rural Vietnamese civilians led to massive civilian casualties and endemic war crimes inflicted by the U.S. troopers.[66]

Widening the War: Cambodia, April 29, 1970

At home during the spring of 1970, President Nixon faced declining popular support for his Vietnam policies, rising congressional opposition, and more peace demonstrations. Negotiations in Paris, both the official and the

secret private sessions, went nowhere. Vietnamization proceeded slowly. To appease domestic dissent, Nixon announced a phased withdrawal of 150,000 troops from Vietnam over the next 12 months. Both General Abrams and General Thieu strongly protested the size of Nixon's proposed troop withdrawal. They insisted that it would leave the RVN vulnerable to VC/NVA attacks and it would retard both Vietnamization and nation-building. Although President Nixon publicly announced that General Thieu had recommended the proposed U.S. troop withdrawals, Thieu had strongly opposed them. But the South Vietnamese leaders, having no choice, reluctantly went along with Vietnamization; they saw it for what it was, a political expedient for the United States. Some Vietnamese dismissed Vietnamization as a U.S. Dollar and Vietnamese Blood Sharing Plan. Others saw it as a fig leaf to cover the U.S. abandonment.[67]

Both Nixon and Kissinger knew that accelerated American troop withdrawals could only stiffen Hanoi's resolve to make no concessions at Paris and to wait until all of the Americans had been forced to leave South Vietnam. On the battlefield, the NVA continued Genreal Giap's patient defensive strategy of protracted small-scale warfare. Only years later, when most Americans had departed, would the NVA shift to the offensive and move in to destroy the South Vietnamese forces and eliminate the Saigon government.

But an event occurred that caught Washington by surprise and shocked and dismayed Hanoi. It also changed the shape of the Vietnam War. On March 18, 1970, while the neutralist leader of Cambodia, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, was in France on holiday, General Lon Nol, his pro-Western prime minister, persuaded the Cambodian assembly to give him power. For years, the Cambodian prince had been able to spare his country and its people from the conflict by accommodating both sides. But with his overthrow, Cambodia's delicate charade of neutrality would soon be replaced by murderous involvement in war. Lon Nol, a staunch anti-Communist, had strong ties to officials high in the South Vietnamese government and to the U.S. military leaders in Saigon.[68]

Sihanouk had come to power in 1954 after leading the nationalist movement that drove out the French. He followed a neutralist line in the Cold War. Neutrality enabled him to extract economic and military aid from both the United States and the Communist powers. For years, Sihanouk kept his small nation at peace and preserved its independence by playing the Chinese Communists and the North Vietnamese off against the Americans and the South Vietnamese.

During the early 1960s, as the United States got more deeply involved in southern Vietnam, Cambodian neutrality took an anti-American tack and tilted toward the Communists. Sihanouk rejected American offers of military aid in 1963 and severed diplomatic relations with the United States in 1965. He allowed the NVA to establish bases in the Cambodian provinces bordering South Vietnam, and he also granted Hanoi the use of the port of Sihanoukville from which they supplied their forces fighting in the southern half

of South Vietnam. Trucks and bicycles carried war materiel from the Cambodian port city to staging areas along the Cambodian–South Vietnamese border. As North Vietnam infiltrated more men and supplies into South Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex, they extended the routes across eastern Cambodia. This region became a vital part of their extended war in the South. Even though neutral Cambodia had become an accomplice in the North Vietnamese war against South Vietnam, Sihanouk allowed American and ARVN forces on occasion to pursue fleeing VC/NVA forces into Cambodia. Sihanouk also tolerated the secret American bombing of the NVA bases and sanctuaries in Cambodia that Nixon initiated in March 1969.[69]

Although caught by surprise, Nixon and Kissinger welcomed the overthrow of Sihanouk, whose behavior had become increasingly erratic; also, Sihanouk's control of events had slipped, and his neutrality policy had become increasingly anti-American in tone. Washington quickly recognized the Lon Nol government and extended the U.S. military and economic assistance to Cambodia. The United States also approved South Vietnamese cross-border raids into Cambodia. Lon Nol barred Hanoi from further access to the port of Sihanoukville. He also ordered the Communists to vacate their bases on Cambodian soil and to get out of his country.

Determined to stay in regions crucial to the conduct of its war in South Vietnam, Hanoi solidified its control over its Cambodian sanctuaries. NVA forces drove west into Cambodia toward the capital of Phnom Penh to overthrow the Lon Nol government. A CIA report to President Nixon warned that the Communist forces could overthrow the new Cambodian regime. Without strong U.S. action, a domino might fall in Southeast Asia. With Cambodia in Communist hands, the port at Sihanoukville would be reopened and the entire country would become an enemy basing area outflanking the Allied forces in South Vietnam.

The deposed Sihanouk quickly cast his lot with the Chinese Communists. From Beijing, he called for the overthrow of Lon Nol's "illegal" regime, for a Pathet Lao victory in Laos, and for a VC/NVA victory in South Vietnam. In Paris, Kissinger met privately with Le Duc Tho who had replaced Xuan Thuy as Hanoi's chief negotiator. In conversations with Kissinger, Tho made it clear that Hanoi had linked the overthrow of Lon Nol's government with the ongoing revolutionary war in South Vietnam. Within Cambodia, to enhance their campaign to overthrow the Lon Nol government, China and Hanoi backed the Khmer Rouge, which had revived in the late 1960s following Sihanouk's efforts to suppress it.[70]

Reacting to the widening war, Nixon believed that the time had come for the United States to make a decisive move in Indochina. For years, MACV, backed by the Joint Chiefs, had called for ground invasions of Cambodia to destroy the VC/NVA border sanctuaries. Johnson had consistently denied the Joint Chiefs' requests because he did not want to widen the war. But Nixon decided that it was now time to go after the sanctuaries. The major targets were 14 North Vietnamese staging areas, which had been off-limits to the U.S. and

ARVN forces. Two areas were to be attacked: the Parrot's Beak, a section of Cambodian land that jutted into South Vietnam to a point only 30 miles west of Saigon, and the Fishhook, a point of land lying 55 miles northwest of Saigon. The president approved General Abrams's proposal that the U.S. forces attack the Fishhook area, while the ARVN forces, supported by the U.S. artillery fire and air strikes, would attack the sanctuaries in the Parrot's Beak.[71]

Nixon's decision to send the U.S. forces into Cambodia was one of the most controversial actions of his presidency. He sent in the troops to serve a variety of strategic and diplomatic purposes. They would shore up Lon Nol's regime and help keep Cambodia out of Communist hands. They would buy more time for Vietnamization to work in South Vietnam. Nixon decided that the strategic advantages to be gained from the Cambodian incursion outweighed its political liabilities, particularly the domestic controversy he anticipated would be aroused by the action. He also hoped that the invasion would put pressure on Hanoi to consider negotiations as an alternative to facing a wider war. Further, Nixon intended to send the Communist leaders a message that he would not be bound by the self-imposed limits of his predecessor; he may have also wished to keep Hanoi guessing about what he might do next.

Nixon also placed the Cambodian crisis in a larger context. He saw it as one of those decisive moments in the Cold War when the will and character of the American people and its leaders were being tested by events and by their enemies. Nixon vowed to meet the challenge; he would show his mettle in the ongoing struggle between the Communist world and the Free World. Nixon was determined to maintain American credibility with both the U.S. friends and foes.[72] It was time for the big play that might win the big game.

Nixon announced his decision to invade Cambodia, and he explained the reasons for the incursion in a televised speech given to the American people on the evening of April 30, 1970. He stated that the invasion did not represent a change in American policy or direction, that it was not an effort to widen the war; rather, it was to protect and facilitate Vietnamization. Nixon claimed that the invasion was necessary to save a friendly government from Communist aggression and to protect the U.S. forces still remaining in South Vietnam after the scheduled withdrawal of another 150,000 troops. He also told Americans that one of the major reasons for the invasion was to capture COSVN, the PLAF command center for South Vietnam, located in the Fishhook area of Cambodia.

Nixon's tone throughout his speech was belligerent and provocative. In a fighting mood, he defied his critics in the streets, the press, the academies, and the Congress: "I would rather be a one-term president than be a two-term president at the cost of seeing America accept the first defeat in its proud 190-years' history." He concluded his speech with some vintage Nixonian Cold War hyperbole: "If, when the chips are down, the world's most powerful nation acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world."[73]

As the MACV staffers planned the Cambodian campaigns to destroy the enemy bases in the areas of the Fishhook and Parrot's Beak and any enemy troops that might try to defend them, they knew that many American combat units had already redeployed to the United States or were scheduled to be redeployed soon. The Cambodian incursion would be the last opportunity for the Allies to mount a large-scale combat operation involving American assets. It would also put the ARVN units to the ultimate test of combat against enemy forces on a foreign battlefield. The Cambodian invasion would therefore furnish an excellent opportunity to measure the progress that Vietnamization had achieved to date.[74]

On April 29, 1970, the ARVN forces, with the U.S. air and artillery support, penetrated the Parrot's Beak area. They captured some enemy supplies, but most of the enemy forces in the region eluded the invaders. On May 1, following artillery barrages and heavy bombing by B-52s, a task force of 15,000 U.S. and ARVN armored and infantry battalions entered the Fishhook region accompanied by helicopter gunships and fighter-bomber strike aircraft. The operation was code-named Toan Thang 43. It was the largest operation involving the U.S. forces in over a year. The fighting was not intensive because the VC/NVA forces chose to abandon their bases and supply depots in the region rather than stand and fight against overwhelming forces. Further, the U.S. forces operated in Cambodia under tight ground rules. They had orders to travel no farther than 19 miles beyond the Vietnamese border, and the U.S. commanders had been told to keep the U.S. casualties down. The Americans also had orders to be out of Cambodia by June 30.[75]

All the U.S. forces had withdrawn from Cambodia by June 29. Operation Toan Thang 43 had some successes. Large quantities of enemy ammunition, weapons, and rice had either been captured or destroyed. All enemy installations and basing facilities had been destroyed. The COSVN operations had been disrupted. But most of the main enemy units had avoided battle. They had retreated deeper into the interior and survived intact.

The pressure on Lon Nol's forces had been eased, and the Cambodian army had gained time to build up its strength. An endangered domino had been saved for a time, but the temporary U.S. incursion could not remove the long-run threat to Lon Nol's survival posed by the Khmer Rouge. The VC/NVA losses of men, facilities, weapons, and supplies, plus the closing of the port at Sihanoukville, probably set back their offensive timetable 12–15 months. The Cambodian incursion bought time for Vietnamization, for the staged withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Vietnam, and for pacification and nation-building programs. It also put increased pressures on the Ho Chi Minh Trail because it was the sole remaining source of supply for the VC/NVA forces fighting in southern South Vietnam.

The Cambodian invasions also eased the danger to the remaining American forces in Vietnam.

But the Allies failed to inflict a decisive defeat on the VC/NVA forces; they disrupted but did not end their use of Cambodian territory.[76] They did not

find COSVN, which had moved deeper into the Cambodian interior than the U.S. or ARVN forces were allowed to go. The U.S.-ARVN military intervention also drove the North Vietnamese forces deeper into Cambodia where they joined the growing Khmer Rouge insurgency, thus setting in motion a tragic chain of events that would lead to the fall of the Lon Nol government and to the worst atrocities of the Second Indochina War.

The gains the Americans and South Vietnamese made from Toan Thang 43 were largely offset by the liabilities of a wider war in Southeast Asia. Even though Nixon had publicly committed himself to winding down the American war in Vietnam, he had expanded the theater of military operations to include another country. Further, the United States had acquired another fragile client in Indochina. Nixon had committed significant U.S. economic and military resources to help Cambodia defend itself against the VC/NVA and Khmer Rouge attacks, at the same time that he was pulling the U.S. forces out of South Vietnam. The American Vietnam War had been expanded; it had become the Second Indochina War. It now encompassed Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Although American aviators and armored units involved in the Cambodian incursion had fought aggressively when they had the opportunity, some U.S. infantry companies indulged in search-and-evade tactics to avoid combat during Toan Thang 43. One company briefly refused a direct order from its commanding officer to march down a road thought to be infested with enemy soldiers.

Most ARVN units involved in the Cambodian incursion did well. They captured many weapons and supplies, and they inflicted severe losses on the VC/NVA units that chose to stand and fight. The ARVN forces were aided by powerful U.S. artillery support and air strikes. Where the two Allies fought in tandem, mostly in the Parrot's Beak, the American fought more aggressively, captured more weapons and supplies, and suffered far greater casualties than did their ARVN counterparts. ARVN armored units developed severe problems because they lacked competent maintenance personnel and sufficient spare parts. They had persistent command and control problems. For example, they failed to coordinate artillery fire with their mobile operations and had to rely on the U.S. artillery. ARVN commanders believed that the performance of the South Vietnamese army during the Cambodian incursion suggested that Vietnamization was working. However, their continuing insufficiencies coupled to their dependence on the Americans had ominous implications for the future survival of South Vietnam. What would happen when the U.S. forces had withdrawn and the ARVN would have to fight the VietCong and the NVA on their own?[77]

Kent State and the Revival of Student Protest

In addition to its many consequences for the Indochina War, the Cambodian incursion had many domestic political impacts. It accentuated the growing

dissatisfaction with the pace of U.S. troop withdrawals, aroused mistrust of the Nixon administration, brought into the open the latent issue of executive authority to make war, and triggered waves of demonstrations that reverberated for months. The organized antiwar coalitions had declined since they had staged the huge nationwide Mobilizations and Moratoria in the fall of 1969. Internally divided and losing lots of supporters who had dropped out, antiwar activists also encountered a host of external obstacles. A war-weary nation was also weary of antiwar protests and protesters. Prominent media gave them little or no coverage. They were harassed by federal and local officials. Often, the Nixon administration's public relations campaigns impugned their motives and their patriotism. Even so, antiwar activity continued at various locales across the nation. At the grass roots level, energetic local groups staged periodic, usually peaceful rallies, mostly on college campuses.[78]

The Cambodian incursion reignited antiwar activity. Protesters took to the streets, and scores of college campuses across the country erupted in demonstrations, all protesting the sudden widening of a war that the president had promised to phase out quickly. Most were peaceful, but some were not. ROTC buildings were bombed or torched on many campuses, including Yale and the University of Wisconsin. On May 1, President Nixon made some incendiary remarks that infuriated virtually everyone opposing or protesting the war. He referred to those antiwar activists who were "blowing up the campuses" as "these bums."[79] On May 2, radical students at Yale issued a call for a nationwide student strike to demand an immediate U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.

At Kent State University, a large public university in Ohio, antiwar protests wrought terrible consequences. On May 1, a crowd of about 500 students gathered at the center of campus to protest the invasion of Cambodia and to denounce President Nixon. That night, thousands of students converged on downtown Kent. Fist fights broke out among patrons at a downtown bar. A riotous mob made up of students, townspeople, and outsiders rampaged through the downtown area, trashing storefronts and smashing windows. The mayor of Kent declared a state of emergency and requested assistance from the Ohio National Guard. During the night of May 2, the ROTC building on campus was burned. Next day, Troop G of the National Guard moved in to occupy the campus. At a press conference held on May 3, Governor James Rhodes vowed to eradicate the "Communist elements" on the Kent State campus. On May 4, at about noon, following hours of confrontations between students and troops, the Guardsmen suddenly aimed their rifles at a crowd of students, and fired off 61 rounds of live ammunition. When the indiscriminate shooting stopped, four students lay dead and nine had been wounded. Victims included protesters and bystanders; one of the students killed was a young woman on her way to class who walked into the line of fire.[80]

The Kent State killings ignited anger and intensified the anguish over the war and its domestic effects. During the next several weeks, over 4 million of the nation's students participated in protest demonstrations against the Cambodian invasion, the killings at Kent State, and President Nixon's war

policies. During the "Cambodian spring," nearly half of the nation's colleges and universities recorded protests. About a fifth of the nation's campuses were forced to shut down, some for a few days and some for the remainder of the spring semester. "It was easily the most massive and shattering protest in the history of American higher education."[81] Governor Ronald Reagan ordered the multi-campus University of California system to close for a week. Most protests were peaceful, but some colleges reported significant violence. On May 6, police wounded four SUNY-Buffalo students and fired tear gas canisters into campus dormitories. On May 14, state police and National Guardsman shot and killed two students in their dorm at Jackson State University in Mississippi. The Cambodian invasion, coupled with the killings on the Kent State campus, had provoked massive protests all across America.[82]

One of the more bizarre incidents of the Vietnam War era occurred during the weeks of demonstrations and protests that followed the Cambodian invasion and the killings at Kent State. On May 8, more than 100,000 young protesters descended on the nation's capital. That night, President Nixon, unable to sleep and distraught over the outrage his actions in Cambodia had caused, had a driver take him to the Lincoln Memorial, where some of the students who had come to Washington were camped out. It was about 4:40 A.M. when the president arrived unescorted. Earnestly trying to communicate with those young people, he rambled on about sports, global travel, racial tensions, and his own student days during the 1930s at Whittier College. The students, either too sleepy or too stunned to engage the president of the United States in a dialogue about the Vietnam War, mostly listened. Within about an hour, White House aides, alerted to his whereabouts, arrived and led him away.[83]

Antiwar rallies occurred in other cities. Anti-draft actions occurred at various Selective Service sites. Bombs were set off at various federal government installations and military recruitment centers. A bank in Isla Vista, a suburban community near the Santa Barbara branch of the University of California, was burned to the ground. An Army research center on the campus of the University of Wisconsin was bombed and a researcher was killed.[84] These terrorist acts represented a kind of chaotic guerrilla warfare being waged against the American war machine by various small groups of radicals and self-styled revolutionaries.

The outbreak of antiwar opposition during May 1970 provoked a backlash among supporters of the administration's war policy. On May 8, construction workers beat up antiwar demonstrators in New York City's financial district. Two weeks later, the head of the New York Labor Council led an estimated 100,000 union members on a march through Manhattan supporting the invasion of Cambodia and denouncing antiwar demonstrators. The "hard hats" waved American flags and sang "God Bless America" as they strode along the streets of New York. Trade union leaders in other cities organized rallies and parades in support of the war. A grateful president held a well-publicized meeting at the White House where he warmly received union leaders who supported his war policies.

This eruption of pro-war support revealed class divisions among Americans that had been exacerbated by the Indochina War. Antiwar activists were recruited mainly from the ranks of the educated middle- and upper middle classes.[85] Pro-war activists mostly came from the ranks of the hardhats, from young men who embraced traditional patriotic ideals and moral values. It pitted those who worked with their hands against those who worked with their minds, the proletariat against the professionals or aspiring professionals. It was evident by 1970 that many of the sons and daughters of the establishment had turned against the war, while most members of the working classes continued to support it.

Congressional Opposition to the War

The Cambodian invasion also provoked dissent within the Nixon administration and an outburst of Congressional criticism. For the first time, it appeared that Congress might seriously challenge the president's power to wage war in Indochina. Content since the rise of the Cold War to let presidents control foreign and strategic policy, the Senate, the more dovish house of Congress, voted overwhelmingly to repeal the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. The bill, offered by Senator Robert Dole (R-Kansas), passed 81-10.

Many senators believed that the resolution had served as a retroactive declaration of war. The Senate's gesture was purely symbolic, however. President Nixon claimed that he possessed the authority to wage war based on the war powers clause of the Constitution, and no one challenged him. The Senate also passed the Cooper-Church amendment, which cut off all funding for military operations in Cambodia, effective on June 30, 1970.[86] But the House of Representatives failed to pass the Cooper-Church amendment; hence, it never became law. Republican Senator Mark Hatfield and his Democratic colleague George McGovern introduced an amendment to a military appropriations bill that would have cut off all funding for the U.S. military operations in Indochina at the end of the year. It also failed to pass.[87]

None of these congressional actions in 1970 seriously impeded the president's power to wage war, but as harbingers of rising congressional opposition, these actions increased the pressure on Nixon and Kissinger to find a way to phase out the American war in Indochina or risk having Congress end it for them. Clearly, the public and congressional responses to the Cambodian invasion had reduced President Nixon's options. Domestic politics prevented finding any new missions for the U.S. combat forces and increased the pressure on the administration to end the war.[88]

Nixon was neither inclined toward nor capable of reconciling his critics. He accused his congressional critics of prolonging the war and told them that if they restricted his war-making powers, they would be responsible for an American defeat in Indochina. Nixon empowered the FBI, the CIA, and military intelligence agencies to use illegal surveillance techniques against radical antiwar groups.[89] By the summer of 1970, the Nixon White House was

exhibiting many of the attributes of a beleaguered fortress. The president and the president's men increasingly held the view that it was them against all of their enemies in the media, the Congress, the universities, and the antiwar movement, all of whom were trying to undermine Nixon's power to govern.

As the embattled president confronted the firestorm of protest provoked by the Cambodian incursion, any hope that he may have held out for breaking the diplomatic deadlock at Paris was dashed. If the Cambodian operation had been intended to pressure the North Vietnamese into making concessions, it had the precisely opposite effect of hardening Hanoi's position. The North Vietnamese and NLF delegates walked out of the Paris talks in protest over the American invasion of Cambodia and refused to return until all the U.S. troops were pulled out of Cambodia. Le Duc Tho broke off the secret talks with Henry Kissinger. Nixon's announced withdrawal of 150,000 more American forces in April, coupled with the uproar provoked in the United States by the Cambodian incursion, only strengthened Hanoi's determination to continue stalling the negotiations until domestic political pressures forced Nixon to withdraw all the U.S. forces from Indochina. Clearly in retreat, on October 7, President Nixon proposed a cease-fire in place, implicitly acknowledging that northern troops would remain in southern Vietnam.[90]

As the fall 1970 midterm elections approached, Nixon campaigned energetically against his Democratic Congressional critics and denounced the antiwar protesters wherever he campaigned. The hard-pressed administration viewed the elections as an opportunity to rally support for Vietnamization and defeat many of Nixon's prominent dovish Congressional critics. Nixon hoped to replace the doves with new people who would support his policies. Vice President Agnew also took to the hustings to campaign energetically against the Nixon administration's numerous opponents. During the two weeks that he actively campaigned, Nixon repeatedly attacked the radical antiwar demonstrators. On October 29, in San Jose, California, the president, as he was leaving the Civic Auditorium after giving a campaign speech, spotted a large group of young antiwar protesters in the parking lot outside of the auditorium. The president climbed onto the hood of his limousine and extended his arms over his head, flashing the "V-for-Victory" sign. His defiant actions provoked a fusillade of rocks, bottles, and eggs thrown by some of the protesters. Mr. Nixon quickly got down from the hood, Secret Service operatives shoved him inside the limo, and it sped away.[91]

But Nixon and Agnew's efforts to strengthen administrative support in Congress mostly failed. A few prominent senatorial doves lost, but so did a few hawks. There were not many changes in the House of Representatives either, but even the few changes were not good news for the Nixon White House. Of the 12 congressmen who lost their seats, 10 had been administration supporters. Several newcomers to the House were avowed doves, most notably Bella Abzug (Democrat-New York) and Ronald Dellums (Democrat-California), both outspoken peace activists. The 1970 elections, like most elections, turned on many issues besides the war. But insofar as the election could be viewed

as a referendum on administration war policies, the president suffered a net loss of support. Both houses of the new Congress remained overwhelmingly Democratic, and the new Congress would prove to be more dovish than its predecessor.

After two years in office, after two years of fighting and diplomatic maneuvering, the man elected president on a promise to bring an early end to the Vietnam War had discovered to his dismay that the American position in Southeast Asia had deteriorated. Nixon's freedom of maneuver, never very great, had diminished. He could see no way to end the war any time soon on terms that accorded with his conception of peace with honor. The Paris negotiations remained deadlocked. Hanoi had not budged from its positions staked out when negotiations had begun in May 1968. The United States could not drive the North Vietnamese troops out of South Vietnam, and Kissinger could not persuade Hanoi to withdraw them. The war had also been widened. The United States was now supporting a struggling government in Cambodia that was trying to survive the growing Khmer Rouge insurgency backed by North Vietnam and China. In South Vietnam, the RVNAF buildup was faltering. The U.S. troop withdrawal was accelerating. Popular support for Nixon's war policy was ebbing, Congressional opposition was growing stronger, and antiwar protest had been revitalized by the Cambodian incursion and the Kent State killings.

Widening the War: Operation Lam Son 719, February 8, 1971

As the American ground war in Vietnam entered its seventh year in early 1971, both MACV commander General Abrams and the director of pacification efforts William Colby believed that they were bringing more and more villages under the control of the South Vietnamese government. On the strategic side, the U.S. air power appeared to be slowing the rate of infiltration of men and material down the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex running through eastern Laos. The U.S. intelligence data showed that Hanoi could not replace its losses from the 1970 campaigns. The flow of supplies and weapons through Sihanoukville had been closed off; the U.S. Naval vessels guarding the long South Vietnamese coastline and riverine conduits had blocked off another source of war materiel for the VC/NVA fighters. As more villages came under the control of the Republic of Vietnam, it became more difficult for the Viet-Cong to obtain supplies and recruit fighters locally. The Ho Chi Minh Trail had become the jugular of Hanoi's war in South Vietnam. Keeping men and materiel moving down the trail network kept the NVA in the war in southern Vietnam.

The ARVN, having increased the size of their forces and acquired better weapons, enjoyed higher morale and had become more confident warriors. Applying their greater firepower, ARVN soldiers always inflicted far greater casualties than they sustained. If some ARVN deficiencies and failures were

overlooked or played down, it was easy enough for the U.S. officials on the ground in Vietnam and in Washington to believe that they were making progress, that Vietnamization was working.

As 1971 began, remaining U.S. forces in Vietnam numbered about 335,000, of which approximately 275,000 were Army and Marine ground troops. Another 60,000 would be sent home in March 1971. It was clear that soon there would no longer be enough U.S. combatants remaining in Vietnam to mount any major offensive operations. General Abrams worked hard to ensure an orderly withdrawal and preserve the fighting capabilities of his remaining troops. General Thieu worried that most U.S. forces would soon be gone from his country and he knew when they all had gone, South Vietnam could not defend itself against the assaults of the southern insurgents and the PAVN troops who had been sent to fight in southern Vietnam. On January 5, 1971, Congress enacted the Cooper-Church amendment that cut off all funding for the U.S. ground operations in Cambodia and Laos, further curtailing the use of the American ground forces remaining in South Vietnam.[92]

Laos, like Cambodia, was a neutral country, its neutrality formally guaranteed by the 1962 Paris Agreement. But neither side had observed that neutrality from the day it was established, and Laos' weak neutralist government, headed by Prince Souvanna Phouma, could not defend the nation's territorial integrity. The struggle for power within Laos was mainly a dimension of the Vietnam War that had spilled into that hapless country. The CIA had been waging a secret war in Laos since 1963, involving Meo tribesmen. CIA officials trained and supported the Meo in their battles against the Pathet Lao. The U.S. aircraft had been bombing targets along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the Laotian corridor since 1964. The Nixon administration escalated the U.S. air war against Laos in 1969. During the first two years of Nixon's presidency, the U.S. bomb tonnage dropped in Laos exceeded the totals for both the Kennedy and Johnson years.

North Vietnamese forces had been occupying part of Laos since the First Indochina War. They also supported and trained the Pathet Lao. By 1971, the NVA controlled all of the Laotian territory adjoining their own country and occupied the entire Laotian corridor, from which they had expelled the native Laotians, using it as one huge logistics system to support their war in South Vietnam.

Confident that Vietnamization was working and knowing that there soon would not be enough U.S. troops left to undertake offensive operations or even to support an offensive operation undertaken by ARVN forces, the U.S. officials devised a plan for invading Laos. The impetus came from Washington. Henry Kissinger appears to have taken the initiative. He proposed inserting ground troops into portions of eastern Laos for the purpose of blocking sections of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and thereby significantly degrading Hanoi's ability to infiltrate men, weapons, and supplies into South Vietnam. Nixon strongly supported Kissinger's proposal. Admiral John McCain, the Pacific Theater commander who had overall command of the American war

in Southeast Asia, sent General Abrams orders from the Joint Chiefs to coordinate plans for an invasion of Laos with General Cao Van Vien, the head of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff. Abrams and his senior commanders devised an operations plan: the U.S. forces would clear the way to the border. South Vietnamese forces would invade Laos, relying on American air, artillery, and logistics support.[93]

President Nixon ordered an invasion of Laos because he assumed that a successful operation would seriously degrade the DRV's ability to infiltrate men and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and thus force Hanoi to postpone any offensives they might be planning. The MACV and RVNAF intelligence analysts had detected a heavy stockpiling of enemy military supplies at two sites. One site was about 30 miles west of Khe Sanh, near the Laotian town of Tchepone, and the other was along the South Vietnam-Laos border, near the northern end of the A Shau Valley. From these two bases, the NVA units could attack the two northern provinces of South Vietnam, Quang Tri and Thua Thien, and threaten the city of Hue. It was a venerable offensive strategy that the North Vietnamese had tried many times in the past, only to be blocked each time by the U.S. troops. Some of the deadliest fighting of the entire war had occurred during these regional battles. Rather than wait for the NVA to attack these northern provinces, General Abrams and his staff, coordinating with General Vien and his staff, proposed a preemptive campaign to destroy the two supply sites in order to relieve the enemy pressure building in the northern provinces. In addition to these anticipated strategic results, Nixon also expected that a successful military operation into Laos would stop his and the war's downward slide in the public opinion polls. Nixon and Kissinger also hoped that a successful invasion would force the DRV negotiators in Paris to make concessions.

While planning for the cross-border operation into Laos, President Nixon and his senior foreign policy and military advisers made some dubious assumptions and key miscalculations. When the PAVN defenders counterattacked the invading ARVN forces inflicting severe casualties and panicked survivors straggled back into South Vietnam, the U.S. officials were shocked and dismayed to find that a campaign that had begun with such high hopes had ended as a strategic disaster. Nixon had assumed that when attacked, the NVA troops would not stand and fight, and would retreat into the interior as they had done during the Cambodian incursion. MACV intelligence believed that the incursion would only be lightly opposed. But CIA Director Richard Helms produced an analysis that showed how Hanoi had concentrated armor, long-range artillery, and major antiaircraft defenses in the region; and predicted that the NVA would fiercely defend this vital artery. Kissinger ignored the CIA analysis and the president never saw it. Although Nixon anticipated that the operation would inflame antiwar activists and dovish politicians, he assumed that victory and successful negotiations in Paris in the wake of a decisive military operation would calm the domestic political waters. The key miscalculation that Nixon and Kissinger shared was that the NVA's concentrated

power at Tchepone did not matter. They had convinced themselves that the ARVN forces, with the U.S. support, could not lose and strategic victory would override any and all adverse political consequences.[94]

General Vien's main objective for the operation, code-named LAM SON 719, was the destruction of enemy logistics installations and supplies at Tchepone and at a basing area near the northern end of the A Shau Valley. The operational plan also called for holding these facilities for 90 days and for interdicting the flow of supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, then withdrawing from Laos before the rainy season began in May. The South Vietnamese military leaders calculated that a successful spoiling operation in Laos, when coupled with the destruction wrought in the Cambodian sanctuaries the previous year, would keep South Vietnam free of any enemy offensives for a year and would buy additional time for Vietnamization.[95]

LAM SON 719 would be the first major operation since the American war began in 1965 in which ARVN forces would have to fight without American advisers or the U.S. combat units accompanying them in battle. The U.S. firebases located just inside South Vietnam would provide artillery support. Cobra attack helicopters and strike aircraft would provide air support, and transportation helicopters, the ever-dependable UH-1 Iroquois, universally known as "Hueys," would provide logistics support, but on the ground, the South Vietnamese soldiers would be on their own.

Anticipating an attack at Tchepone, the hub of the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex running through the Laotian corridor, General Giap moved the B-70 Corps consisting of three infantry divisions into the incursion area. The 2nd PAVN division, which had been fighting in South Vietnam, also moved up to the Tchepone area. By early March, Hanoi had massed approximately 35,000 troops to defend the trail hub and mount a counteroffensive. These well-equipped troops included 6 antiaircraft battalions, 12 infantry battalions, 3 tank battalions, and 8 artillery regiments. Unlike the Cambodian incursion, where the VC/NVA forces fled into the interior to avoid battle with the invaders, the PAVN forces in the vicinity of Tchepone were prepared to fight the South Vietnamese invaders.[96]

On February 8, 1971, units of the ARVN 1st Airborne Division and 1st Armored Brigade under the command of General Hoang Xuan Lam pushed into Laos along Route 9, west of Khe Sanh. The operation encountered trouble from the outset. LAM Son 719 was the largest and most complex military operation ever undertaken by the ARVN. Planning had been inadequate and many officers including the most senior commanders lacked both the experience and know-how to successfully carry out such a complex undertaking. There were immediate command and control problems from the outset. Poor communication only exacerbated the situation. North Vietnamese agents placed at high levels within the RVNAF command structure had furnished complete details of the operation to the enemy forces in advance. Consequently, the element of tactical surprise was completely lacking for LAM SON 719. Route 9 was in terrible condition, long stretches of it virtually impassable. The poor condition

of Route 9 meant that Hueys, flown by American pilots, became the essential mode of logistical support. Then, the weather turned bad, and the U.S. aircraft could not fly their air support missions for several days.

With improving weather, following a massive artillery bombardment and many B-52 bombing missions, the incursion into Laos began. To cover the northern flank, ARVN 1st Airborne and Ranger units were deployed to the north of the major advance. They were helilifted to two landing zones (LZs). One LZ was known as Ranger North; the other as Ranger South. By February 11, the main ARVN forces had reached A Loui, a village about 20 kilometers inside Laos, approximately halfway to Tchepone.

ARVN politics also undermined LAM SON 719's chances for success. On February 12, General Thieu ordered General Lam to halt the offensive if he reached a level of 3,000 casualties. Lam halted immediately. Thieu gave this order because the ARVN 1st Airborne was his coup insurance. Their destruction would leave him vulnerable to overthrow by his ARVN rivals. After meeting with General Lam, Thieu ordered the ARVN 1st Airborne back to Saigon and replaced it with an inexperienced RVN Marine Division, further weakening Lam Son 719. Because of Thieu's meddling, LAM SON 719 achieved only a fraction of its goals. The ARVN forces destroyed some enemy supply depots and disrupted NVA logistics along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But Thieu, concerned about losses, ordered the South Vietnamese forces to withdraw from Tchepone.[97]

As the ARVN forces began their withdrawal, the PAVN forces counterattacked. The PAVN forces used their Soviet-supplied 122mm and 130mm artillery to outrange the ARVN firebases and pounded them at will. Ground operations against the ARVN outposts were supported by the 102nd PAVN Regiment deploying Soviet-built PT-76 and T-54 tanks. The ARVN units stationed at Ranger North and Ranger South were decimated in a three-day battle. An ARVN firebase south of Route 9 also came under heavy attack. ARVN armor and infantry of the 17th Cavalry moved in to try to save their comrades. Over the next several days, North and South Vietnamese tanks fought the first armored battles of the Vietnam War. With the help of U.S. air strikes, the ARVN destroyed 23 tanks at a loss of 3 of its tanks and 25 armored personnel carriers (APCs). During all the PAVN assaults on firebases and columns of ARVN forces, the Communist forces took heavy casualties from strike aircraft, Cobras, and artillery fire.

The withdrawal quickly became a rout. The RVN forces came under intense pressure from PAVN infantry, tank assaults, and artillery barrages. 35,000 battle-hardened NVA troops pursued 8,000 inexperienced ARVN soldiers. General Giap saw an opportunity to inflict a major defeat on the South Vietnamese forces and completely discredit Vietnamization. He ordered all-out assaults on the retreating South Vietnamese. The retreating ARVN ground forces had to run a gauntlet of ambushes along Route 9.

Only a disciplined and organized army can execute an orderly withdrawal while under attack by a determined foe and the South Vietnamese force

that had ventured into Laos was neither. Discipline and order collapsed as panic-stricken troops abandoned their equipment and weapons and fled on foot in the direction of the border. The headlong retreat was kept from becoming a debacle only by the U.S. air power and heroic efforts by the U.S. helicopter pilots, which together inflicted heavy casualties on the attacking NVA forces, suppressed PAVN artillery fire, knocked out enemy tanks, hauled in ammunition, and hauled out ARVN troops. Because of the extraordinary U.S. effort, remnants of the thoroughly demoralized ARVN forces returned to South Vietnam. Using Soviet-made shoulder-fired missiles, PAVN soldiers brought down 108 American helicopters and damaged another 618. Eighty-nine American pilots and air crewmen were either killed or reported missing in action, and another 178 were wounded.[98]

The LAM SON 719 operation proved to be a disastrous defeat for the ARVN soldiers. The U.S. media portrayed the Laotian incursion as a debacle. Television cameras showed American viewers dramatic images of panicky ARVN soldiers straggling back to South Vietnam territory. Reacting to yet another widening of the Indochina War, several senators introduced resolutions aimed at limiting presidential power to conduct military operations in Indochina and cutting off all funds for operations in Cambodia and Laos. None of them passed.

"The operation revealed the inherent and incurable flaws of the RVNAF, which doomed any realistic hopes of successful Vietnamization."[99] These flaws included (1) the hopeless incompetence of the ARVN's politicized leadership, starting at the top with General Thieu; (2) the continuing inability of the static home-guard infantry divisions to meet the demands of modern mobile warfare; (3) the lack of professionalism, accentuated by the lack of U.S. advisers who usually coordinated helicopter flights, artillery fire, tank-infantry operations, and air strikes for the ARVN forces; (4) serious problems with communications and maintenance; (5) basic deficiencies in training and discipline; (6) the perennial lack of a fighting spirit when facing PAVN troops in intensive combat; and (7) the ARVN's continuing dependence on the American forces. All of these failures once more exposed Vietnamization for the illusion that it was.[100] If LAM SON 719 was viewed as a test of the progress ARVN had made toward Vietnamization, it flunked the test.

In a televised speech delivered on the evening of April 7, 1971, President Nixon told the American people that LAM SON 719 proved that Vietnamization had succeeded. Nixon's portrayal of the Laotian incursion as an ARVN victory made little sense to millions of television viewers who had recently watched video clips showing terrified Vietnamese soldiers clinging to the U.S. helicopter skids, desperately trying to return to South Vietnam. Polls revealed that a large majority of Americans refused to see the Laos operation as a success. Polls also showed that Nixon now had a credibility problem on Vietnam almost as large as Johnson's had been. Only 41 percent of Americans approved of Nixon's handling of the war; 46 percent disapproved. Nearly

two-thirds of Americans polled said that Washington had made a mistake when it sent the U.S. troops to fight in Vietnam.[101]

The failure of Lam Son 719 proved that Vietnamization had not succeeded and there was no realistic possibility of it ever succeeding. Vietnamization stood revealed for what it was, a self-serving American illusion. The South Vietnamese understood that they had been defeated and understood the dire implications of that defeat for the future of Vietnamization, even if the president of the United States did not. In Saigon, anti-American demonstrations erupted. One poster showed Nixon standing over a pile of dead South Vietnamese soldiers, with a message that Vietnamization meant the sacrifice of South Vietnamese soldiers by the United States. Within the United States, the Laotian incursion revived elements of the antiwar movement. The most notable participants were groups of disillusioned Vietnam War veterans, many of them belonging to Vietnam Veterans Against the War **(VVAW)**.[102]

The DRV leadership elite viewed the operation, which they named *Duong 9-Nam Lao Chien Thang* (Route 9-Southern Laos Victory) as a major victory. In its immediate aftermath, the NVA quickly expanded the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex from 60 miles to 90 miles in width. Soon more trucks and bicycles than ever were hauling personnel and supplies to the southern war. Additionally, the Politburo began planning for a major offensive operation in South Vietnam to be launched in early 1972.

Notes

1 Jeffrey Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 8–9.
2 Ibid., 9.
3 Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 81; Hess, *Vietnam*, 114–15; DeBenedetti, 277; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 114–23.
4 The Nixon quote is found in Roger Morris, *Uncertain Greatness: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 156; Samuel Lipsman, Edward Doyle, and the editors of Boston Publishing, *Fighting for Time, The Vietnam Experience* (Boston, MA: Boston Publishing, 1983), 8, 27–28. See Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 289, 522–29. "National Security Study Memorandum No. 1," January 21, 1969 (extracts).
5 Jeffrey P. Kimball, "Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War," in David L. Anderson, ed., *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 217–21; Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 45–46.
6 Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, 10.
7 Moss, *America in the Twentieth Century*, 371–73.
8 Polls cited in Mueller, *Wars, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, 92–93.
9 Quote is from Schandler, *Unmaking of a President*, 321.
10 Henry Brandon, *The Retreat of American Power* (New York: Delta, 1972), 58–59; Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 85; Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 275.
11 George C. Herring, "The Nixon Strategy in Vietnam," in Peter Braestrup, ed., *Vietnam as History: Ten Years after the Paris Peace Accords* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1984), 51–52; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3rd ed., 245; Kimball, "Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War," 222–23; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 129.

12 Lipsman et al., *Fighting for Time*, 30–31; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 225.
13 Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 242–49; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 589–94.
14 Henry B. Crawford, "Operation Menu's Secret Bombing of Cambodia," in *Vietnam* (December 1996): 22–24.
15 Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 252–53; Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 158–62; Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 258–59.
16 Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 46–47.
17 Lipsman et al., *Fighting for Time*, 31–32; quote is from Hess, *Vietnam*, 115.
18 Lipsman et al, *Fighting for Time*, 32. Porter, ed., *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 291, 531, "Address on Television by President Richard M. Nixon," May 14, 1969 (extract).
19 Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 271–74; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 226.
20 Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 87–88.
21 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 278–83; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 130–31.
22 Copies of Nixon's July 15, 1969, letter to Ho Chi Minh, and the North Vietnamese leader's response, dated August 15, can be found in Tad Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace: Foreign Policy in the Nixon Years* (New York: Viking, 1978), 137, 139; Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, 15–21, found that Nixon's "madman theory" was a key part of his strategies for dealing with North Vietnam and the Soviet Union. It was a species of psychological warfare that entailed periodic escalatory military actions. Nixon would have aides put out the word to his adversaries that the president possessed an unstable personality and was an extreme Cold Warrior given to unpredictable and reckless actions. Nixon employed his madman theory to try to convince the North Vietnamese to negotiate an end to the war on American terms rather than risk Nixon's wrath and possibly dangerous use of excessive force, including nuclear weapons.
23 Quoted in Lipsman et al., *Fighting for Time*, 36.
24 Quoted in Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 164.
25 Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit, 1983), 124–30; Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 163–64; Szulc, *Illusion of Peace*, 150–56; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 158–65, is the best brief analysis of the DUCK HOOK contingency planning.
26 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 228.
27 Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 278–83. Henry Cabot Lodge, the head of the U.S. team at the Paris talks, had met privately many times with Xuan Thuy prior to Kissinger's August 4 meeting. These talks had been unproductive.
28 Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor* 43–44. Aside from some NSC aides, only Nixon, Kissinger, and Ambassador Bunker knew of the secret sessions.
29 Tad Szulc, *Illusion of Peace*, 148–49. Nixon, like Johnson, tended to equate criticism of his war policy with subversion. He secretly ordered the FBI, the CIA, and the other intelligence agencies to look for connections between the antiwar movement and the enemy. During the summer of 1969, Ho Chi Minh was old, ailing, in fact dying. His letter to President Nixon was probably written By Le Duan.
30 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 228.
31 Blaufarb, *Counterinsurgency Era*, 264–78; Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, 731–36; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 231–33; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 609–12; Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes* 123–46; and Hess, *Vietnam*, 118.
32 Hess, *Vietnam*, 118–19.
33 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 269–270; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 612–13.
34 Hess, *Vietnam*, 126.
35 DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 248–53.

36 Charles DeBenedetti, *The Peace Reform Movement in American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 180–85; Lipsman et al., *Fighting for Time*, 36–37; DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 255–57.
37 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 281.
38 Quoted in Lipsman et al., *Fighting for Time*, 37.
39 Transcript of Nixon's speech delivered November 3, 1969. The speech also appears in Richard M. Nixon, *Public Papers: Richard M. Nixon, 1969* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 901–9. Although the policy itself had been in place for a year and a half, the term "Vietnamization" was coined by Nixon's secretary of defense, Melvin Laird.
40 Polls are cited in DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 259.
41 Quoted in Szulc, *Illusion of Peace*, 158.
42 DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 261–62.
43 Ibid., 262–63. One of the people who had a minor role in organizing the huge November 15 Washington protest was a 22-year-old Rhodes Scholar and future president, William Jefferson "Bill" Clinton.
44 Polls cited in ibid., 264.
45 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 284.
46 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 283–88; Lipsman et al., *Fighting for Time*, 17–23; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 614–15.
47 Quoted in Lipsman et al., *Fighting for Time*, 22.
48 Transcript of interview with Melvin Zais, General, U.S. Army (Ret.), 1977, Vol III, 575–88, U.S. Army Military History Institute archives, Carlisle Barracks, PA. General Zais had a son fighting in the battle of Dong Ap Bia. General Zais believed that the name "Hamburger Hill" was suggested by a young wire service reporter interviewing a hysterical soldier who had participated in the battle.
49 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 615.
50 Ibid., 615–19; Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 278–80; Lipsman et al., *Fighting for Time*, 92–115; Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 153–61; Cincinnatus, *Self-Destruction: The Disintegration and Decay of the United States Army during the Vietnam Era* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), *passim.* "Cincinnatus" is the pseudonym used by Cecil B. Currey.
51 Baskir and Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance*, 3–61; Moss, "Vietnam Generation," 4–9.
52 Stanton, *Decline and Fall*, 279–80.
53 Paul L. Savage and Richard A. Gabriel, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the American Army," *Armed Forces and Society* 2 (Spring 1976): 362–71; Baritz, *Backfire*, 294–309; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 617–19.
54 Lipsman et al., *Fighting for Time*, 92–96.
55 Ibid., 97–100; Prados, *Vietnam*, 277–78. A CBS News television documentary portrayed a combat refusal that occurred in April 1970 in War Zone C near the Cambodian border during Operation TOAN THANG 43.
56 Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 153–58; Cincinnatus, *Self-Destruction*, passim.
57 Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 154–55; Bryan G. Fiman, et al., "Black-White and American-Vietnamese Relations among Soldiers in Vietnam," *Journal of Social Issues* 31 (Fall 1975): 43–46; Lipsman, *Fighting for Time*, 102; Prados, *Vietnam*, 273–74. African Americans constituted approximately 15 percent of the forces sent to Vietnam from 1961 to 1972. Vietnam was the first major foreign war in which the U.S. Armed Forces were fully integrated.
58 Moss, "Vietnam Generation," 14.
59 Cited in Lipsman, *Fighting for Time*, 103.
60 Alfred W. McCoy with Cathleen B. Read and Leonard P. Adams, II. *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 9.

61 Ibid., 181–85, 217–22. McCoy accuses several high-ranking military officials in the Thieu-Ky government of drug trafficking, and he names names. McCoy also charges that the U.S. embassy officials refused to investigate these charges and denied that any South Vietnamese officials were involved in drug smuggling.
62 Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 324–25; Dougan, *Nineteen Sixty- Eight*, 79.
63 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 258.
64 An independent journalist, Seymour M. Hersh, exposed the Army's cover-up of the My Lai massacre. See his book, *Cover-Up: The Army's Secret Investigation of the Massacre at My Lai 4* (New York: Random House, 1972).
65 "Conversations between Lt. General William R. Peers and Lt. Colonel Jim Breen and Lt. Colonel Charlie Moore," in Oral History Collection of U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 33–44, 56–58; William R. Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), passim; Palmer, *25-Year War*, 85–86, 170–71; Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 258; Merle F. Wilberding, "What Really Happened in Pinkville," *Vietnam* (April 2008): 28–35, is a riveting article by an Army lawyer who dissected the Calley Trial testimony. Wilberding deconstructs the mythology and misconceptions that still swirl around the massacre and the man who unleashed it. Lt. Calley was initially convicted of premeditated murder of 20 people and sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor. Following lengthy reviews, his sentence was first reduced to 20 years, then to 10 years. As it turned out, Calley served very little time. President Nixon intervened and put him under house arrest until all his appeals were exhausted. He eventually served about four months in military prison before being paroled by the Army.
66 Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2013). Turse has written a thorough account of what he calls the real American war on Vietnamese civilians. Gunther Lewy has also studied the issue of American war crimes and atrocities committed during the Vietnam War. See his Chapter 9, "Atrocities: Fiction and Fact," 307–42, and Chapter 10, "The Punishment of Atrocities and War Crimes," 343–73. In October 2004, the Toledo (Ohio) *Blade*, a family-owned newspaper, devoted 15 pages over four days to an expose of an elite Army unit known as the Tiger Force. According to authors of the *Blade* articles, the Tiger Force, a 45-man platoon attached to the 101st Airborne operating in Quang Ngai province in South Vietnam's fiercely contested central highlands, murdered hundreds of noncombatant men, women, and children from May to November 1967. In 1971, Army investigators conducted a lengthy inquiry that eventually concluded that 18 Tiger Force personnel had participated in war crimes. No one was ever formally charged and the investigation was quietly shut down in 1975.
67 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 295, 539–41, "Nixon Speech," April 20, 1970 (extract); Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3rd ed., 253. Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 741–42, makes the point that Nixon's troop withdrawals saved the army from disintegration.
68 Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 191.
69 Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 458–61; Lipsman, *Fighting for Time*, 127–30, 138–42; Hess, *Vietnam*, rev. ed., 116–18.
70 Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 468–70. William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), chap. 8 "The Coup," 112–27, has suggested the U.S. complicity in the coup that overthrew Sihanouk; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 198–99, states

that while no direct evidence has been found that links the U.S. officials with a conspiracy to overthrow Sihanouk, the U.S. officials were aware of its planning and indirectly in touch with the plotters.

71 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 625–27; Willbanks, James H., *Nixon's Cambodian Incursion.* Vietnam Magazine, June 2020, Vol. 33, No. 1, 24; Hess, *Vietnam*, rev. ed., 118–19.
72 Szulc, *Illusion of Peace*, 252–60; Lipsman, *Fighting for Time*, 152–53; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 235–36; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 211–12.
73 Transcript of Nixon's speech, April 30, 1970; a copy of the speech is printed in Richard M. Nixon, *Public Papers*, 1970 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 405–10.
74 Stanton, *Decline and Fall*, 319–21.
75 Ibid., 322–25; Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 297–301; Sorley, Lewis, ed. *Vietnam Chronicles: The Abrams Tapes, 1968–1972* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2004, May 1970), 414–15.
76 Palmer, The 25-Year War, 103–4; Stanton, *Decline and Fall*, 324–25; "Vietnam: A War That Is Finished," CBS television documentary first shown to the American public in August 1975.
77 Prados, *Vietnam*, 394.
78 Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 213–14.
79 DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 279.
80 Kenneth J. Heineman, *Campus Wars: The Peace Movement at American State Universities in the Vietnam Era* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 456–500.
81 Benedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 280.
82 Ibid., 249–50.
83 Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 218–19; DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 279–80; Dallek, *Partners in Power*, 203–4. President Nixon has an account of the incident in Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), 459–66. White House Chief of Staff Harry R.Haldeman's diary entry for May 9, 1970, sardonically referred to Nixon's impromptu visit to the Lincoln Memorial as capping his "weirdest day yet."
84 Lipsman, *Fighting for Time*, 181–82; DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 280–82.
85 DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 281–82.
86 Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 199–201.
87 Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 76.
88 Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 251–52; Hess, *Vietnam*, rev. ed., 120.
89 Brandon, *Retreat of American Power*, 146–49; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 238.
90 Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 174–75; Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 968–72; Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 105–7; Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 80–81.
91 DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 293; Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician*, 394; Unpublished essay by Kathryn Collins Philp, "The President, Politics, and the Police," *passim.*
92 Prados, *Vietnam*, 405–6; Lewis Sorley, *A Better War* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1999), 228–29.
93 Prados, *Vietnam*, 406–7.
94 Ibid., pp. 409–10.
95 Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 302–3; Stanton, *Decline and Fall*, 333–34; and Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 637–41. General Thieu named the proposed incursion into Laos after Lam Son, the birthplace of Le Loi, a great Vietnamese national hero who, in one of the most famous military campaigns in Vietnamese history, had defeated an invading Chinese army in 1427. 71 referred

to the year 1971, and the 9 referred to Route 9, the main road leading to Laos that would be used by the invading forces.

96 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 637–42.
97 Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 304–5.
98 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 645–49; Stanton, *Decline and Fall*, 336–37. South Vietnamese losses were heavy: 1,146 battle deaths, 4,236 wounded.
99 Quote is from Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 651–52.
100 Ibid., 652–54; Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 336–37.
101 Poll numbers are cited in Dallek, *Partners in Power*, 260–62.
102 Hess, *Vietnam*, 126.

11 A War for Peace, 1971–73

A War-Weary Nation

Even before the Lam Son 719 debacle, polls consistently showed that a large majority of Americans, regardless of their politics, had become thoroughly sick of the Indochina Wars. Yet, the war in Vietnam and its domestic consequences continued to plague the increasingly war-weary nation. In January 1971, Lieutenant William Calley went on trial before a military court for his part in the My Lai massacre that had taken place on March 16, 1968 nearly three years earlier. While Calley was on trial, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), meeting in Detroit, sponsored "Winter Soldier," a forum of 109 veterans testified that they had committed, witnessed, or heard of My Lai-type war crimes. On March 31, 1971, a military court convicted Lieutenant William Calley of mass murder for his role in the My Lai massacre and sentenced him to dismissal from the Army and life imprisonment at hard labor. For once, both hawks and doves agreed on something that Lieutenant Calley had been given a raw deal: hawks, because they believed that no soldier should be convicted in war time for doing his duty; doves, because they believed that Calley had been a sacrificial offering to cover up the fact that many other war criminals went free and senior officers under whose command the atrocities were perpetrated were never charged or tried. President Nixon responded to this wave of sympathy for Calley and commuted the life sentence to three years.[1]

During the third week of April 1971, in Washington, D.C., disillusioned veterans staged a series of peaceful protests against their government that continued to wage war in Vietnam. On April 19, Gold Star Mothers (mothers of soldiers killed in the war) led more than 1,100 veterans as they marched across the Lincoln Memorial Bridge to the Arlington Cemetery gate. The Gold Star mothers and a few others approached the cemetery gate to enter and lay wreaths, but authorities had closed the gate and locked it upon learning of their imminent arrival. On April 22, a large group of veterans demonstrated on the steps of the Supreme Court. They demanded to know why the Court had not ruled on the constitutionality of the war in Vietnam. The veterans sang chorus after chorus of *God Bless America*. 110 veterans were arrested for disturbing the peace, but were later released without being charged.

John Kerry, as the spokesman for the VVAW, testified against the war for over two hours before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in front of a packed house of media and other observers. Other veterans spent the day lobbying on Capitol Hill. That evening, VVAW members staged a candlelight march around the White House. On April 23, over 20,000 VVAW members marched from their encampment on the Mall to the capitol. Over 800 veterans, one-by-one, threw their medals and ribbons over a makeshift fence erected in front of the steps of the Capitol, to the other side, sending them back to the government that had sent them off to fight a war that they and most of their fellow citizens no longer supported. Some came in wheelchairs; others were missing an arm or a leg. Some wept; others raged at the war machine that appeared to have a momentum of its own—all made compelling witnesses to the anguish of a controversial war that the U.S. officials appeared to be unable to either win or end.[2]

Nixon administration officials worked hard to contain, repress, and discredit the antiwar activities of the VVAW and other veterans. It appeared at times that the Nixon administration was waging war against antiwar activists, many of whom were decorated combat veterans of the Vietnam War. The president was especially concerned that the opposition of veterans would further undermine public support for administration war policies in ways that student radicals, hippies, and middle-aged Leftists could not.[3]

Two other demonstrations followed that of the VVAW, one organized by liberal antiwar organizations and the other organized by a more militant direct action group, the May Day Collective. Hundreds of thousands of antiwar demonstrators descended on Washington. Peace spokesmen met with congressional leaders, urging them to take more decisive actions to end the war and to address urgent domestic social needs. On May 2, before the May Day protests were scheduled to begin, police launched a preemptive raid, dispersing a crowd that had gathered at the Jefferson Memorial and arresting hundreds. "On May 3 and 4, city police, federal officials, Marines and Army troops swept the streets, disrupted marches, broke up attempts to block traffic, and arrested 7,000 persons. . . ."[4]

Not long after the spring demonstrations in Washington had subsided, another dramatic war-related issue commanded public attention. On June 13, the *New York Times* began publishing secret government documents that had been given to *Times* reporter Neil Sheehan by former Department of Defense officials Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo. The documents were part of a Pentagon study that had been undertaken by Ellsberg and his colleagues at the request of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Compiled under the general direction of Morton Halperin with day-to-day supervision provided by Leslie Gelb, both Department of Defense officials, these documents amounted to an in-house top-secret history of the long American involvement in Indochina that had resulted in the Vietnam War. The massive 47-volume study, officially titled *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense*, was quickly dubbed the "Pentagon Papers."

Their publication caused a furor as people discovered what many dovish critics had suspected all along. Readers discovered that the U.S. had expanded its war with secret bombings of Cambodia and Laos, coastal raids on North Vietnam, and Marine Corps attacks, none of which had been reported in American media. The most damaging revelations revealed that four consecutive presidential administrations, from Truman's through Johnson's, had misled the public regarding their intentions in Vietnam. Readers discovered that President Kennedy had supported the military coup that had overthrown and murdered Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Nhu on November 1, 1963. Readers also learned that Lyndon Johnson had decided to expand the war while promising American voters during the 1964 electoral campaign, "that we seek no wider war." Senator Birch Bayh noted that the documents said one thing and that the American people had been told something else by their elected officials. Bayh concluded that difficult reality explained the credibility gap, why people do not trust their government.

The revelations of the Pentagon Papers, Lieutenant Calley's trial, and continuing antiwar demonstrations all helped drive popular support for the Vietnam War to an all-time low. In June 1971, a poll recorded 61 percent of respondents stating that the U.S. involvement in the war was a mistake. A July poll revealed that two-thirds of Americans believed that America should continue to withdraw its troops, even if the Saigon government collapsed.[5]

Nixon tried hard to prevent the publication of the Pentagon Papers. Attorney General John Mitchell secured a court injunction on the grounds that their publication represented "a clear and present danger" to national security. The newspaper appealed the injunction and the case of *The New York Times Co. v. United States* quickly rose through the legal system. On June 30, 1971, the Supreme Court ruled 6-3 that the government could not prove that publishing the papers seriously compromised national security. The jurists found that publication of the Pentagon Papers only represented a clear and present danger to the reputations of former public officials who had conceived and implemented the U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia and then misrepresented it to the American people.

Thwarted in his efforts to stop the publication of the Pentagon Papers through the courts, Nixon in early July formed a secret investigating unit, the "Plumbers." White House counselor John Erlichman subsequently ordered a team of Plumbers to break into the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist in Beverly Hills to find information that would discredit the man who had leaked the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times.* On September 3, 1971, the Plumbers burgled the office of Dr. Lewis Fielding, searching for medical records that could undermine the credibility of Ellsberg.[6] This illegal action constituted the foundational act of what would become known as the Watergate scandals within a few years. The Plumbers and other Nixon operatives committed many additional illegal activities in subsequent years that would ultimately bring down Nixon's presidency. Ellsberg and Anthony Russo were later indicted and tried on charges of stealing and possessing secret government

documents. Both Ellsberg and Russo fully expected to be convicted and sentenced to serve long prison terms in federal prisons. However, on May 11, 1973, Federal District Judge William Matthew Byrne, Jr. declared a mistrial and dismissed all charges against Ellsberg and Anthony Russo when federal prosecutors told Judge Byrne that they had learned that two of the Plumbers, E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy, had been members of the team that burglarized Dr. Fielding's office.

Talking While Fighting

During the first few months of 1971, Politburo leaders in Hanoi had to confront some grim realities. They ruled a war-weary nation. Like the large majority of Americans, the North Vietnamese people were thoroughly sick of the long war. Because the North Vietnamese state did not allow a free press, liberal democratic political institutions, or permit legal opposition parties, there could be no organized or public protests; however, officials in charge of maintaining security were intensely concerned about the rising level of popular discontent and possible riotous protests of their policies. The North Vietnamese economy had only partially recovered from the damage inflicted by Operation Rolling Thunder. Several Politburo members traveled abroad seeking aid to boost North Vietnam's sagging war economy. Several Eastern European countries, Cuba, and Mongolia reaffirmed the cruciality of the DRV's war effort by contributing economic, technical, and scientific aid. The ongoing negotiations in Paris with the Americans remained stalled.

Although Lam Son 719 had been a military and political disaster for the RVN, and signaled the seemingly permanent failure of Vietnamization, the United States still retained diplomatic advantages viz-a-viz the DRV. Both Beijing and Moscow, intent on nursing along their improving relations with the United States, issued only mild criticisms of America's latest expansion of the war into Laos. Le Duan could see that the leaders of People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union viewed their relations with the United States as more important than supporting the DRVs ongoing war in southern Vietnam.

After the South Vietnamese soldiers had come reeling back from their ill-fated Laotian incursion, Nixon instructed Henry Kissinger to offer Hanoi some new proposals in Paris that the president hoped would get the stalled peace talks moving. He knew that within America the war was more unpopular than ever and he feared that the upsurge of antiwar activity in the spring of 1971 in which war veterans affiliated with the VVAW figured prominently would put further pressure on Washington to end the war. The president also realized that military operations like the Cambodian and Laotian incursions were not likely to force Hanoi to negotiate terms that he could accept. Kissinger's recent talks with Soviet officials had been productive; the outlines of a major arms control agreement with the Soviets had emerged from these discussions. Kissinger's work on the opening to China was also promising. Nixon and Kissinger were constructing a foundation for détente with the

Soviet Union and rapprochement with China. The groundwork for Nixon's triangular diplomatic offensive against Hanoi was being laid. The president also believed that his prospects for reelection in 1972 depended mainly on his ability to end the Vietnam War.

Meeting secretly with Xuan Thuy in Paris on May 31, 1971, Henry Kissinger offered a new seven-point peace plan. The plan contained two important concessions: Kissinger offered to set a date, December 31, 1971, for the complete withdrawal of all U.S. combat forces from South Vietnam; he also indicated that America was willing to withdraw its troops without requiring a simultaneous withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces. Since the United States had been unilaterally withdrawing its troops for two years, irrespective of Hanoi's troop deployments, Kissinger's latter proposal was not only a major concession, but it also aligned the U.S. negotiating position with the U.S. military reality. More important, the new proposal separated the military issues from the political issues.[7] Thus, it would be possible for Washington and Hanoi to negotiate a cease-fire and to defer settlement of the major political question over which the long war was being waged—who would have political power in Saigon—to the postwar period.

American officials had not informed President Thieu that the United States was offering Hanoi a concession that years later would prove to be a death sentence for South Vietnam—accepting the presence of 150,000 PAVN forces, the equivalent of 10 divisions, in South Vietnam even after a cease-fire had been implemented and all the U.S. forces had been withdrawn. Some historians of the American Vietnam War have noted that by late spring of 1971, both President Nixon and Henry Kissinger were beginning to implement their "reasonable interval," better known as their "decent interval" strategy. Sensing that the South Vietnamese state could not survive permanently on its own once a cease-fire was in place and the Americans had gone home, they hoped to achieve a settlement that would allow South Vietnam to survive for at least two or three years before collapsing and dying. So when the inevitable happened and South Vietnam was no more, Nixon and Kissing hoped that no one would notice or care, and most importantly, they would avoid being blamed for the "loss of Vietnam to communism." If the decent interval lasted at least two to three years, they could claim that they had negotiated an honorable peace under difficult circumstances. They could then blame its failure to endure on the media, on the Democrats in Congress, on the antiwar movement, or maybe on all of them.

Kissinger's new proposals ignited the first serious negotiations between Washington and Hanoi since the talks had begun nearly three years earlier. Le Duc Tho returned to Paris. Several intense secret meetings between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho took place over the next three months. Responding to Kissinger's concessions, Tho offered a nine-point plan of his own. It was the first comprehensive peace plan that the North Vietnamese had ever offered the Americans, and it too contained concessions. Hanoi agreed to release all American prisoners of war (**POWs**) by the end of 1971, simultaneously with

the departure of all U.S. troops from Vietnam. Also, for the first time, Hanoi did not ask for the outright removal of Thieu as a precondition for negotiations, only that the United States must stop supporting the South Vietnamese leader so that a new Saigon regime could be installed.[8]

In subsequent meetings, the status of the Saigon government proved to be the sticking point between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. Hanoi insisted that Washington disavow Thieu. Nixon refused to abandon Thieu. This latest round of secret talks broke off in September when it became obvious that the impasse could not be resolved.[9] While the new proposals made by both sides had been promising indicators, neither side was yet prepared to make the sort of concessions that would be necessary to secure an end to Ameca's involvement in the Second Indochina War.

Le Duan was not interested in settling with the Americans during the summer of 1971 because he was convinced that the DRV's victory in Lam Son 719 earlier that year had shifted the military balance in Hanoi's favor. He encouraged the southern cadres to raise the level of political agitation to try to disrupt the impending elections in South Vietnam. He also urged them to prepare the ground for another Tet-like offensive scheduled for 1972. Nixon for his part was not interested in concluding a cease-fire in the summer of 1971 because he did not believe the DRV delegates were interested in negotiating a settlement that he could accept. He also believed that improving relations with the PRC and the Soviet Union would soon give him additional diplomatic leverage over North Vietnam.[9]

On July 15, while Tho and Kissinger were still holding secret talks in Paris, President Nixon made a dramatic announcement: that he intended to visit the People's Republic of China before May 1972! The most immediate consequence of Nixon's announcement was to reinforce Le Duan's sense that July 15, 1971 was not the right day to negotiate a settlement of the war in Paris. By framing Nixon's pronouncement within the much larger context of Cold War history, it is not an exaggeration to say that it caught the whole world by surprise. Within the United States, upon learning the news, official Washington and most Americans expressed both astonishment and joy. A few on the Right expressed disapproval or at least recommended caution. The *Washington Post* editorialized: "If President Nixon had announced that he was going to the moon next spring it would not have been any more surprising."

Le Duan and his colleagues in the Politburo were dismayed by the Sino-American rapprochement. It also seriously rattled Saigon. General Thieu increasingly distrusted his American allies. He particularly distrusted Henry Kissinger, whom he regarded as duplicitous. Thieu worried lest the U.S. officials conclude an agreement that ended the American war by sacrificing his government and his country. He also had to ask: if the U.S. foreign policy toward Vietnam had been predicated in part on the need to prevent Chinese expansion into Southeast Asia, what happens to South Vietnam if the Americans no longer regard China as a threat?[10]

Meanwhile, South Vietnam prepared to hold its presidential election as called for under the 1967 constitution. General Thieu, acutely aware that he had won the previous election with a plurality of only 35 percent, was determined to win resoundingly this time around. He intended to use his powers of incumbency to ensure a landslide victory.

When the 1971 electoral campaign began, General Thieu faced serious challenges from two strong rivals, General Nguyen Cao Ky and General Doung Van "Big" Minh. Either might have been able to defeat Thieu in a fair election. General Minh had a large mixed following among retired RVNAF officers, Buddhists, southern Catholics, non-Communist intellectuals, and civilian politicians. Minh also had obtained the support of the NLF, mainly because he had called for the creation of a coalition government that would include representatives of the Provisional Revolutionary Government **(PRG)**, which had been created by the NLF in June 1969.[9] General Ky, hitherto noted for his fanatical anti-Communism, staged a remarkable *volte-face.* He called for recognition of the PRG and supported negotiating an end to the war with the Communist leaders in Hanoi.

But it did not matter what policies or programs Ky and Minh stood for nor who supported them; Thieu used his control of the machinery of government to eliminate them from the presidential race. The United States took a public stance of neutrality during the election. However, behind the scenes, CIA and the U.S. embassy officials worked to ensure Thieu's landslide reelection. In an election that took place on October 3, 1971, an election that the U.S officials secretly helped him rig, General Thieu was the only candidate. The ballots provided space only for voting "yes" for Thieu. Polling was supervised by Thieu's soldiers; the South Vietnamese secret police threatened to arrest anyone who opposed Thieu, and the votes were counted by Thieu's officials. President Thieu was reelected to another four-year term as South Vietnam's president, with 94.3 percent of the vote cast.

Disappointed by the American refusal to sacrifice Thieu and worried about the Sino-American rapprochement and the Soviet-American détente, On November 29, Le Duan sent orders to the cadres in southern Vietnam to prepare for a major offensive to be launched in early 1972.

The Easter Offensive

As 1972 began, both the battlefields of Vietnam and the American home front were comparatively calm. Only about 140,000 U.S. troops remained in Vietnam, of whom about 20,000 constituted combat forces, and more troops would be leaving soon. American battle deaths for 1971 had totaled 1,380, the lowest for any year since the American Vietnam War had begun in 1965. The lottery draft was in place, draft calls were low, and draftees were no longer being sent to Vietnam for combat duty. The air wars continued in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, but they received little coverage in the news and entailed few U.S. casualties. Even in this calmer context, polls showed that fewer than 50 percent of the people approved of Nixon's Vietnam policies.[11]

Toward the end of January, Nixon made several dramatic announcements. On the 25th, he revealed to the American public that Henry Kissinger had been meeting secretly with North Vietnamese emissaries for six months. He also told the people that the only remaining obstacle to peace in Vietnam was Hanoi's stubborn insistence that General Thieu's government would have to be eliminated before any settlement could be reached. Simultaneously, Nixon announced a new proposal: within six months of an agreement, the United States would remove all of its forces at the same time the POWs were exchanged. Simultaneously, a cease-fire would go into effect, and new elections would be held in South Vietnam under international supervision. He also indicated that the PRG could participate in these elections. But even as he announced the new proposals, he vowed once again that America would never abandon Saigon.[12]

North Vietnam promptly denounced the President's decision to go public with secret negotiations and repeated its demands that the United States must stop supporting Thieu and set a final date for the removal of all of its forces from Vietnam before any settlement could be reached. The peace talks collapsed soon after and were put on indefinite hold.

Even though Nixon's peace proposals did not move negotiations closer to a settlement, had in fact gotten them suspended indefinitely, his remarks did score domestic political points with the American public at the beginning of a presidential election year, which was their prime purpose. Many prominent dovish politicians supported his peace initiative, as did much of the mainstream media. Public opinion polls showed increasing popular support for the president's negotiating stance.

Three weeks after making his latest proposals for ending the American Vietnam War, Nixon journeyed to China for his historic state visit. His journey to Beijing signaled his opening to the PRC. While the President was visiting Beijing, Premier Zhou Enlai told him that China supported Hanoi's and the PRG's negotiating positions put forth at the Paris sessions. He also told Nixon that the Chinese would never meddle in Vietnamese internal affairs. Soon after Nixon departed Beijing, Zhou traveled to Hanoi to reassure his nervous allies that the Chinese had made no deals with the Americans concerning the war in southern Vietnam or the political status of the RVN.[13]

Upon his return to the United States in late February, President Nixon was delighted to find that his power and prestige as a peacemaker had been greatly enhanced. He looked forward to his trip to Moscow, scheduled for late spring, confident that he and Kissinger could use his triangular diplomatic offensive linking any subsequent improvement in the U.S. relations with the two Communist superpowers to Moscow's and Beijing's willingness to prod Hanoi into negotiating an end to the war on Washington's terms.

But the Indochina War was about to resume, larger than ever. Despite Zhou's assurances, the aged revolutionaries in Hanoi, who had been single-mindedly pursuing the goals of revolutionary nationalism since 1945, viewed their planned spring offensive as being perhaps their last opportunity

to win the war, bring down the Thieu government, and achieve a settlement on their own terms—a settlement that would force the Americans out of Indochina and pave the way for reunification of Vietnam under the rule of the Vietnamese Communist Party **(VCP)**.

The North Vietnamese leaders also worried about the growing *détente* between the United States and the Soviet Union which would be sealed by Nixon's journey to Moscow. They worried lest the Soviets curtail their military assistance or pressure Hanoi into accepting American terms for a settlement. The North Vietnamese held memories of 1954 at Geneva, when the Soviets, concerned about improving relations with Western Europe and the United States, joined with the Chinese to force Ho Chi Minh to accept the temporary partition of Vietnam that had led to a costly war with the United States. To Hanoi, spring 1972 looked too much like 1954 *redux*.[14]

Hanoi accelerated the planning for the 1972 offensive during the fall of 1971. Le Duan and his right-hand man Le Duc Tho controlled general strategic planning and General Van Tieng Dung prepared the military operational plan. The DRV leaders had two distinct objectives for their offensive. At the diplomatic level, they wished to defeat Nixon's impending triangular offensive. They knew that a military victory that crushed the ARVN and maybe collapsed the South Vietnamese government would insulate the DRV from superpower manipulations and force the Americans to settle on Hanoi's terms. At the domestic level, Le Duan wanted to redeem his *Tet Mau Than* strategy that had failed so spectacularly in 1968. Duan was convinced that the main reason for the failure of the Tet-68 Offensive was the lack of coordination between the military and political spheres following the surprise attacks. This time, deploying a larger, much more powerful army equipped with Soviet tanks and modern anti-aircraft weapons followed by better coordination between military action and the ongoing revolution in the countryside as well as the political activity of the cadres in South Vietnamese cities, they would prevail.

Duan and his senior associates assumed that political necessity would force President Nixon to continue to adhere to the timetable of scheduled U.S. troop withdrawals and that he would not be able to throw the remaining American combat forces into battle against the invading NVA divisions.[15] As events unfolded that spring, neither Nixon's diplomatic initiatives nor Hanoi's Easter Offensive could accomplish their Indochina goals in 1972, "but they did bring the war into a final, devastating phase which would ultimately lead to a compromise peace."[16]

During the time before the offensive would be ready for launching, Hanoi continued its small-scale protracted war strategy, the small-unit struggle for control of villages in South Vietnam. Politburo leaders conceded that the RVN pacification programs, especially land reform, had reduced the areas controlled by the PRG, and that PLAF main force levels were depleted. But the Politburo leadership also knew that in the long run, it was the fighting ability of the ARVN that mattered more than Saigon's pacification programs. Once the Americans had departed, Thieu would be forced to rely on his own

forces, and Le Duan believed that the 1972 offensive would overwhelm the ARVN. The Twentieth Plenum, meeting in February 1972, approved General Tung's final plans for the spring offensive, scheduled to begin in late March.[17]

General Tung launched the Easter Offensive **(Chie' n dich Xuan he' 1972)**, which the Politburo called the Nguyen Hue Offensive, March 30, 1972 (Figure 11.1).[18] The attackers struck on three fronts simultaneously, deploying altogether approximately 14 infantry divisions supported by tank and artillery units. The DRV committed almost all of its divisions to the offensive, approximately 200,000 soldiers, joined by thousands of VietCong guerrillas. This invasion, the largest offensive operation anywhere in the world since 300,000 soldiers from the PRC had crossed the Yalu River into North Korea during the Korean War in November 1950, was a dramatic indicator that Le Duan and his colleagues were playing for high stakes. With this ambitious venture, they were going all in; they gambled that they could inflict a decisive defeat on the ARVN and its American allies and end the war on their terms. The outcome of a war and the fates of two governments hung in the balance.[19]

Beginning on March 30, the first wave of NVA forces poured across the DMZ to strike at the ARVN positions in the two northernmost provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien (Figure 11.2). Three of the PAVN divisions, totaling about 30,000 men, equipped with modern Soviet-made weaponry that included rockets, missiles, tanks, and heavy artillery, joined in the massive assaults into the northern provinces.[20]

Once again, the Allies were caught by surprise. Although their intelligence officers had been expecting a big NVA offensive, they did not know exactly when and where the attacks would come. They had not anticipated a frontal assault over the DMZ, which had previously been considered sacrosanct by both sides. Neither had they anticipated the size, power, or the sheer ferocity of the assaults. The ARVN defenses in the two northern provinces had been placed in the hands of the 1st and 3rd Divisions, and they bore the brunt of the NVA assaults. Within a few weeks, the situation in these provinces had become critical. The PAVN forces had overrun the ARVN defensive positions and had wiped out several of their firebases. Compounding the ARVN problems, the incompetent **MRI** commander, the notorious General Lam of LAM SON 719 shame, ordered the 3rd Division, probably the weakest division in the RVNAF order of battle, to counterattack in the face of superior PAVN forces and under terribly unfavorable operational circumstances. They were massacred. The unfortunate 3rd Division embodied all of the deficiencies still plaguing the ARVN after years of Vietnamization: incompetent and corrupt leaders at all levels; continuing command, control, and communication problems; poorly trained soldier who revealed a lamentable lack of fighting spirit when facing aggressive enemies.

On May 1, the demoralized ARVN troops, accompanied by thousands of frightened family members and panic-stricken civilians, fled in headlong

Figure 11.1 The Nguyen Hue Offensive, April–October 1972. *Public domain.*

Figure 11.2 ARVN soldiers in the destroyed city of Quan Tri, September, 1972. *INTERFOTO/Alamy Stock Photo.*

fashion toward the south. The PAVN gunners, firing into the fleeing masses, inflicted thousands of casualties on soldiers and civilians alike. On May 1, the provincial capital, Quang Tri City, fell. The entire province lay in NVA hands.[21] The city of Hue, 40 miles south of Quang Tri City, was threatened. The U.S. officials in Saigon and Washington feared that the South Vietnamese government itself might collapse from the pressures generated by the all-out DRV offensive.

Alarmed by the success of the PAVN forces and fearing the fall of Hue and even Danang, General Thieu replaced Lam with General Ngo Quang Truong, probably the finest general in the South Vietnamese army. Apolitical, thoroughly professional, and battle-seasoned, Truong was a superb leader who could have commanded troops in any army. He organized a defense for Hue and saved the city, and may have saved South Vietnam as well.

Following their successful defense of Hue, the South Vietnamese made retaking Quang Tri City their major military objective of the northern campaign. General Truong built up his forces and in late June launched a counterattack. The Allied assault on Quang Tri brought massive firepower to bear, including the U.S. naval gunfire, tactical air strikes, and B-52 bombing runs. Finally, General Thieu ordered the ARVN's best soldiers, the South

Vietnamese Marines, to go into the city and drive out the NVA forces. After five days of hand-to-hand fighting in the streets and buildings of Quang Tri, the North Vietnamese were expelled. Quang Tri City was officially reclaimed by the South Vietnamese on September 16. Arnold Isaacs, an American journalist who witnessed the Battle of Quang Tri, filed this description of the aftermath: "When it was finally recaptured Quang Tri was no longer a city but a lake of shattered masonry. . . . It was another case—on a larger scale than ever before—of destroying Vietnam to save it."[22]

A second front of the Nguyen Hue Offensive opened when two PAVN divisions penetrated the central highlands at Dak To and Tan Canh. Within a few weeks, they had beaten the ARVN defenders and had begun a series of attacks on Kontum City. At the same time, the NVA forces attacked Kontum, another PAVN division, assisted by local VC forces, occupied most of the coastal province of Binh Dinh, a long-time Communist stronghold.[23] Once again, the perennial NVA goal, the bisection of South Vietnam, threatened. If the city of Kontum fell, the NVA forces would link up with the VC/NVA forces in Binh Dinh, and Thieu's country would be sliced in two.

The defense of Kontum City was organized and directed by John Paul Vann.[24] He had returned to Vietnam as a minor civilian official following his retirement from the Army in 1964. By dint of his energy, experience, intelligence, forceful personality, and total dedication to the cause, Vann had worked his way up the bureaucratic ranks to become the leading U.S. adviser in MR2 by 1972. Although a civilian, Vann held the equivalent military rank of a major general. When the RVN MR2 commander, General Ngo Dzu, an accused drug trafficker, suffered a nervous collapse under the stress of the NVA attacks, Vann personally took charge of defending Kontum City.

The Battle of Kontum raged for nearly three weeks. The NVA forces launched a series of frontal assaults on the ARVN forces. Led by a Vann protege, Colonel Ly Tong Ba, the ARVN defenders repeatedly beat back the NVA attacks. While Colonel Ba's forces were holding the NVA attackers off, Vann called in an air armada of U.S. helicopter gunships, tactical air strikes, and B-52 bombings that decimated the attacking forces. The critical moment in the Battle of Kontum came during the night of May 28, 1972. NVA forces broke through the ARVN defenses and poured into the city. Only round-the-clock bombing by cells of B-52s finally broke the NVA assault, enabling Ba's battered 23rd Division to clear the city.[25]

A few days after achieving his greatest victory, John Paul Vann died in a fiery helicopter crash a few miles south of Kontum City. Vann had given ten years and finally his life trying to save South Vietnam from Communist conquest. His body was recovered and flown back to the United States. John Paul Vann was given a state funeral and buried with full honors in a moving ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. President Nixon celebrated his patriotism and posthumously awarded him the Medal of Freedom, the highest award a civilian could receive.

The third front of the Nguyen Hue Offensive opened in the Tay Ninh and Binh Long provinces northwest of Saigon in MR3. Three VietCong divisions, the 5th, the 7th, and the 9th, manned mostly by North Vietnamese troops and commanded by North Vietnamese officers, poured into South Vietnam from their basing areas in Cambodia. The 5th VC Division took Loc Ninh, a town lying about 80 miles north of Saigon on Route 13, a highway leading straight to the South Vietnamese capital. The ARVN forces fell back to An Loc, a town nine miles south of Loc Ninh on Route 13. Failing to take An Loc by frontal assault, the NVA forces besieged the town. The Battle of An Loc raged for weeks.[26] General Thieu, determined to stop the NVA thrust at An Loc, threw in most of his strategic reserves and his elite airborne forces to bolster the defenses of the besieged town.

The crucial battle for An Loc occurred on the morning of May 11. Units of all three enemy divisions launched attacks on the ARVN defenders. They did not go well for the Communist forces, who suffered from the traditional NVA deficiencies—inadequate command and control, and communication issues. Also, inexperienced tank and heavy artillery fighters were ineffective. The NVA were hit immediately, first by waves of U.S. and VNAF fighter-bombers and then by B-52 strikes. Thirty B-52 strikes struck the NVA forces within 24 hours. Entire PAVN units, caught in the open by the big bombers, vanished in clouds of dust and debris. Although there was fighting in the vicinity of An Loc for a few more days, the battle was over. The ARVN forces had held.[27]

Linebacker: Nixon Revives the Air War against North Vietnam

Nixon and Kissinger knew that the United States had to react quickly and decisively to support the South Vietnamese or the Saigon regime might very well collapse in the face of the powerful NVA onslaught. They understood that it was essential to defeat the North Vietnamese thrusts militarily. If the DRV offensive succeeded, Nixon could not expect the upcoming summit with the soviets to be productive, nor could he hope to achieve a negotiated end to the Vietnam War on his terms. A North Vietnamese victory would be a major strategic and diplomatic disaster for the United States that could derail all of the president's plans for achieving a new world order based on improving relations with the major communist powers. Nixon understood that the communist offensive offered an opportunity to implement many of the duck hook operations that Kissinger's committee had drawn up during the summer of 1969. If the U.S. air power could defeat the offensive and also launch a massive counterattack on the North Vietnamese heartland, Nixon and Kissinger just might be able to force Hanoi to accept a settlement favorable to the survival of south vietnam.[28]

On April 4, 1972, in an effort to blunt the Nguyen hue offensive, Nixon decided to mount an all-out air interdiction campaign against it. He revived the air war against North Vietnam that had been on hold since operation rolling

thunder had been shut down on October 31, 1968. As the North Vietnamese had predicted, Nixon did not consider either sending the U.S. combat forces back to South Vietnam or using the few remaining maneuver battalions still serving in the country. The U.S. forces continued to leave South Vietnam, while the battles forced by the Nguyen hue offensive raged on. On April 6, Nixon told the new commander of the 7th air force, General John W. Vogt, "I want you to get down there and use whatever air you need to turn this thing around."[29] from around the world, the U.S. aircraft carriers and air force squadrons raced toward the Indochina war. Additional B-52s flew into Andersen air force base, bringing the combined total of the huge strategic bombers in Thailand and Guam to 210. More than half of the B-52s in the Strategic Air Command **(SAC)** were positioned to strike at the NVA invaders. Nixon also ordered the attack carriers *Constellation* and the *Kitty Hawk* to join the four other attack carriers already on station in the gulf of Tonkin. The six powerful warships gave the navy its greatest concentration of airpower in the war.[30]

The revived air interdiction campaign against north Vietnam designed by the navy and air force commanders, code-named **Operation Linebacker**, had many diplomatic and strategic goals: (1) to send the North Vietnamese a warning that if Hanoi persisted with its offensive in an effort to win the war, the North Vietnamese could expect to get hit with the most punishing aerial offensive of the war; (2) to cut off North Vietnam from external sources of supply by destroying all of its railroads and harbors; (3) to destroy stockpiles of food, ammunition, weapons, and equipment already in North Vietnam; (4) to interdict as much as possible the supplies and equipment moving toward the battlefields in south Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; (5) to destroy all enemy transportation systems, pol facilities, and power plants; (6) to destroy or at least seriously deplete the DRV's formidable air defense system; and (7) to wring concessions from the north Vietnamese so that a peace settlement would accord with the U.S. and south Vietnamese aspirations.[31]

On April 10, the U.S. aircraft struck supply storage centers near the city of Vinh, about 150 miles north of the DMZ. On April 13, B-52s flying from the large SAC base at U-Tapao in Thailand bombed oil storage sites near Hanoi and Haiphong. It was the first time in the long war that the big bombers had been used in attacks on North Vietnam's two largest cities. On April 16, the U.S. bombers accidentally hit four Soviet merchant ships lying at anchor in Haiphong Harbor, killing some Soviet seamen. The Soviets protested the bombing of their ships and the deaths of their sailors, but they did not make a major issue of these events, suggesting to Washington that the Soviets were not going to let the U.S. military actions in Vietnam interfere with their upcoming summit meeting with the Americans.

Throughout the months of April and May, the U.S. military aircraft flew hundreds of sorties in North Vietnam. Air Force and Navy tactical bombers flew most of the missions, but B-52s also participated. The LINEBACKER Operation exceeded any previous U.S. aerial warfare against North Vietnam. Naval and Air Force pilots flew round-the-clock bombing missions against

supply lines, storage facilities, industrial targets, power plants, and other targets considered to have military value. For the first time in the air war, the U.S. pilots dropped "smart bombs." These were guided precision weapons. Using laser or electro-optical guidance systems, "smart bombs" could destroy targets in heavily populated areas without causing large civilian casualties.[32]

In addition to reviving the air war against North Vietnam, Nixon also ordered air attacks against the invading North Vietnamese forces along their northern, central, and southern fronts in South Vietnam. Within ten days of the launching of the invasions, Allied aircraft were inflicting heavy losses on units of Hanoi's mobilized army on all three fronts. By June, the Nguyen Hue Offensive was losing its momentum.

The U.S. efforts to separate the North Vietnamese from their Chinese and Soviet sources of supply represented the most risky military move Nixon made during the Vietnam War. Nixon believed that he had to take the risk to save South Vietnam from military collapse in order to preserve the chance of an acceptable settlement of the war.[33]

One of DUCK HOOK's original proposals called for the mining of North Vietnam's harbors to interdict all ship traffic into Haiphong and other North Vietnamese ports. But before Nixon ordered the ports to be mined, he used diplomatic channels to forewarn the Chinese and Soviet leaders of his intentions. The president took these steps to avoid possible reprisals by the major Communist powers, and to reopen secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese emissary Le Duc Tho.[34]

As Nixon applied military pressure to Hanoi, he also applied diplomatic pressure to the Soviets. Kissinger met secretly with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev in Moscow on April 20. Before he would consent to talk to Brezhnev about any of the issues of the impending summit, he insisted that they talk about the war. Kissinger told Brezhnev that the United States would accept a cease-fire in place, meaning that the NVA troops could remain within South Vietnam's territory. Kissinger asked that the Soviet leader pass this information on to Hanoi and also urge Hanoi to negotiate an end to the war. The U.S. envoy explicitly linked progress toward *détente* to Soviet willingness to persuade Hanoi to accept a compromise settlement of the war. Brezhnev agreed; he told Kissinger that the Soviet Union wanted to help settle the war. However, he protested to Kissinger that he did not have the kind of influence with the Hanoi leadership that the Americans appeared to think he did. He also refused to ask Hanoi to call off its offensive, but he did send a high-ranking envoy Konstantin Katushev to encourage the Communist leaders to make peace with the Americans. DRV president Pham Van Dong angrily rejected the Soviet suggestion. He told Katushev that the Americans have to understand "that Vietnamization will surely fail, that the puppets will undoubtedly be swept away, that there is no way to retrieve them."[35]

Brezhnev also helped Kissinger restart the talks with the North Vietnamese. Kissinger met secretly with Le Duc Tho in Paris on May 2, three weeks before the convening of the Moscow summit. At the time of the meeting, the

North Vietnamese offensive was going well and the North Vietnamese felt no need to negotiate seriously. Quang Tri had fallen to the NVA forces; Kontum and An Loc were under intense attack. Le Duc Tho was confident that the Saigon government verged on collapse, and he believed the U.S. air power could not save it. Confident of military victory, Tho rejected all of Kissinger's proposals. The tense meeting was short and it accomplished nothing.[36]

Disappointed and angered by Tho's response, President Nixon decided to escalate the U.S. air war against North Vietnam. He believed that it was essential to defeat the invasion. Nixon gambled that the Chinese and Soviets both placed greater importance on improving their relations with the United States than they did on retaliating on behalf of their allies in Hanoi. The president growled to his aides, "The bastards have never been bombed like they're going to be bombed this time." After Nixon ordered the Air Force to bomb North Vietnam, he relieved General Abrams of his command. Abrams was not sacked; rather, he was promoted to serve as the Army Chief of Staff replacing Westmoreland. Apparently, Kissinger was responsible for the Abrams' removal because the MACV commander opposed the resumption of the air war against North Vietnam.[37]

On May 8, in a dramatic televised speech, Nixon announced to a startled nation that he had ordered his most drastic escalations of the war: the mining of Haiphong harbor, a naval blockade of North Vietnam, and a massive air war against that country. He also used the speech to tell the North Vietnamese that the U.S. aircraft would continue to mine ports and interdict lines of communication across the North Vietnamese heartland until Hanoi agreed to release all the U.S. POWs and accept an internationally supervised ceasefire throughout all of Indochina, to be followed by the complete withdrawal of all remaining U.S. military forces within four months.[38]

While Nixon spoke to the American people, Navy jets from the USS *Coral Sea* dropped mines in the narrow 12-mile-long channel connecting the port of Haiphong with the Gulf of Tonkin. Twenty-seven freighters, mostly Soviet, were bottled up at Haiphong. For the next three days, Navy aircraft mined the approaches to North Vietnam's other ports and also to several inland waterways. The blockade quickly cut off the sources of about 85 percent of North Vietnam's war materiel and disrupted all North Vietnamese naval activity.[39]

To the immense frustration of the North Vietnamese, Moscow and Beijing both reacted with restraint to the mining and the renewed bombing of North Vietnam. Nixon and Kissinger had gambled and they had won. They had succeeded in isolating Hanoi from its major allies. Neither the USSR nor China did more than issue *pro forma* criticisms of the U.S. actions, and both privately put pressure on Hanoi to end the war. The two major Communist powers wanted the Vietnam War to end, lest it jeopardizes the major realignment of power then taking place in the world. Hanoi's leaders bitterly observed that the Moscow summit occurred on schedule, even as Operation LINEBACKER was devastating North Vietnam and destroying their army fighting in South Vietnam.[40] Meetings in Moscow between the American and

Soviet leaders proved cordial and productive. President Richard Nixon and Chairman Leonid Brezhnev signed several important agreements, including the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty **(SALT I)**, new trade agreements, and a new Berlin treaty. Nixon and Kissinger had pulled off the first meeting between a U.S. president and the Soviet leaders in five years. It was a major diplomatic success for both of the long-time Cold War adversaries.

Just as the North Vietnamese leaders worried lest their major Communist allies no longer supported their cause, Saigon's leaders feared that the U.S. commitment to their cause might also be sacrificed. The scale and ferocity of the fighting, the destructiveness of the renewed air war in South Vietnam, and the large numbers of casualties incurred accentuated the already intense levels of war-weariness among South Vietnam's beleaguered population.

The effects of the fighting in the spring and summer of 1972 were to further diminish the ranks of South Vietnamese patriots. More and more people yearned for peace, for an end to the death and destruction afflicting their tortured country, even if it meant a Communist victory. After 20 years of precarious existence, after 20 years of American economic, political, diplomatic, military, and moral support, South Vietnam had failed to evolve a clear national identity. After 20 years, its leaders could not project a vision, define a cause, or proclaim a goal that inspired its citizens to fight a patriotic war.[41] The battle for Quang Tri City, which resulted in huge casualties on both sides, and the city's utter destruction, was a metaphor of the bloody, stalemated war.

Within the United States, reaction to Nixon's dramatic war escalations proved quite limited. There was a flurry of protest demonstrations, but they did not attract large or militant followings. Doves introduced another round of end-the-war resolutions in the Senate, but none passed. Most U.S. ground combat forces had been withdrawn from South Vietnam and those remaining in that country no longer participated in combat operations. One of the main energizing sources of antiwar activity had been the draft linked to a fear of being sent to fight and perhaps die in Vietnam. Sensing this concern, President Nixon announced in June that no more draftees would be sent to Vietnam unless they volunteered. He also stated that by September 1, there would only be 39,000 U.S. soldiers in Vietnam. The president had not only gradually phased out the American ground combat role in Vietnam but also gradually phased out much of the activist opposition to the Vietnam War.

A large majority of Americans regarded Nixon's military actions as a justifiable reaction to an invasion of South Vietnam by North Vietnam. Nixon's bold response also attracted considerable popular support. The success of the Moscow summit demonstrated that military escalations did not automatically endanger *détente*. Polls showed strong public support for Nixon's retaliatory actions against the North Vietnamese and for his diplomatic accomplishments in Beijing and Moscow. His public approval rating climbed dramatically. His reelection prospects had been brightened considerably.

The Nguyen Hue Offensive had petered out in September when South Vietnamese Marines expelled the last PAVN remnants from Quang Tri City.

Hanoi's efforts to use massed forces to overwhelm the ARVN units had met with disaster. Le Duan and his generals had seriously underestimated the fighting ability of at least some of the ARVN forces. The U.S. air power had exacted a ghastly toll. Hanoi lost over 100,000 of the 200,000 troops committed to battle, most of its tanks, and much of its artillery. North Vietnam had been subjected to the most intense bombing campaign of the entire war and sustained heavy damage.[42] PAVN's inadequacies made them vulnerable to such catastrophic destruction. Unaccustomed to mobile, mechanized warfare, they often failed to coordinate their infantry and armor attacks. Their primitive logistics capability could not provide the huge amounts of ammunition, gasoline, and spare parts required to support their offensive effectively. And most of all, NVA commanders appeared not to understand how vulnerable their large invading army was to the U.S. air power, especially the mighty B-52s.

Hanoi failed to retain control of a single provincial capital in South Vietnam. But the DRV did gain control of land along the borders with Cambodia and Laos. They retained control of this territory for the remainder of the war. In 1975, the Communists would use these border areas that they controlled to launch the successful attack on Saigon that enabled them to win the war, eradicate the South Vietnamese state, and unify Vietnam under their control.

The South Vietnamese also suffered heavy casualties, an estimated 25,000 soldiers killed. Some ARVN commanders, particularly General Truong and Colonel Ba, demonstrated professional competence in combat situations. Some ARVN units fought courageously and effectively under enemy fire. The VNAF pilots often gave a good account of themselves in many battles.

But the PAVN offensive also revealed the continuing shortcomings of the RVN armed forces. Their helicopter and other air transport units proved inadequate. Artillery was poorly coordinated and often inaccurate. Communications and intelligence services remained poor. The ARVN logistics system could never function effectively without the U.S. assistance. The U.S. advisers directed most of the ARVN combat operations; they were the reinforcing steel rods that held the South Vietnamese army structures together. Many ARVN soldiers continued to perform poorly in combat situations. The ARVN officer corps remained infested with corrupt and incompetent officers. Worse yet, South Vietnam was running out of men. The pool of draft-age men was running dry. Reserve units were depleted, and many regular units could not replace their losses. Shortages of competent officers and noncoms were more acute than ever in the aftermath of the Nguyen Hue Offensive.[43]

The inescapable truth to emerge from the Easter Offensive was that ARVN soldiers could neither stop the enemy without significant U.S. air support nor could their counteroffensive have succeeded without it.[44] Once again, the ARVN demonstrated that it was unprepared to assume the full burden of defending South Vietnam from the attacks of the VietCong and North Vietnamese forces.

On August 22, 1972, the 1st Battalion of the U.S. 7th Cavalry boarded a plane for Texas. The last U.S. ground combat forces had departed the

Vietnam War. It had been 7 years 5 months and 14 days since the Marines had stormed ashore on the beaches south of Danang on the morning of March 8, 1965 to initiate the ground combat phase of the American Vietnam War. During that long interval, nearly 46,000 American soldiers had died in an effort to secure the survival of the South Vietnamese government. The ground combat phase of the war was over for the U.S. troops. As the last contingent of U.S. combat soldiers departed Vietnam, the war between factions of Vietnamese nationalists raged on.

Ending the American War in Vietnam

Washington and Hanoi, having failed to break the diplomatic stalemate by military means during the summer of 1972, moved during the fall to break the military stalemate by diplomatic means. Although confident of impending victory over George McGovern, the inept Democratic challenger, Nixon wanted to fulfill the promise he had made four years ago to achieve a peaceful settlement of the Indochina War before the November election took place. For their part, the North Vietnamese for the first time in the long war genuinely sought a peace agreement. They had been separated from their major allies by Nixon and Kissinger's adroit diplomacy. Their army in South Vietnam had been destroyed by the U.S. air power. Their economy was reeling and their war-weary people were suffering under the heaviest aerial bombardment of the war.

Le Duan finally understood that his strategy of trying to win the war by achieving a decisive victory that would destroy the ARVN, collapse the South Vietnamese government, and force the Americans to withdraw had failed. He had tried in 1964 with his "go for broke" strategy; he tried again in 1968 with *Tet Mau Than*; and tried once more in 1972 with the Easter Offensive. Although he did not welcome negotiations—he did not trust either his American adversaries or his major Communists allies—he knew that the DRV would have to seek a diplomatic settlement to end the American war in his country.

Hanoi abandoned its efforts to achieve a military victory in South Vietnam. The Politburo sought a negotiated settlement that did not contravene their long-range goals of replacing the Thieu regime with a coalition government dominated by the PRG, expelling the Americans, and achieving national reunification. They wanted to stop the destructive air war raining punishment on their economic and military facilities in order to rebuild for later military operations. They also sought to restrict American military operations in South Vietnam, salvage some of their forces fighting in that region, and seek the release of thousands of their political operatives and civilian supporters who were languishing in South Vietnamese prisons.[45]

Secret meetings between Kissinger and Tho resumed in Paris on July 19. They also met on August 1 and again on August 14. The atmosphere was cordial for all of these meetings. The differences between the two sides had narrowed considerably. About the only sticking point was the political status

of South Vietnam. Even though Zho Enlai had pressured Tho to allow Thieu to remain in power, following instructions that he received from Le Duan, Tho continued to stall. He would not negotiate with the South Vietnamese unless Thieu resigned. The North Vietnamese knew that time was on their side: the NVA would continue to infiltrate more and more troops into South Vietnam, and the United States would become less and less willing to continue its support of Thieu.

While Tho and Kissinger negotiated ineffectually, President Nixon escalated the air war against North Vietnam. The number of daily sorties quadrupled. More and more "smart bombs" were used to allow the U.S. pilots as many precision raids as possible. In September, the Air Force introduced a new all-weather tactical bomber, the F-111, which could fly near the speed of sound at tree-top level in darkness or bad weather. They could strike anytime, anywhere, and without warning.[46] The LINEBACKER Operation continued until October 23, when Nixon halted all the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam north of the 20th Parallel.

By October 11, after several more meetings, Kissinger and Tho had worked out a settlement based on the U.S. concept of a two-tracked agreement that separated the military and political aspects of the conflict. Hanoi agreed to allow General Thieu to remain in power temporarily in exchange for a grant of a political status in South Vietnam to the PRG. Within 60 days of a cease-fire, Hanoi agreed to return all of the American POWs and the United States agreed to withdraw all of its remaining troops and military equipment from South Vietnam.

Both sides had made concessions. The most painful concession for the Communists had to be renouncing their four-year-long demand for Thieu's removal. In effect, Hanoi accorded the Saigon government a measure of legitimacy; recognition of Thieu ran counter to the DRV's long-run goal of national reunification under the rule of the VCP. Washington's most significant concession permitted all NVA troops currently in South Vietnam to remain. That critical concession meant the Americans had accepted a basic reality of the war. Having failed to drive the North Vietnamese forces out of South Vietnam by military means, they could not hope to get them out via diplomacy.

Kissinger also accepted Tho's proposal that a tripartite commission made up of delegates from the RVN, the PRG, and neutralist elements would be created to supervise elections and administer the agreement. All decisions of the tripartite commission would have to be unanimous, which meant that both the Thieu regime and the PRG representatives would retain a veto over the commission's actions.[47] Kissinger tried but failed to get Laos and Cambodia included in the proposed settlement. Significantly, the draft agreement between Kissinger and Tho deferred the key issue, who would rule in South Vietnam, to an unspecified time in the future. Presumably, that matter would be resolved by the tripartite commission after the Indochina War had ended and the Americans had gone home. With 150,000 PAVN troops in South

Vietnam, the Americans gone, and only the inept and corrupt RVNAF to protect his regime, General Thieu could not be sanguine about his prospects for long-term survival.

In a celebratory mood, Kissinger flew back to Washington to inform President Nixon of the agreement. Nixon, initially incredulous, was delighted with its terms, although he wondered whether Thieu would buy into it. Kissinger intended to fly to Hanoi to sign the finalized agreement on October 31. On October 18, Kissinger flew to Saigon to brief Thieu on the impending peace agreement only to discover that the South Vietnamese leader refused to accept it. Thieu and his associates were outraged: without consulting them, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho had negotiated a settlement of the war that looked to the South Vietnamese leaders like an abandonment of their cause.

Thieu, with the help of his most trusted assistant, the American-educated engineer Hoang Duc Nha, drew up a lengthy list of 64 clarifications they demanded from Kissinger. Thieu's three most serious concerns were the continued presence of 150,000 North Vietnamese troops in southern Vietnam after the Americans had withdrawn all of their combat forces, the proposed tripartite commission that appeared to him as a coalition government in the making, and the Demilitarized Zone **(DMZ)** continued to be referred to as a "provisional military demarcation line" (as stipulated in the 1954 Geneva Accords) rather than a boundary separating two sovereign entities, North and South Vietnam. Thieu was not reassured when Kissinger told him that any North Vietnamese violation of the agreement would provoke an instant and deadly response from the United States. General Thieu preferred that the war in his country continue rather than accept a settlement he believed rendered his nation more insecure than ever. He also believed that President Nixon would stand by him and not let Henry Kissinger negotiate his downfall. It was clear that by the fall of 1972 Saigon had become the chief obstacle to the American exit from the Vietnam War.[48]

Kissinger was angered by Thieu's strenuous opposition to the agreement that he and Le Duc Tho had forged. He tried over the next several days to convince the South Vietnamese leader to accept it. On October 22, the U.S. envoy made a final unsuccessful attempt to persuade Thieu to accept the agreement. Understanding that any further efforts would be futile, Kissinger bluntly told Thieu, "I believe the course that you are following is suicidal."[49] Kissinger also warned the South Vietnamese president that the United States could sign a separate peace treaty with Hanoi. Upon his return to Washington, Kissinger also attempted to generate momentum for a pre-election settlement of the Indochina conflict by announcing dramatically at a special press conference held in Washington on October 26:

> We believe that peace is at hand. We believe that an agreement is within sight . . . and what stands in he way of agreement now are issues that are relatively less important than those that have already been settled.[50]

But peace was not at hand, primarily because President Thieu refused to accept the agreement negotiated by Kissinger and Tho. On October 30, President Nixon wrote Thieu a personal letter urging him to accept the deal. Washington also approved a resupply operation, called Operation ENHANCE, for Saigon: massive amounts of U.S. weapons and equipment were airlifted to South Vietnam—aircraft, tanks, trucks, armored personnel carriers (APCs), and other materiel—to strengthen the RVNAF forces. Despite his letter and Operation ENHANCE, "Nixon's words would fall on deaf ears."[51]

A week later, his landslide reelection behind him, Nixon turned hawkish. For the next round of talks with Thieu, Nixon sent a Kissinger aide, General Alexander Haig. Thieu, who distrusted Kissinger, respected Haig as a fellow soldier. Even so, Haig was unable to persuade Thieu to accept the agreement. His main objection continued to be that the agreement allowed NVA troops to remain in South Vietnam after the cease-fire had gone into effect and American military personnel had returned to the States. In a final effort to bring him around, Nixon wrote Thieu another letter in which he told Thieu that what was important was "not any particular clause in the agreement but our joint willingness to maintain its clauses."[52] Ambassador Bunker also assured Thieu that if the North Vietnamese violated the cease-fire agreement, the United States would act promptly in support of the GVN. Nothing worked; Thieu still refused to come on board. Kissinger, fed up with what he regarded as Thieu's irrational and suicidal obstructionism, regarded the RVN as the chief obstacle to ending the war. Nixon viewed both Hanoi and Saigon as obstacles to "peace with honor," that is, the U.S. disengagement from the war while South Vietnam was still standing.

The president tried to break the *impasse.* On November 14, he sent General Thieu a secret letter informing him that Washington would try to renegotiate the pending agreement in accordance with Saigon's wishes, but the U.S. president also made it unmistakably clear to the South Vietnamese leader that Washington wanted an agreement with North Vietnam and that all the U.S. forces would be out of Vietnam within six months.[53] Nixon directed Kissinger to return to Paris and to attempt to renegotiate with Tho to try to resolve Thieu's major concerns.

At a meeting in Paris with the DRV envoys on November 20, Kissinger introduced many matters for reconsideration that the North Vietnamese assumed had been resolved. He presented the most important modifications that had been requested by Thieu: (1) deletion of the name "PRG of the Republic of South Vietnam" because Thieu did not want the PRG recognized as a legitimate governmental entity, (2) withdrawal of all DRV troops stationed in South Vietnam, and (3) resolution of the matter of the DMZ by an international conference in Geneva, not by the Paris negotiations.[54]

Kissinger, who considered Thieu's requests preposterous, did not hold out any hope that the North Vietnamese might accept them. Kissinger could not have been surprised when Le Duc Tho, after hearing Kissinger's presentation, could only say, "If these are your last, unchangeable proposals, settlement is

impossible."[55] Tho and his colleagues, concluding that they had been tricked into approving an agreement the Americans had never intended to keep, angrily rejected all of Kissinger's revised proposals. The next day, the North Vietnamese hardened their negotiating stance; they even returned to their old stance of insisting that Thieu would have to be ousted as a precondition for any settlement.

A disappointed Henry Kissinger understood that the agreement that he and Tho had negotiated was dead. The following day, he tried to threaten Tho by telling him that Nixon had directed him (Kissinger) to break off the talks and the United States was prepared to resume military activities until the North Vietnamese were willing to settle the war on "honorable terms." Tho scoffed at the threats and told Kissinger that he would never sign any agreement that required the withdrawal of PAVN troops from southern Vietnam.

Knowing that time was running out for the RVN, that same day Kissinger met with the South Vietnamese delegates at the plenary (public) session of the Paris talks. He told them the blunt truth: the North Vietnamese had rejected all of Thieu's requests for renegotiating the terms of the agreement. He told them that President Nixon was prepared to make a unilateral deal with Hanoi: a complete withdrawal of all remaining U.S. troops in return for getting all the U.S. POWs back. Kissinger warned the RVN delegates that if the secret talks collapsed, "the consequences for your government will be disastrous and you will bear full responsibility."[56]

During the first 12 days of December, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho held several meetings. But Tho had not returned to Paris to make concessions or to salvage the agreement. He not only was uncompromising, he kept raising new issues, making new demands on matters that had already been settled. Kissinger cabled President Nixon that the North Vietnamese were more intransigent than ever. He sensed that the North Vietnamese sought to avoid an agreement; they were trying to drive a wedge between Washington and Saigon, forestall further bombing, and wait until the new U.S. Congress convened in January 1973. The new Congress, controlled by Democrats and in a dovish mood, might cut off all funding for the war and force the Americans to get out of Vietnam. South Vietnam, abandoned by the United States, would then be vulnerable to a future NVA assault. After returning from Paris on December 14, Kissinger, with Nixon's approval, sent an ultimatum to Hanoi threatening them with "grave consequences if they did not return to the negotiating table within 72 hours." The Politburo officials did not respond. Two days after the deadline expired, President Nixon ordered a resumption of the bombing.[57]

President Nixon had decided to try to resolve the latest Paris *impasse* by force. The aerial campaign conducted by the U.S. Seventh Air Force and U.S. Navy Task Force 77, officially called OPERATION LINEBACKER II, which the U.S. media quickly dubbed the "Christmas Bombing," began on December 18. For the first time in the war, Nixon ordered the deployment of B-52s, the most powerful weapons in the U.S. air arsenal, against Hanoi

and Haiphong, the two largest cities of North Vietnam.[58] The day before the Christmas Bombing commenced, the president told the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Thomas Moorer, "I don't want any more of this crap about the fact that we couldn't hit this target or that one. This is your chance to use military power to win this war, and if you don't, I'll consider it your responsibility."[59]

Unlike OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER and OPERATION LINEBACKER, which were essentially interdiction operations designed to neutralize or at least degrade North Vietnam's military potential before it could be fully utilized, OPERATION LINEBACKER II aimed to destroy major target complexes in and near Haiphong and Hanoi. Admiral Moorer complied with the president's demand and designed the bombing campaign to achieve maximum physical damage and inflict the utmost psychological distress on civilians.[60]

The new bombing campaign would also be a spectacular show of resolve to reassure Saigon that the United States remained committed to the goal of an independent South Vietnam. President Nixon was also sending a message to both the RVN and the DRV that they could not prevent a settlement. To achieve maximum impact, Nixon sent no warning or ultimatum to Hanoi, nor did he go on television to tell the American public why it was necessary to renew the air war against North Vietnam. Instead, he directed Henry Kissinger to hold a press conference in which he accused Le Duc Tho of having retreated from some of his previous agreements. Starting on December 18, the sky over Hanoi and Haiphong was filled by the largest U.S. air armada of the war. Wave after wave of B-52s struck warehouses, oil storage facilities, rail yards, airfields, power plants, industrial complexes, and SAM-2 sites mostly along the 60-mile Haiphong-Hanoi corridor.

Both Hanoi and Haiphong were well-defended; they possessed sophisticated air defense systems that could be expected to bring down a sizable number of the big planes, which composed an integral part of the American strategic deterrent vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. OPERATION LINEBACKER II deployed half of the **SAC's** manned bomber fleet. Air Force commanders were reluctant to risk these expensive aircraft and their highly trained crews. Production lines for B-52s had long been shut down and losses could not be replaced. Nixon understood that the SAMs would claim many B-52s, but he felt that he had to use them to achieve the levels of destruction and psychological impact required to persuade the North Vietnamese to return to the bargaining table. During the course of the 11-day air war, the Soviet-supplied missile systems, some of which were manned by Soviet crews, brought down 15 B-52s and damaged several others. Ninety-two U.S. pilots and air crewmen were killed or captured.[61]

LINEBACKER II provoked furious criticism within the United States and abroad. No effort had been made to prepare the American people for the air war. Most believed that the war was virtually over with only a few details remaining to be resolved before a peace agreement was signed. Hence, they

reacted with surprise and outrage to the largest bombing campaign of the long war. Even as the United States waged its aerial war, government officials in Hanoi showed visiting U.S. journalists and antiwar activists schools, hospitals, and residential areas destroyed or damaged by bombs. Press editorialists and congressional opponents accused Nixon of waging a war against the civilian population of North Vietnam. Senator Edward Kennedy said that the air raids "should outrage the conscience of all Americans."[62] European press and government leaders also denounced the U.S. bombing campaign. Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme compared the bombing to Nazi atrocities.[63] Congressional critics, on recess for the Christmas holidays, made it clear that when they returned to Washington on January 3, they would cut off all funds, thus depriving the president of the ability to wage war anywhere in Indochina. Polls showed that the bombing brought Nixon's approval rating down to 39 percent, the lowest of his presidency.

On December 22, Nixon cabled Hanoi that if the North Vietnamese agreed to resume the peace talks, then the United States would stop the bombing. There was no immediate response from the North Vietnamese. On December 26, following a 36-hour respite to observe the Christmas holiday, 120 B-52s, flying out of both Andersen and U-Tapao air bases, attacked Hanoi and Haiphong. It was the most intense day of aerial bombardment in the history of aviation warfare. The next day, Hanoi signaled to Nixon that they were prepared to resume the Paris talks on January 8, 1973. They also notified Washington "that the bombing was not the reason for this decision." Nixon continued the bombing for two more days. On December 29, he ordered that all bombings north of the 20th Parallel cease at 7:00 P.M. local time.[64] The next day, the president told the American people that the aerial war was over and that peace negotiations would resume in Paris on January 8.

The LINEBACKER II Operation had some successes. It again disrupted the DRV's supply lines from China and the Soviet Union. It also sent Hanoi a warning that America would unleash its aircraft in the event that the North Vietnamese violated provisions of the final treaty about to be negotiated. In addition, the firm show of U.S. resolve served to reassure the South Vietnamese and perhaps made General Thieu more willing to accept the final settlement. But Hanoi returned to the bargaining table mainly because they saw that it was in their interest to do so. The North Vietnamese delegates would likely have returned eventually had LINEBACKER II never occurred.[65]

Negotiations between Kissinger and Tho in Paris resumed on January 8, 1973. The number of unresolved issues between them was very small and an agreement was hammered out in six days. Washington again allowed the Communists to maintain an active political and military presence in South Vietnam. Hanoi again accepted the existence of the Thieu regime and allowed continuing U.S. aid to the RVN. The Christmas Bombing campaign had not produced a settlement that differed in any significant measure from the agreement that had been previously worked out by Kissinger and Tho in mid-October. Nothing of substance had changed between October 1972 and

January 1973. There were a few cosmetic changes, but the terms of the final agreement closely followed the October settlement that Thieu had rejected. At their final meeting on January 13, Kissinger and Tho both lifted a toast to peace and both pledged that their nations would abide by the terms of the agreement.[66]

The Christmas Bombing campaign did not significantly alter the political or military balance between North and South Vietnam, nor did it improve the chances for the RVN's long-term survival. Whatever Nixon hoped to achieve by the intense 11-day bombing campaign, perhaps a permanent diminution of Hanoi's war-making ability, or perhaps better terms for South Vietnam in the final settlement—all failed to transpire. For all of its sound and fury, the Christmas Bombing campaign proved to be a diplomatic irrelevance. The war would end for the United States when the Saigon regime could be pushed into accepting the deal Kissinger and Le Duc Tho had already negotiated.

As Nixon gave Kissinger his final instructions before the envoy left for Paris to negotiate the peace agreement with Tho, the new Congress was preparing legislation that would cut off funding for all the U.S. military activity in Vietnam. Kissinger later wrote that as he was about to leave for Paris, Nixon "urged me to settle on whatever terms were available."[67] The Christmas Bombing campaign had forced Washington to accept the settlement that Nixon had rejected in October. As John Negroponte, one of Kissinger's aides put it, "We bombed the North Vietnamese into accepting our concessions."[68]

Nixon took the best settlement he could get and then imposed it on General Thieu before the new Congress itself ended the American war by cutting off all funding for military action in Indochina. Nixon again sent General Haig to Saigon to give the South Vietnamese leader a blunt letter the president had written demanding that he sign the agreement. The letter also indicated that Nixon was committed to signing the accords on January 23; "I will do so, if necessary, alone." To put more pressure on the hapless Thieu, the letter also informed him that in the event he did not sign the agreement, Washington would cut off all further assistance to South Vietnam. Thieu, after failing to get the changes he had sought implemented, accepted an agreement that he feared and loathed one day before the deadline.[69]

On the morning of January 23, 1973 in Paris in an ebullient environment, Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho signed a preliminary cease-fire agreement. In a speech to the world, President Nixon declared that the agreement had achieved America's objectives of "peace with honor" and that it had the full support of South Vietnam's president Nguyen Van Thieu. South Vietnam's vice-president General Nguyen Cao Ky, listening to the speech, described it as a sellout:

> I could not stomach it, so nauseating was its hypocrisy and self-delusion. . . . This is an enormous step toward the total domination of Vietnam and there is no reason why the Communists should stop now. . . . I give them a couple of years before they invade the South.[70]

Bui Diem, South Vietnam's ambassador to the United States, noted,

> They said they wanted an honorable peace, but really they wanted to wash their hands of the whole business and run. But while they were washing their hands and scuttling, they did not want to be accused by the Vietnamese and the world of abandoning us.[71]

Just hours before the signing of the cease-fire became known to the public, Lyndon Johnson died of a heart attack. The January 25, 1973 edition of the *Washington Post* headline announced the signing of the peace treaty; it was accompanied by a photo of a smiling Henry Kissinger. In the bottom corner of the front page was another photo. It showed President Nixon and Mrs. Johnson watching the casket carrying the lifeless body of the late president approaching the capitol.[72]

Neither Peace nor Honor: The Paris Accords, January 27, 1973

Representatives of all four delegations at the Paris talks, the United States, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the PRG signed the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam, usually called the Paris Accords, on January 27, 1973. Secretary of State William Rodgers signed for the United States. The Accords had two major divisions: a set of military provisions and a set of political provisions.

The main military provisions of the Paris Accords provided that (1) a cease-fire throughout South Vietnam would go into effect immediately; (2) at the same time, America would cease all acts of war against North Vietnam and agree to remove, deactivate, or destroy immediately all of the mines that had been laid in North Vietnamese ports, harbors, and waterways; (3) the United States would agree to remove all of its remaining forces, including advisory personnel (about 24,000 people), from South Vietnam and to dismantle all of its bases in that country within 60 days; (4) Hanoi would agree to return all American POWs within 60 days; (5) the 150,000 NVA troops currently inside South Vietnam would be allowed to remain. A Joint Military Commission **(JMC)**, made up of representatives from the three governing bodies, would be created; (6) neither the United States nor the North Vietnamese would send more troops to South Vietnam; and (7) two commissions, the ARVN and VC/NVA forces, and **the International Commission on Control and Supervision (**ICCS), made up of delegates from Hungary, Poland, Indonesia, and Canada, would enforce the cease-fire provisions of the agreement.[73]

The major political provisions of the Paris Accords provided that (1) the Thieu government and the PRG would both be accorded legitimacy within South Vietnam; (2) both entities would establish a **National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord**, representing equally the RVN, the PRG, and the "third force" elements in South Vietnam to implement the political aspects of the

Accords, including holding elections to determine the future government of South Vietnam; (3) South Vietnam would be declared a free and an independent nation; and (4) all signatories would guarantee that the reunification of Vietnam would be gradual, peaceful, and without coercion.[74]

President Nixon, in a speech from the Oval Office, given a few hours after the Accords were signed in Paris, told the American people that all the remaining U.S. troops would be out of Vietnam and all American POWs would be coming home within 60 days. He also stated, "South Vietnam has gained the right to determine its own future. Let us be proud that America did not settle for a peace that betrayed an ally."[75] If he truly believed his statements, President Nixon was deluding himself. The agreement that had taken four years to consummate served primarily as a vehicle that permitted the United States an exit from the war—we retrieved our POWs and the Thieu government remained in power. But the American extrication coupled with Nixon's upbeat rhetoric disguised a disastrous strategic defeat: withdrawal from a war that Washington could no longer hope to win, a war that no longer commanded the support of Congress, the media, or most Americans, and a war that continued on terms increasingly perilous to the survivability of the Saigon government. For the DRV and the NLF, the war went on, on terms increasingly favorable to their cause.[76]

The signing of the Paris treaty occasioned no celebrations or outpourings of joy among the people of South Vietnam or within the Thieu government. Some 150,000 North Vietnamese troops remained in South Vietnam, which meant that South Vietnam's internal security was further endangered by the presence of ten divisions of enemy troops on its soil. The agreement also granted the PRG, the political arm of the PLAF insurgency, a political status in South Vietnam, meaning that the areas of South Vietnam under the control of the VietCong had been granted political legitimacy.

The Paris Accords left unresolved the fundamental issue for which the United States and North Vietnam had fought a long, costly, and bloody war: the political status, indeed the very existence of South Vietnam. Since the Geneva Accords of July 1954, since the temporary division of Vietnam at the 17th Parallel, Washington and Hanoi had been at odds over who should rule in southern Vietnam. Having deferred the major question for which the Vietnam War had been fought, one that would determine whether an independent South Vietnam would survive, the wording of the Paris agreement reflected the presumption that the question would be resolved by political means, sometime in an unspecified future.

But the political mechanisms created to resolve the crucial political issues were inherently unworkable.[77] At the time the Paris agreements were signed, all informed observers understood that the question of who would ultimately have political power in South Vietnam could only be resolved by force. The Paris Accords did not bring a cease-fire; they did not end a war; and they did not save South Vietnam from a Communist takeover. They only ensured that the Vietnam War would go on for a few more years without the Americans.

Isolated by Nixon's triangular diplomatic offensive from their major allies, the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union, and unable to force the Americans out of South Vietnam by military means, Hanoi opted to remove the American forces by diplomacy. Le Duan and his colleagues had to accept the continued existence of the RVN for a few years and accord the Thieu government legitimacy. But the North Vietnamese never renounced their long-held revolutionary goals, and they had no intention of abiding by any terms of the Paris Accords that interfered with the attainment of their goals. Hanoi's acceptance of the Paris settlement was based on its assumption that once the Americans had left, the PLAF/PAVN forces could defeat Thieu's regime within a few years. The North Vietnamese also understood that the mechanisms for policing the cease-fire, like the mechanisms for resolving the political issues, were inherently unworkable.

Hanoi's leaders believed that the South Vietnamese armed forces would never be able to withstand another major NVA offensive on their own; years of Vietnamization had not eliminated the RVNAF's basic flaws or given the South Vietnamese government a broad popular base of support. By Hanoi's reckoning, the RVN would survive only as long as it took North Vietnam to rebuild its forces and mount another offensive, about two or three years. The Paris Accords could only delay for a few years, but they could not prevent, North Vietnam from eventually achieving its military and political objectives.[78]

Only a credible threat of U.S. military retaliation could have enforced the Paris Accords and kept South Vietnam alive indefinitely. But the domestic political reaction to the Christmas Bombing campaign suggested that it had been Richard Nixon's last hurrah. Neither Congress nor the American people would support reentry of American naval and air power into combat anywhere in Indochina, much less advisers or ground combat forces.[79] The Communist leaders concluded that Nixon dared not "risk the political damage that would result from an effort to reimpose U.S. power in South Vietnam."[80] If North Vietnam could not be restrained from military action, if South Vietnam could not defend itself on its own, and if America could not intervene militarily to try to save the RVN, the demise of South Vietnam was inevitable. Nixon's vaunted "peace with honor" in reality meant disguised American strategic defeat delayed by a "decent interval" of at most a few years' duration.[81]

The 1973 Paris Accords, which resembled the 1954 Geneva Accords in many ways, essentially amounted to a deal between Hanoi and Washington. The United States got its POWs back and its remaining troops out of Vietnam. Hanoi got the bombing of its country and the battering of its army halted and also got the remaining American soldiers out of Vietnam. The Thieu government got nothing, neither peace nor the prospect of a political settlement that could ensure the long-term survival of the state of South Vietnam.

The American and Vietnamese people paid a painfully high price for the illusory peace that Nixon and Kissinger achieved after four more years of war. Many critics of their Vietnam policy maintain that they could have gotten the same terms four years earlier had they been more adroit and flexible

diplomatists. Four more years of war had cost more than 15,000 additional U.S. battle deaths, about 150,000 additional South Vietnamese battle deaths, and over 400,000 additional North Vietnamese battle deaths. Hundreds of thousands of civilians in South Vietnam also died during those extra years of war and 2 million more refugees fled the countryside for the cities and suburbs of South Vietnam. Within the United States, continuing inflation weakened the economy and eroded the living standards of millions of American families. The war also perpetuated and intensified domestic conflicts, dividing Americans, polarizing politics, and poisoning the political atmosphere. The United States emerged from its lengthy involvement in Southeast Asia with its world status and prestige diminished.[82] By the time the United States withdrew all of its soldiers from Vietnam, the morale, discipline, and fighting spirit of its Army had seriously eroded.

The Soviet Union had used the years that the United States had entangled itself in a major war in Southeast Asia to achieve a rough strategic parity with its major Cold War rival. By 1973, many Americans, achingly weary of war and, for that matter, of all international commitments, increasingly embraced a neo-isolationist outlook. Nixon himself paid dearly for his prolongation of the Vietnam War. The Watergate scandals, which forced his resignation from the presidency in disgrace, grew out of his inability to end the Vietnam War quickly as he had promised. Richard Nixon eventually joined Lyndon Johnson as one of the two most prominent victims of the lengthy American crusade to contain the expansion of Communism in Southeast Asia.[83]

A bizarre follow-up to the Paris agreements occurred in October 1973, when a Nobel Peace Prize committee jointly awarded Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho the 1973 Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts to bring an end to the Vietnam War. Kissinger was uneasy about the award, and Le Duc Tho rejected it, pointing out that the war had not ended. Kissinger later refused to attend the awards ceremony at the University of Oslo and then donated the $65,000 cash prize he received to a scholarship fund established to help the children of U.S. soldiers killed or missing in Vietnam.

The Nobel committee had awarded the prize to two diplomats who had negotiated a fictitious peace. There was never one day that fighting in Vietnam stopped. Even as the committee announced its awards, the war raged on and Vietnamese continued to kill Vietnamese in southern Vietnam. Former Undersecretary of State George Ball quipped, "The Norwegians must have a sense of humor." An American expert on Asian affairs bluntly observed: "There is no peace and we stayed too long." A *New York Times* editorial writer labeled the award "The Nobel War Prize."[84]

Notes

1 Rf. Ch.9, endnote 28 for the details of Lt. Calley's various commutations.
2 David Fulghum et al., *South Vietnam on Trial*, 104–8; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 245; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 251. Future Democratic Party

Presidential candidate John Kerry was one of the veterans who came to Washington.
3 Prados, *Vietnam*, 420–29.
4 Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 252.
5 Polls cited in Benedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 310.
6 Harry R. Haldeman, with editorial assistance from Stephen Ambrose, *The Haldeman Diaries* (New York: Putnam, 1994), 300.
7 Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1016–23.
8 Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 266–68; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 208–10.
9 Nguyen, *Hanoi's* War, 211–14; Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 300, 555–56, "DRV Nine-Point Plan," June 26, 1971; Good-man, *The Lost Peace*, 111–15; Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1023–31.
10 Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 218–19.
11 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 292.
12 DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal*, 324.
13 Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 119–22. Berman says that the suspicious North Vietnamese did not believe Zhou when he tried to reassure them that China had not sold out the Vietnamese revolution in order to improve relations with the United States.
14 Hess, *Vietnam*, 127.
15 Nguyen, *Hanoi's* War, 232–34.
16 Quote is from Herring, *America's Longest War*, 246.3
17 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 288–92.
18 Consciously emulating their national past, the North Vietnamese leaders named their 1972 spring offensive after Nguyen Hue, who, in 1789, led a surprise offensive against a Chinese army, driving them out of Vietnam.
19 Prados, *Vietnam*, 453–54.
20 Sorley, ed., *Abrams tapes*, April 7, 1972, 813; Prados, *Vietnam*, 463–68.
21 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 680–84; Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 343; and Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 315–19.
22 Quote is from Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 26.
23 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 343–44; Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 293.
24 Reference footnote 31, Ch. 4; Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 754–85.
25 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 688–93; Fulghum, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 184–89.
26 Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 343–44; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 693–97.
27 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 706–13; Fulghum, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 150–54, 160–67; Sorley, ed., *Abrams Tapes*, May 9, 1972, 847.
28 Jeffrey Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon Era Strategy.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004, 28-28; Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon.* New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978, 587; Clodfelter, *Limits*, 153.
29 Quoted in Fulghum, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 142.
30 Clodfelter, *Limits*, 153–54.
31 Ibid., 158.
32 Hess, *Vietnam*, 128–29; Clodfelter, *Limits*, 159.
33 Nixon, *Memoirs*, 590–91; Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1119–21; Fulghum, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 142–43; Nguyen, Hien-Lang T. "Cold War Contradictions: Toward An International History of the Second Indochina War, 1969–1973" in Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn Young, eds., *Making Sense of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 235–36.
34 Nixon, *Memoirs*, 588–89; Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1113–14.
35 Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 124–26. Dong's quote is from Berman.

36 Fulghum, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 144–45; Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 118–19; Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1135–37, 1144–48, 1169–70.
37 Quoted in Herring, *America's Longest War*, 247;
38 Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 131.
39 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 305, 566–67, "Address to the Nation by Nixon," May 8, 1972 (extracts); Nixon, *Memoirs*, 605; Clodfelter, *Limits*, 157.
40 Hess, *Vietnam*, 129.
41 Ibid., 130.
42 Summers, *On Strategy*, 134–35; Berman, *No Peace*, *No Honor*, 164–66.
43 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 706–12; Stanton, *Rise and Fall*, 344–45; Fulghum, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 183–84.
44 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 712.
45 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 295–96; Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 120–21; Clodfelter, *Limits*, 170–71.
46 Clodfelter, *Limits*, 161–62, 165–67.
47 Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 126–29; Samuel Lipsman, Stephen Weiss, and the editors of the Boston Publishing, *The False Peace: 1972–1974, The Vietnam Experience* (Boston, MA: Boston Publishing, 1985), 9–13; Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1331–59.
48 Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1366–92; Nixon, *Memoirs*, 702–3; Hess, *Vietnam*, 131.
49 Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 170.
50 Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1395.
51 Berman, *No Peace, No Honor.* 175.
52 Ibid., 187.
53 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 300.
54 Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 188–90.
55 Ibid., 191.
56 Ibid., 194–95.
57 Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1415–46; Nixon, *Memoirs*, 732–33; Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 151–60; Clodfelter, *Limits*, 179–81; and Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 318, 587–90, "Press Conference Statement by Kissinger," December 16, 1972 (extract); Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 207–15.
58 Clodfelter, *Limits*, 182.
59 Quoted in Herring, *America's Longest War*, 253–54.
60 Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 215.
61 Clodfelter, *Limits*, 186–89. The main reason so many of the B-52s were shot down was inept SAC mission planning. Since the three-plane cells flew at the same altitude and same speed, they had to make wide turns to avoid collisions. The wide turns blanked out their jamming antennae over the SAM sites.
62 Quoted in ibid., 191. In Hanoi, 1,318 civilians were killed and 1,216 were wounded. In Haiphong, 305 were reported killed; Kimball, *Vietnam War File*, 278–79.
63 Arnold Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 54–57; Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1453.
64 Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Clodfelter, *Limits*, 188–89.
65 A multiservice study of Operation LINEBACKER II concluded that it was an operational failure, and it did not force the North Vietnamese to return to the Paris talks. See Lt. Col. Michael Nostrand, U.S. Air Force, et al., "Lessons Learned from LINEBACKER II," in *Vietnam* (October 2000): 38–44, 72.

66 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 296–97; Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 160–64; Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1461–68. The U.S. air war against North Vietnam ended December 29, 1972. The U.S. air war in South Vietnam ended January 27, 1973. The U.S. air war in Laos ended February 22, 1973. The U.S. air war against Cambodia continued until August 15, 1973.
67 Kissinger is quoted in Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 222.
68 Quoted in Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 279.
69 Nguyen, Hien-Lang T. "War for Peace," in *Vietnam*, 25, no. 5 (February 2013): 44–45; Hess, *Vietnam*, 134–35; Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 320, 592, "Letter from Nixon to Thieu," January 5, 1973; Nixon, *Memoirs*, 737–51. Nixon wrote two letters to Thieu pledging U.S. support. One dated November 14, 1972, says, "You have my absolute assurance that if Hanoi fails to abide by the terms of this agreement it is my intent to take swift and severe retaliatory action." The second letter dated January 5, 1973 says, "We will respond with full force should the settlement be violated by North Vietnam."
70 General Ky's quote is taken from Olson and Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, 251.
71 Bui Diem's quote is from Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 233–34.
72 Berman has a moving description of this ironic juxtaposition of Vietnam War images in *No Peace, No Honor*, 236.
73 Copies of the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam, January 27, 1973 are reprinted in Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 188–99. See also Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 324, 599–600. "Letter from Nixon to Pham Van Dong," February 1, 1973. Article 21 of the peace agreement committed the United States to help finance the postwar reconstruction of Vietnam. In a secret February 1, 1973 letter that President Nixon sent to North Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, he promised $3.25 billion in reconstruction aid and another $1.5 billion in commodities.
74 Porter, *Vietnam Document*, vol. 2, Document 324, 599–600; Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 64–68, discusses the major political and military provisions of the treaty, mainly to show that few of those provisions were ever carried out.
75 Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 61; quoted from Nixon's speech is found in Olson and Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, 251.
76 Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 453–54, notes that Nixon doubted that the treaty would end the fighting. He knew that Hanoi intended to seize control of South Vietnam and made no effort to hide its intentions.
77 Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 62–63; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 256.
78 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 299; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 730–31.
79 Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 262, cites a Gallup poll taken at the time the Paris Accords were signed that asked this question: if North Vietnam does try to take over South Vietnam again, do you think the United States should bomb North Vietnam or not? 71 percent of the people said no to bombing.
80 Quote is from Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 299. The epistolary promises that President Nixon made to General Thieu to intervene militarily if the North Vietnamese violated the Paris Accords were unknown to the Congress and the American people. The commitments were never implemented because Nixon was forced to resign the presidency because of the Watergate scandals and Congress refused to honor them.
81 Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, 298, 300; Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 62–63.
82 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 256. Kissinger responded to those critics who said that he and Nixon could have ended the Vietnam War years earlier. He says that was not possible because an abrupt American pullout from Vietnam would have encouraged Soviet and Cuban adventurism in Africa, a Soviet

invasion of Afghanistan, and Islamic terrorism in the Middle East. Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).

83 Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 368–71. Kimball cuts through the self-serving myths and rationalizations perpetuated by Nixon and Kissinger to show that all they achieved with four years of diplomacy and war was a flawed agreement that doomed South Vietnam to early extinction following the U.S. military withdrawal. Kimball is one of several scholars who raise perhaps the most important of all the "what-if" counterfactual speculations about the American Vietnam War: could the war have been ended years earlier if Nixon and Kissinger had been more flexible, more adroit, and bolder diplomatists?

84 Quoted in Lipsman et al., *The False Peace*, 119; see also Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 314.

12 The Decline and Fall of South Vietnam, 1973–75

The POWs Come Home

As the Indochina Wars raged on, the American POWs came home. The return of the POWs generated a national celebration. Here was an aspect of the war that a divided nation could unify around. The return of the 591 American POWs in February and March 1973 represented the only positive U.S. accomplishment to come out of any postwar negotiations held in accordance with the terms of the Paris agreements. The arrangements called for the POWs to be released in four increments, 15 days apart. The remaining 24,000 U.S. troops on active duty in South Vietnam would depart simultaneously, in four equal-sized increments. If any snags occurred that delayed the return of the POWs, the remaining U.S. troops would delay their departure from Vietnam.[1]

Called OPERATION HOMECOMING, the first contingent of 115 POWs left Hanoi's Gia Lam Airport on February 12 and were flown to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. As they deplaned, some walked briskly, others hobbled painfully down the ramp. Navy Captain Jeremiah Denton, the senior officer among the first group of returnees, who had been held captive for seven years, reached the microphone first. He spoke for all of them when he proudly announced, "We are honored to have had the opportunity to serve our country."

At Clark, many aviators were able to enjoy their first American-style meal in years—steaks and banana splits. They were then flown to the United States where they had to endure a media blitz as they were reunited with their families. The other returning POWs followed in 15-day intervals, until the last men had been repatriated on March 29. Hundreds of small towns and cities across the United States staged heroes' welcomes for individual returnees. There were homecomings, parades, and visits to the White House. On the evening of May 24, President Nixon hosted a gala banquet in honor of the returning POWs.

The POWs had survived the longest captivity of any prisoners in American military history. As prisoners, they also had often been forced to endure deprivation, harassment, and tortures inflicted by their captors. Most of the prisoners endured their agonies heroically, maintaining their military

professionalism under extreme duress in accordance with the strict standards of the U.S. Code of Military Conduct. Colonel Fred V. Cherry, the senior African American POW, set a heroic example. He was tortured for 92 consecutive days after his captors failed to break him by appealing to his "blackness."[2]

On March 30, the last contingent of 5,200 U.S. soldiers remaining in South Vietnam assembled at Tan Son Nhut Air Base on the outskirts of Saigon, in readiness for their flights back to the United States. By April 1, 1973, the only U.S. military personnel remaining in South Vietnam were 159 Marines, who were serving as embassy guards, and another 50 people, who were serving in the Defense Attaché Office **(DAO)** as permitted by the provisions of the Paris agreement.

The celebrity status accorded the POWs contrasted starkly with the treatment often given to returning ground combat veterans, particularly veterans who returned after Tet-68. They rarely received parades or official welcomes at home. Few Americans appeared to appreciate their sacrifice or thanked them for a job well done. They were often ignored by a society that had carelessly sent them off to fight a war that most Americans were ambivalent about or had lost faith in completely. Many returning Vietnam combat veterans found themselves to be embarrassing reminders of a war that no one wanted to think or talk about. Worse, some people, opposed to the war, took out their animus toward that conflict by harassing the returning uniformed veterans.

The War of the Flags

The fighting was intense during the days before the cease-fire was scheduled to take hold on January 28, 1973 and it never ceased. There was never even a day in which the fighting ceased. The Paris Accords never ended the conflict; however, it did usher in a new phase, the **War of the Flags**—because both sides showed that they controlled villages by flying either the flag of the RVN or the NLF. During the War of the Flags, PAVN and PLAF forces attacked hundreds of villages trying to grab as much territory as they could before the fighting stopped. Washington reacted with the largest aerial campaign since LINEBACKER. Air Force and Navy aircraft flew hundreds of sorties endeavoring to blunt the Communist assaults.[3] General Thieu also responded with offensive operations designed to reclaim these lands and enhance the total amount of territory and population under the control of the RVN. As the War of the Flags began, the military situation in South Vietnam favored Thieu's forces. The U.S. aid had built up the RVNAF forces until they had become one of the largest and best-equipped armies in the world.

The Thieu government appeared to be in a strong position. As a consequence of successful pacification efforts from 1970 to 1972, coupled with the smashing of the Communist offensive during the summer of 1972, the RVN controlled about 75 percent of the territory and perhaps 80 percent of the 19 million inhabitants of South Vietnam. Communist holdings were confined mostly to the thinly populated western periphery of the country and

scattered enclaves in the Mekong Delta, in the central highlands, and along the coast. The RVNAF totaled more than 1 million troops, and they were well equipped, because of the recent lavish American resupply efforts.

Both the surviving PLAF forces and the 150,000 PAVN forces in southern Vietnam, still battered and short of supplies from the 1972 campaigns, were no match initially for Thieu's forces. During the first year following the Paris agreements, the ARVN forces not only reclaimed most of the lands and villages grabbed by the VietCong in the fall of 1972, but also acquired control of some areas that had been in VC hands for years. Thieu was determined to use his military advantage while he had it.[4]

Underlying political weaknesses undercut much of the military advantage that Thieu's forces enjoyed over its enemies. In some regions, authorities loyal to Saigon ruled by day; the VietCong took over at night. The populations of many villages counted as "loyal to the RVN" were inhabited by villagers who did not trust the Saigon government; they were secret neutralists or supporters of the PRG. The Saigon government's control over much of the rural population of South Vietnam was only nominal.[5]

In April 1973, General Thieu, concerned about the level of support he could expect to receive from the United States now that the war was over for Americans, journeyed to San Clemente, California, to confer with President Nixon and Henry Kissinger. Thieu's visit received little media coverage. The POWs were home, and the media were giving the burgeoning Watergate scandals saturation coverage. Vietnam no longer mattered to most Americans. Thieu found Nixon preoccupied with Watergate. The president had difficulty focusing on the continuing Indochina Wars, but he promised Thieu that Washington would always stand with South Vietnam.

After San Clemente, Thieu flew to Washington where his visit went virtually unnoticed. Such inattention was in marked contrast to previous visits by South Vietnamese heads of state, which had generated massive publicity and sometimes demonstrations by antiwar activists. Thieu discovered that support for South Vietnam was fading fast in Congress. Thieu returned to Vietnam worried that the Americans would eventually abandon South Vietnam.[6]

Thieu remained fearful that if the Communists rebuilt their forces and launched attacks in South Vietnam that his forces could not contain, Nixon might not honor his pledge to rescue the RVN. These worries about continuing the U.S. support motivated the South Vietnamese leader to press for every advantage over his enemies while he could. Even though all the U.S. combat forces had been withdrawn from South Vietnam and Thieu worried about American staying power over the long run, Washington continued to provide strong military support for the Thieu government in 1973. Thousands of former U.S. military advisers continued to work with the ARVN forces, but they had civilian status in order to circumvent treaty provisions. Powerful U.S. naval and air forces remained nearby in the Gulf of Tonkin, in Thailand, and on the island of Guam. Nixon attempted to maintain a credible threat of U.S. reentry into the war to deter Hanoi from treaty violations and aggressive military actions.

Hanoi, needing a respite from war to rebuild its shattered military forces, confined its activities in South Vietnam largely to politics during most of 1973. These political activities were largely carried out by NLF cadres operating in the contested villages of South Vietnam. They also modernized their logistics capability within southern Vietnam. They constructed a macadamized highway and an eight-inch oil pipeline running along the border with Laos and Cambodia from the DMZ to Loc Ninh, about 65 miles northwest of Saigon. Hanoi also infiltrated more troops into South Vietnam in violation of the Paris Accords. During the final months of 1973, about 170,000 PAVN and 60,000 PLAF fighters could be found in South Vietnam. They responded to the aggressive tactics of the RVNAF with counterattacks of their own. Both sides sustained heavy casualties, and the PAVN/VC forces succeeded in reclaiming some of their traditional strongholds.[7]

During the summer of 1973, Le Duan traveled to Moscow and Beijing in search of additional military aid. To his dismay, Duan discovered that both the Soviets and the Chinese valued improving relations with the United States more than a Communist victory in Vietnam. They had reverted to the stance they had taken at the Geneva conference in 1954 when they pressured the Vietminh to accept a temporary partition of their country rather than assume control of a united Vietnam. Just as South Vietnam appeared to matter less to the U.S. officials than before the Paris Accords, so too a Communist victory in Vietnam now seemed a lower priority to the Soviet and Chinese leaders.[8]

Within the United States, the Watergate scandals had seriously eroded Nixon's ability to influence events in Indochina. During 1973, Congress took action to end all lingering U.S. military activity in Indochina. On May 10, the Senate enacted legislation that prohibited using any appropriated funds for military intervention in Indochina. Nixon vetoed that legislation. In June, Congress passed legislation requiring an immediate end to the bombing of Cambodia and all other U.S. military operations in Indochina. Nixon vetoed the measure, and the House sustained his veto. Congress subsequently forced a reluctant president to accept a compromise proposal that halted the bombing on August 15.[9] In November, Congress enacted the War Powers Act over another presidential veto. Passage of the act was the culmination of years of effort by congressional opponents of U.S. military involvement in Indochina to restrict the power of the president to commit the U.S. forces to war without the advice and consent of Congress. The War Powers Act required the president to inform Congress within 48 hours of any decision to deploy the U.S. forces overseas. The new law further mandated that the president must remove these forces within 60 days, unless Congress specifically endorsed their deployment. The War Powers Act, in tandem with the Cambodian bombing cutoff, made it virtually impossible for President Nixon to commit the U.S. forces to any further military operations anywhere in Indochina.[10]

By the end of 1973, Nixon was powerless to influence events in Indochina. With his popular approval ratings reduced to historic lows, Nixon fought grimly for his political survival against a growing army of political foes

determined to destroy him if evidence implicating him in the Watergate cover-up scandal could be found. He could only watch passively as the Indochina War of the Flags escalated and the political settlement he had tried to forge for South Vietnam came apart.[11]

During 1974, the military balance in South Vietnam (what the DRV strategists referred to as the "correlation of forces") shifted steadily against the RVNAF.[12] Because of Thieu's efforts to gain control over his whole country, many of his divisions were tied down in static defensive positions. They were vulnerable to attacks wherever the VietCong or PAVN forces chose to strike. By the fall of 1974, Hanoi had placed an estimated 285,000 troops into South Vietnam, far in excess of what they were allowed under the Paris Accords. They had also stockpiled huge quantities of war materiel brought down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which had been transformed into an efficient supply corridor for men, weapons, fuel, and ammunition since the departure of U.S. air power from the war.

The Decay of South Vietnam

Corruption, a chronic problem of the GVN since its inception, scaled new heights during Thieu's final years. Corruption was more widespread in the military, among the officer corps, than elsewhere. Wealthy soldiers purchased safe duty assignments. Promotions were regularly sold to the highest bidders. Pilots demanded bribes before flying combat missions. Supply officers demanded bribes before furnishing food for the troops. Division commanders regularly siphoned off huge sums of money from military payrolls. Presiding at the apex of this vast empire of corruption, General Thieu and his senior military commanders accrued great wealth. "Corruption had become the glue that held the Thieu regime together."[13]

Official efforts to eradicate or slow the rate of corruption "ranged from the ineffectual to the pathetic."[14] General Thieu felt compelled to tolerate his regime's staggering corruption, since he and his cronies were the prime beneficiaries. Even had he been willing to try seriously to reform his government, he would have failed. Had Thieu tried to remove the corruption from all of his government's civilian and military agencies, the radical surgery required would have killed the patient. It also would have cut out his political power and all major sources of his wealth.

Except for dismissing a few corrupt officials for cosmetic purposes, Thieu chose to cover up his regime's systemic corruption. The U.S. officials, led by the last U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, Graham Martin, went along with the cover-up. They either denied that corruption was a serious problem in South Vietnam or insisted that it was being eliminated. If the U.S. officials were either blind or complacent about corruption, most South Vietnamese, victimized in countless ways by fraud, bribery, extortion, and graft, were not. Their anger over government corruption was intensified by economic decline, and they complained bitterly about their worsening predicament.

By mid-1974, Thieu presided over a collapsing economy. The rate of inflation had skyrocketed. The cost of living in Saigon had risen 27 percent during the first six months of the year. The price rise for essential commodities was even sharper: rice rose 100 percent, sugar 107 percent, and cooking oil 139 percent. Rice and other food commodities had to be imported. Hyperinflation meant that most soldiers and civil servants were not earning enough to meet the basic needs of their families. "The ultimate expression of the decay of South Vietnam was the widespread black market with the Communist forces."[15] Both the VietCong and North Vietnamese troops were able to get much of their food, medicine, and even weapons from regions under Saigon's control. The sellers' motives were usually mercenary; to make a buck, they sold their enemies what they needed.

At the same time retail prices were shooting up, unemployment was rising rapidly. In 1974, an estimated 1 million people, about one-fifth of the workforce, were without jobs. The piaster was devalued repeatedly against the American dollar. The National Bank of Vietnam traded extensively in black market operations to profit from fluctuations in the value of the piaster and as a hedge against hyperinflation. A huge trade deficit evolved that quickly wiped out the RVN's slim foreign reserves. Many consumer goods were in short supply. Industries dependent on imported materials slashed their production schedules or, more often, shut down. Oil prices had been rising since the Arab oil boycott kicked in during October 1973. Because the RVN had to cut back on its purchases of oil, military ground and air operations were curtailed. The major oil companies supplying the South Vietnamese armed forces all discovered that large amounts of oil were stolen, mostly by elements within Saigon's military forces.[16] The South Vietnamese people suffered from an economic double whammy composed of hyperinflation and deep depression; it was stagflation on steroids.

The sick South Vietnamese economy was further undermined by the effects of the American pullout. The pullout eliminated about 300,000 jobs, as well as a large annual inflow of dollars. In 1970, the U.S. soldiers had spent over $500 million, and in 1971 they had spent over $400 million in South Vietnam. In 1974, they spent less than $100 million.[17] By 1974, economic and social conditions were the worst they had ever been during South Vietnam's 20-year existence.

One of the causes of the RVNAF's decline in 1974 was the reduction in the amount of U.S. military assistance going to South Vietnam. Because the huge South Vietnamese army had been trained to fight American-style battles, relying on mobility and massive firepower, it was extremely expensive to maintain and operate; it required an annual budget of $3–3.5 billion to sustain it. But the United States provided only $2.3 billion during the fiscal year 1973 and $1.1 billion for 1974. Ammunition was in short supply. Unable to fight in the manner in which they had been trained because of equipment and ammunition shortages, the morale of the RVNAF, never too high under the best of circumstances, plummeted.[18]

The congressional aid cuts no doubt sapped the strength and morale of the RVNAF forces, but they were not the most important causes of the GVN's growing military weakness. Even the reduced aid South Vietnam received from the United States was larger than the amount of aid furnished the DRV by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. They too reduced the amount of aid going to North Vietnam following the end of the American war. The inescapable reality was that Vietnamization had never worked. Most of the RVNAF's many shortcomings that had always vitiated its fighting abilities had never been corrected. Desertions probably exceeded inductions in 1974, and the officer corps grew more corrupt and more politicized than ever.

The fundamental weakness of the South Vietnamese military forces could be found in the realm of politics. The Thieu government in 1974 still suffered from the same problems that had been in place since Ngo Dinh Diem had come to power in 1955. It remained what it had been from its beginning, a narrowly based oligarchy dependent for its survival on the political loyalty of senior military commanders. These loyalties had to be purchased—by favors and corruption. General Thieu never won the hearts and minds of most South Vietnamese civilians. Thieu's American connections and his skill at political maneuver had kept him in power for years, but neither he nor his government represented a cause or a purpose, a positive reason for which most South Vietnamese soldiers wanted to risk their lives. Most viewed military service as either an unavoidable disaster or an opportunity for graft. Systemic corruption, the decline of the army, and the reductions in the U.S. aid combined to undermine the fragile South Vietnamese political structure. "After two decades of U.S. support, the government of South Vietnam still did not represent any genuine sense of nationhood."[19]

During August 1974, Congress slashed the U.S. military aid to South Vietnam still further, and Nixon, his role in the attempted cover-up of the Watergate burglary established, was forced to resign in disgrace to avoid impeachment, removal from office, and possible criminal trials. Thieu was rapidly running out of American friends, and Americans were even more rapidly running out of reasons for continuing to support his cause.

Thieu soon faced the most serious challenge to his rule since taking office. On September 8, a group of Catholics led by Father Tran Huu Thanh publicly protested the extensive corruption that riddled Thieu's government. Thanh's charges set off a torrent of protest against Thieu and his corrupt regime. Huge demonstrations, similar to the ones that had brought down Diem and Nhu in 1963, broke out in Saigon and other cities. Militant Buddhists again took to the streets to lead popular protests against the government. Thieu made a few efforts to respond to his critics, and then cracked down hard on the protesters.[20] Many citizens were bludgeoned into silence; popular support for the Saigon regime was at an all-time low. More and more citizens talked openly of seeking an accommodation with the National Liberation Front.

The Final Offensive

Politburo members in Hanoi observed the general deterioration of South Vietnamese society and the continuing cuts in American support for Thieu's failing regime. The hawks in the Politburo believed that the time had come for another all-out war in South Vietnam. The doves took a more cautious stance. They wanted to wait and see if the new American President, Gerald Ford, could persuade Congress to restore military aid funds to the ARVN. They also wanted to wait and see if Ford would be willing to make good on Nixon's promise to recommit the U.S. air power in South Vietnam to save the RVN in the event of another invasion from North Vietnam.

By fall, the hawks had won the debate. What clinched the argument favoring another North Vietnamese attack on South Vietnam was the outbreak of popular unrest in Saigon and Hanoi's perception that the U.S. domestic public opinion and Congressional opposition would likely prevent Ford from ordering any further U.S. military interventions into South Vietnam. At a key meeting held in October 1974, the Politburo approved a proposal by General Van Tien Dung, Giap's successor as the chief of staff, for a new military offensive scheduled to be launched in South Vietnam in 1975. Even though PAVN commanders knew that they had regained the strategic initiative, their initial plan was cautious. NLF efforts to rebuild the VietCong base in southern Vietnam villages had failed. The urban cadres were undermanned and ineffective. Because of funding cuts, the PAVN suffered from several deficiencies, shortages of heavy weapons and ammunition being the most serious. Consequently, Dung's careful strategic plan called for a two-year campaign that would culminate in the overthrow of the Thieu regime and the creation of a coalition government in 1976.[21]

In the fall of 1974, when Hanoi's leaders looked at the United States, they saw a nation led by an inexperienced president who lacked a popular base, and appeared to assign Indochina a relatively low priority. President Ford viewed such traditional foreign policy issues as relations with the major Communist powers, efforts to break the dismal cycle of periodic warfare between Arabs and Israelis, and in-house quarrels with NATO allies as much more vital to the U.S. national interests than a violent conflict in Southeast Asia between factions of Vietnamese. The new president was determined that the conflict in Vietnam, which had become "Johnson's War," and then "Nixon's War," would never become "Ford's War." Hanoi also saw a dovish Congress that was increasingly preoccupied with the deteriorating American economy.[22] Serious internal problems generated by energy shortages and "stagflation" had a far greater urgency for most Americans than a lingering war in Indochina that no longer involved the U.S. soldiers. Hanoi's directorate understood that the United States still possessed formidable military power and these forces were positioned to intervene in Indochina, but they made a judgment that powerful domestic and international constraints precluded Washington's reentering the Vietnam War.

In mid-December, General Dung ordered the 3d and the 7th PAVN divisions under the command of General Tran Van Tra to attack Phuoc Long, an isolated and poorly defended province near the Cambodian border 80 miles northwest of Saigon. Dung would use the assault on Phuoc Long as a test, to find out whether Saigon and Washington would respond to a direct attack on South Vietnamese territory that clearly violated the Paris agreements. Dung knew of former President Nixon's commitments to General Thieu, and he wanted to find out if his successor intended to honor them.

Within three weeks, the Communist forces had overrun the province and captured the provincial capital, Phuoc Binh. The ARVN defenders took heavy casualties during the three weeks of fighting in Phuoc Long. The ARVN made no effort to counterattack, to try and retake Phuc Long. The Phuoc Long debacle demonstrated that Thieu's government lacked both the means and the will to defend its territory against the first major PAVN offensive in three years.

To the ever-cautious Hanoi leaders, it appeared to them that the United States might be going to intervene using naval air power. They were mistaken because they misinterpreted the actions of an aircraft carrier battle group led by the USS *Enterprise* headed toward South Vietnam at the time that they were occupying Phuoc Long. The carrier group was on station in the South China Sea. Its mission was peaceful. It served as a visible reminder of U.S. power in the vicinity and to be prepared to evacuate the U.S. civilian and military personnel remaining in South Vietnam. The *Enterprise* turned back out to sea and Hanoi concluded that the Ford administration would not intervene militarily in South Vietnam, regardless of the provocation or threat.

When Hanoi's leaders perceived that Saigon could not defend Phuoc Long and that the Ford administration would not intervene, they realized that their initial operations plan had been too conservative. On January 7, 1975, the Politburo approved a new plan. It called for PAVN main force divisions, accompanied by armor and artillery regiments, to attack the central highlands, which, if successful, would open up corridors to move east toward the coastal regions and south toward Saigon itself.[23]

On March 10, five PAVN main force divisions, joined by regiments of tanks, artillery, antiaircraft batteries, and engineers, launched a massive surprise attack on the strategic city of Ban Me Thuot, the capital of Darlac province in the central highlands. The outgunned ARVN defenders fought bravely, but Ban Me Thuot fell to the Communists within a week. With the takeover of that city, the NVA had positioned itself to achieve its long-standing strategic goal, the bisection of South Vietnam.[24] After the fall of Ban Me Thuot, with no powerful ARVN forces blocking the PAVN's march to the sea, South Vietnam was about to be sliced in half.

Tight security and clever deception tactics enabled the PAVN forces to catch the South Vietnamese by complete surprise. RVN leaders knew that the DRV was going on the offensive, but they did not know where the first assaults would strike. The unexpected attack of Ban Me Thuot was a psychological

blow that appeared to unhinge General Thieu. While the battle for Ban Me Thuot raged, the South Vietnamese leader, seemingly confused, frightened, and in a virtual state of shock, made a fateful decision that hastened the demise of his country. He suddenly abandoned his strategy of holding as much South Vietnamese territory as possible. Convinced that the outnumbered and outgunned defenders of Pleiku and Kontum could not hold off the Communist attackers, he ordered his commanders to withdraw their forces. Thieu wanted to redeploy them to try to hold all of South Vietnam south of a line running from Tuy Hoa on the coast to the Cambodian border.[25] Most of South Vietnam's strategic resources and population lay south of this line. General Thieu decided to trade territory for time and for a chance to consolidate his defenses farther to the south. He would accept the loss of the northern half of his nation in order to preserve the southern half. Pleiku and Kontum fell to the Communists within days.

Thieu's military commanders were ill-prepared to carry out one of the most difficult and dangerous military operations, a controlled retreat while under heavy enemy fire. ARVN military discipline broke down, and the retreat quickly turned into a rout. Hundreds of thousands of terrified civilians joined the demoralized soldiers as all fled the central highlands toward the coastal city of Tuy Hoa. During the two-week trek of soldiers and civilians streaming for the coast, two-thirds of the 60,000 RVNAF soldiers were killed or captured, and thousands of civilians perished as well. Most of the casualties came from PAVN fire, as soldiers continually attacked the virtually defenseless columns of intermingled soldiers, dependents, and refugees. Only about 20,000 South Vietnamese soldiers and perhaps 60,000 civilians reached their destination.[26]

General Thieu's decision to abandon the central highlands was a strategic, political, and psychological disaster that cost his country ten provinces, perhaps 200,000 civilian casualties, and more than two divisions of troops. Within two months, the invaders had captured most of the central provinces. During those two months, there occurred the most dramatic shift in the military balance of power since the Vietnam War began. Thieu's decision to abandon the northern half of his country also cost him whatever remaining confidence the South Vietnamese people retained in his abilities to protect them from the enemy (see Figure 12.1).

Thieu's decision to abandon the central highlands and the rapid crumbling of his armies caught Hanoi by surprise. Although they were confident of ultimate victory, the North Vietnamese had anticipated stubborn resistance and hard fighting from Thieu's forces over the next two years. They had been at war with the RVN for nearly 20 years, and never had they achieved a major military victory or scored a decisive strategic breakthrough—until now. Perceiving that their armies could probably conquer all of South Vietnam before the rainy season struck, they ordered General Dung to move up his timetable for victory by one year, from 1976 to the spring of 1975. They sensed that they were getting close to achieving victory in the cause to which they had devoted their lives.

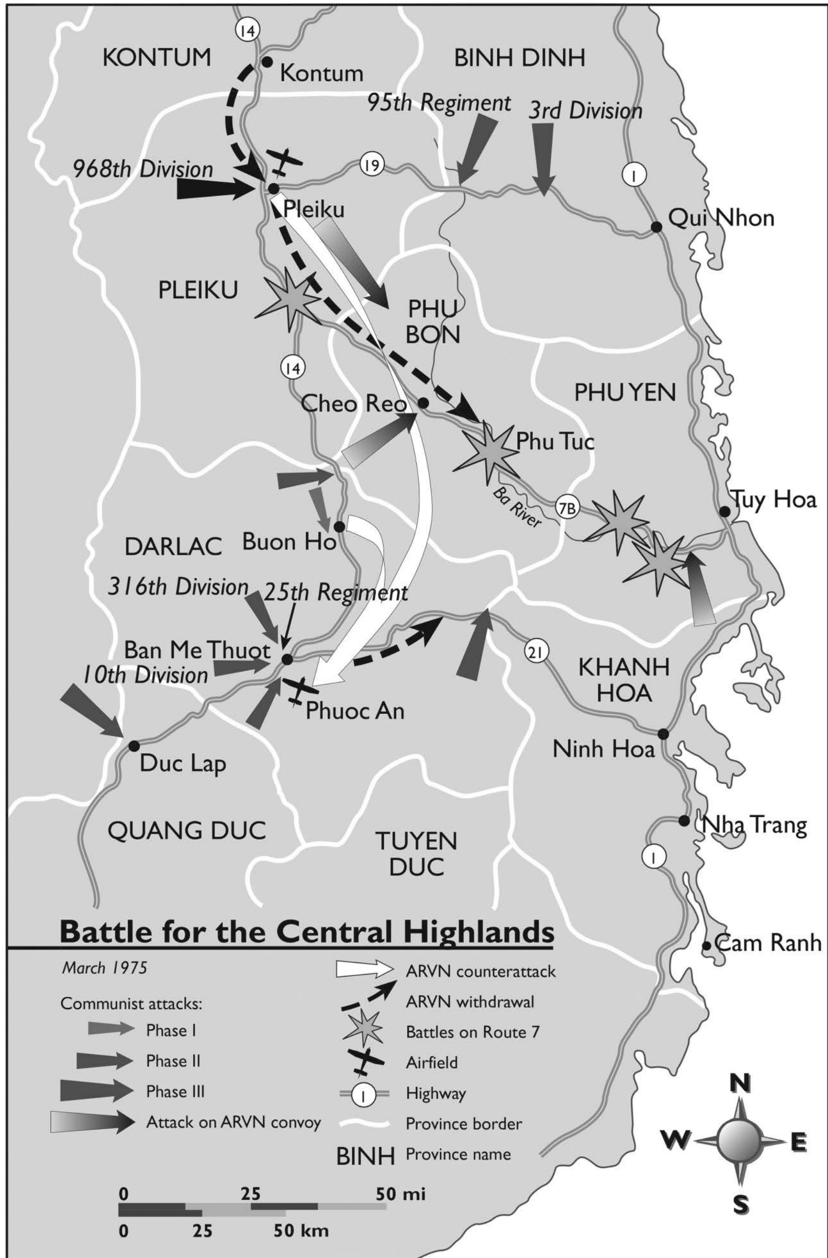

Figure 12.1 Battle for the central highlands. *Public domain.*

As the RVN forces abandoned the central highlands, General Dung sent five NVA main force divisions, along with artillery, tank, and antiaircraft regiments, to attack key sites in the five northern provinces of South Vietnam. In some of the battles, the outnumbered ARVN forces fought hard, but the PAVN main forces quickly overpowered them. Refugees poured into Hue and Danang, the two largest cities in the region. As the PAVN forces approached these cities, the South Vietnamese defenders simply melted away. Hue fell on March 26. Four days later, the victorious NVA forces marched into Danang without meeting any resistance. Almost ten years to the day, after the first U.S. Marines hit the beaches near Danang to initiate the American Vietnam War, South Vietnam's second largest city fell to the advancing PAVN forces.

Of the 2 million people densely packed into Danang at the end, over 1 million of them refugees, perhaps 50,000 got out before the conquerors arrived. The last flight out of Danang on March 29, 1975 was a World Airways Boeing 727 bound for Saigon. It was commandeered by a mob of 320 uniformed soldiers from the ARVN 1st Division who shoved aside women and children, often trampling members of their own families, in their panic-driven haste to board the plane. As pilot Ken Healy began to taxi the big plane toward the runway, crazed soldiers standing on the tarmac fired their rifles and threw grenades at the plane. If they could not leave, they were determined that no one else would either. One exploding grenade jammed the flaps on the left wing of the 727. Because a stalled VNAF A-37 jet fighter with bombs slung under its wings blocked the main runway, Healy was forced to use the short taxi strip for takeoff. As the overloaded plane struggled into the air, observers on the ground could see bodies hanging from the plane's undercarriage and wheel wells. Ninety minutes later, the plane, nearly empty of fuel, delivered its payload of patriots safely in Saigon. A rabble of cheering enlisted men poured out of the aircraft.[27]

During the first week of April 1975, the coastal cities of Quang Ngai, Qui Nhon, Tuy Hoa, and Nha Trang fell to the NVA attackers as they rapidly advanced down the South China seacoast toward Saigon. The South Vietnamese defenses were collapsing so fast that the attacking forces could scarcely keep pace. The PAVN forces also occupied Cam Ranh, formerly the site of the largest U.S. logistics base in South Vietnam.

The Ho Chi Minh Offensive, April 5–30, 1975

Hanoi, sensing that final victory was near, ordered General Dung to marshal all of his forces for an immediate offensive against Saigon. The North Vietnamese had to attain final victory before the summer monsoons arrived. They also wanted to strike for the jugular, while the South Vietnamese armies were in disarray. They did not want to give the Saigon government a chance to regroup and perhaps rally the people to resist the advancing NVA forces.[28]

As the Communist leaders planned the final campaign designed to bring their war that they had begun 30 years ago for independence and national unity to a victorious climax, they named it the Ho Chi Minh Offensive.

As Thieu's armies disintegrated and the Communists geared up for the final thrust to Saigon, the U.S. efforts turned to humanitarian aid. The Ford administration developed Operation Babylift to evacuate some 1,500 children for adoption in Australia and the United States. Only orphans were eligible, but many of the children involved were not orphans. Parents who feared the worst for their children at the hands of the VietCong placed their children in the program. The first Operation Babylift aircraft, a giant Air Force C-5A transport, took off from Tan San Nhut Air Base on April 4 with 243 children on board. Scarcely a half-hour later, the plane crashed, killing 178 of the children. Americans watched the terrible scene unfold on television. For many viewers, the fiery crash and the death of so many children epitomized much of the horror and futility associated with the American involvement in Vietnam.[29]

On the same day the Operation Babylift plane crashed, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff Frederick Weyand told President Ford that Thieu's government verged on defeat. Even if the United States significantly increased its military aid to Saigon, General Weyand thought its chances of survival were meager at best. Weyand also rejected General Westmoreland's call for renewed air strikes over North Vietnam, pointing out that Congress would never support such action. CIA director William Colby agreed with General Weyand's assessment of the military situation. Ford, understanding that the South Vietnamese had lost the war, knew that the American people would never support a U.S. military intervention to try to salvage a hopeless cause.[30]

By mid-April, advance elements of the North Vietnamese army were approaching Saigon. The last major battle of the Vietnam War occurred at Xuan Loc, a strategic crossroads that formed the center of Saigon's forward defenses. At Xuan Loc, about 30 miles east of the capital city astride Route 1, the main Vietnamese north–south highway, the 18th ARVN Division, under the command of General Le Minh Dao, made a gallant stand against four NVA divisions that were reinforced with tank and artillery regiments. In an epic struggle, the defenders of Xuan Loc held their positions for a week against vastly superior forces. The heroic defenders of Xuan Loc could delay the North Vietnamese advance, but they could not stop it. Xuan Loc was the bloodiest battle of the Second Indochina War, with 4,000 ARVN and 6,000 PAVN deaths. After the fall of Xuan Loc, the road to Bien Hoa Airport and Saigon lay open.

America Abandons Cambodia

As the end of the Republic of South Vietnam approached, the civil war in neighboring Cambodia that had destroyed much of the country and left most of its survivors impoverished played itself out. With the defensive perimeter

around the besieged capital of Phnom Penh shrinking daily, the hapless leader of the Khmer Republic, Lon Nol, was forced to resign on April 1. Efforts by Secretary of State Kissinger to arrange an eleventh-hour peace settlement were spurned by Prince Sihanouk and his Chinese patrons. On April 10, Congress refused to support a bill calling for $222 million in emergency military aid for the dying Khmer Republic. Two days later, the American evacuation of Phnom Penh began. After five years, at a cost exceeding $1 billion, the U.S. effort to prevent a Communist takeover in Cambodia had failed. On April 17, abandoned by the Americans, the Cambodian Khmer Republic fell. The Khmer Rouge had always resisted domination by the Vietnamese Communists. They occupied Phnom Penh and proceeded to implement a radical and horrific program of emptying the cities and turning the country into an agrarian communal society. An eyewitness, *New York Times* reporter Sydney Schandberg, described Phnom Penh's conquerors as "grim, robot-like, brutal."[31] They immediately began evacuating the 2 million people crammed into the city. The Cambodian holocaust was about to begin.

America Abandons Laos

The U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam had its parallel in Laos. The Communist Pathet Lao and the Laotian government agreed to a cease-fire on February 21, 1973. Following the cease-fire agreement, the fighting in Laos continued sporadically. American B-52s ended their bombing in Laos on February 22. Ground fighting gradually tapered off, and by April 1973, the long civil war in Laos had ended. On September 12, negotiators signed a protocol that cleared the way for establishing a new coalition government, a government in which the Pathet Lao was the dominant party. Under the new arrangement, the Pathet Lao retained complete control over the areas of the country occupied by its military forces and shared power to administer the rest of the country.

When Cambodia and South Vietnam fell to the Communists in the spring of 1975, the Pathet Lao formally took control in Laos. The Pathet Lao triumph meant that the North Vietnamese had considerable leverage in Laos, because the Laotian Communists had always been closely aligned with the Vietnamese Communist Party. The chief victims of the Communist triumph in Laos were the Hmong, the Meo tribesmen whom the CIA had trained and equipped to fight in the "secret war" in Laos. The Hmong, abandoned by their former American patrons, were forced to flee their native land. About 100,000 Meo ended up in the United States. Most of those who stayed behind were hunted down and killed by the Pathet Lao[32]

America Abandons South Vietnam

The sudden collapse of the South Vietnamese armies in the central highlands and northern provinces in the spring of 1975 had stunned American officials. Intelligence reports had given them no indication that Hanoi had planned a

major offensive for 1975. The U.S. officials had assumed that South Vietnam's defenses were adequate to withstand any attacks the Communists were likely to mount that year. But it soon became clear, even in the face of mounting disaster in southern Vietnam, that the Ford administration had no plans for any further U.S. military intervention in that region. Both Ford and Kissinger understood that it would be politically impossible for the United States to send in the U.S. aircraft to bomb and mine, as Nixon had done in 1972, to try to save the South Vietnamese armed forces from the latest PAVN offensive.

On April 10, in a televised speech to Congress, Ford asked the lawmakers to appropriate an additional $300 million in emergency military assistance for General Thieu's imperiled government. Even though he knew that Congress was not going to provide the funding, Ford sounded all of the familiar themes to support his request. He pleaded with Congress to honor a sacred American commitment, a commitment embraced by every president from Truman to Nixon. He spoke of America's "profound moral obligation" to the South Vietnamese people. He told the legislators and the American people that the United States would dishonor the sacrifices made by the tens of thousands of American soldiers who had died in Vietnam if it failed to help the people of South Vietnam in their hour of mortal danger. He raised the specter of a bloodbath in which thousands of South Vietnamese, particularly Catholics, would be slaughtered by the victorious Communists.[33]

Very few members of Congress on either side of the aisle responded to Ford's appeal with any enthusiasm. Weary of a seemingly endless war, most members of Congress were not in a generous mood. Most of them viewed the cause in Vietnam as having been already lost; they were far more concerned about assuring the evacuation of all Americans from Saigon than they were about sending General Thieu's dying regime any more aid. Four days after delivering his speech, Ford met with several members of the Congress. They told him that there would be no additional funds for military assistance. Congress was interested only in providing humanitarian assistance, and they were concerned mainly for the safety of U.S. personnel who remained in South Vietnam. On April 17, the same day Xuan Loc fell and the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh, Congress formally rejected Ford's request for military aid for South Vietnam.

Most Americans, facing serious domestic economic and energy problems and concerned about important foreign policy matters elsewhere, had long since lost their crusading enthusiasm for saving South Vietnam from Communist aggression. Opinion polls taken in April 1975 showed that a large majority of Americans opposed any further U.S. military action in South Vietnam, even if the failure to take such action resulted in a Communist takeover. Most Americans were surely unhappy about the prospect of a Communist victory in Vietnam, but they were resigned to its occurrence. Most Americans also believed that they had already sacrificed far too much of their blood and treasure in Indochina, and they refused to contribute more.

Even as President Ford, Congress, and nearly all Americans clearly indicated that the United States would no longer provide military assistance to South Vietnam, Graham Martin, the last U.S. ambassador to that dying country, energetically tried to persuade someone, anyone, to come to their rescue. Martin tried to get Saudi Arabia to finance South Vietnam's continuing war effort. But the Saudis, who could recognize a losing cause when they saw it, politely declined. Martin also resisted efforts at humanitarian assistance, fearing that such aid would convince the South Vietnamese that the U.S. officials had concluded their cause was hopeless. Further, Martin delayed as long as possible before ordering the evacuation of all U.S. personnel, their dependents, and those South Vietnamese who had worked for the Americans.[34]

General Thieu, convinced that the Americans were not going to send South Vietnam any more military aid or intervene to try and save his country, resigned on April 21. That evening, Thieu spoke for the last time to his countrymen. Most of his 90-minute televised speech amounted to a tearful and often hysterical defense of his leadership and a bitter attack on his long-time ally, the United States. He excoriated the United States for "running away." He denounced Henry Kissinger for having forced him to sign the Paris Accords and then refusing to honor former President Nixon's pledges of support when North Vietnam renewed its aggression in violation of the Accords.

> Kissinger didn't see that the agreement led the Vietnamese people to death. . . . The United States has not respected its promises. It is unfair. It is inhumane. It is not trustworthy. It is not responsible.[35]

Four days after resigning, General Thieu boarded a C-118 transport plane provided by the CIA and fled his country for Taiwan.

Thieu's successor was elderly Tran Van Huong, the RVN vice president, who, during his few days in office, tried futilely to seek a negotiated settlement of the war. The North Vietnamese, positioning their forces for a final assault on Saigon, had no time for desperate eleventh-hour proposals for a political solution to a war that they were winning on the battlefield. On April 22 local time, General Dung signed the order to begin the conquest of Saigon. At that moment, 10 PAVN divisions encircled the defenseless city.

On April 23, speaking to a large audience at the Tulane University field house, President Ford made the U.S. abandonment of South Vietnam official. He urged Americans to forget about the Vietnam War and avoid arguments about who was to blame for its disastrous outcome. He told the crowd:

> America can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned.[36]

As Ford uttered the magic word, "finished," the predominantly student audience of 4,500 erupted with frenzied whistling, cheering, clapping,

foot-stomping, and shouting that lasted for several minutes. The president had given voice to the national mood existing at the moment the PAVN forces readied themselves to win their final victory of the long Vietnam War.

The End Days of South Vietnam

As the PAVN/PLAF forces drove relentlessly toward their final triumph during the last days of April 1975, the contrast in the national mood with what it had been nearly ten years earlier when President Johnson had sent the U.S. armed forces off to fight a land war in Southeast Asia could not have been greater. That combination of pride, arrogance, innocence, crusading anti-Communism, and expectations of a quick and easy triumph that had propelled the country into the war had long vanished. During those woeful final days, the national mood was dominated by an overwhelming desire to be rid at last of an endless war. It was a war that had already cost far more in lives and dollars than any worst-case scenarist could have imagined at its outset. A nation badly divided by political and cultural crises exacerbated by the nation's longest war wanted only for the war to cease. As the Saigon government, which the United States had helped create and sustained for over 20 years, suffered its death agonies at the end of April 1975, most Americans averted their eyes.

The PAVN and VietCong forces had the city by the throat; their tanks and artillery were ready and their troops were positioned for attack. But for a few days they held back to allow the Americans and those Vietnamese who had worked for the U.S. officials to leave. Within the doomed city, thousands of Vietnamese tried desperately to escape. Everywhere, Americans were accosted by Vietnamese brandishing letters and documents, pleading for a way out of their country. To facilitate the evacuation of South Vietnamese nationals, the U.S. Congress hastily approved legislation waiving entry restrictions for 150,000 Indochinese aliens, including 50,000 high-risk Vietnamese. Each day, thousands of Vietnamese flew out of Tan Son Nhut Airport onboard C-141s and C-130s that formed a round-the-clock airlift to freedom.

On April 27, the PAVN launched its first attack on Saigon, a rocket barrage that they deliberately aimed at densely populated areas of the city: downtown Saigon and the suburb of Cholon. The rockets killed and wounded hundreds of people. On the same day, Nhu Tang Troung resigned the GVN presidency. The South Vietnamese Assembly then replaced Troung with General Doung Van Minh, the man who had briefly headed the military directorate that had replaced Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963. The Assembly charged Minh with the task of restoring peace to South Vietnam. The PAVN commander quickly made it unmistakably clear that the only political settlement he would consider accepting from General Minh would be unconditional surrender.[37]

On April 28, fighting erupted along the outskirts of Saigon. Late in the day, the only NVAF air strike of the entire war hit Tan Son Nhut Air Base. Five American-built A-37s destroyed or damaged several aircraft parked along the

main runways and disrupted the U.S. airlift for several hours. The attack had been led by a VNAF defector, Lieutenant Nguyen Thanh Trung. Now a captain in the North Vietnamese Air Force, Trung had trained a group of MIG pilots to fly the A-37s that had been captured from the South Vietnamese earlier in the 1975 offensive.[38]

Early on the morning of April 29, the NVA launched a rocket attack on Tan Son Nhut Airport. The first rockets slammed into a Marine guard post. They killed Lance Corporal Darwin Judge and Corporal Charles McMahon, Jr. Corporals Judge and McMahon were the last U.S. casualties of the Vietnam War, the last of more than 58,000 who were killed. Shortly after the first rocket barrages struck, long-range artillery shells began falling on the air base. The rocket and artillery barrages forced the fixed-wing airlift operations to shut down.

President Ford then ordered the final phase of the Saigon evacuation, codenamed **Operation Frequent Wind**, to begin. It was a massive helilift designed to remove the remaining Americans and the eligible Vietnamese and third-country nationals from the surrounded city and fly them to a large fleet of U.S. naval ships stationed some 40 miles out to sea. Buses navigated the crowded city streets to designated pickup sites, gathered the evacuees, and hauled them to Tan Son Nhut Airport and the waiting helicopters. At every assembly site, the number of people waiting to board the buses vastly exceeded their carrying capacities. Thousands of eligible Vietnamese never got evacuated.[39] By afternoon, the entire city had dissolved into chaos. Frenzied mobs roamed the streets. Vandals overturned cars and set fire to buildings. Looters ransacked homes and apartments. A crowd of perhaps 10,000 Vietnamese converged on the U.S. embassy either in the hope of finding a way out or to vent their rage at the departing Americans. Marine security guards, standing atop the compound walls, used their rifle butts and boots to beat back the hordes of Vietnamese trying to get onto the embassy grounds. Nevertheless, several thousand Vietnamese managed either to climb the walls or to storm the gates. Angry South Vietnamese soldiers on the streets outside of the embassy grounds fired at the departing helicopters leaving them behind.

By 8:00 P.M., the evacuation from Tan Son Nhut Airport had been completed. The last Americans to depart the airport were a detachment of Marine security guards who had been assisting the evacuees. Before the Marines boarded the last helicopter, they prepared the Defense Attache Office complex for destruction. Formerly the headquarters of MACV, the buildings had symbolized for a decade the U.S. commitment to defend South Vietnam. From their vantage point aboard the helicopter ascending into the night, the departing Marines watched the structures that had housed sophisticated communications equipment, secret documents, and a vault containing $3.5 million in the U.S. currency collapse into rubble.[40]

During the early morning hours of April 30, helicopters flying from the American embassy made the last evacuations of the Vietnam War. Just before 5:00 A.M., a weary Ambassador Martin and his senior staff members departed

the embassy. But there were not nearly enough places onboard the available helicopters to evacuate all of the remaining Vietnamese and third-country nationals. 420 people were left behind on embassy grounds. Looking down at the stranded people milling about helplessly as his helicopter headed for the open sea, one of the U.S. officials could think "of no word in any language adequate to describe the sense of shame that swept over me."[41] The last Americans to leave Vietnam were the Marine security forces who had barricaded themselves on the embassy rooftop to await the final helicopters that would take them to the waiting ships. As the last U.S. helicopter lifted off, Sergeant Juan Valdez observed Vietnamese evacuees trying to push their way through the still-barricaded door, waving papers at the sky to show that they too should be allowed to leave Vietnam.

At about noon, North Vietnamese tanks rumbled by the American embassy headed for Independence Palace, the South Vietnamese capitol and official residence of President Minh. Alongside the tanks rolled trucks crammed with young PAVN soldiers. As it approached the Palace grounds, the lead tank barreled through the steel front gate, smashing it down. The tanks gathered in a semicircle facing the entrance to the Palace, their big guns trained on the capitol. In a gesture of triumph, a lone soldier, waving a huge blue and red flag emblazoned with the yellow star of the National Liberation Front, raced up the steps of the Palace. PRG officials announced over radio Saigon that the city had been liberated. In Paris, DRV envoys announced that Saigon had been renamed Ho Chi Minh City. Inside Independence Palace, President Minh awaited the victors in his office. As they approached, he tried to surrender to the senior officer present, PAVN Colonel Bui Tin, but Tin curtly informed him that all power had already passed into the hands of the revolution: "You cannot give up what you do not have."[42] Minh and the other RVN officials who had assembled in his office were taken into custody.

On May 8, a large crowd gathered in front of the presidential palace to hear the head of the new provisional government, General Tran Van Tra, proclaiming the triumph of the Vietnamese revolution. He swept the Republic of Vietnam onto the ash heap of history. America's limited war fought in Indochina to contain the expansion of Communism had failed.

We Lost, They Won, Why?

The United States failed to achieve its goals in Vietnam—to create an independent nation in the southern half of Vietnam to contain the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia. But America was not a defeated nation. Its power and interests remained global in scope. Although there is no consensus (and probably there never will be) among scholars of the American war in Vietnam, many, including the author of this book, believe that the American effort at nation-building, assisting in the creation of an independent South Vietnam, was probably doomed to fail from the outset. The Republic of South Vietnam could never have become a viable nation-state. It could never

overcome its neo-colonial origins as a puppet government, an instrument of Western imperialism.[43] From Ngo Dinh Diem's to Nguyen Van Thieu's, every one of the succession of inept and corrupt governments strongly supported by the United States failed to develop a popular base of support, achieve political stability, or unite a politically fragmented people. They also all failed to enlist the loyalties of or appeal to the self-interest of most peasant villagers who made up the large majority of their citizenry. Failure to achieve local legitimacy ultimately doomed the South Vietnamese cause. American firepower killed and wounded huge numbers of PLAF and NVA soldiers, but it could not eradicate the Vietnamese national revolution or its appeal. It could never win the hearts and minds of a majority of the Vietnamese peasantry for a succession of South Vietnamese governments. Since the South Vietnamese government lacked the will to fight and Pentagon planners never devised strategies that could achieve victory, only a Communist triumph could bring peace to southern Vietnam.

Because they never acquired legitimacy in the eyes of the majority of their people, South Vietnam's governments never acquired the ability to defend themselves from the revolutionary war waged unrelentingly against them for nearly 20 years. With or without the U.S. backing, there never was a viable political alternative to the revolutionary nationalism that swept Vietnam after 1945. The United States and its succession of client governments in South Vietnam could never solve the essential South Vietnamese conundrum: how to achieve a stable political order without supporting revolutionary changes.[44]

In the early 1950s, both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations openly supported the failing French effort to re-impose colonialism on the Vietnamese people with money and arms. Following the failure of the French cause in 1954, the United States intervened to try to create a new nation-state in southern Vietnam in violation of the Geneva Accords. By the early 1960s, the United States significantly increased its support of the Republic of South Vietnam, which was trying to defend itself against the resurgent revolutionaries, now committed to winning control over the entire country and reuniting it under their rule.

In the summer of 1965, perceiving that the South Vietnamese government was nearing collapse despite massive U.S. economic and military aid, Americans assumed the major burden of the fighting against the VietCong insurgents. After 1969, when a majority of the American people turned against the Vietnam War, America shifted the burden of the fighting back to its South Vietnamese clients. But Vietnamization never worked, and probably could have never worked. The South Vietnamese state remained dependent on the United States for its security and survival. When all of the U.S. soldiers went home in 1973 and Congress curtailed its support for the RVN, when they were on their own, their cause became hopeless.

But the failure of the South Vietnamese state to establish itself and survive is not just the story of the failure of a succession of inept, corrupt, elite-based governments to develop a strong political base and acquire the ability

to defend themselves. And it is not just the story of a major U.S. foreign policy failure, the failure of a succession of American administrations, from Truman's through Ford's, to develop effective aid, counterinsurgency, and pacification programs, or effective military strategies that could neutralize the revolutionary war strategies of the National Liberation Front and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

To understand the outcome of the Vietnamese revolution, the focus must necessarily be on the North Vietnamese and the southern insurgents, and on the myriad of factors that enabled them to ultimately prevail after a three-decades-long struggle. The focus must be on local, particular Vietnamese realities. It was not easy; the Communists made a lot of mistakes over the years. They launched three major offensives, in 1964, in 1968, and again in 1972; all were failures that cost the DRV and the NLF dearly in blood and treasure.

They enjoyed many advantages during the long war, and they made skillful use of them all. They had able and determined leaders from Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap to Le Duan and Van Tien Dung, and their associates. At the local level where the revolution played out, local cadres organized villages, indoctrinated soldiers, and penetrated all levels of the South Vietnamese civilian and military bureaucracies. Although the revolutionary leaders were all committed Communist ideologues, they were also ardent Vietnamese nationalists. They harnessed the powerful patriotic feelings of most Vietnamese to their cause—to reunify the fatherland under Vietnamese leadership that was independent of all foreign influences. They also appealed to the xenophobia of the Vietnamese, whose 2,000-year history had conditioned them to hate and fear foreigners, especially powerful foreigners like the Chinese, French, and the Americans, who came to exploit them and to impose their cultures. Their social reform agenda, particularly the promise of land to poor and landless peasants who constituted the bulk of Vietnamese rural populations, enabled them to rally the masses to their cause. For the peasant masses, the revolution had a powerful dual appeal: to their patriotic feelings (a unified, independent, and sovereign Vietnamese nation) and to their economic self-interest (land of their own).

The Vietnamese revolutionary leaders also skillfully exploited the rivalry between the major Communist powers, the Soviet Union and the Chinese, to extract the economic and military aid from both nations that the Vietnamese had to have in order to have a chance to win the war. They got the aid they required and they played one powerful ally against the other without compromising their cause or independence. They retained their autonomy, and in so doing, they demonstrated how small powers can exert leverage on great powers.

Drawing on the rich warrior tradition of Vietnamese history as well as on modern Chinese models of revolutionary warfare, the DRV leaders fashioned a complex, sophisticated, and ultimately successful strategy of "people's warfare," a form of protracted warfare that shrewdly blended military, diplomatic, and political tactics. They heeded the lessons of their own national

historical experience. They knew that if they were patient, retained the tactical initiative, avoided battles where they could suffer ruinous losses, and inflicted sizable casualties on the invaders over a lengthy time period, then Americans would tire of the war and go home, just as the French did before them, and the Chinese before the French.

The Vietnamese revolutionaries had not prepared for the rapid and total victory they attained at the end of April 1975. As they planned the Final Offensive, they had anticipated that their path to power would be gradual. During the transitional period, there would be two separate governments, the DRV in northern Vietnam, and a new provisional government in southern Vietnam. Within the new southern government to be created, the DRV would share power with the NLF, that is with their governing structure the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), and probably non-Communist elements from General Thieu's government.

When the ARVN collapsed and South Vietnam rapidly disintegrated in the spring of 1975, Hanoi realized that there would be no need for a transitional period of shared governance. A provisional government, the Military Management Commission, headed by General Tran Van Tra was quickly established. At a reunification conference held in November 1975, the Politburo promulgated its plan for creating a single national government of a united Vietnamese nation. During the first session of the National Assembly meeting in June 1976, the new united nation was officially named the Socialist Republic of Vietnam **(SRV).**

When the revolutionaries finally achieved their goals of independence and national reunification after a long hard struggle, they found that they governed an impoverished nation whose physical environment, economy, and social fabric had been battered by decades of war. Most nations that have lost wars have sustained proportionately far fewer casualties and suffered much less physical, economic, and social damage than did the victorious North Vietnamese.

The U.S. officials defended the long American involvement in Vietnam as an effort to maintain political stability in Southeast Asia. The domino correlative with America's containment ideology magnified the significance of the endeavor to create a pro-Western and non-Communist alternative to revolutionary nationalism in southern Vietnam: the larger U.S. mission in Indochina was always defined as preventing the spread of Chinese and Soviet influence throughout Southeast Asia. Successive U.S. administrations perceived Vietnam as a conduit of Communist expansionism that had to be closed to keep southern Vietnam, the rest of Indochina, and the nations of Southeast Asian within the Western orbit. For Americans, Vietnam was always about much more than Vietnam.

At every stage of the U.S. involvement in Indochina, it was always of great importance to the U.S. officials to maintain America's credibility. The U.S. officials backed the French effort to re-impose colonialism on the Vietnamese to maintain credibility with the French that the United States was their

staunch ally who would support their efforts to resist Communist expansion whether it occurred in Southeast Asia or Europe.

The U.S. officials embarked on a nation-building crusade in southern Vietnam to show their allies that they could protect vulnerable nations from falling like so many dominoes to Communism, and to show the Soviets and Chinese that "wars of national liberation" could not succeed. To maintain credibility with the South Vietnamese that the United States would stand by them no matter what, the U.S. officials launched a devastating aerial war against North Vietnam. To demonstrate to the world that Americans had learned the hard lessons of Munich, Lyndon Johnson Americanized the Vietnam War by putting in a half-million ground combat forces. And for years, to prove to the North Vietnamese that they could not achieve via negotiations what they could not win on the battlefields of Vietnam, the U.S. officials backed a succession of South Vietnamese governments and refused to make the necessary concessions that could produce a settlement.[45]

In the aftermath of the Communist takeover of Indochina, the elaborate edifice of international economic and political relations that the United States had constructed in the Far East during the 1950s and 1960s did not crumble. In the years since the end of the Indochina Wars, the non-Communist nations of Southeast Asia have enjoyed unprecedented stability and prosperity.

The outcome of the American Indochina War suggested that the containment ideology itself had been misapplied. A policy developed to contain the spread of Soviet influence into Southern and Central Europe could not be applied effectively to the regional conflicts and civil wars of Southeast Asia. Following the triumph of Communist forces in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, there were no more Communist takeovers in Southeast Asia. Communist influence did not reach beyond Indochina. Outside of Cambodia and Laos, countries that had become extensions of the Vietnam War, which is more accurately termed the Second Indochina War, the dominoes never fell.

Within Indochina, the Communist dominoes soon crashed into one another. Military victory only accentuated the deep internal divisions within the Communist world. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge leadership implemented a savage reign of terror that cost between 1 and 2 million lives. The Vietnamese, nursing an expansionist agenda of their own, invaded Cambodia in 1978 and overthrew the Khmer Rouge regime it had previously helped bring to power. Hanoi established a replacement regime, a puppet government in Phnom Penh supported by Vietnamese troops.

China, which had close ties with Cambodia, responded to Vietnamese imperialism in Cambodia by invading the SRV and provoking a short, sharp border war between the two Communist nations. The war, known as the Sino-Vietnamese War, sometimes called the Third Indochina War, is rendered in Vietnamese as *Chien tranh bien giori Viet-Trung***.** On February 17, 1979, China sent approximately 220,000 ground combat soldiers, supported by tank and artillery regiments, into northern Vietnam. There ensued a brief war between the two erstwhile allies. The Chinese forces advanced quickly into northern

Vietnam, with fighting occurring in three far northern Vietnamese provinces in the mountainous border regions. The Chinese then launched attacks on major provincial capitals and communication centers. Battles erupted at Cao Bang, Lang Son, and Quang Ninh. The Chinese People's Liberation Army **(PLA)** strategy consisted mainly of trying to lure PAVN main force units into action to try to inflict heavy casualties.

But the battle-tested Vietnamese military, which had been almost continuously at war for more than 30 years, easily evaded the crude Chinese operations plan. They did not allow themselves to be lured into fighting an attrition-style war. They did not commit their main force units to confrontational battles with the PLA nor did they withdraw their forces from Cambodia, which had been one of the goals of the invaders. Instead, the Vietnamese withdrew their forces from the provincial capitals and retreated to the surrounding hills and montane ridges. The Vietnamese then attacked from all sides and inflicted heavy casualties on the Chinese. Confused, suffering sizeable losses of men and materiel, and worried that the Soviet Union, the SLV's staunchest ally, might intervene, the Chinese headed back toward their homeland. By March 16, all of the PLA forces were back on Chinese soil and the short war was over.

In the aftermath of the month-long war, both sides claimed victory. Chinese spokesman stated that the invasion had accomplished its goals. They had punished the Vietnamese for their imperialism in Cambodia and they had reinforced the international community's opposition to Vietnam's use of military forces to occupy another country and impose an unpopular regime. The Chinese also claimed that they had demonstrated that the Soviet Union could not protect Vietnam nor project its power into the countries comprising the former Indochina. For their part, the Vietnamese claimed that they had retained the necessary control in Cambodia to protect the Cambodian people from the savagery of the Pol Pot regime. They had inflicted major damage on the Chinese invaders and had protected their homeland without ever committing their major armies. Both sides suffered major personnel losses. Accurate numbers are hard to come by, but the Chinese lost an estimated 25,000 soldiers killed, and the Vietnamese perhaps half that many. The PLA, which had not fought a war in decades, was embarrassed by its poor combat performance. The SRV's foray into imperialism in Cambodia cost it some luster in the Third World.[46]

The United States, which had gone to war in Vietnam in 1965 to contain Chinese expansionism in Southeast Asia, found itself quietly backing China's efforts to contain Vietnamese expansionism in 1979. In these intramural Communist power struggles for regional hegemony, the Soviets backed the Vietnamese against the Chinese and their Khmer Rouge allies. Clashing perceptions of national interest and historic cultural and national rivalries consistently overrode ideological considerations in guiding the actions of Soviet, Chinese, Vietnamese, and other Indochinese Communist political leaders during the late 1970s.

Within Vietnam itself, the costs of the 30-year war were horrendous, for much of which the Americans must bear direct responsibility: catastrophic human loss and suffering and extensive damage to a fragile pre-industrial economic infrastructure struggling to escape the legacies of French colonial exploitation. Millions of acres of forest and croplands were destroyed. Millions of South Vietnamese were turned into refugees, most of whom poured into the slums and back-alley labyrinths of southern cities. Twenty years of American aid programs had created an artificial consumer economy in South Vietnam that retarded commercial and industrial development. This ersatz economy collapsed during 1974–75 leaving southern Vietnam without a viable urban economic base.

The Costs of a Lost War

Within the United States, following the fall of Saigon, there was no bitter "who lost Vietnam?" debate or a resurgence of McCarthyite redbaiting. That there was no search for scapegoats or the development of "stab-in-the-back" theories of the kind that had contributed to the destabilization of the Weimar Republic came as a pleasant surprise to Cold War intellectuals like Henry Kissinger. He had feared the worst that America would tear itself apart in an orgy of recrimination following the U.S. failure in Vietnam.

Instead of recriminations, historical amnesia set in, symptomatic of moral and political exhaustion. For years, most Americans did not want to think or talk about Vietnam, much less argue about it. Amnesia persisted until the early 1980s when there was a revival of interest in the war and controversy over its lessons and legacies. Conferences and symposia of concerned scholars, journalists who had covered the Vietnam beat, and former civilian and military officials involved in the war convened to examine and explain the war from multiple perspectives. A veritable flood of scholarly and popular literature on the war suddenly issued forth. Hollywood and network television discovered Vietnam, and the war quickly became a staple of popular culture. A conspiracy of silence rapidly gave way to an obsessive interest in the first major foreign war the United States ever lost.

The fallacies of U.S. Cold War ideology may have been exposed by the internecine Communist wars in Indochina and the absence of a McCarthyite backlash at home. Vital American foreign policy interests in the Far East, Middle East, and Europe may have suffered no permanent setbacks following the U.S. withdrawal and subsequent defeat in Vietnam. However, the damage done to the United States by its Vietnam ordeal was nevertheless severe and lasting. George Kennan, the principal architect of America's Cold War foreign policy based on containing Communism's expansionist tendencies, called the Vietnam War "the most disastrous of all America's undertakings over the whole two hundred years of its history." The tragic outcome of the long war, which had consumed over 58,000 lives and left another 300,000 combatants wounded on the eve of the bicentennial, dampened many Americans' enthusiasm for celebrating their nation's 200th birthday.

In addition to the human costs of the war, the economic and financial costs were high. Except for World War II, the Vietnam War cost more than any other war in American history—an estimated $167 billion. President Johnson's efforts to finance simultaneously a major war and Great Society reform programs without imposing major tax increases or economic controls ignited inflation. The long-term economic costs of the Vietnam War were even more serious. The U.S. economy was booming at the time the United States Americanized the war. By the early 1970s, as America gradually disengaged from the war, the U.S. economy had entered an era of relative decline. The Vietnam War accelerated that decline. The war helped launch and sustain the inflationary spiral that weakened many important industries, eroded purchasing power, reduced living standards, and undermined citizen confidence in the American economic system.[47]

The Vietnam War also undermined public faith in the competency and honesty of elected officials and helped force two strong presidents out of office prematurely. It enlarged the administrative state in a nation that lauded private initiative and private-sector solutions to problems. It eroded the value of public service and engendered fear, suspicion, and hatred of government in the hearts and minds of millions of Americans. One of the legacies of the Vietnam War has been the persistent distrust of governmental institutions and the officials who run them.[48]

The Vietnam War shattered the bipartisan consensus that had guided American foreign policy since the late 1940s, and it inaugurated an era of confusion and conflict that has never been entirely resolved. The losing war also demonstrated that America's vast wealth and powerful military technology could not defeat a poor Third World nation determined to achieve national reunification, nor could the United States support forever an ineffective regime that lacked a popular base of support and the will to fight.

Americans also discovered that there were limits to American power and limits to the burdens the American people would shoulder in pursuit of foreign policy objectives. For the first time since the Cold War began, many Americans questioned the validity of their global mission to contain Communism. Some analysts believed that the nation had overreached its capabilities and thereby had entered an era of relative economic and strategic decline. The U.S. stature in the world declined for a time as a consequence of the U.S. defeat in Vietnam. The Vietnam experience discredited military service for years. Following the cancellation of the draft, the military services struggled to recruit enough personnel to meet minimal staffing levels.

A bitter controversy erupted over whether hundreds of thousands of draft evaders, resisters, and deserters should be granted amnesty or severely punished for their violations of Selective Service laws. The debate perpetuated the war-sown divisions between doves and hawks. The Vietnam War was the most controversial and least popular war in the U.S. history. It divided Americans more deeply than any conflict since the Civil War. Most Americans had become disillusioned with the national crusade to save South Vietnam from

Communism and had stopped supporting the U.S. war effort long before it ended. Millions of Americans opposed the Vietnam War, and upward of a million of those opponents actively demonstrated their opposition.

The gravest damage done to America by the Vietnam War occurred in the realm of the spirit. It was a deep wound within the national psyche. The ultimate domino was America's mythic conception of itself. Before Vietnam, America's most cherished vision of itself was expressed in the famed metaphor of "a shining city upon a hill." America's mission in the world was to redeem history. In secular terms, America's mission was to set a democratic example to guide and inspire the rest of the world. America's post-World War II foreign policy was founded on the principle of thwarting the spread of Communism to preserve the sphere of freedom, the empire of liberty, in the world. America sent its citizen-soldiers to southern Vietnam to save its inhabitants from the evil embrace of expanding Communism. But once launched upon their errand into the wilderness of Vietnam, Americans discovered that the red-white-and-blue alternative to revolutionary nationalism was only death and destruction and, ultimately, defeat for their soldiers and for the Vietnamese people that they had tried so hard for so long to help. The lofty American conception of itself perished in the jungles, swamps, and rice paddies of southern Vietnam.

Notes

1 Kissinger linked the return of the POWs to the departure of the final contingents of U.S. ground forces to ensure that these provisions of the Paris agreements were carried out.
2 Wallace Terry, ed., *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Ballantine, 1984), 281–83.
3 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 257; Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 305; Prados, *Vietnam*, 518–19. As the War of the Flags began, ARVN lost on average 1,000 troops per month fighting the PLAF and PAVN forces during 1973 and 1974.
4 Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 162–65.
5 Hess, *Vietnam*, 136.
6 Denton's statement is taken from Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 311.
7 Porter, "Statement by the Provisional Revolutionary Government Foreign Ministry," November 2, 1973, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 345, 642–45; Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 302–5.
8 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 312–13.
9 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 341, 639; "Fulbright-Aiken Amendment—Public Law 93–52, Section 108," July 1, 1973; Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 143, 226–28, 234–37.
10 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 741–42; Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 173–74; Prados, *Vietnam*, 520–21.
11 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 261–62.
12 In mid-1974, total RVNAF forces numbered about 1.1 million. The VietCong and PAVN forces in the South totaled about 240,000.
13 Quote is from Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 167; Hess, *Vietnam*, 136–37.
14 Lipsman et al., *The False Peace*, 138.
15 Quote is from Hess, *Vietnam*, 137.

16 Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 173–74; Lipsman et al., *The False Peace*, 140–41; Prados, *Vietnam*, 523–25.
17 Lipsman et al., *The False Peace*, 182–83.
18 Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 313–21; Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 207–9.
19 Quote is from Hess, *Vietnam*, 138.
20 Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: An Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End Told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 116–24.
21 Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, vol. 2, Document 351, 658–59, "General Dung's Account of the October Political Bureau Conference," (extract). Dung conceded that the U.S. intervention remained a possibility, but he also stated that even if the Americans did reenter the war, they could not save Thieu's government from collapse. Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 306–8; Merle L. Pribbenow, *North Vietnam's Final Offensive: Strategic Endgame Nonpareil.* Article in *Parameters*, Winter 1999–2000, 58–71.
22 Lipsman et al., *The False Peace*, 182–83.
23 Duiker, *The Communist Road*, 308–9; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 762–64; Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 331–35; Pribbenow, *North Vietnam's Final Offensive*, 58–71.
24 Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 345–52; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 770–74; Clark Dougan, David Fulghum, and the editors of Boston Publishing, *The Fall of the South*, *The Vietnam Experience* (Boston, MA: Boston Publishing Co., 1985), 48–52.
25 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 774–77; Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 353–56; Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 179–81; Pribbenow, *North Vietnam's Final Offensive*, 58–71.
26 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 777–79; Dougan et al., *Fall of the South*, 56–63.
27 Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 366–71; Dougan et al., *Fall of the South*, 81–82; CBS television documentary, "Vietnam: A War That Is Finished," first shown in August 1975.
28 Hess, *Vietnam*, 138.
29 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 321–22.
30 Ibid., 322–23.
31 Quoted in Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 281–82. See his chap. 8, "Fall of the Khmer Republic," 241–89.
32 Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 173–80; Hess, *Vietnam*, 145–47.
33 Ibid., 407–13; Dougan et al., *Fall of the South*, 107–8, 118–21, 127–29. Although it rejected Ford's request for military assistance, Congress authorized a final $300 million that the president had requested to provide humanitarian aid and to pay the costs of the evacuation from South Vietnam.
34 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 324.
35 Thieu's remarks quoted in Hess, *Vietnam*, 140; Snepp, *Decent Interval*, 392–97. According to Morley Safer, as he left his country, Thieu took several suitcases containing "heavy metal," presumably gold bullion.
36 Ford's remarks were recorded on CBS video, "Vietnam: A War That Is Finished."
37 Dougan et al., *Fall of the South*, 154–55.
38 Ibid., 157–58.
39 Ibid., 163–64.
40 Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 4; Dougan et al., *Fall of the South*, 163–64.
41 Quoted in Dougan et al., *Fall of the South*, 171.
42 Colonel Tin's remarks are quoted in Hess, *Vietnam*, 140; Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 447.
43 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3d ed., 298; Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991). In detailing the various South Vietnamese and American pacification efforts in a specific locale, Bergerud discovered that nothing they could do could overcome the Saigon government's lack of local legitimacy.

The Phoenix program badly damaged the NFL infrastructure in Hau Nghia province, but the Saigon government could never replace it; David L. Anderson, *The Vietnam War and Its Enduring Relevance*, in *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 72.

44 Gilbert, Marc Jason, ed. *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* (New York: Palgrave, 2002). Gilbert, *Editorial Introduction*, 7–8.

45 Had the U.S. forces threatened the North Vietnamese regime with extinction, the Chinese would probably have intervened militarily to preserve it. China acquired nuclear weapons by 1964, nuclear missiles by 1966, and thermonuclear ("hydrogen") bombs by 1967. Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–75* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 33–36; Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 329.

46 MacFarquhar, Roderick, *The People's Republic, Part 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 447–49.

47 Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 329.

48 Galambos, Louis, "Separating the Wheat from the Chaff: Vietnam's Implications for the Future," unpublished paper delivered at the Fourteenth Military Symposium on "Vietnam, 1964–1975: An American Dilemma," held at the United States Air Force Academy October 19, 1990.

13 Legacies of a Lost War

The Endless War, 1975–92

Although the American War in Vietnam ended in early 1973 with the signing of the Paris Accords, the removal of all remaining U.S. troops, and the return of the POWs, the United States did not normalize relations with its former enemies for over 20 years. For more than two decades, the United States, embarrassed and embittered by the outcome of the Second Indochina War, continued to regard the Communist government of Vietnam as an enemy. It rejected all requests to normalize relations or develop commercial ties. Washington also endeavored to keep Vietnam isolated from the world family of nations, and refused to allow it to become a member of the United Nations or participate in the developing global economy.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the Ford administration took a hard line toward its former enemies. The U.S. officials were angered by the exodus of some 125,000 terrified refugees fleeing Vietnam that began soon after the fall of Saigon and the final departure of remaining Americans. The refugees were mostly former RVN officials, former RVNAF officers, former contract employees of the U.S. government and their families.[1] A wartime embargo that had applied only to North Vietnam was extended to include all of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger claimed that Hanoi's violations of the Paris Accords provided a legal basis for the U.S. actions. The Ford administration also refused to pay any of the $3.25 billion in reparations that former President Nixon had promised in writing to Pham Van Dong at the time of the signing of the Paris Accords to help pay for the postwar reconstruction of Vietnam.[2] Most Americans retained no interest in either Vietnam or the Vietnamese people now that the war was over and all U.S. civilian and military personnel serving in Vietnam had been extracted. The only issue that aroused any public interest was the fate of the American soldiers missing in action **(MIAs).**

President Ford "made normalization contingent on Vietnam's restraint toward its neighbors and a full accounting of U.S. soldiers missing in action."[3] Under the terms of the Paris Agreements, the responsibility for resolving the question of the MIAs devolved upon the four-party Joint Military Team **(JMT)** made up of members from the United States, South Vietnam, North

Vietnam, and the PRG. The Americans on the JMT quickly discovered that the Communists were in no hurry to resolve the MIA issue. Hanoi preferred to use the information that its officials had on the fate of some of the MIAs as bargaining chips. The Communists linked furnishing information on the fate of the MIAs to progress on unrelated issues. The emotionally charged MIA issue lingered long after the Vietnam War ended even though all but one of the MIAs had been declared legally dead. The exception was maintained to symbolize continuing official efforts to extract a full accounting of the fate of the missing men from the recalcitrant Vietnamese.[4]

The Vietnamese had an opportunity to improve relations with the United States in 1977, when Jimmy Carter, who favored normalizing relations, took office. He made normalizing relations conditional upon Vietnam giving a full and proper accounting of the 2,387 American servicemen who were listed as MIAs. But the Vietnamese insisted on linking progress on the MIA issue with payment of the $3.25 billion that was promised to them by Nixon. The Carter administration, acknowledging no legal obligation to pay reparations, refused to accept that linkage.

Conflicts among China and the nations of Southeast Asia complicated efforts by the Americans and Vietnamese to move toward normalizing relations. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge murdered hundreds of thousands of urban dwellers and another million or more Cambodians starved to death or died of diseases. Vietnam invaded Cambodia at the end of 1978, overthrew Pol Pot's murderous regime, and installed a new government under the Cambodian leader Hun Sen. Prince Sihanouk, the former ruler of Cambodia, opposed Sen, and was supported by China. The PRC invaded Vietnam and fought a short bloody war with the Vietnamese. The Soviets backed the Vietnamese and the United States backed China in these conflicts because we viewed the PRC as a counter to the growing influence of the Soviet Union in Southeast Asia.

With Vietnam embroiled in those intramural wars among the Communist nations of Southeast Asia and with Cold War imperatives inclining the United States to back the PRC, play down the Cambodian tragedy, and oppose Vietnamese and Soviet imperialism, the Carter administration, which succeeded in establishing diplomatic relations with China in 1979, showed little interest in normalizing relations with Vietnam. Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union deteriorated rapidly in the late 1970s because of Soviet intrusion in the Middle East and their invasion of Afghanistan. Carter also had to try to arrange for the release of U.S. hostages taken prisoners in Iran by rogue supporters of the revolutionary regime recently come to power in that country. Little progress was made on the MIA issue during the final phase of Carter's presidency. No reparations were ever paid to the Vietnamese.

For many years, the two major obstacles to normalizing relations between the two nations were Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia and the POW/MIA issue. Most of the missing people were flyers whose planes had gone down over water or over Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia during the war and whose fate was yet unknown.

When Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, he promised the families of the MIAs that he would make a vigorous effort to resolve the matter. But Reagan's attention was focused on the global competition with the Soviet Union and trying to overthrow the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, which the Reagan administration viewed as a Communist outpost in Central America.[5]

The U.S. officials repeatedly stated that they had no evidence that any American servicemen were alive or being held against their will anywhere in Indochina. The National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia continued to demand an accounting from Hanoi and from the U.S. government for the 2,393 people they regarded as missing. Opportunists, adventurers, publicity seekers, and con artists got involved in the controversies enveloping the MIAs. They conducted raids, searches, and expeditions over the years into Indochina to try to find or account for some of the missing men. Many people insisted that they saw or heard of live POWs being held in Laos or Vietnam, although no live Americans were ever found. The families of MIAs charged the U.S. government with covering up evidence they had of Americans still being held in Indochinese prisons. The Vietnamese repeatedly denied that they kept any POWs at the time of the repatriation or that they had any MIAs in custody. They also offered to cooperate with the U.S. officials to account for the missing people.[6]

Toward the end of his presidency, Reagan abandoned his hard-line Cold War stance and shifted toward *détente* with the Soviet Union. He developed closer ties with the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reformist regime, which was also moving toward reducing Cold War tensions. Within Vietnam, facing losses of aid and support from the Soviet Union, reformers introduced some state-managed capitalist-style changes called *Doi Moi* (in English Renovation). Reagan appointed General John Vesey as his personal emissary to meet with the Vietnamese to discuss the fate of the MIAs. Out of these meetings came a signed agreement between the two countries to cooperate on searching for MIAs. The Vesey mission marked a turning point in the U.S. relations with Vietnam. The path to normalization was now clear.[7]

For George H. W. Bush, who came to power in 1989, Vietnam was not a high priority and he continued the incremental approach taken by General Vesey. In April 1991, Senator John McCain visited Vietnam for the first time since his repatriation in 1973. He brought a proposal from President Bush for bilateral cooperation leading in the near future to normalizing relations. The Vietnamese had recently removed their troops from Cambodia, a development that made it easier for Bush to make his proposal. The Vietnamese responded positively.

In the summer of 1992, a Senate Select Committee chaired by Senator John Kerry, also a Vietnam veteran, held extensive hearings on the POW/MIA issue. In sensational testimony before the committee, former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger acknowledged that at the time of the return of the POWs, there may have been some unaccounted for POWs who were left behind in Laos. Ross Perot, a maverick billionaire from Texas who ran

for president as an independent candidate in 1992 and 1996 and who had a long record of involvement with the POW/MIA issue, told the committee that he had evidence of Americans still being held in Laos and Vietnam. Appearing before the Select Committee, Henry Kissinger emphatically denied Schlesinger's and Perot's charges. Kissinger insisted that if he or President Nixon had had any evidence that even one POW had been left behind in March and April 1973, they would have "moved heaven and earth" to retrieve that individual.

Normalizing Relations, 1992–95

A major breakthrough occurred in October 1992, when the Vietnamese announced that they were determined to bring the long-running dispute with the Americans over the MIA situation to a close. Although for years they had denied having such materials in their archives, the Vietnamese suddenly turned over more than 5,000 black-and-white photographs of American servicemen and their personal effects. They also released thousands of supporting documents to accompany the photographs. This treasure trove of photos and documents enabled Washington to resolve many of the MIA cases. Nothing was found in these pictures and papers that suggested there were any live POWs anywhere in Southeast Asia. Le Duc Ahn, the new president of Vietnam, was the person primarily responsible for his country's new cooperativeness with the United States on the POW/MIA issue. Ahn's primary goal was to signal to the United States that he was ready to meet Washington's prime requirement for establishing diplomatic relations and lifting the boycott. In December 1992, President Bush allowed the U.S. companies to open offices in Vietnam.

Polls taken over the years revealed that a large majority of Americans supported the policy of non-recognition of Vietnam, the embargo, and the efforts to isolate that country from the international community. Critics contended that the non-recognition policy did not serve American national interests, because it drove the Vietnamese into the hands of the Soviets. It also deprived the American business community of profitable trade and investment opportunities in a developing country where the U.S. capital and technology were sorely needed. Additionally, many veterans of the Vietnam War argued that diplomatic recognition of Vietnam was a prerequisite for the reconciliation between the Americans and Vietnamese that must come after the long war between them. Many Vietnamese, both officially and privately, indicated that they bore Americans no ill will and wanted them to return as tourists and investors.

In 1993, the Clinton administration cautiously moved toward normalizing relations. Vietnam had clearly met the U.S. standards for recognition. The boycott was ineffective; other nations were investing capital in many Vietnamese enterprises and developing trade ties with that country. Wall Street pressured Washington to lift the embargo and allow the U.S. companies a

crack at major Asian markets. A public opinion poll taken in 1993 showed for the first time that a majority of Americans supported normalizing relations with Vietnam.

Clinton lifted the embargo in February 1994. Thirty U.S. corporations opened branch offices in Vietnam the day after the boycott ended. Thus began, in historian George Herring's words, "the battle for Vietnamese hearts and wallets."[8] But the U.S. trade and investment prospects initially appeared modest. Inept and corrupt Vietnamese bureaucrats were more of a hindrance than a help in promoting foreign trade and investment. Vietnamese industries did not produce goods that American consumers were likely to buy, nor could most Vietnamese, with an annual per capita income of $180.00, buy many U.S. products.

In January 1995, as a symbolic gesture, the Vietnamese returned the American embassy compound in Ho Chi Minh City to the United States. Representatives of the two nations signed an agreement opening liaison offices in their respective capitals. In a brief, White House ceremony held on the morning of July 11, 1995, President Clinton, who as a graduate student had opposed the Vietnam War and avoided military service, with Senator John McCain, a war hero and former POW, standing by his side, officially extended diplomatic recognition to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The U.S. diplomatic recognition of Vietnam came 50 years after Ho Chi Minh had stood in Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square and, quoting from the American Declaration of Independence, had declared Vietnam to be an independent nation. In making the announcement, Clinton said:

> This moment offers an opportunity to bind up our wounds. They have resisted time for so long. We can now move on to common ground.[9]

Evolving Diplomatic, Commercial, and Strategic Relations, 1995–2020

On May 9, 1997, the U.S. Congressman Douglas "Pete" Peterson, a former U.S. Air Force fighter pilot shot down over North Vietnam in 1966, who spent six and one-half years as a POW in Hanoi, arrived at that city's Noi Bai Airport en route to assuming his duties as the new U.S. ambassador to Vietnam. Peterson was the first American envoy ever posted to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. He was warmly greeted by a large friendly crowd waving both the U.S. and Vietnamese flags. He proved to be enormously popular with the Vietnamese. In 1998, Peterson married Vu Li, a Vietnamese woman serving as an Australian diplomat. "Their marriage was a symbolic step in American-Vietnamese relations."[10]

The warm relations established by American and Vietnamese emissaries masked some grim realities. Despite modest progress as a result of *doi moi*, Vietnam remained one of the poorest countries in the world. Its people, two-thirds of whom still lived in villages and hamlets, worked long hours for low

wages. They also continued to be denied basic human, legal, and political rights. Religious practices were circumscribed for both Buddhists and the 8 million Roman Catholics living in Vietnam. Human Rights Watch routinely put Vietnam on its list of countries with abysmal human rights records. All media remained under tight government control. Teachers, college professors, intellectuals, and artists all had to follow the party line. Anyone openly critical of the Vietnamese Communist Party, the government, or of the economic system risked surveillance, harassment, even prison, not to mention the loss of privileges and opportunities for a good education or a good job. Most Vietnamese citizens were resolutely apolitical, or at least adopted that stance as protective coloration.

Trade unions were controlled by the government and opposition political parties were illegal. Infrastructure industries and services were inadequate. Vietnam appeared to be rich in political and military leaders, but poor in capable personnel trained to develop a modern, high-tech industrial economy. Inept and corrupt managers, lack of investment capital, and backward technologies hindered economic development. A rapidly growing young population threatened to undercut any economic growth that might occur. The gap between rich and poor was widening, and the government was riddled with a corruption that critics claimed was as bad as any in South Vietnam during the war.[11]

During the late 1990s, following a decade of modest growth, the Vietnamese economy entered a period of decline. The growth rate plummeted, unemployment shot upward. Exports lagged, especially the goods produced by inefficient state-owned industries that could not compete in the global economy. Foreign investment also declined sharply, as many would-be investors grew frustrated with inefficient and corrupt Hanoi bureaucrats. Vietnam's economic woes were primarily internal. Vietnam was largely immune from the Asian economic malaise that befell Thailand, South Korea, and other Asian nations in 1998 because Vietnam's antiquated Communist system of political economy kept them largely isolated from the global economic downtown that hurt the other Asian nations.

Responding to pressures generated by a younger, more dynamic generation of capitalist wannabes, the Vietnamese took a few steps toward freeing up their ossified system. A stock market, Hanoi's first, opened in 1999. On July 13, 2000, after years of intense negotiations, the Vietnamese and Americans signed a bilateral trade agreement. It promised increased American investment in Vietnam and the opening of U.S. markets to Vietnamese products. Even so, the U.S. exports to Vietnam for the year 2000 totaled about $300 million. In that year, Americans sold the Mexicans more in three days than we sold the Vietnamese during that entire year.

One significant factor that complicated American-Vietnamese relations at the turn of the twenty-first century was Vietnam's relations with China. China was the regional hegemon, with a long history of dominating Vietnam. The Vietnamese had struggled for a thousand years to cast

off Chinese imperialism then had to fight them off periodically for several hundred years more. As recently as 1979, Vietnam had fought China in a short but bloody war. Conflicts continued between the Vietnam "David" and the China "Goliath" over control of the Spratly and Paracel Islands, two uninhabited archipelagos, each consisting of thousands of tiny reefs, cays, islets, and rocks, which lie about equidistant from the two countries in the South China Sea. They are of little economic or strategic value in and of themselves, but they contain rich fishing grounds and may possess vast deposits of oil and natural gas.

Accompanying the gradual improvement in economic relations between the United States and Vietnam in the last 15 years has been a gradual thawing in diplomatic relations. In September 1999, Madeleine Albright became the first U.S. Secretary of State to visit Hanoi. Her reception was for the most part cordial, if not exactly warm. When she raised the matter of human rights, she received a frosty response and a firm reminder that such issues fell under the rubric of "internal matters." In March 2000, Albright was followed by a visit from William Cohen, the first U.S. Secretary of Defense to visit Hanoi. Meeting with his Vietnamese counterparts, Cohen reached some agreements with them whereby the United States would assist in removing the millions of land mines still planted in the Vietnamese countryside, and undertake joint research into the harmful effects of Agent Orange on the Vietnamese people, its agricultural economy, and physical environment. The U.S. and Vietnamese officials also pledged to continue to cooperate on finding and repatriating the remains of American MIAs.

President Clinton's visit was a major diplomatic event. He arrived in Hanoi on November 16, 2000, for a three-day emotional visit that ended with a dramatic speech in Ho Chi Minh City. Everywhere the president went, he was mobbed in the streets by crowds of excited, joyous Vietnamese in Hanoi as well as Ho Chi Minh City. The Vietnamese are by culture and tradition restrained people, formal and polite, and not given to open displays of emotion. No one had ever received the kind of tumultuous welcome accorded Clinton, who apparently was more popular in Vietnam than he was in the United States at the time. This unprecedented outpouring of emotion may been the main reason why Le Kha Phieu, the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, felt compelled to remind his people that they had fought and sacrificed to achieve their independence—President Clinton was the leader of a country that had waged a long war trying to prevent Vietnam from regaining its independence and control over its territory.

Clinton's popularity with the Vietnamese derived mainly from his personification of the United States, which for a generation of younger Vietnamese symbolized the modern world that they yearned to embrace. They found American "soft power," consumer goods, great universities, and a flourishing popular commercial culture, especially attractive. For the Vietnamese political class, clinging to power and trying to retain as much of their dysfunctional system of political economy as they could, Clinton embodied the volatile

global capitalist world order that they feared to join but understood that they might have to.

To the typical Vietnamese person-in-the-street, Americans, whether it be the president or ordinary Americans visiting Vietnam, were welcome—that they were citizens of a nation that carpet-bombed their country for years, killed an estimated 3 million of its people, turned one-third of the population of southern Vietnam into refugees, left many of its rivers polluted and its forests denuded, and rendered millions of hectares of farmland unsuitable for agriculture for years notwithstanding. Most Vietnamese have either forgotten about these events and forgiven Americans, or were too young to know or care. In 2012, the median age of the Vietnamese population of 90,000,000 was about 22. An estimated two-thirds of the population has been born since the end of the war, the demise of South Vietnam, and the unification of the country under the Communist rule.

By 2006, the United States had become Vietnam's chief export market. For that year, Americans purchased over $6 billion worth of goods. Economic reformers were in power in Hanoi; Vietnam was moving toward a Chinese model of marrying an authoritarian political system with a free market, growth, and export-oriented economic system. Like China, the Communist Party was increasingly Communist in name only. Its claim to legitimacy increasingly chained to its ability to improve living standards and the quality of life enjoyed by the Vietnamese people. Vietnam joined the **World Trade Organization (WTO)** in 2007, an important step toward opening its markets to foreign capital and creating a more attractive investment environment. Vietnamese president Nguyen Minh Triet journeyed to Washington to meet with President George W. Bush on June 22, 2007. Triet was the first Vietnamese head of state to visit the United States since the Vietnam War.

Both countries signed agreements on June 6, 2006, to strengthen defense ties. American warships began visiting Vietnam on goodwill tours. On November 7, 2009, the USS *Lassen*, an Arleigh Burke class frigate, arrived for a formal port call at DaNang. The *Lassen* was under the command of Commander (CDR) Hung Ba Le, the first Vietnamese-American to command a U.S. warship. Le, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, had fled Vietnam 35 years ago when his father, who had been a commander in the South Vietnamese Navy, boarded a small boat that slipped out of Danang with his wife and his four youngest children, including Le, aboard. They drifted at sea for several days before being rescued by a U.S. Navy vessel. The family eventually settled in northern Virginia. All members of Le's family have become the U.S. citizens. Commander Le, who does not speak Vietnamese, while visiting the land of his birth for the first time, spent several days meeting aunts and uncles on his mother's side of the family who reside in Hue.

Vietnam's ruling Communist elite imposes a harsh authoritarian order on the people. Ordinary Vietnamese citizens are denied basic political rights that most Americans take for granted. Dissidents are routinely silenced, often punished, and a few are serving prison terms for protesting the lack of basic

freedoms, or for publicly criticizing prominent officials and their policies. The Vietnamese economy suffers from a myriad of deficiencies, the most serious of which include endemic corruption; inefficient state-owned enterprises, which cannot compete with private sector companies; inadequate banking and financial services; and the relatively low wages and salaries earned by well-educated, highly skilled workers. Despite the lack of freedom and serious economic shortcomings, Vietnam has racked up some impressive achievement in the early years of the twenty-first century. Living standards have risen and the overall quality of life has improved for millions of its people.

In 1986, when reformers launched Doi Moi (Renovation) that marked the beginning of the nation's transition from a centrally planned economy to a more market-oriented economy, Vietnam was one of the poorest countries in the world. Most of its population was living in villages and hamlets. Since 1990, the economy has averaged an annual growth rate exceeding 7 percent. During that time, per capita income quintupled, from $180.00/annum to $1400.00/annum. Vietnam has moved up—from the ranks of extreme poverty to join the strata of lower-middle-income countries. Perhaps a third of the Vietnamese population is classified as urban. Educational levels attained have risen and illiteracy has been nearly eliminated. Average family size is smaller and the status of women, at least of women living in urban societies, has improved.

Paralleling the expanding commercial ties between the United States and Vietnam has been growing diplomatic and strategic ties between the two countries. The United States has backed Hanoi in its sovereignty disputes with China over the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos. More importantly, the Obama administration chose Vietnam as a major ally in America's security "pivot" toward Asia. Washington's primary strategic goal is to counterbalance China's efforts to expand its influence in the greater South China Sea region. America's principal strategic advantage viz-a-viz China in this region is its ability to project naval power into the region.

An exclamation point was appended to the deepening diplomatic, commercial, and strategic ties between America and Vietnam on July 26, 2013, when Vietnam's President Truon Tan Sang met with President Obama in the Oval Office for a lengthy and cordial meeting. Before he departed the White House, Mr. Sang invited the President to visit Vietnam. The two nations, formerly enemies who fought each other in a long, hard, and bitter war, had officially become good friends.

President Donald Trump first went to Asia in November 2017. He traveled to Japan, China, South Korea, and Vietnam. Trump, as a draft eligible young man, received five deferments, thus avoiding military service completely as well as a possible tour to the Vietnam War. Four of the five deferments were for education. The fifth, a medical exemption for bone spurs, became controversial, during his 2016 campaign for the presidency. Did the bone spurs disqualify the young Trump for military service or was the deferment one more example of a rich kid using family influence to avoid his patriotic duty?

But Trump's dealings with the military draft, which had been abolished in 1973, were ancient history when he arrived in Hanoi on November 11, 2017, for a two-day formal visit. Trip highlights included attending an official welcoming ceremony with Vietnam's President Tran Dai Quang held at the Presidential Palace in Hanoi. Next day, President Trump spoke at the annual Asia-Pacific Economy Cooperation **(APEC)** summit where he affirmed the strong U.S. commitment to peace, security, and economic development of the Asia-Pacific region. He particularly stressed how impressed he was with Vietnam's recent progress: "Vietnam has truly become one of the great miracles of the world."

Vietnam Veterans Come Home

Returning veterans of the American War in Vietnam encountered uniquely difficult circumstances as they struggled to come to terms with their war experiences, readjust to civilian routines, and get on with their lives. They had fought in the first foreign war that America had ever lost. Millions of their fellow citizens were humiliated and embittered by the outcome of the war. Returning veterans were uncomfortable reminders of a recent national trauma that most people wanted to forget. Because of the cancellation of the draft in early 1973, large gaps separated the veterans from the far larger numbers of young Americans of similar ages who had never spent a day in any branch of military service.

Popular stereotypes of Vietnam veterans as deeply troubled and psychologically wounded young men adrift at the margins of society abounded, powerfully reinforced by popular television shows and movies. Although it was not appreciated by most people at the time, Vietnam veterans had much in common with the veterans who had fought in America's earlier twentieth-century wars. But the myth that the soldiers who had fought in previous wars, particularly World War II, all reintegrated easily into civilian life after the wars misled people, including a lot of the Vietnam veterans. Many soldiers who had fought in these previous wars had returned home suffering from serious physical and psychological disabilities, and had found it difficult, sometimes impossible, to readjust to civilian life.

It is exceedingly difficult to generalize about the experiences of the millions of Vietnam veterans re-entering civilian society. Thousands suffered from alcohol and drug addictions; thousands more had severe physical and psychological disabilities. Far more found their wartime experiences rewarding. They spoke glowingly about growing up in the Army, about becoming men and learning the value of teamwork. The large majority of returning veterans, including many afflicted with serious problems, took pride in their military service. Others referred to searing, traumatic experiences that profoundly and permanently changed them, experiences they found very difficult to cope with or talk about. There were also many veterans who spoke of their year of service in "Nam" as if it were a brief, relatively insignificant experience

that left no permanent impact. They did not give it much thought, quickly returned to their civilian ways, and got on with their lives.

Often, the experiences soldiers had had in the war influenced how well or how poorly they functioned upon their return to civilian life. Of the nearly 3 million men and women who served in Southeast Asia, approximately 870,000 were involved in combat. The others served in rear echelon assignments, and they did not engage in combat. Combat veterans generally had more difficulty readjusting to civilian life than did the much more numerous rear echelon types. The degree of support returning veterans received from family, friends, church members, workplaces, and government agencies often shaped how a veteran came to terms with his war experiences and reintegrated into civilian society.[12]

It soon became obvious that large numbers of veterans suffered from higher levels of stress than did their civilian counterparts. These symptoms, which often did not surface until years after the veterans had returned to the States, were initially labeled "post-Vietnam syndrome." In 1980, the American Psychological Association (APA) gave these symptoms a new label, **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**. According to the APA findings, people experienced the traumatic event through recurring dreams or memories, or by seeming to experience it as if it were happening in the present.

Veterans afflicted with PTSD suffered a variety of psychological dysfunctions induced by their traumatic wartime experiences. Symptoms included (1) drug and alcohol abuse; (2) recurring nightmares, often reliving traumatic war experiences; (3) chronic depression; (4) psychic numbing, the inability to feel any strong emotion; (5) guilt feelings about their war actions, or about having survived when their buddies had been killed; (6) the inability to experience intimacy; and (7) unpredictable outbursts of rage and aggressive behavior.

The Veterans Administration acknowledged that PTSD was a psychological disorder that afflicted large numbers of Vietnam veterans and by 1981 had opened 137 centers across the country to provide medical treatment, counseling, and support for veterans afflicted with PTSD. No one could say with certainty how many veterans suffered from PTSD. Surveys varied wildly. A veterans' group claimed that 1.5 million veterans were afflicted. A study by the Centers for Disease Control found the incidence rate of PTSD among Vietnam veterans to be 2 percent (about 60,000 cases). Symptoms varied widely among veterans, as did the severity of the illness.

How a person reacted to a traumatic event appeared to be shaped more by the psychological makeup of the individual than by the event itself. If a person had a prior history of depression, he was three times more likely to develop PTSD than someone who did not.[13] Complicating efforts to treat cases of PTSD were men who made up stories about experiencing traumatic events in the war when they did not. Some faked symptoms of PTSD to collect benefits, or just to get attention and sympathy. Although such *poseurs* came forward, the overwhelming majority of veterans seeking treatment did suffer genuine symptoms of stress deriving from their wartime traumatic experiences.

In addition to the large numbers of Vietnam veterans afflicted with psychological disorders, soon after the war ended, former soldiers came forward claiming that they suffered from a wide range of serious illnesses deriving from their exposure to chemical defoliants and herbicides. These cases derived from Operation Ranch Hand, the U.S. Air Force's herbicidal warfare program in place from 1961 to 1971. During those years, millions of gallons of herbicides and defoliants were sprayed over the jungles and fields of South Vietnam. One of the compounds used by the U.S. military was Agent Orange, a toxic mixture of the chemicals 2, 4-D, and 2, 4, 5-T (dioxin). The main goals of Operation Ranch Hand were to defoliate forested lands depriving PLAF guerrillas of cover, to destroy rice and other food crops degrading the guerrillas' food supply, and to force people to leave their villages and hamlets and migrate to cities controlled by the RVN, thereby depriving the guerrillas of their rural base of support. Thousands of U.S. military personnel were exposed to these chemical herbicides and defoliants, as were countless Vietnamese. According to the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, approximately 5 million Vietnamese people were exposed to Agent Orange. Of these, 400,000 people were killed or maimed, and 500,000 children have been born with defects as a consequence of their exposure to the chemical herbicides and defoliants. The U.S. government spokesmen have insisted that these estimates are unreliable and vastly inflated.

Initially, the U.S. government dismissed all claims and the companies that manufactured the chemicals insisted that they were not dangerous. In 1979, two veterans groups filed class action lawsuits on behalf of over 2,00,000 veterans against the companies who manufactured Agent Orange, including Monsanto Corporation and Dow Chemical Company. After six years of litigation, the case was settled out of court. The chemical companies agreed to pay $180 million into a fund for veterans and their children.[14]

Veterans' advocates campaigned for years to persuade the federal government to compensate sick veterans who had been exposed to Agent Orange. For years, the Veterans Administration denied that there were any serious health risks deriving from exposure to the chemical. In 1989, the first secretary of the new cabinet-level Department of Veterans Affairs, Edwin Derwinski, wanting to resolve the controversy associated with Agent Orange, appointed retired Admiral Elmo Zumwalt as a special consultant. After conducting a thorough investigation, Admiral Zumwalt concluded that exposure to Agent Orange was associated with dozens of deadly diseases, including several kinds of cancer, liver disease, neurological disorders, and birth defects in the children of veterans who had been exposed to chemical defoliants.

In 1991, the U.S. Congress enacted the Agent Orange Act giving the Department of Veterans Affairs the authority to declare particular medical conditions presumptive evidence of exposure to Agent Orange. The declarations made those veterans who served in Vietnam eligible to receive treatment and compensation for those conditions. In subsequent years, the list of presumptive conditions was expanded. In 1996, the Clinton administration agreed to

provide compensation to veterans who suffered from diseases and conditions that the Institute of Medicine associated with Agent Orange.[15]

The Wall: The Vietnam War Memorial

The war memorial project was conceived by a group of Vietnam veterans led by Jan Scruggs and built entirely with private contributions. It stands in a grassy meadow near the Lincoln Memorial. It was dedicated in a moving ceremony on November 23, 1982. Designed by Maya Ling Lin, a Yale University undergraduate, it consists of a wall of burnished black granite cut into the earth in the shape of a shallow V. Invisible at ground level, visitors approach it by walking down a concrete path. The names of 58,282 men and women who died in the Vietnam War are carved on the reflecting panels. "The Wall," as the memorial quickly came to be called, is a way of honoring the war dead without honoring the war in which they gave their lives. Because a number of veterans considered the black wall too impersonal, two statues were added. A bronze statue titled "The Three Soldiers" was added in 1984. It depicts three soldiers, one white, one Hispanic, and one African American standing on a hill solemnly gazing down at the wall of names. "The Women's Memorial," added in 1993, commemorates the contributions of the thousands of women who served in the war. It is a statue showing three women—one gazes skyward, one prays, and one holds a wounded soldier in her arms.

The memorial serves as a stark reminder of the human costs of fighting the Vietnam War, and by extension the frightful human costs of fighting wars, whatever their political and strategic objectives. It called attention to the ordinary men and women who served in the war rather than the politicians who sent them to fight and the military commanders who led them in battle. Critics of the memorial, while praising the efforts of the veterans to depoliticize the Vietnam War out of respect for the warriors who died serving their country, have suggested that an unintended consequence of their efforts has been to ignore the salient fact that the nation's leaders made policy decisions that plunged the country into a disastrous war. Ways of remembering the sacrifices of so many who fought the war also allow the American people to forget its unpleasant aspects.

In the years since its opening, the memorial has become one of the most visited of Washington's many monuments. As one approaches the granite slabs, one has the distinct sensation of descending into a valley of death, a valley of death consecrated by the blood of heroes who died in a faraway place for a murky cause they scarcely comprehended. The Wall exerts an enormous emotional impact on visitors. Hushed and reverent throngs filed slowly along the pathway by the walls of names. For some, especially the men and women who had served in Vietnam, their visit to the Wall often proved overwhelming; they sobbed, cried openly, and hugged one another, perhaps bonding in those intimate moments, and finding some comfort and closure. Others appeared to be earnestly trying to communicate with a realm beyond earthly existence.

The Wall has endured as the central place for remembering the American War experience in Vietnam.[16] It spawned the development of hundreds of Vietnam memorials across the country.

Some Vietnam veterans revisited their war experiences by returning to Vietnam. After the embargo was lifted and relations between the United States and Vietnam were normalized, thousands of veterans journeyed to Vietnam. Their motives varied; for some, they came to make amends for their attacks on the land and its people. They often got involved in various kinds of humanitarian projects. Others came to make contact with the children they had fathered. For some of the veterans, their visits to Vietnam enabled them to find the peace and closure they had sought for years.[17] Nearly all returned from Vietnam with reports of how friendly and welcoming they had found the Vietnamese.

Americans gradually embraced an emerging consensus about Vietnam veterans and the war they fought. They understood that most of the veterans had not committed atrocities against helpless civilians, that most of them were not junkies, alcoholics, or crazies. Despite encountering some difficulties deriving from their war service, most Vietnam veterans completed school, went to college, obtained jobs, entered the professions, married, had families, and became solid and productive citizens in their communities. Per capita income of Vietnam-era veterans exceeded that of their non-veteran contemporaries. Americans also gradually understood and accepted the reality: dysfunctional veterans were not weaklings, losers, or criminals, but human beings who suffered from serious medical and psychological disabilities. They needed empathy and support, and above all they needed medical services and counseling, not pity, rejection, or condemnation.

Doves who had previously denounced Vietnam veterans as racist killers of women and children now viewed them in a different light. They saw them as 19-year-old boys drafted and sent to fight an immoral war. They realized that many veterans themselves were victims of a war policy that was misguided and wrong. They had been betrayed by their government and initially misunderstood by many of their civilian counterparts.

Hawks belatedly acknowledged that most Vietnam veterans had fought with valor and tenacity under circumstances that precluded the possibility of victory. They had fought bravely, they had won all of the major battles, and they had always inflicted far greater casualties than they took; but politicians had denied them victory.

In time, both hawks and doves accepted the Vietnam veterans. They agreed that they belonged in that honorable lineage that includes all the veterans of all of America's foreign wars. They agreed that they had been good soldiers in a bad war, although "bad war" still meant something quite different to most former doves than it did to most former hawks.

On Monday, May 28, 2012, President Barack Obama came to the Wall 50 years after the U.S. soldiers participated in their first major combat operation in South Vietnam. President Obama concluded his short speech at the Wall

by sharing with his audience, which included a large contingent of Vietnam War veterans, what he believed to be an important lesson drawn from that war:

> Let us never use patriotism as a political sword. Patriots can support a war. Patriots can oppose a war. And whatever our view, let us always stand united in support of our troops who we placed in harm's way. That is our solemn obligation.[18]

Vietnamese Americans

The story of Vietnamese Americans is a recent one. The 1970 U.S. census did not even have a category for Vietnamese Americans. The Fall of Saigon at the end of April 1975 brought the first wave of large-scale emigration from Vietnam to the United States. Approximately 125,000 people, most of whom had worked for the United States or for the government of South Vietnam, including many senior civilian and military officials of the RVN, who feared promised Communist reprisals, were airlifted to the Philippines and to Guam. They were subsequently transferred to various refugee centers within the United States. Washington, in order to prevent the refugees from forming ethnic enclaves and to minimize their impact on local communities, dispersed the Vietnamese immigrants, sending many of them to small towns and rural areas. Within a few years, they had mostly resettled in California and Texas.

A second wave of Vietnamese immigration began in 1978. As the newly empowered Communists sent thousands of former RVN military officers and government employees to "re-education camps," approximately 2 million people fled Vietnam in small, unsafe, and overcrowded boats. Thousands perished trying to escape Vietnam. These "boat people" were generally less well-educated and came from lower socioeconomic levels than the first wave of immigrants. They often ended up in squalid refugee camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong, or the Philippines, where they could languish for years before being permitted to enter countries that would take them. A third wave of immigrants migrated to the United States in 1992 when the Communist authorities released people from the re-education centers and allowed them to come to the United States provided they had family members in this country who would sponsor them. From 1975 through 2005, an estimated 650,000 Vietnamese refugees and asylees came to America in the three major immigrant streams.

Vietnamese Americans have some of the highest naturalization rates of any immigrant group, confirming that they never had any intention of returning to their homeland. In 2005, a survey found that 71 percent of foreign-born Vietnamese had become the U.S. citizens. In 2006, there were an estimated 1.6 million Vietnamese Americans, two-thirds of whom were foreign-born and one-third of whom comprised an American-born second generation.

Over half of the entire Vietnamese American population resides in two states. According to the 2010 census, 581,946 (38%) Vietnamese Americans reside in California and another 210,913 (14%) live in Texas. Vietnamese Americans comprise the fourth largest Asian American group after Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, and Indian Americans. In 2020, the estimated population of Vietnamese Americans exceeded 2,200,000.

According to a study by the Manhattan Institute in 2008, Vietnamese Americans are among the most assimilated immigrant groups in the United States. While their rates of cultural and economic assimilation were no greater than other immigrant groups, their rates of civic assimilation were the highest among all large immigrant groups. Coming as political refugees seeking asylum, they viewed their stay in the United States as permanent and quickly became involved in the civic affairs and politics of their new homeland.

Coming as refugees from a Communist country, most Vietnamese Americans are staunch anti-Communists; they regularly protest human rights violations by the SRV. They remained strongly committed to the Republican Party. Older Vietnamese tend to hold the Democratic Party in anathema because they see it as having been less supportive of the Vietnam War. Some of these hard-core anti-Communists blame the Democrats for forcing the United States to withdraw its military forces from Vietnam and abandon South Vietnam to the Communists. In the 2004 U.S. presidential election, Republican incumbent George W. Bush received an estimated 70 percent of the Vietnamese American vote. In the 2008 election, approximately two-thirds of Vietnamese Americans voted for the Republican candidate John McCain, in stark contrast to other Asian American groups who cast large majorities for the Democratic candidate Barack Obama, the winner by a decisive margin in both the popular and electoral vote counts. However, the 2008 electoral totals revealed a generational split within Vietnamese American society. Sixty percent of Vietnamese Americans between the ages of 18 and 29, mostly born in the United States, voted for Obama. For the 2016 election, virtually every Asian American group voted by large majorities for the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. Even so, Donald Trump still received 32 percent of the Vietnamese American vote.

Vietnamese Americans have flexed their political muscles in the cities and states where they have clustered. In California and Texas, Vietnamese have been elected to public offices at the local and state levels. In 2004, Herbert Vo won election to the Texas state legislature. In March 2007, John Tran was elected the mayor of Rosemead, CA, a city of approximately 60,000 people, half of whose population was made up of Asian Americans, including a sizeable Vietnamese American contingent. At the federal level, Viet Dinh, the Assistant Attorney General of the United States from 2001 to 2003, was the chief architect of the Patriot Act of 2001 enacted by Congress and signed by President George W. Bush. Several Vietnamese Americans have sought seats in the House of Representatives as Republican candidates. In 2008, Anh Cao, a Hurricane Katrina activist in New Orleans, was elected to Congress

representing the people of Louisiana's 2nd congressional district. In 2018, Stephanie Murphy, born in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly known as Saigon, was elected to Congress representing the people of Florida's Seventh Congressional District.

The Vietnamese American social and economic profile is diverse. The first wave of immigrants to the United States consisted mainly of educated middle- and upper-middle-class professionals. The much larger second wave included many working-class and lower-middle-class people. Within the cities of California that have sizeable Vietnamese populations, there are disparities of income, status, and occupation type between the established first wave immigrants and the later arrivals of lower-income refugees. Although census data depicted an upwardly mobile people, poverty rates among Vietnamese Americans remained higher than national norms. As was typical of immigrant groups, Vietnamese started numerous small businesses. Vietnamese entrepreneurs and workers have found an economic niche establishing nail salons. Investigative journalists on the staff of *Nguoi Viet*, a major Vietnamese American newspaper, reported that 37 percent of nail salons nationwide and 80 percent of nail salons in California were owned and operated by Vietnamese Americans. Some Vietnamese American entrepreneurs have become quite wealthy.

Traditionally, Vietnamese inhabit a Confucian culture; they prize education and learning. Parents pressure children to excel in school and enter the professions such as medicine, engineering, and science. Many Vietnamese parents, denied opportunities to get good educations and confined to menial jobs because of limited English language skills, proudly watched their American-born children graduate from their adopted nation's elite universities. These Vietnamese American families have replicated the oldest success story in American history: impoverished refugees fleeing tyranny and poverty, coming to American, working exceedingly hard long hours to establish their families, and then watching proudly as their children achieve excellent educations en route to fulfilling and productive lives.

Many Vietnamese American families, while successfully adapting to American ways and borrowing heavily from American culture, have retained much of their Vietnamese heritage. Vietnamese Americans, who have excellent command of the English language, speak Vietnamese in their homes. They intend to rear bilingual and bicultural children. Celebrations of Tet remain the high point of the year for many Vietnamese. Many Vietnamese Americans retain close ties to their homeland. In the early 1980s, Vietnamese living in the United States annually sent hundreds of millions of dollars to their families in Vietnam; however, corrupt SRV officials skimmed off much of the money. Since the normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam in 1995, overseas Vietnamese living in America have sent more than $2 billion each year to relatives residing in Vietnam.[19] Thousands of Vietnamese Americans, including the American-born second generation, have traveled to Vietnam to visit relatives and to explore the country from which their parents fled.

Media portrayals of Vietnamese Americans have been mostly favorable. They were shown to be hardworking, patriotic people, most of whom had come to this country as impoverished refugees uprooted from their homeland. In a relatively short period of time, they built new lives for themselves and established vibrant communities. However, for sizeable numbers of Vietnamese American, social and economic relations have not always been so rosy. There have been conflicts with the larger U.S. population. During the 1980s along the U.S. Gulf Coast, white shrimpers complained of unfair competition from Vietnamese Americans. A local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan tried, unsuccessfully, to drive off the Vietnamese shrimpers. Some low-income African Americans stated that Vietnamese refugees received more governmental assistance than they ever did.

Gang activities became a major concern within some Vietnamese communities and with police forces. In 1992 in Sacramento, California, a Vietnamese American gang engaged in a shootout with local police outside an electronics store. Gangs have also engaged in violent home invasion robberies of wealthy Vietnamese American families. Despite these gang activities, crime rates among Vietnamese American communities remain low. Most Vietnamese are law-abiding citizens and enjoy good relations with local law enforcement personnel.

Sizeable numbers of American-born Vietnamese men and women have sought careers in law enforcement. Hundreds have served in the U.S. Army and other branches of military service. Eleven Vietnamese American patriots have given their lives fighting American foreign wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Specter of Vietnam

The specter of Vietnam has hung over every American foreign and military policy debate from the 1970s into the second decade of the twenty-first century. President Richard Nixon initially defined what he called the **Vietnam syndrome** as a manifest unwillingness to intervene militarily in any Third World country for fear of being trapped into extended military operations. An arrogance about the uses of U.S. military power that had existed before the Vietnam War had given way to a neo-isolationist yearning to avoid all military involvement in the world lest America get trapped into another Vietnam-like quagmire.

The ghost of Vietnam influenced the public debate over President Reagan's interventionist policies in Nicaragua in the early 1980s. The Reagan administration vigorously waged a proxy war against the *Sandinista* government by arming and training a counterrevolutionary army, the *Contras*, to overthrow them. Democratic congressional opponents of the *Contra* policy cried, "No more Vietnams in Central America!" Defenders of the Reagan policy insisted that Nicaragua was different from Vietnam, and that they would not make the same mistakes that had undermined the U.S. effort in Southeast Asia, which he called a "noble cause." Administration officials insisted that they

would never send American ground combat forces to get bogged down in a stalemated war; they were training, equipping, and supporting Nicaraguan "freedom fighters" who could defeat the Sandinista forces and liberate Nicaragua without any direct U.S. military intervention. In this debate, both critics and defenders of the American intervention in Nicaragua revealed that they drew different lessons from the Vietnam experience. The debate also suggested that its participants were more interested in using different ways of remembering the American War in Vietnam to score debaters' points in the present than they were in coming to terms with what really happened in Indochina.[20]

In an effort to overcome the restrictive effects of the Vietnam syndrome, Caspar Weinberger, who served as the Secretary of Defense in Reagan's administration, aided by his senior military assistant General Colin Powell, a Vietnam veteran, developed a set of principles governing the use of force in the post-Vietnam War era. The most important of these principles, reflecting the lessons that Powell had learned from his Vietnam experience, included (1) have clear and achievable political and military objectives, (2) obtain the approval of the public and Congress before undertaking any military operation, and (3) deploy sufficient military forces to achieve victory and withdraw your army. Henceforth, if these principles were applied, the U.S. military forces would either undertake missions that they could accomplish or they would stay home.[21]

Memories of Vietnam dominated public debate over the Persian Gulf War and shaped the Administration's war policy during the period 1990–91. Congressional opponents of President George H.W. Bush's plan to use military force to drive the Iraqi army out of Kuwait warned of the dangers of getting bogged down in a lengthy and costly war in a Third World country. These critics preferred to use economic sanctions to drive the Iraqis out.

Mindful of the fears of millions of his fellow citizens, when President Bush launched the Gulf War, he pledged that "this will not be another Vietnam. Our troops will . . . not be asked to fight with one hand tied behind their back."[22] The military's handling of the media coverage of the Gulf War reflected its mistaken belief that uncensored and biased media coverage of the Vietnam War had contributed to the American defeat in Indochina. The heroes' welcome given to the returning DESERT STORM veterans was shaped, in part, by guilty memories of the shabby treatment given to many returning Vietnam War veterans. Many Vietnam-era veterans, having been denied homecoming parades of their own, marched with the returning Gulf War veterans. After the victorious outcome of the Gulf War, President Bush proclaimed that Americans had once and for all licked the Vietnam syndrome. Bush's epitaph for the Vietnam syndrome would be the first of several premature proclamations of its demise.

The Vietnam specter surfaced once again during the 1992 presidential election. Democratic candidate Bill Clinton was attacked repeatedly by George H.W. Bush for having avoided the draft while the Vietnam War was

raging and for having helped to organize antiwar demonstrations in London in 1969 while he was a Rhodes Scholar. Although less was made of it, Bush's Vice President Dan Quayle had to deal with the charges against him that had surfaced at the time he was chosen to be Bush's running mate in 1988. Quayle allegedly used family political connections to land a prized slot in an Indiana National Guard unit in 1969 to sidestep a possible tour of duty in Vietnam. Neither Quayle nor Clinton appeared to suffer any serious political damage from these attacks, but the attacks against them attested to the continuing troublesome legacy of Vietnam War memories.

"The ghosts of Vietnam still lingered"[23] during the 1990s. President Clinton inherited a humanitarian intervention to prevent massive starvation among the inhabitants of Somalia. Bush had dispatched several thousand U.S. troops to distribute food and protect the people from the ravages of ongoing civil war in that chaotic country. In 1993, the U.S. forces turned their mission over to a force of U.N. peacekeepers. When a Somali warlord, Farid Adeed, refused to submit to the U.N. authority and took over its food distribution centers, the U.N. commanders requested assistance from the U.S. forces.

A small force of U.S. Rangers were sent into the capital city of Mogadishu; they encountered thousands of Adeed's fighters armed with automatic weapons. The Somalis brought down a Blackhawk attack helicopter. In a savage firefight, Somalis killed 18 U.S. soldiers and dragged the body of one of the slain Americans through the streets. Shocked TV viewers in the United States, watching the desecration of the young soldier's body, demanded the withdrawal of all U.S. military personnel from the violent anarchy raging in Somalia. Clinton had no choice but to withdraw all U.S. forces lest Somalia become the latest Vietnam quagmire. Memories of the Somalian fiasco prevented the Clinton administration from even considering intervening to halt the genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

Americans were divided over whether to intervene militarily in the brutal ethnically driven civil wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1993 to 1995. Opponents of U.S. intervention once again evoked the specter of another Vietnam-like quagmire. Many of Clinton's advisers warned him of the political fate that awaited presidents who got their country bogged down in an unpopular war. Polls showed that a majority of congressional members and a large majority of the American people opposed the Clinton administration's decision in December 1995 to send 20,000 U.S. combat soldiers as part of a 60,000-person NATO contingent assigned to keep the peace in Bosnia. In March 1999, when Washington joined with NATO forces to wage an air war against the remnants of the Yugoslav Federation to protect the ethnic Albanian inhabitants of Kosovo, President Clinton felt compelled to rule out sending the U.S. ground combat forces lest he once again stirs the cooling embers of the Vietnam syndrome.

When President George W. Bush initiated a controversial war to remove the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein from power in March 2003 as a major campaign in the ongoing war against Islamist terrorism, he reignited debate

over the Vietnam syndrome with a vengeance. At times, the 2004 presidential election, which occurred a year into the Iraq war and occupation, appeared to be a debate about the Vietnam War 30 years after the fact. The Democratic challenger, Senator John Kerry, validated his bid to unseat a wartime president by parading his military service during the Vietnam War. Senator Ted Kennedy, a vehement opponent of the Iraq war, exclaimed, "Iraq is George Bush's Vietnam!" His senate colleague, John McCain, another Vietnam War hero, who had spent five and one-half years as a POW and strongly supported the war in Iraq, insisted that "Iraq is no Vietnam," adding, "and I know something about Vietnam."

President George W. Bush entered the Vietnam legacy debate on August 22, 2007, when he gave a speech at a Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Kansas City, Missouri. He argued strongly against withdrawing American forces from Iraq. Citing years of bloody upheaval in Southeast Asia following the U.S. pullout, the president stated that Vietnam's lessons provide a reason for persevering in Iraq rather than for leaving any time soon. Historians of the American Vietnam War and analysts of U.S. foreign policy conceded that President Bush might be right on the facts—after all, over 1.5 million Cambodians perished and perhaps 2 million Vietnamese and Laotians became refugees after America pulled out of those countries—but they challenged his drawing analogies from the causes of those upheavals to predict what might happen in Iraq if the Americans withdrew.

Much to the dismay of hawkish senators like John McCain, President Barack Obama's approach to foreign policy in general and to the ongoing war on terror in particular demonstrated that the Vietnam syndrome is alive and well. It never went away. Its influence manifested itself in Obama's careful approach to the Libyan revolution and his cautious approach to the violent and chaotic civil war raging in Syria. Obama's two most important foreign policy advisers are Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Charles Hagel. Both men were combat veterans of the Vietnam War. Both were wounded and both eventually turned against a war they came to understand as unwinnable, and an egregious waste of lives and resources. The President and his two principal foreign policy advisers were committed to finding peaceful diplomatic solutions to the myriad of dangerous global problems afflicting our troubled planet. Powerfully influenced by the ways they understood and remembered the Vietnam War, they were committed to using military force only when vital U.S. national interests were directly threatened.

President Donald Trump inherited the Vietnam syndrome when he came to office. He made it starkly clear at the outset of his presidency that his popular campaign slogan "Make America Great Again" (**MAGA**) did not include military interventions in foreign lands. He cited the Vietnam War as an example of a failed foreign war instigated by liberal Democrats. Influenced by his neo-isolationist instincts, he sought to bring home most of the American soldiers serving abroad.

The legacy of Vietnam lives. It is the war that never goes away. It refuses to recede into the misty realms of forgotten history. The Vietnam War remains a metaphor haunting the American imagination. It serves as a cautionary tale of the catastrophe that befell a rich and powerful nation that allowed its crusading idealism to override its realistic sense of limits.

Notes

1 Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace: The Legacy of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5.
2 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 312.
3 Ibid., 316.
4 Lipsman and others, *The False Peace*, 76–79; *New York Times* (August 30, 1988), A6.
5 Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, 22–23.
6 *New York Times* (August 31, 1988), A6.
7 Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, 31–41.
8 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 320.
9 Clinton quote is from Olson and Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, 282.
10 Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, 64.
11 Andrew J. Pierre, "Vietnam's Contradictions," in *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 6 (November–December, 2000): 69–86.
12 Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, 74–75.
13 Ibid., 82–88.
14 Ibid., 90–91. According to the terms of the agreement, the chemical companies admitted no wrongdoing, and the veterans could reopen hearings if the funding proved inadequate.
15 Ibid., 91–93.
16 Ibid., 104.
17 Ibid., 108–9.
18 Baker, Peter, "Obama Begins Commemoration of Vietnam Era." *New York Times*, May 29, 2012, A16.
19 Ibid., 125, 127.
20 Kevin O'Keefe, "The Vietnamization of Nicaragua," in George Donelson Moss, ed., *A Vietnam Reader: Sources and Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991), 301–13.
21 Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, 191–92.
22 Quoted in Ben Kiernan, "The Vietnam War: Alternative Endings," *American Historical Review* 97, no. 4 (October, 1992): 1136.
23 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 3rd ed., 312.

Tables

Table A U.S. Military Personnel Serving in South Vietnam

December 31, 1960	900
December 31, 1961	3,205
December 31, 1962	9,000
December 31, 1963	16,500
December 31, 1964	23,300
December 31, 1965	184,300
June 30, 1966	267,500
December 31, 1966	385,300
June 30, 1967	448,800
December 31, 1967	485,600
June 30, 1968	534,700
December 31, 1968	536,100
April 30, 1969	543,400
June 30, 1969	538,700
December 31, 1969	475,200
June 30, 1970	414,900
December 31, 1970	334,600
June 30, 1971	239,200
December 31, 1971	156,800
June 30, 1972	47,000
December 31, 1972	24,200
March 30, 1973	240

Source: U.S. Department of Defense official records.

Table B Statistical Portrait of U.S. Casualties in Indochina

1.	Killed in combat	45,941
2.	Wounded in combat	300,635
3.	Severely disabled	75,000
4.	Died in noncombat situations	10,420
5.	Eight female nurses died, one was killed in combat	
6.	Missing in Action (MIAs)	2,338
7.	Prisoners of War (POWs)	766
8.	90% of combat deaths were enlisted men	41,003
9.	10% of combat deaths were officers	4,938
10.	60% of combat deaths were aged 19–21	26,931
11.	22% of combat deaths were aged 22–25	10,421

(Continued)

Table B (Continued)

12. 18% of combat deaths were aged 26+	8,589
13. 33% of the dead had served less than one year	14,995
14. 33% of the dead had served between one and two years	14,853
15. Blacks accounted for 12% of the combat deaths	5,662
16. Other nonwhites accounted for 1% of the combat deaths	469
17. Whites accounted for 87% of the combat deaths	39,827
18. Draftees accounted for 33% of the combat deaths	15,404
19. 76% of the men sent to Vietnam came from lower middle class or working class backgrounds	
20. 25% of the men sent to Vietnam had family incomes at or below the poverty level	

Source: Thayer, War without Fronts.

Table C A Statistical Portrait of U.S. Vietnam Veterans

Service during Vietnam era, 1964–1975	8,700,000
Service in South Vietnam	2,700,000
Combat in South Vietnam	870,000
Vital Statistics (1978)	
Median age	32 years
Median education	12.9 years
Median income, ages 20–39	$12,680
Unemployment rate, ages 20–34	5.5%
In VA hospitals	9,652

Source: Veterans Administration and Department of Defense official reports.

Glossary

AID Agency for International Development (also USAID).

AK-47 A Soviet and Chinese assault rifle used extensively by the VietCong and by the PAVN forces.

APC Armored Personnel Carrier.

ARVN Army of the Republic of Vietnam. The regular South Vietnamese national forces.

CAP Combined Action Program.

Charlie GI slang for the VietCong, a short version of Victor Charlie, from the U.S. military phonetic alphabet for VC.

Chieu Hoi Literally "Open Arms," a program set up to encourage Viet-Cong and NVA soldiers to defect to the South Vietnamese side.

CIDG Civilian Irregular Defense Groups. Teams devised by CIA operatives that combined defense functions with social and economic development programs designed to win the allegiance of the *Montagnards*.

CINCPAC Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Command.

Cobra Bell AH-1G fast attack helicopter, armed with machine guns, grenade launchers, and rockets.

COMUSMACV Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.

CONUS Military acronym for the Continental United States.

CORDS Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support.

Corps Two divisions assigned to defend a military region.

COSVN Central Office, South Vietnam, the headquarters controlling all VietCong political and military operations in southern Vietnam.

CTZ Corps Tactical Zone.

DAO Defense Attaché Office, an agency that was part of the U.S. mission sent to South Vietnam following the January 1973 Paris Accords that ended the American war. It was a replacement for MACV; DAO administered the U.S. military assistance program to the GVN, 1973–75.

DESOTO U.S. Navy destroyer patrols in the South China Sea.

DMZ Demilitarized Zone.

DOD Department of Defense.

DRV Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), created by Ho Chi Minh September 2, 1945.

EAGLE PULL Code name of the U.S. evacuation of Phnom Penh in April 1975.

FMFPAC Fleet Marine Force, Pacific Command.

Fragging The murder of a commissioned or noncommissioned officer by an enlisted man of lower rank, usually with a fragmentation grenade.

Free-fire zones Territory considered completely under enemy control. South Vietnamese officials authorized the use of unlimited firepower in such zones.

FREQUENT WIND Code name of the U.S. evacuation of Saigon in April 1975.

Green Berets Famed nickname of soldiers serving in the U.S. Army Special Forces trained for counterinsurgency operations. The name derived from the green berets worn by these elite forces.

Grunt The most frequent nickname given Army and Marine ground combat forces.

GVN Government of Vietnam (South Vietnam).

HES Hamlet Evaluation System. A monthly statistical report that provided CORDS with information on rural security.

Hot Pursuit The policy, occasionally authorized, of allowing U.S. soldiers cross-border pursuit of retreating VietCong or NVA forces into Cambodia.

Huey Nickname given the Bell UH-1D series helicopter.

ICC International Control Commission, created by the Geneva Accords (1954) to supervise implementation of the agreements.

ICCS International Commission of Control and Supervision. Agency responsible for administering the January 1973 Paris Accords.

JCS Joint Chiefs of Staff.

JGS Joint General Staff, the South Vietnamese equivalent of the U.S. Joint Chiefs.

JMC Joint Military Commission, consisting of members from North Vietnam, South Vietnam, the PRG, and the United States, responsible for implementing the military provisions of the Paris Accords of 1973.

JMT Joint Military Team, consisting of members from North Vietnam, South Vietnam, the PRG, and the United States, responsible for accounting for all POWs and MIAs.

KIA Killed in action.

Lao Dong The Vietnamese Worker's Party, the North Vietnamese Communist Party, founded in 1951. The ruling party of North Vietnam until 1975; thereafter it ruled the entire country.

LINEBACKER I Code name for U.S. bombing of North Vietnam resumed in April 1972 in response to the Nguyen Hue Offensive.

LINEBACKER II Code name for the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam during December 1972; called the Christmas Bombings.

LZ Landing Zone, for helicopters.

MAAG Military Assistance Advisory Group, the forerunner of MACV, 1955 to 1962.

MACV Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, formed in 1962, lasted until 1973.

Main Force Regular army forces of the North Vietnamese and VietCong.

MAP Military Assistance Program.

Medevac Helicopters with the mission of transporting wounded soldiers quickly from the battlefield to forward hospitals.

MENU Code name for the secret B-52 bombing missions in Cambodia.

MIA Missing in Action.

MR Military Region, formerly a CTZ, Corps Tactical Zone.

M-16 The standard issue U.S. automatic rifle used in the Vietnam War from 1966.

Napalm A jellied gasoline incendiary weapon used by the French and the Americans during the Indochina wars.

NCO Noncommissioned Officer.

Neutralize Word used by Phoenix/Phung Hoang operatives to define putting the VCI out of action. Neutralize could mean killing, capturing, or going into the *Chieu Hoi* program.

NLF The National Liberation Front, formed December 20, 1960.

NSAM National Security Action Memorandum.

NSC National Security Council.

NVA North Vietnamese Army.

NVN North Vietnam.

OB Order of Battle, a comprehensive arrangement and disposition of military units deployed in battle.

OCS Officers' Candidate School.

Operation VULTURE A planned U.S. operation to relieve the siege at Dien Bien Phu in April 1954. It was never implemented.

OPLAN Operations Plan.

OSS Office of Strategic Services, a World War II intelligence organization, forerunner of the CIA.

PACAF U.S. Pacific Air Force.

PACFLT U.S. Pacific Fleet.

Pathet Lao Laotian Communist insurgents who came to power in 1974–1975.

PAVN People's Army of Vietnam; the North Vietnamese army.

PF Popular Forces.

PHOENIX A joint U.S./South Vietnamese program to detect and to neutralize the VietCong infrastructure.

Phung Hoang The South Vietnamese—run program to destroy the VCI, it paralleled the PHOENIX program.

PLA People's Liberation Army of South Vietnam, the military arm of the VietCong.

PLAF People's Liberation Armed Forces of South Vietnam, aka the PLA.

POW Prisoner-of-War.

PRG Provisional Revolutionary Government, formed by NLF in 1969.

PRP People's Revolutionary Party, the Communist Party apparatus that controlled the National Liberation Front, founded in 1962.

PSYOP Psychological Operations, a form of psychological warfare.

PTSD Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

RANCH HAND Code name for the U.S. Air Force aerial defoliation program to deny ground cover and food crops to the VietCong.

RDC Revolutionary Development Cadres. Teams of South Vietnamese pacification workers trained to carry out various missions.

RF Regional Forces.

ROK Republic of Korea (South Korea).

ROTC Reserve Officer Training Corps.

Ruff-puffs South Vietnamese regional and local forces used for village security.

RVN Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam).

RVNAF Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, all South Vietnamese military forces including ARVN, Regional Forces, and Popular Forces.

SAC Strategic Air Command.

SAM Surface-to-air missile.

SA-2 Medium-range surface-to-air missile. Effective up to 60,000 feet, speed about Mach 2.5.

SANE Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. An organization opposed to the nuclear arms race; active in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Sappers VietCong commandos, used for demolition and sabotage operations.

Search-and-Destroy Large-scale Allied offensive operations designed to find, fix, and destroy enemy forces. A form of attrition warfare.

SEATO Southeast Asia Treaty Organization.

Seventeenth (17th) Parallel Temporary dividing line separating northern and southern Vietnam, created by Geneva Accords (1954), pending unification elections scheduled for July 1956, which were never held.

SOG Studies and Observation Group, MACV.

Sortie One operational flight by one aircraft.

Special Forces U.S. Army personnel trained to carry out counterinsurgency operations, often covert and unconventional. They also trained *Montagnards* and South Vietnamese Special Forces.

SRV Socialist Republic of Vietnam

SVN South Vietnam.

Tet The Vietnamese lunar New Year and their most important holiday.

Third Countries U.S. Allies that furnished military forces for the Vietnam War South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand.

USAID United States Agency for International Development.

VC VietCong. The word VietCong originally was a derogatory contraction of two Vietnamese words meaning a Vietnamese who is a Communist.

VCI VietCong infrastructure; the political leaders of the VietCong, also responsible for logistic support of the military forces.

VNAF Vietnamese Air Force (the South Vietnamese Air Force).

WIA Wounded in Action.

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