Vietnam: The Real Enemy

by Ngo Vinh Long

Vietnam is a country of about 128,000 square miles, stretching more than 1,200 miles from the southern boundary of China along the eastern coast of the Indochinese peninsula and curving into the Gulf of Siam between the eighth and ninth parallels. About 80 percent of the country is mountainous, and about 90 percent of its population has been living in the lowland areas for a long time. In fact, the bulk of Vietnam’s population—which increased from an estimated 10 million by the time the Vietnamese court surrendered all of Vietnam to the French in 1884 to about 21 million by the beginning of World War II, then to close to 53 million by the time of the last census in 1980 and to more than 65 million in 1989—has been crowded into the two proverbial rice baskets of the Red River Delta in the north and the Mekong River Delta in the south.

The central part of the country, traditionally referred to by the Vietnamese as the shoulder pole for carrying the two rice baskets, is a narrow strip of land that extends from near the nineteenth to the twelfth parallel with such poor soil and unfavorable climate that many of the people there have for a long time lived off the rock quarries and the salt fields. Proverbially, in this region dogs are said to eat stones, and chickens rock salts. Worse still, on this narrow strip of land from 1965 until the end of 1972 the United States dropped more than 2 million tons of bombs—about equal to the total amount of bombs dropped on all fronts during World War II—and delivered about 3 million tons of high explosives through artillery strikes, and hundreds of thousands of tons of chemicals. The resulting destruction has kept the population density there much lower than that of the northern and southern regions.

In general, however, as a result of the unprecedented destruction by the bombings (close to 5 million tons) and the artillery strikes (about 7 million tons) there is now only about one acre of cultivated surface for every six to seven Vietnamese in all regions of the country. This is after about 3 million acres of land have been reclaimed since 1975 at great costs in both financial and human terms because of the millions of tons of unexploded mines and ammunition in the ground. In the southern half of the country where the United States declared that it came to “nation-build,” American bombing—which amounted to over 1,000 pounds of explosives for each man, woman, and child—also was heavily responsible for over 10 million refugees and up to 2 million deaths out of a total estimated population of 19 million by 1972.

What seems quite fantastic to most observers of Vietnam is how such a tiny country, which is so stretched out both geographically and economically, could have stood up to the American military onslaught. What made the population there fight on in spite of such tremendous destruction and dislocation? The explanation by American policy makers and mainstream scholars has been that the South Vietnamese had been coerced and terrorized by the North Vietnamese communists and their henchmen in the South, the Viet Cong. The North Vietnamese, in turn, were egged on by the Red Chinese. U.S. president Lyndon B. Johnson, for example, explained on 7 April 1965, “Over this war—and all Asia—is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China. The rulers in Hanoi are urged on by Peking.”

While it has been convenient for American policy makers and mainstream historians to refuse to acknowledge the real enemy against whom they were fighting in order to justify the American war effort as well as the failure of that effort, many serious students of Vietnamese history have realized over the years that the total disregard of the realities of Vietnam had doomed the American intervention from the start. Joseph Buttinger, an early mentor of President Ngo Dinh Diem of the

2. Quoted in ibid., p. 4.
In U Minh District in the Mekong Delta the rivers and canals reach the front porches of every home. They provide wash water and transportation, and a supply of fish as well. The bulk of the population of Vietnam lives either in the Mekong River Delta in the south or the Red River Delta in the north.

so-called Republic of Vietnam ("South Vietnam," as American policy makers called it since 1954, although no Vietnamese anywhere ever used the term themselves) and a noted Vietnam historian, wrote in 1977:

It is bad enough not to take into consideration that the Vietnamese people had struggled for over two thousand years against being absorbed by China, and had for almost one hundred years fought against colonial rule in order to regain independence. Much worse still was not to know, or knowingly to disregard, the fact that as a result of French colonial policies in Indochina the whole of Vietnam had become Communist by the end of World War II. I say the whole of Vietnam, not only the North—something which, in spite of thirty years of French and American propaganda, remains an undeniable historical fact.  

I. French Conquest and Consequences: 1850–1945

Although a number of books have detailed the long struggle of the Vietnamese against the French that finally led to the triumph of the revolutionary forces in 1945, it is necessary to summarize a few pertinent facts here in order to give the reader a background for a better understanding of developments since the end of World War II.

On 31 August 1850 a French naval squadron came to the central part of Vietnam and attacked the port city of Da Nang, partly because it was most accessible by sea and partly because it was only about thirty-five miles south of the imperial city of Hue. This started a war of colonial conquest which, aided by the policy of appeasement by the Vietnamese court, resulted in the takeover of the country in stages until its total annexation by the French in 1884. There were at least three reasons for the appeasement policy. First, the Nguyen court at the time was so unpopular that there was an average of 400–600 revolts and peasant uprisings against it per year. Hence the court wanted to reserve all its resources and energy for putting down these uprisings, which it perceived as the main threats to its survival. Second, the court did not fully understand the intentions of the French, thinking that since they came from so far away they would be interested only in obtaining certain trade advantages rather than conquering the country and occupying it by force. Third, the imperial forces, which marched in tight formations into battles, were no match for the long-range French rifles and cannons, and so the court thought it should avoid casualties for its own troops as well as buy time by making compromises with the French. But appeasement only whetted the appetite of the French, and as a result they kept on forcing the court to make one territorial concession after another, starting with the southern provinces of the Mekong Delta.

The people and the scholars continued to fight back, however, using guerrilla tactics to frustrate the French, in spite of the fact that the court, under treaty obligations to the French, ordered all popular resistance groups to withdraw from the
This map of Indochina is an enlargement of part of a map of Kampuchea (Cambodia), Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia from
conceded provinces. The quality of the popular resistance can be seen in the following account of a French historian and an on-the-spot eyewitness in 1861, at the beginning of the intense armed struggle in the Saigon–Bien Hoa area, foreshadowing the experiences that American GIs were to encounter more than 100 years later:

One would like to put the finger on the main cause for the appearance of these bands which, during the rainy season, seemed to circulate freely around our columns, behind them when they advanced, ahead of them when they returned to their point of departure. They seemed to come up out of the ground. We imagined that there must be some central point from which they fanned out, some point where they had food and other supplies. That is why we concentrate on Bien Hoa. After Bien Hoa—Vinh Long. The fact is that the center of resistance was everywhere, subdivided ad infinitum, almost as many times as there were Annamites. It would be more exact to consider each peasant fastening a sheaf of rice as a resistance center. The trouble with fighting on a terrain where the enemy can live and hide is that the war becomes personal; it changes its aim and name—and becomes repression. 5

From 1861 to 1897 popular armed struggles, organized by various scholars and local leaders, raged on in spite of a combination of repression by the French and the court. But since the court had betrayed the people and robbed them of the only possibility for unified actions on a nationwide scale, almost all popular armed struggles were suppressed by 1897. From then until the beginning of World War I the French were able to firmly establish their colonial structures for the political domination and economic exploitation of the country. 6

Administratively the French divided Vietnam into three regions, or “countries” (pays) as they called them. The southern region, which extends from the southernmost tip of the peninsula to the twelfth parallel and which was now called Cochin China, became a direct French colony and was ruled by a French “governor.” The central and northern regions, renamed Annam and Tonkin respectively, became “protectorates”—in other words, the French “residents” in Hue and Hanoi were now supposedly ruling these regions through the Vietnamese court and the traditional elites. In fact, however, they had stripped the court of almost all of its power, including all residual rights over the land.

Landgrabbing and Landlessness

In the century before the French arrived, the distribution of wealth in the country was not as equitable as the names of the Nguyen land policy suggested: “equal-field land system” (quan dien che) or “personal share land system” (khau phan dien). Nevertheless, every family had land to till that it could call its own. As soon as the French occupied a certain area after fierce struggles by the local residents, they would concede provinces. The quality of the popular resistance can be seen in the following account of a French historian and an on-the-spot eyewitness in 1861, at the beginning of the intense armed struggle in the Saigon–Bien Hoa area, foreshadowing the experiences that American GIs were to encounter more than 100 years later:

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After the turn of the century, however, the French and the collaborators increased their theft of the peasants’ land. Rice exporting was the biggest and most profitable way of making money for the French and the Vietnamese ruling class. By the twenties and thirties over half of the peasants in Tonkin and Annam were completely landless, and about 90 percent of those who owned any land owned next to nothing. In Cochin China about 75 percent of the peasant population was landless, and the majority of the landowners (who were nearly 80 percent of all landowners) owned almost nothing. According to official French statistics, at least 44 percent of the land in Tonkin, 39 percent of the land in Annam, and 88 percent of the land in Cochin China was owned by landlords.

The United States also regarded as irrelevant the consistent and repeated reports by its own intelligence and other sources that reached the highest levels of government in Washington that Ho Chi Minh was first and foremost a nationalist, that there was great mass support for his government, and that there was no alternative to this government and no hope of crushing the determination of Vietnamese people to safeguard their independence.

Because most Vietnamese peasants became landless or nearly so, they had to work as agricultural laborers and as tenant farmers and sharecroppers. Agricultural workers were wage laborers. Most of them owned no land and were unable to become tenants or sharecroppers. Most of the small landlords used agricultural workers, while many medium and all big landlords used tenant farmers and sharecroppers. By the late 1920s and early 1930s tenant farmers and sharecroppers worked about half of the cultivated surface in Tonkin and Annam. French estimates showed that in Cochin China some 80 percent of the paddies were worked by tenants and sharecroppers. A large portion of the remainder was worked by wage laborers.

In Tonkin, and generally in Annam, tenant farmers had to give the landlords approximately half their gross income (in cash or in kind, depending on the terms) and had to pay for all the expenses of cultivation. The sharecropper, meanwhile, had to pay from 50 to 70 percent of his crops, besides all production costs. Then there were expensive gifts and services to landlords. Tenant farmers and sharecroppers who did not bring gifts or provide services frequently enough would fall out of favor.

In Cochin China, the terms of tenancy were as bad as in the other regions. There was relatively little sharecropping; tenancy was the ubiquitous fact of life. Rents typically ranged from 50 to 70 percent and yet, as Le thi Huynh Lan, a reporter

for Phu Nu Tan Van [New literature on women] wrote in 1929, that was not enough:

But this is not all, since the landlords do not let the tenants go freely tilling the land and gathering the paddies to pay the rent. They force the tenants to work for a whole month without any compensation. They force them to borrow 50 piasters which is to be paid by 100 gia [forty liters each, or 300 piasters at the current price] of paddy rice at harvest time [that is, six months later.] They force them to present white rice for offerings during holidays in the fifth month.

When the harvest comes, the landlords send their thugs to guard the threshing grounds. As soon as the rice is threshed, the thugs clean up everything. What is left for the tenants are the piles of hay. All they can do is hold their brooms and rakes and look on with tears in their eyes. . . . Any tenant who lacks good manners [that is, those who protest] would immediately have his house pulled down and would be evicted from the estate. . . . What I have just told you is only one-tenth of what actually happens. There are many more things piling up on the tenants' heads.

The situation in Annam and Tonkin was summarized by Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap, who later became the secretary general of the Vietnamese Communist Party and defense minister of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam respectively, in their detailed account of the working and living conditions of the Vietnamese peasants:

Every year the agricultural workers must go hungry for seven or eight months, the poor peasants for five or six months, and a number of middle peasants are short of food for three or four months. During these months they eat just one meal a day, sometimes one meal every two days. They eat . . . anything they can find to fill their stomachs. In the countryside near harvest time we see emaciated, pale faces with glassy eyes, foam-specked lips. These are the faces of hunger; the poor with bloodless faces carry a sickle looking for work.

**Reasons for Hunger**

One reason for this sorry state of affairs was that there were few employment opportunities outside of the agricultural sector. Another reason was the horrible pay and working conditions in the mines, plantations, and industrial and commercial enterprises. In 1929, the peak year for employment during the colonial period, French official sources listed 52,000 workers in all Indochinese mines, 81,000 workers in the agricultural plantations, and 86,500 workers in all other industrial and commercial enterprises throughout Indochina. There were actually many more workers than the official statistics showed because the French records counted only card-holding employees, while in fact two or three employees sometimes held one card. This was because each worker was responsible for about seventeen hours of work a day. No one worker could maintain this pace. Family members, relatives, and friends had to substitute at least twice a week. But even if the number of workers were two or three times larger than the official French estimate, this was still too small to make a difference in terms of absorbing the unemployed rural laborers. Besides, as colonial statistics testify, even a very "active" card-holding worker (in other words, several persons working one job) received an annual income of only 44 piasters in Tonkin, 47 piasters in Annam, and 55 piasters in Cochinchina during the late 1920s, which was barely enough for the rice consumption of a single person. Even a dog belonging to a colonial household cost 150 piasters a year to feed.

In the southern half of the country where the United States declared that it came to "nation-build," American bombing—which amounted to over 1,000 pounds of explosives for each man, woman, and child—also was heavily responsible for over 10 million refugees and up to 2 million deaths out of a total estimated population of 19 million by 1972.

Besides underemployment, there was chiseling. The workers explained this situation in a letter to the editor published in the 5 December 1936 issue of Dong Phap (Eastern France):

Each male worker gets a little more than two dimes [20 cents] to three dimes a day and a woman or girl worker gets only 18 cents. Even so, when the time comes for us to receive our pay we seldom get the full amount. The larger part of our wages are taken by the supervisors and foremen . . . our salaries are already too low. How can we survive with all these fines and cuts? Moreover, food prices increase every day and we have become hungrier and hungrier. A number of Vietnamese studies have shown that 37 to 50 percent of some workers' earnings were taken.

Cochin China. But Bunout (p. 112) estimated that if women and children workers were included, about 100,000 persons worked in the rubber plantations alone.

7. Phu Nu Tan Van, 15 August 1929. This was the largest magazine in circulation in Indochina at the time.
9. For a detailed breakdown of the number of workers, see Résumé statistiques relatifs aux années 1913–1940 (Hanoi, 1941), p. 9, and Annaire statistiques de l'Indochine, 1941–1942, p. 278. These sources were published by the colonial government. For the number of workers in commercial, industrial, and agricultural enterprises, see Rene Bunout, La main d'oeuvre et la législation du travail en Indochine (Bordeaux: Delmas, 1936), p. 9. Official French statistics for 1930 listed 49,000 persons in the rubber and other agricultural plantations in

14. Ibid.
Even without the cuts, fines, and various types of “squeeze” by the supervisors and foremen, Vietnamese workers never actually received their full daily wages. Colonial capitalists did not pay wholly in cash. A large part of wages came in goods like rotten rice, decaying fish, and spoiling vegetables and greens at prices far above market rates. The price of these goods was automatically deducted from wages. Workers who did not go to the company stores to pick them up would lose their money.

In the mines and plantations, workers also had to pay for living in shacks built by the companies. The usual charge was at least a month’s pay. Workers also paid for all their tools—hoes, hammers, baskets—and paid for damages. In the mines and rubber plantations workers were also frequently severely punished for even the slightest “infractions” and hence they called these places “hell on earth” (dia nguc tran gian). Few escaped from that hell. The usual punishment for workers who ran away was death by torture, hanging, stabbing, or some other means that made examples of the “criminals.” Because of this—and overwork, inadequate food, and terrible housing—the mortality rate was about 30% percent according to the rubber companies’ own records. By the end of World War II the workers stopped calling the plantations “hells on earth” (lo sat sinh). The mining areas also became known as “death valleys” by those who worked there. French and Vietnamese descriptions generally indicate that the workers there suffered more deprivation and poverty than their counterparts in the plantations. Usually peasants did their best to stay away from the mines and plantations altogether even though they had to subject themselves to the lack of employment and hunger described above.

In 1945, in an article entitled “The Crisis of a Hungry Population,” a famous Vietnamese agronomist wrote:

All through the sixty years of French colonization our people have always been hungry (original italics). They were not hungry to the degree that they had to starve in such manners that their corpses were thrown up in piles as they are now. But they have always been hungry, so hungry that their bodies were scrawny and stunted; so hungry that no sooner that they finished with one meal than they started worrying about the next; and so hungry that the whole population had not a moment of free time to think of anything besides the problem of survival.

II. Revolutionary Struggles: The First Thirty Years

In spite of the overwhelming social and economic difficulties described above, by the mid-1920s several revolutionary groups began to organize peasants, workers, and intellectuals in the struggle against the colonial regime and its collaborators. On 3 February 1930, at a unification meeting in Kowloon (China), the three communist parties of Vietnam merged into a single party under the name of the Vietnam Communist Party (Dang Cong San Viet Nam). The meeting had been convened on 6 January by Nguyen Ai Quoc (later President Ho Chi Minh). The meeting adopted a political program, strategy, and shortened rules, as well as regulations and strategy for the development of mass organizations such as workers’ associations, peasants’ associations, the Communist Youth League, the Women's Association for Liberation, the Red Relief Society, the Self-Defense Militia, and the Anti-Imperialist Alliance. In its political program the party stated that anticolonialism and antifeudalism (in other words, struggle against the landowning Vietnamese ruling class) were the principal and inseparable tasks.

15. Ibid.; Bunout, La main d’oeuvre, p. 8.
17. Nghiem Xuan Yem, “Nan Dan Doi” (The starvation crisis of the people), Thanh Nghi no. 107 (5 May 1945), p. 18.
of the revolution.18 The party subsequently changed its name to Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) and soon emerged as the undisputed leader of the Vietnamese revolution. From 1930 to 1931, under the banner of independence and democracy, the party organized and coordinated massive peasant demonstrations and worker strikes in most parts of the country. In the southern part peasant struggles broke out in fourteen out of a total of twenty-one provinces and, in spite of brutal French repression, lasted for over a year. In the central part, as a result of the firm worker-peasant alliance brought about by the party, struggles against the French not only broke out in many provinces but seizure of administrative power also occurred in the two provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh. It took the French colonial administration over a year, with the deployment of divisions of soldiers and airplanes and with the use of "pacification methods" such as crop destruction, relocations, and starvation, to be able to reoccupy the two provinces.19

Among other things, the offensive further proved to many people that the United States would never be able to win the war in Vietnam firstly because of the evident popularity of the NLF and secondly because, in its bombing destruction of the cities the United States reconfirmed the fact that it had all along regarded the Vietnamese people themselves as the real enemy in Vietnam.

As a result of the arrest and imprisonment of some 16,000 persons, most of whom were communist cadres, and the death of thousands of village inhabitants, the revolutionary movement in Vietnam under the leadership of the Communist Party suffered a period of setbacks during the Depression years of 1932–34. Beginning in 1935, the party began to rebuild its organizations and infrastructures and began a new period of struggles called the “1936–1939 democratic campaign.” During this period the party trained millions of people in the struggle against the French colonial administration, for democratic liberties and the improvement of the people's living conditions, against fascism and war, and for the maintenance of world peace. Whereas the Communist Party exerted its leadership mainly over the workers and peasants during the 1930–31 period, it was now extending its leadership to other strata of the urban and rural population. As a result, a broad democratic front was created and a nationwide movement of unprecedented political struggles was achieved. Technically, a combination of illegal, semilegal, and legal activities were employed. Thousands of party cells were formed all over the country, hundreds of organizations of all types were set up, and an average of five hundred demonstrations and strikes were staged every year. As a result, by the time World War II was about to begin, the revolutionary movement in Vietnam was already well prepared politically and organizationally, both in the towns and in the countryside.20

The danger of war and of Japanese aggression had become evident to the Indochinese Communist Party in 1938. Right after the Munich Conference of September 1938, for example, the Regional Executive Committee of the ICP in the northern region of Vietnam decided to send many of its cadres into the countryside to carry out underground work and to set up bases in anticipation of enemy repression that would come mainly in the towns. In October 1938, the ICP, in a public manifesto, denounced France and Great Britain for their policy of capitulation to fascist pressures, called attention to the danger of Japanese aggression, and exhorted all groups and social strata, including the democratic French, to join the ICP-sponsored Indochinese Democratic Front in order to fight for freedom, peace, improvement of the people's living conditions, and the defense of Indochina. Effective defense of Indochina, the ICP maintained, could only be achieved with increased democratic liberties and decreased exactations by big colonial interests.

The French colonial administration, however, was at this time largely interested in the defense of the mother country, France itself. In 1938 it forced the Vietnamese population to buy 40 million piasters worth of bonds in order to buy war materiel for France. Early in 1939, 10 million piasters of new taxes were levied to build air bases and finance other war preparations. Paris also decided that Indochina should supply France with 1.5 million soldiers and workers, or fifteen times as many as the number required during World War I. It was also early in 1939 that the Japanese occupied Hainan Island, about 150 miles from the Vietnamese port of Haiphong, and advanced their troops in mainland China down close to the Vietnamese border. The bankrupt policy of the French, therefore, only served to rally more and more people into the ranks of the ICP.

On 1 September 1939, fascist Germany attacked Poland. On 3 September, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. As World War II started, democratic and progressive movements in the colonies were subject to swift and merciless repression. In Indochina, the French colonialists immediately issued a series of decrees dissolving all democratic organizations and closing down all progressive newspapers. Since the ICP was the only party that had developed a comprehensive program as well as solidly built bases, it became the focal point

18. For discussion and original documents relating to this event, see Tran Huy Lieu et al., Tai Lieu Tham Khao Lich Su: Cach Mang Can Dai Viet Nam (Reference documents: modern Vietnamese revolution) (Hanoi: Ban Nghien Cuu Van Su Dia xuat ban, 1956), vol. 5, pp. 98–102, and vol. 6, pp. 51–52 and pp. 134–40. For a detailed treatment in English, see Huynh Kim Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, pp. 90–141.


20. For the most detailed study of the 1930s in English, see Ngo Vinh Long, Peasant Revolutionary Struggles in Vietnam in the 1930s (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1978, 745 pp.). For the “Popular Front” period of 1936–39, also see Huynh Kim Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, pp. 218–31.
of French terror and repression. On 4 January 1940, in a speech before the Indochinese Government Council, Governor General Catroux explained the reason for the attack on the ICP: “We have launched a total and swift attack against the communist organizations; in this struggle, it is necessary to annihilate the communists so that Indochina may live in peace and remain loyal to France. We have no right not to win. The state of war forces us to act without mercy.”

The fact that the foremost Vietnamese priority was postwar reconstruction and economic recovery can be seen in the adoption in 1977 of a five-year plan which was made with the full expectation that massive amounts of foreign aid from Western capitalist countries and from socialist countries would be forthcoming. However, by 1977 China had cut almost all aid to Vietnam, and in 1978 the United States said that it was not going to normalize relations with Vietnam although both sides had already agreed to this.

In an attempt to keep Indochina loyal to France, the French colonial administration increased the Indochinese armed forces to 100,000 and doubled the number of police and security service agents. Scores of so-called “camps of special laborers” were also quickly set up to detain thousands of political prisoners and “communist suspects.” As soon as the war started Paris ordered Indochina to supply France with 3.5 million metric tons of foodstuffs, 800,000 tons of tea, coffee, and sugar, 600,000 tons of rubber, and 300,000 tons of cable. Existing taxes were increased and new taxes and duties were imposed. The budget of Indochina almost doubled, from 80 million piastres for 1938 to 134 million for 1940. Workers’ wages were reduced drastically while working hours were increased to seventy-two hours a week and strictly enforced as a result of the 10 April 1939 decree by the governor general of Indochina. In the countryside peasants were subjected to ever-worsening exploitation and oppression. Rents, interest rates, and taxes were increased; peasants’ lands were expropriated; peasant males were rounded up to serve in the military and perform corvée labor; paddy, boats, carts, and horses were requisitioned; and rice and maize crops were uprooted so that the land could be used for planting jute and castor-oil plants. By the end of 1939, tens of thousands of Vietnamese soldiers and workers had been sent to France. In the first eight months of 1940 another 80,000 Vietnamese youths were shipped to France to become cannon fodder.

Double Colonization and Liberation

On 10 May 1940 Hitler attacked France. A month later the French ruling class capitulated to the German fascists, declaring Paris an “open city.” Two million French soldiers were disarmed and a puppet government headed by Marshal Petain was set up at Vichy. The French defeat caused great confusion among the colonialists in Vietnam. Any attempt whatsoever to resist Japanese aggression fizzled out, and the colonial administration readily yielded to all Japanese demands. On 22 September 1940 the Japanese attacked Lang Son (about 15 miles south of the Vietnam-China border) and landed 6,000 troops at Do Son (near Haiphong). After some minor engagements with the Japanese near the Vietnam-China border, Governor General Decoux surrendered Indochina to the Japanese.

Faced with these great changes in the internal and international situation, on 8 February 1941 Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam to assume direct leadership of the Vietnamese revolution. Ho made Pac Bo in Cao Bang Province his base of operation. In May 1941, he convened the eighth plenary session of the Party Central Committee in Pac Bo, which decided that the most urgent task at the time was to liberate the country from Franco-Japanese domination. To this end, Ho Chi Minh proposed to change the name of the National Front Against the French and Japanese Fascists into Vietnam Independence League (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh or Viet Minh for short) to rally all social classes and political and religious groups.

For the next four years, until May 1945, the party and its Viet Minh Front (adopting as their emblem the gold-starred red flag that had first appeared in the Mekong Delta in 1930) concentrated their efforts in setting up ever-increasing numbers of guerrilla bases and in expanding their infrastructure among the population by rallying all social strata, including the landlords and bourgeoisie, to fight against the French and the Japanese.

The struggle against the French and the Japanese from 1941 until 1945 required extremely patient organizing because they would not stop at any means to try to destroy the revolutionary movement. An example was the policy of rice collection, the purpose of which, as Resident Chauvet of Tonkin expressed it, was to cause hunger and starvation among the population in order to dampen their revolutionary spirit as well as bring in the necessary food supplies for the French themselves and the Japanese. The end result of this policy was an unprecedented famine that killed 2 million persons out of a total population of about 8 million in the northern region alone. The famine conditions in Tonkin were described in the 28 April 1945 issue of Viet Nam Tan Bao, a Hanoi paper, as follows:

When we entered the villages we saw the peasants miserably dressed. Many of them had only a piece of mat to cover their bodies. They wandered about aimlessly in the streets like skeletons.


When the Viet Minh took over Hanoi during the August Revolution in 1945, they hung the revolutionary flag on the building that had held the offices of the Resident of Tonkin, the French representative in the northern region of Vietnam. This was at the end of World War II and thus an opportune time to seize control from the defeated Japanese, freeing Vietnam from a century of foreign domination and hundreds of years of monarchic rule. For the first time in the history of Vietnam, the entire country was in the hands of the people! However, the French were not ready to lose their most valuable possession in Asia, and within two months they had driven the Viet Minh and other nationalist elements out of Saigon and restored French control of the southern provinces.

With skin, without any strength left, without any thoughts, and totally resigned to the ghosts of starvation and disease. Their rice had all been taken away from them by the government. They did not have any potatoes or corn. They were forced to eat everything, whether poisonous or not, they did not care. They had eaten up all the vegetation around them. . . . When a dog or a rat died, it was the occasion for the whole village to come around to prepare it and parcel it out among themselves.

In spite of such odds, the Viet Minh managed to organize the population to fight back and to attack French and Japanese granaries and rice transport systems to obtain the necessary food to feed the hungry population. We cannot go into the details here. We can only summarize the struggle that began on 13 August 1945 when the Viet Minh’s Insurrection Committee issued an order to the armed forces and the people to immediately launch a general insurrection by attacking and taking over all urban areas and enemy strongholds. As soon as the order for general insurrection was issued, people’s organizations and guerrilla and self-defense units everywhere moved into action. From 14 to 18 August the administrative centers of almost every village, district, and province of twenty-seven provinces were attacked and taken over, and revolutionary power was established in many of them almost immediately.

The three major cities of Hanoi, Hue, and Saigon held out a few days longer, but the victory of the Viet Minh was swift and bloodless. Within a period of only twelve days, from 14 August to 25 August fifty-nine provinces were completely liberated, ending almost a century of colonial domination and hundreds of years of monarchic rule. For the first time in the long history of Vietnam, the administration of the entire country was in the hands of the people. This August Revolution, as the Vietnamese called it, was capped by two events of significant symbolic importance. On the afternoon of 30 August before tens of thousands of people assembled at the southern gate of the Imperial Palace, the three-red-striped yellow flag was lowered, and the yellow-starred red flag was hoisted. Emperor Bao Dai, the last ruling monarch of the Nguyen dynasty, read the abdication act, which said in part: “I prefer to be a citizen of an independent nation rather than to be the king of an enslaved country.” He then handed over to Tran Huy Lieu, representative of the Revolutionary Provisional Government, the gold seal and sword, the symbols of royal power, and formally declared the abolition of the monarchy in Vietnam.

Two days later, on 2 September, before a crowd of over half a million assembled at the Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi,

President Ho Chi Minh introduced the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and read the Declaration of Independence, which states in part:

The French have fled, the Japanese have capitulated, Emperor Bao Dai has abdicated. Our people have broken the chains which for nearly a century have fettered us and have won independence for the Fatherland. . . .

The whole Vietnamese people, animated by a common purpose, are determined to fight to the bitter end against any attempt by the French colonialists to reconquer our country.

We are convinced that the Allied nations which at Tehran and San Francisco have acknowledged the principles of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam. . . . The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property, in order to safeguard their independence and freedom. 25

III. The First Indochina War: 1946–54

As stated in the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence, the new leaders of Vietnam were concerned not only about the prospect of a French reconquest of Vietnam but also of intervention by certain Allied nations. These countries were understood to be the United States and Great Britain, although their names were not specifically mentioned in the Declaration of Independence because the Vietnamese were still hoping that they could be persuaded otherwise. According to the Vietnamese analysis at the time, Vietnam was the first colonial country to emerge independent after World War II under the leadership of a communist party, and it was also becoming a socialist and anti-imperialist country; therefore it was only logical that colonial and imperial powers would try to destroy the newly independent Vietnam. 26

However, in his massively researched book on the origins of the American intervention, George McT. Kahin concludes that the American policies that so heavily shaped the course of Vietnamese history for three full decades after World War II were never intrinsically Vietnamese in orientation: they were always primarily directed by considerations transcending that country. For at least the first three years after the war, because of France's position as the keystone of U.S. European policies, American priorities in Europe—not Asia—brought U.S. power indirectly, but nevertheless heavily, to bear in Vietnam. Insofar as communism was then an issue, it was primarily its potential in France that shaped American policy toward Vietnam. 27

While the Vietnamese leaders were wrong about the real reasons for a possible American intervention in Vietnam, they were certainly right in their fear that the United States and other Allied nations would support the French in their colonial reconquest of Vietnam. Again, according to Kahin, a badly ravaged postwar France possessed neither the military equipment nor the financial resources to mount a major military effort in Indochina. It was thanks to the United States that she was able to marshal the crucial elements of power which she began to apply there within a few months of the war's end. . . . Moreover, within two months of Japan's surrender, American ships in large numbers were carrying French forces to Vietnam, and Washington provided Paris with credits to help it purchase seventy-five U.S. troop transports. Thereafter the United States supplied Paris with a large quantity of modern weaponry—ostensibly for the defense of France and Western Europe, but with the understanding that a substantial part could be used for the military campaign in Indochina. 28

French Colonial Reconquest

Armed with American weapons and supported by British troops, the French began an all-out attack on Saigon on the evening of 22 September 1945. A war of colonial reconquest thus began, as Joseph Buttinger sums it up: "The aim of the French who at this time had not yet begun to talk about stopping Communism, was made clear by General Jean Leclerc, who, on September 30, 1945, stated in Saigon: 'I did not come back to Indochina to give it back to the Indochinese.' " 29

For the next fourteen months, because of the need to solve the problem of famine as well as a host of other problems, such as the withdrawal of the 200,000 Chiang-Kai-shek Chinese troops that had entered the northern part of the country ostensibly to disarm Japanese troops under the Allied plan, the new Vietnamese government tried to avoid going to war with France by making every effort to accommodate the French through negotiations in Vietnam and Paris. But French troops multiplied their provocations throughout the country, and French reinforcements kept coming as the French government actively prepared for the reconquest of Indochina. The rest of this episode is summarized by Joseph Buttinger as follows:

But not until November 1946 did the French feel strong enough—behind a screen of lies about events in the port city of Haiphong—to start military action against the North. An incident over customs control, which the French tried to take away from the Hanoi government, served as a pretext for extending the war to the North. On November 23, 1946, the French killed, according to their own admission, over six thousand civilians in Haiphong. . . .

Less than four weeks later, the French were ready to take decisive action in Hanoi as well. On December 19 they issued an ultimatum demanding that the Viet Minh government dissolve its para-military and police forces and let the French army assume control of the capital. Recognizing this as a declaration of war which left him only the choice of resistance or capitulation, Ho Chi Minh acted more as a nationalist than a Communist when he the Viet Minh.


26. Van Tao et al., Lich Su Cach Mang Thang Tam (History of the August Revolution) (Hanoi: Su Hoc, 1960), pp. 149–81. For the most detailed first-hand account by an American of the August Revolution and subsequent developments, see Archimedes L. A. Patti, Why Vietnam: Prelude To America's Albatross (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). Patti was the head of the Indochina mission of the Office of Strategic Services, and a special envoy sent by President Roosevelt to Vietnam to meet and cooperate with Ho Chi Minh and


28. Ibid., pp. 7–8.

called on this people to defend Vietnamese national independence... 30

The Vietnamese decision to resist unprovoked French military intervention, according to French propaganda, was the beginning of the First Indochina War. This resistance was soon denounced in the West as “Communist aggression.”30 As Joseph Buttinger has pointed out, this was a lie invented to justify the American support for the French colonial war, because without American support “the First Indochina war would then have never taken place, and without the First there would certainly never have been a Second Indochina War. But long before the United States financed 78 per cent of the cost of the French Indochina war in 1953/54, their war had to some extent also become America’s war.”31 The compilers of the Pentagon Papers, the official secret study of the American involvement in Vietnam that was disclosed in mid-1971, concluded that because the United States backed the French from the very beginning, it ignored repeated appeals from Ho Chi Minh (eight messages from Ho between October 1945 and February 1946 received no reply). The United States also regarded as irrelevant the consistent and repeated reports by its own intelligence and other sources that reached the highest levels of government in Washington that Ho Chi Minh was first and foremost a nationalist, that there was great mass support for his government, that there was no alternative to this government and no hope of crushing the determination of Vietnamese people to safeguard their independence. By April 1946 the United States acknowledged French control of Indochina and “thereafter, the problems of U.S. policy toward Vietnam were dealt with in the context of the U.S. relationship with France.”32

Four Phases of the First Indochina War

The First Indochina War, or as the Vietnamese called it, the Nine-Year National Resistance, has been treated in detail elsewhere. What should be added here is that it could be divided into four phases, each of which ended with ever-worsening French military defeats and ever-increasing American intervention. The first phase began with the armed struggle that spread throughout the country in response to the calls of the government of the DRV and ended in the winter of 1947 after the greatest French military offensive up to that time, the “Lea” operation, resulted in almost complete disaster.

31. Ibid., p. 22.
32. Ibid., p. 24.

33. See The Senator Gravel Edition of the Pentagon Papers (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), vol. 1, p. 30. This will be referred to hereinafter simply as the Pentagon Papers. Officially the “History of the U.S. Decision Making Process on Vietnam Policy,” this 47-volume top-secret inquiry into U.S. involvement in Indochina was commissioned by Robert McNamara and headed by Leslie Gelb. It was completed in January 1969 and 43 volumes of it were made public in June and July 1971 by the New York Times.
The second phase of the war lasted for about two-and-a-half years, from the spring of 1948 to the fall of 1950. Compelled to wage a protracted war, the French put into effect a "pacification" program and a "Vietnamization" program. This called for the setting up of a puppet administration and a "national army" composed of Vietnamese draftees. With increased American aid, which totalled about $1.5 billion by the end of 1949, the puppet army was supposedly to be built up to about 100,000 men and entrusted with the task of "pacifying the occupied regions." From these occupied regions the French launched "mopping-up operations" (comparable to the later American "search-and-destroy" missions) into the countryside, especially in the southern half of the country.

The United States also twisted the arms of the French to install a puppet regime in Saigon headed by the former monarch Bao Dai. As summarized by Kahin:

A full year before the French Parliament finally, in February 1950, agreed to ratify the Elysée Agreement that was to be the charter of Bao Dai’s rule, the United States had taken steps toward recognition of his yet-to-be-formed government. . . .

On June 21, 1949—still some seven months before action was to be taken by the French legislature—the State Department publicly endorsed Bao Dai’s "new unified States of Vietnam," announcing that its emergence "should serve to hasten . . . the attainment of Vietnam’s rightful place in the family of nations," with Bao Dai’s efforts to unite "all truly nationalistic elements" providing "the basis for the progressive realization of the legitimate aspirations of the Vietnamese people." It was thereby made very clear that the United States saw Bao Dai’s putative regime as the legitimate representative of the Vietnamese people . . . Ho Chi Minh’s actually functioning government, it should be noted, had as yet received no similar promise of recognition from either Moscow or Peking.34

In spite of all the American efforts, political and military initiative had passed into the hands of the Viet Minh by 1949. In the occupied areas the French met not only with increasingly intense guerrilla war but also with strong popular opposition. In the countryside, self-defense forces were organized. "Resistance villages" (comparable to "combat villages" during the 1960s and 1970s) were built everywhere. French storage depots, strategic and economic centers, and communication lines were under constant attack. The war was even brought to the hearts of big cities such as Hanoi, Saigon, Hue, and Haiphong, where the French had thought they were secure. Hand in hand with the guerrilla force, during the 1949–50 period the People’s Army launched a series of campaigns over the entire country, destroying more than 200 fortified positions, killing more than 10,000 colonial troops, and liberating large territories.35

All this and the victory of the Vietnamese revolution caused great concern to the French and the United States. In order to prevent Chinese military assistance that the French claimed for the first time in April 1950 was forthcoming as a result of an alleged agreement between the Viet Minh and the Chinese communists, the French tried to seal off the Sino-Vietnamese border as well as to encircle the Viet Bac region where the central organs of the Vietnamese resistance were located. On the evening of 16 September 1950 the Vietnamese attacked the French positions. After six weeks of fierce fighting, all the strongly defended French garrisons in the region fell. According to the French military historian Bernard Fall: “When the smoke cleared, the French had suffered their greatest colonial defeat since Montcalm had died at Quebec. They had lost 6,000 troops, 13 artillery pieces and 125 mortars, 450 trucks and three armored platoons, 940 machineguns and more than 8,000 rifles. Their abandoned stocks alone suffice for the equipment of a whole additional Viet Minh division.”36

The great victory of the Vietnamese in the fall of 1950 created disarray among the French. Martial law was proclaimed in Hanoi, and French nationals received orders to prepare for evacuation from Vietnam. In Paris some political parties called for the abandonment of Indochina to reinforce the defense of North Africa and other colonies, while others called for more troop reinforcements and more direct U.S. intervention.

The third stage of the war began in December 1950 when Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, one of the most capable French generals, was sent to Indochina as high commissioner and commander-in-chief to try to turn the tide. According to the Pentagon Papers, “De Lattre electrified the discouraged French forces like General Ridgeway later enheartened U.S. forces in Korea. . . . He calculated that he could win a decisive victory within fifteen months in Vietnam, and ‘save it from Peking and Moscow.’ . . . Moreover, De Lattre was convinced that the Vietnamese had to be brought into the fight.”37

34. Kahin, Intervention, pp. 34–35.
the Vietnamese, ordering mopping-up operations that involved fifteen to eighteen battalions in each operation and were supported by massive air strikes. But counterattacks by the Vietnamese guerrillas and regional forces in coordination with the regular army inflicted heavy losses on the French and liberated large areas in all regions of the country. Citing French official sources, Kahin concludes:

Maintaining the military initiative in most areas, the Vietminh had, by the spring of 1953, extended their authority over more than two-thirds of the area of Tonkin. . . . In central and southern areas, the Vietminh held most of the coastal regions all the way down to the outskirts of Saigon, apart from the enclaves around Hue, Danang, and a few other towns; and about half of the Mekong Delta was firmly in Vietminh hands. 36

Worse French Defeats, Deeper U.S. Intervention

In the summer of 1953 the war entered its final stage. In May 1953 General Navarre replaced Salan as commander-in-chief of the French armed forces in Indochina and proposed a so-called Navarre Plan which—worked out in conformity with American instructions—aimed at annihilating the Vietnamese forces and completely pacifying the country in eighteen months and in three stages. At this time the Republican administration in Washington was fully committed to the defense of Indochina against "communist imperialism." John Foster Dulles, according to the Pentagon Papers, spoke of Korea and Indochina as two flanks, with the principal enemy—Red China—in the center. A special study mission headed by Representative Walter Judd, a recognized Republican spokesman on Asia, surveyed the Far East and reported on its view of the high stakes involved: "The area of Indochina is immensely wealthy in rice, rubber, coal, and iron ore. Its position makes it a strategic key to the rest of Southeast Asia. If Indochina should fall, Thailand and Burma would be in extreme danger, Malaya, Singapore and even Indonesia would become more vulnerable to the Communist drive. . . . The Communists must be prevented from achieving their objectives in Indochina." 37

Because of the tremendous importance that was now attached to Indochina, the United States stepped up its military supplies to the French and pressured them to try for a military victory. The French government was under mounting public pressure to bring an end to the war, and hence it was ready to go to the negotiating table with the Viet Minh. The United States, however, consistently steered the French away from it. In the words of the Pentagon Papers, "In general, the U.S. sought to convince the French that military victory was the only guarantee of diplomatic success." 38 The Navarre Plan was thus adopted, and the United States became heavily involved in the conduct of the war. American aid accounted for close to 80 percent of the French war expenditure for the 1953–54 period, and airlifts were organized from France, the Philippines, and Japan for supplies to the French. Besides that, American military advisors arrived on the scene, two aircraft carriers of the Seventh Fleet were dispatched to the Gulf of Tonkin, and
250 American pilots took direct part in the fighting. In spite of this aid and in spite of the fact that General Navarre now had over half a million troops under his command, in Kahin’s words, at the end of 1953, when it had become clear to Navarre that his central objective of recovering the initiative in Tonkin’s Red River Delta was failing, he decided to put his chips on pinning down the Vietminh to do battle in surroundings where he believed his superior fire power and control of the air would ensure success. For this confrontation he chose the village of Dien Bien Phu, in a valley of northwestern Tonkin astride a major route into Laos, taking the “calculated risk” of garrisoning it with his “best units and reserves in the Tonkin Delta.” Initially he had broad support for this tactic from Americans, including Eisenhower, who was now taking a direct interest in French military efforts.42

In February 1954 Admiral Radford told a House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee that the Navarre Plan was “a broad strategic concept which within a few months should insure a favorable turn in the course of the war.”43 The French government, however, already saw the writing on the wall and desired to seek a negotiated settlement to end the war. At the Quadrupartite Foreign Minister’s meeting in February 1954 in Berlin, the French used whatever leverage they had to have the Indochina problem placed on the agenda for the Geneva Conference that had been called to work out a political settlement for the Korean War. Although the United States had to agree to this demand partly as a result of the French threat to withdraw from the European Defense Community, the National Security Council ordered that “the U.S. should employ every feasible means to influence the French Government against concluding the struggle on terms inconsistent with the basic U.S. objectives. . . a nominally non-communist coalition regime would eventually turn the country over to Ho Chi Minh with no opportunity for the replacement of the French by the United States or the United Kingdom [emphasis added by Ngo Vinh Long].”44

It was in the same month that the Viet Minh forces started to surround Dien Bien Phu (correct Vietnamese spelling) and on 16 March launched their attack against the French garrison. Although most French mobile units had been defending the Red River Delta, this attack forced the French to move them to Dien Bien Phu and other fronts. In April President Eisenhower wrote to Winston Churchill saying that France must grant “unequivocal independence” to Bao Dai’s Vietnam “so that American entry into Indochina would not have the taint of colonialism.” Eisenhower said that America’s allies, particularly Great Britain, should indicate their willingness to become militarily involved along with the United States in its direct intervention because this “would lend real moral standing to a venture that otherwise would be made to appear as a brutal example of imperialism.”45 Hand in hand with pressures on its allies, the United States also made actual preparations for direct armed intervention.46 On 7 May 1954, after fifty-five days of fierce fighting, General de Castries, the field commander at Dien Bien Phu, surrendered with his remaining 16,200 men. At the same time, French military forces throughout the country were severely routed by the various revolutionary forces. Thus in spite of last-minute maneuvers Washington was faced with a fait accompli: the First Indochina War was over.

IV. The “Diem Solution” and the Rise of the NLF

On 8 May 1954, one day after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the Indochina phase of the Geneva Conference began to officially register France’s defeat and to provide France with a face-saving means of disengagement. France did not want anything more than a graceful way out. On the first day of the conference, France immediately put forward a number of proposals for an armistice. But President Eisenhower and the Joint Chiefs “agreed that the Government could not back the French proposal with its call for a supervised cease-fire.”47 Therefore, for the next two months the United States tried to do everything to sabotage the negotiations and to create the opportunity for direct intervention in Vietnam. This latter objective included forcing the French government to agree to a new “united action” in May 1954, to the installment of Ngo Dinh Diem as Bao Dai’s premier in June, and to a position paper in July that would allow the United States to intervene in case of no settlement and to “see, with other interested nations, a collective defense association design to preserve, against direct and indirect aggression, the integrity of the non-Communist areas of Southeast Asia.”48

Principally because of the American intransigence and public threats, the DRV delegation was pressured by both China and the Soviet Union to make significant concessions that finally allowed the “Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam” to be signed by the French and the DRV governments on 20 July, and the multilateral Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference to be endorsed by all participants, except the United States, the following day. The United States, however, did make a “unilateral declaration” promising to abide by all the provisions of both agreements, especially to the provision for free elections to reunify the country.

Because the agreement and the declaration—which later came to be known collectively as the Geneva Agreements—were important for the return of peace and political reconciliation in Vietnam, and because the United States immediately broke its promise and went about violating every provision of the agreements, it is necessary to summarize some of the most essential features contained therein. Since the “Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam” provided the prerequisite foundation upon which the multilateral Final Declaration rests, it should be considered first. This agreement incorporated the following essential features: First, there was to be established a “provisional military demarcation line” (fixed at the seventeenth parallel) “on either side of which the forces of the two parties shall be regrouped after their withdrawal, the forces of the People’s Army of Vietnam to the north of the line and

42. Kahin, Intervention, p. 45.
43. Pentagon Papers vol. 1, p. 96.
44. Ibid., pp. 87, 442.
47. Pentagon Papers vol. 1, p. 121.
the forces of the French Union to the south" (Article 1). Civil administration in the regroupment zone to the north of the seventeenth parallel was to be in the hands of the Viet Minh, and the area to the south of the parallel was to be in the hands of the French (Article 8). Article 14 detailed the provisions for political and administrative control in the two regrouping zones pending the general elections. Paragraph (a) states in full: “Pending the general elections which will bring about the unification of Vietnam, the conduct of civil administration in each regrouping zone shall be in the hands of the party whose forces are to be regrouped there in virtue of the present Agreement.” Paragraph (b) of Article 14 specified that following the evacuation of the Viet Minh troops from south of the parallel, the French would assume responsibility of the administration there until after the elections.

A group of four articles—Articles 16–19—provided for the insulation of Vietnam from the international pressures of the Cold War by banning the introduction of all troops and military personnel, of all types of arms and war materiel, and of military bases and aggressive policy from the outside. Article 29 and most of the subsequent articles provided for the establishment of an International Commission for Supervision and Control, which was to be “responsible for supervising the proper execution by the parties of the provisions of the agreements” (Article 36).

The Final Declaration of the conference endorsed the preceding armistice agreement and sanctioned, in even further details, the political and administrative arrangements outlined in the armistice agreement. One of the most important paragraphs, Paragraph 7, had a definite bearing on the Viet Minh’s expectations concerning Vietnam’s political future and hence deserves quotation in full:

The Conference declares that, so far as Vietnam is concerned, the settlement of political problems, effected on the basis of respect for the principles of independence, unity and territorial integrity, shall permit the Vietnamese people to enjoy the fundamental freedoms, guaranteed by democratic institutions established as a result of free general elections by secret ballot. In order to ensure that sufficient progress in the restoration of peace has been made, that all the necessary conditions obtained for free expression of the national will, general elections shall be held in July 1956, under the supervision of an international commission composed of representatives of the Member States of the International Supervisory Commission, referred to in the agreement on the cessation of hostilities. Consultations will be held on this subject between the competent representative authorities of the two zones from July 20, 1955, onwards.

This was the most important reason for the many significant concessions made by the DRV at the conference. In Kahin’s words:

The major quid pro quo won by the Vietminh was the assurance that the struggle for control of Vietnam would be transferred from the military to the political level, a realm in which the Vietminh leaders knew their superiority over the French and their Vietnamese collaborators was even greater than it was militarily. Thus, in exchange for regrouping their military forces to the north of the seventeenth parallel into a territory considerably smaller than the total area they actually controlled, they had the assurance that in two years they would have the opportunity of winning control over the whole country through a nationwide election that they were, with good reason, confident of winning. For the Vietminh this was the heart of the Geneva Agreements. As [British prime minister Sir Anthony] Eden has categorically stated, without the firm and explicit assurance of national elections aimed at unifying the country, the Vietminh would never have agreed to the armistice. In that judgment, he has been unequivocally supported by Tran Van Do, Bao Dai’s principal representative at Geneva.

Ho’s government had ample basis for believing those elections would indeed be held. Not only were they clearly promised for a definite date in Geneva’s Final Declaration, but the bilateral armistice agreement with France also stipulated that the conduct of the civil administration south of the seventeenth parallel was to be the responsibility of France, “Pending the general elections which will bring about the unification of Vietnam.”

There was no doubt in Paris as to France’s obligation to ensure “observance and enforcement” of the provisions of the Geneva Agreements in her southern area of responsibility, as stipulated in her armistice with the Vietminh. Although it was generally expected that France would stay on until national reunification elections were held, in case she did not both the armistice agreement and her treaty of June 4, 1954, with Bao Dai’s regime provided that any Vietnamese administration succeeding hers was legally bound to assume her obligations. 49

Although the United States was able to exact many concessions by throwing its weight around during the conference, the fact that the agreements met the essential political objectives of the DRV was a bitter pill for the American government to swallow. According to the Pentagon Papers, “When, in August, papers were drawn up for the National Security Council, the Geneva Conference was evaluated as a major defeat for United States diplomacy and a potential disaster for United States security interest in the Far East.” 50 As a result, according to General James Gavin, “Admiral Radford was emphatically in favor of landing a force in the Haiphong-Hanoi area even if it meant risking war with China. In this he was fully supported by the Chief of Staff of the Air Force and the Chief of Naval operations.” Secretary of State Dulles and the Central Intelligence Agency generally agreed. It was assumed that the “expeditionary force” would be “eight combat divisions, supported by thirty-five engineer battalions, and all the artillery and logistical support such a mammoth undertaking requires.” 51 Dulles was quoted as saying that an American intervention had become possible because “we have a clean base there [in Indochina] now without a taint of colonialism. Dien Bien Phu was a blessing in disguise.” 52 Extreme military pressure, however, was rejected by Eisenhower, and a “compromise” that involved the setting up of a “stable, independent government” was reached. 53 This was what later came to be known as the “Dien Solution,” a flagrant violation of the Geneva Agreements, and a decision that would bring about the grim consequences of later years. But the problem confronting the United States at the time was how to install a puppet regime in the southern part of Vietnam. As expressed by Leo Cherne, one of the original promoters of the “Dien Solution,” in the 29 January 1955 issue of Look magazine: “If elections were held today, the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese would vote Communist . . . No more than 18

50. Pentagon Papers vol. 1, p. 177.
53. Gavin, Crisis Now, p. 49.
months remain for us to complete the job of winning over the Vietnamese before they vote. What can we do?"

Diem and Repression

The first thing to do was to have Diem announce that his regime would refuse to participate in the scheduled conferences for elections stipulated in the Geneva Agreements or in the free and internationally supervised elections called for in 1956, as well as to get rid of the French who were the guarantors of the Geneva Accords and of elections. On 28 April 1956, French troops were finally evacuated completely from Vietnam under American pressure. The second thing that the United States and Diem did was to try to eliminate the revolutionary movement in the southern part of Vietnam by stepping up repression and pacification of the rural areas. With regard to this repression, Kahin writes:

The Diem regime moved, publicly as well as covertly, to eliminate or stifle all opposition. Despite the Geneva Agreements' prohibition against political reprisal, it quickly targeted the most visible of large numbers of Vietminh sympathizers in the South. . . .

In mid-1955, soon after the last Vietminh army units had been regrouped to the North, Diem launched an anticomunist denunciation campaign in which his administration dragooned the population into mass meetings to inform against Vietminh members and sympathizers. . . . In May 1956, after only ten months of the campaign, its head announced that more than 94,000 former Vietminh cadres had "rallied to the government," with an additional 5,613 having surrendered. Full figures were never released on the considerable number who were executed, jailed, or sent to concentration camps, euphemistically called "re-education camps." . . .

More indicative of the actual scale of the problem and its exploitation was the February 1959 report that, in a single province of An Xuyen, a five-week campaign had resulted in the surrender of 8,125 communist agents and the denunciation of 9,806 other agents and 29,978 sympathizers. . . .

The high tide in the campaign of repression began with Diem's promulgation of Law 10/59 on May 6, 1959. . . . Under the new law, within three days of a charge special military courts were to sentence to death—usually through guillotining—with no right of appeal, "whoever commits or attempts to commit . . . crimes of sabotage, or of infringing upon the security of the State" as well as "whoever belongs to an organization designed to help or to perpetrate [these] crimes." The scope for retribution was every bit as broad in the economic field. Here the death sentence was to be meted out to anyone "who intentionally proclaims or spreads by any means unauthorized news about prices, or rumors contrary to truths, or distorts the truth concerning the present or future situation of markets in the country or abroad, susceptible of provoking economic or financial perturbations in the country." 54

Pacification and Reactions

As far as pacification of the countryside was concerned, besides routine raiding operations with his regular army, Diem also carried out a so-called land reform program that in effect sent landlords back into the countryside to reclaim lands that the revolution had parcelled out to the peasants during the resistance war and to collect land rents for as many years back as

In violation of the Geneva Accords, the United States installed Ngo Dinh Diem as the puppet leader of "South Vietnam" in 1954 and then backed a coup nine years later that killed him and his brother after they had shown some independence and contacted both the NLF and DRV to seek a negotiated settlement. Ngo Dinh Diem is shown here with his immediate family—his brother and chief adviser, Ngo Dinh Nhu, standing behind him; his powerful sister-in-law, Madame Nhu, in the center; and his very influential oldest brother, Archbishop Thuc, in the back on the right.

the landlords could lay claim to. In the best four-cornered study of the war (that is, analysis from the perspectives of the DRV, the NLF, the Saigon regime, and the United States) published to date, Gabriel Kolko writes:

Diem's so-called land reform which began in early 1955 and was consolidated in October 1956 was an extremely complex effort to reestablish control of the Viet Minh regions in the Delta only, where it was applied most rigorously. . . . For the substantial portion of the peasantry that had benefited from the Viet Minh's reforms, Diem's measures represented a counterrevolution, and its fear of losing valuable gains and returning to the traditional peasant-landlord structure created a crisis in the rural areas. For it was Diem's land program, not the Party, which led inevitably to renewed conflict in South Vietnam. The moment he abolished the legal standing of the Viet Minh's land reforms, he unleashed social discontent and created actual and potential enemies. 55

The fierce struggles by the peasants to defend their land rights led Cach Mang Quoc Gia (Nationalist revolution), the veritable official organ of the Diem regime, to make the following complaint in the 23 February 1959 issue: "At present, in the countryside the landowners cannot collect their land rents because they dare not return to their villages." This unrest in the countryside was of course blamed on the "Viet Cong,"


or literally, “Vietnamese Communists.” So in the same month, with the help of American and British experts, a pacification program involving wholesale resettlement of the resident population was forcefully carried out in order to separate so-called loyal from disloyal groups. Since people were taken from their plots of land—on which their houses, paddy fields, and ancestral tombs, and so on, were located—and moved to totally unsuitable areas, and since it often happened that many “loyal” families were grouped together with “suspect” families for no reason other than the fact that they might have relatives who had fought with the Viet Minh against the French, this resettlement technique brought protests even from the ranks of senior Saigon government officials. In April of 1959, more “sophisticated” relocation sites with barbed-wire fences and spiked moats around them were constructed with forced labor and at enormous cost to the peasants and were euphemistically called “agrovilles.” In many cases, when the houses and fields of those who had been relocated were considered too distant from the newly constructed agrovilles, they were simply burnt down. On 14 July 1959, Cach Mang Quoc Gia declared: “We must let the peasants know that to give shelter to a communist or follow his advice makes them liable to the death penalty. We must behead them and shoot them as people kill mad dogs.”

Birth of the National Liberation Front

Coupled with Law 10/59 this meant that any peasant who protested the relocation program, resisted land grabbing, or asked for a rent or tax reduction could be legally executed. This left the peasants with few choices except to resort to armed struggle to defend themselves. Throughout the later half of 1959 armed engagements with the Diem army and police broke out in remote villages in many areas. In January 1960, insurrections broke out in Ben Tre Province—thirty-five miles south of Saigon—under the leadership of former Viet Minh cadres. This brought about a chain reaction that helped liberate about half of the villages in all of southern Vietnam. Side by side with the peasant uprisings there were massive struggles by workers, students, ethnic groups, and various religious and political groups. On 20 December 1960 those organizations and groups born of the opposition and resistance to the United States and the Diem regime merged into a National Front for Liberation—called National Liberation Front, or NLF, in the West—whose program called for the overthrow of the Diem administration, the liquidation of all foreign interference, the establishment of a national coalition government, a foreign policy of peace and neutrality, and a gradual advance toward the peaceful reunification of the country. Early in 1961, the People’s Liberation Army came into being. From that time on the NLF dealt the Diem regime repeated military and pacification setbacks that convinced the United States that Diem was no longer equal to his task.


57. Nighswonger, Rural Pacification, pp. 46–47.

An ethnic Cambodian boy in a rural village surrounded by barbed wire in Tra Vinh (Vinh Binh) Province in 1967. Although this boy’s village appeared to be an established village that “just happened” to have barbed wire around it, by the end of 1967 there were three million refugees in South Vietnam, many of them living at relocation sites surrounded with barbed wire.

Coups and Musical Chairs

In April 1963, confronted with pressures from all sides and with the advice of his brother and chief political confidant, Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem established contact with both the NLF and the DRV to seek a negotiated settlement. According to Kahin, “Nhu’s flirtation with the Vietnamese Communists, serious or not, caused American officials enough concern so they listened to even the most radical arguments for ousting him and Diem. . . . Aware of American fears of a Nhu-Diem accommodation with the enemy, Saigon’s generals concluded that Washington was all the more likely to support a move to oust them.” 58 Ellen J. Hammer’s recent book, A Death in November, has vividly documented the details of the American-backed coup that resulted in the murder of Diem and his brother Nhu on 1 November 1963. 59 And Kahin was correct in his conclusion.


that "the President [John Kennedy] had certainly wanted to see
Diem and Nhu removed from power, and he ordered full support
to the generals who had overthrown them. Lodge [U.S. ambas-
sador in Saigon] and Rusk [U.S. secretary of state] promptly
established a close working relationship with the new govern-
ment, headed by General Duong Van Minh.\textsuperscript{60} The United
States increased its military supplies and aid to Saigon, and in
1964 Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara came to Saigon
to work out new pacification plans. But the deeply shaken
Saigon regime and army were plunged into an endless crisis:
within twenty months of the fall of Diem, thirteen coups, nine
cabinets, and four charters followed one after another. The
various U.S. services tried in vain to find a formula of govern-
ment likely to allow the war to be conducted in an efficient
way: military junta, associated military-civilian government,
dictatorship under one general, rule by veterans or "young
Turks."

While the United States was playing musical chairs in
Saigon, the NLF armed forces and the population went on the
offensive. The strategic hamlets that had succeeded the agro-
villes and had contained 85 percent of the rural population
before the fall of Diem were, according to an official American
estimate, completely destroyed.\textsuperscript{61} Again, according to American
estimates, by the beginning of 1964 about half of the villages
in South Vietnam were already under solid NLF control, and
by the beginning of 1965 the zone liberated by NLF covered
nearly four-fifths of the territory and two-thirds of the popula-
tion. Once again, Washington was confronted with the situation
of either making peace or escalating the war. Throughout 1964,
the NLF made repeated efforts to arrange a negotiated settle-
ment based on the Laot model, with a neutralist coalition gov-
ernment. But the United States consistently rejected any such
"premature negotiations" as incompatible with its goal of main-
taining a noncommunist South Vietnam under American con-
control. And after a period of agonizing that has been documented
and discussed in detail by George Kahin, President Johnson
decided to side with those advisers who argued that "bombing
the north will save the south." But as pointed out by Kahin,
"It was soon evident that bombing the North was ineffective.
There were none of the positive consequences in the South—
either political or military—that Lyndon Johnson's advisers
had confidently predicted. . . . As the political and military
fabric of the southern regime continued to unravel even more
rapidly than before, almost all of his advisers pressed for a
second dimension of escalation—the introduction of U.S.
ground forces."\textsuperscript{62}

In other words, the United States was prepared to escalate
the war because Saigon was about to fall to the southern NLF
forces and not because of any threat—real or imagined—from
the North. As we will see in the next section of this article, a
small northern unit was identified by American intelligence in
the South for the first time only about seven weeks after Amer-
ican troops had landed in Vietnam in large numbers.

\textsuperscript{60} Kahin, \textit{Intervention}, p. 181.
\textsuperscript{61} Nighswonger, \textit{Rural Pacification}, pp. 61–63.
\textsuperscript{62} Kahin, \textit{Intervention}, pp. 236–85 for details leading to the decision. See p. 306 for the immediate quote.
\textsuperscript{63} For details, see ibid., pp. 295–305; \textit{Ramparts}, July 1975.

V. The Full-Scale American War, 1965–75

In January 1965, while the United States was preparing
the pretexts for sending its troops into South Vietnam in great
numbers, the Saigon regime was clever enough to see that it
should respond to the NLF's call for a negotiated end to the
war. General Nguyen Khanh, who was the head of the Armed
Forces Council that ruled Saigon at the time, later confirmed
that he was close to a political settlement with the NLF and
an alliance with the Buddhists. When the Americans found this
out, however, Khanh was removed and sent into exile in France.
This helped foreclose any possibility for a peace settlement
and propelled the United States toward a full-scale war in Viet-
nam.\textsuperscript{64} On 6 March American combat units landed in Danang,
ostenibly to contain "North Vietnamese aggression." But,
writes Kahin, "on April 21, the day American intelligence con-
firmed the existence of what later emerged as a single battalion
of PAVN [People's Army of Vietnam] troops in the South,
many times more American combat units were already there.
Indeed, at that time even the number of South Korean soldiers
in South Vietnam (2,000) was greater than this North Vietnam-
ese unit."\textsuperscript{65}

The introduction of American troops and "allied forces"
started a full-scale American war against Vietnam that was
later called the "Vietnam War," or the "Second Indochina War."
The conduct of the war by the United States and its allies has
been described in vivid detail in many books and reports written
in English.\textsuperscript{66} Except for a handful of studies, the revolutionary
side of the war has yet to be adequately described and ana-
lyzed.\textsuperscript{67} Because of space limitations in this article we will
summarize only a few developments of the three main phases
of this war: the period of massive escalation from 1965 to 1968,
Nixon's "Vietnamization" period of 1969 to 1972, and the post-

About two weeks after the first introduction of American
ground forces into Vietnam, the National Liberation Front is-
sued a "Five-Point Statement" that included an offer for a
peaceful settlement of the war. On 8 April 1965 Prime Minister
Pham Van Dong of the DRV also spelled out clearly in a
"Four-Point Position" the desire of his government to seek a
political settlement that was basically a return to the Geneva
Agreements. But as pointed out in the Pentagon Papers, the
United States ruled out any compromise, and the "negotiating
terms that the US proposed were . . . more akin to a 'cease
and desist' order that, from the DRV/VC point of view, was

\textsuperscript{64} Kahin, \textit{Intervention}, p. 307.
\textsuperscript{65} Recent excellent examples include Neil Sheehan, \textit{A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam} (New York: Random
as \textit{The Perfect War: The War We Couldn't Lose and How We Did} (New
\textsuperscript{66} These include Kolko's \textit{Anatomy of a War}; Jeffrey Race, \textit{War Comes to Long An} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); and
This stamp from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1965 celebrates "500 American aircraft shot down over the North."

tantamount to a demand for their surrender." This marked the pattern that was to last until the end of 1967: The United States responded to every peace offer from the DRV and the NLF by further escalation with the hope that it could destroy the Vietnamese resistance through pacification and military destruction. But this only increased the popularity and support for the NLF, which in turn created problems for the U.S.-Saigon side. The French daily Le Figaro reported on 15 February 1967 that Pentagon generals were obliged to admit that the pacification program had become a complete failure and that by the end of 1966 the number of Saigon troop "desertions had reached a monthly figure of 500 per regiment." A report of the U.S. Senate Armed Forces Committee also maintained in early 1967 that "by the end of the dry season, the Viet Cong still controlled 80 per cent of South Vietnam territory?" For our purpose here it is sufficient to point out that this offensive had three phases. The first phase began on 31 January when commando units and local forces attacked almost simultaneously all the major cities, 36 of the 44 provincial capitals, and 64 of the 242 district towns. "The enemy’s Tet offensive," the author of the Pentagon Papers wrote shortly after it occurred, "although it had been predicted, took the U.S. command and the U.S. public by surprise, and its strength, length and intensity prolonged this shock." The CIA on 10 February estimated that the offensive had already accomplished its main psychological, political, and military objectives. The communists, it said, were now gaining control over vast new rural areas, smashing Saigon’s military, economic, and political system, and having more direct influence on the urban sector. And, after a study tour to Saigon, General Earle Wheeler, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had to admit in a report of 17 February to President Johnson that Tet was "a very near thing." He wrote that had it not been for "timely reaction of the United States forces," the attacks would have succeeded in numerous places. This very timely reaction included massive American artillery and air strikes that leveled from 30 to South Vietnam. Yet the results of these efforts are meager. . . . In reality, we can control only a very small area, according to the required norms. I would say that we control only 4 per cent in the daytime and only one per cent during the night."

But instead of responding to repeated peace-talk offers from the NLF and the calls from the DRV for "an unconditional cessation of U.S. bombing and all other acts of war against the DRV" so that peace negotiations could begin, the United States doubled and then tripled attack sorties against the North, demanding "reciprocity" in exchange for the bombing halt. On 29 December 1967, DRV foreign minister Nguyen Duy Trinh repeated the peace-talk offer, and President Lyndon B. Johnson again demanded reciprocity. Since Hanoi was not bombing the United States, the Vietnamese revolutionary leaders interpreted this demand as an attempt by the United States to get Hanoi to call off the struggle in the South. Therefore, the DRV and the NLF decided to carry out the Spring 1968 Offensive—later called the "Tet Offensive" in the United States—to force the U.S. government to de-escalate the war against the North and to go to the negotiating table.

Tet: The Great Turning Point

The 1968 Tet Offensive was the greatest turning point of the Vietnam War because of a combination of far-reaching political, military, psychological, and diplomatic impacts that can be fully understood only in the whole context of the Vietnam War and the nature of the revolutionary struggle in Vietnam. This writer and several authors have dealt with this offensive in great detail elsewhere." For our purpose here it is sufficient to point out that this offensive had three phases.

80 percent of many cities. But what was perhaps most difficult for the Americans to understand was how this “very near thing” would have been pulled off with such small numbers of attackers. In Saigon, for example, only one thousand local NLF forces and sappers managed to hold off over eleven thousand U.S. and Saigon troops and police for three weeks. Regular troops waited nearby but were not employed except in Hue where one thousand regular DRV troops captured the Citadel and occupied it until 24 February while American firepower destroyed about 80 percent of the city. Among other things, the offensive further proved to many people that the United States would never be able to win the war in Vietnam firstly because of the evident popularity of the NLF and secondly because, in its bombing destruction of the cities, the United States reconfirmed the fact that it had all along regarded the Vietnamese people themselves as the real enemy in Vietnam.

Because of mounting pressures from all fronts as a result of the Tet Offensive, on 31 March—the day that the United States considered the Tet Offensive ended—President Johnson made a major speech, announcing his decision to withdraw from the upcoming presidential election and to limit the bombing of the North to the panhandle area and saying that “the United States is ready to send its representatives to any forum at any time, to discuss the means of bringing this war to an end.” It was a cunning maneuver designed to placate American public opinion. The American air force, seriously crippled by losses sustained over North Vietnam as well as in the South during the ground attacks, could no longer afford to scatter bombing raids over too vast a territory. By limiting their strikes to the panhandle where a good 20 percent of the North Vietnamese population lived and which was an extremely valuable food-producing area, the United States could destroy more with the same tonnage. In fact, after 31 March, the number of air sorties against the DRV and air and artillery strikes against South Vietnamese villages, especially the Mekong Delta, increased to unprecedented levels, and Johnson was able to increase the numbers of American troops in Vietnam and asked an additional $39 billion from Congress for his war expenditures. Under these conditions, Johnson hoped that the Vietnamese would refuse his offer. But he was taken by surprise on 3 April 1968, when the DRV declared itself ready to meet with the United States. It turned out that Johnson’s “any forum at any time” did not include Phnom Penh, Warsaw, and Paris, and Washington immediately put up absurd conditions for the selection of a meeting place.

**Tet: The Second and Third Phase**

On the night of 4 May the second phase of the Tet Offensive began when 119 bases, towns, and cities were attacked. The main objective was to get the United States to de-escalate the war against the North and go to the negotiating table, as well as to disrupt the Saigon military and political system. Again the “allied forces” had to rely heavily on helicopter gunships and napalm strikes in populated areas in the attempt to drive out the infiltrators. As a result, for example, some 8,000 homes in Saigon’s eighth district were destroyed in five days. American officers strongly defended this tactic although it brought about new devastation on Saigon. “There is no clean way of fighting a city war,” argued one American general. “If you try to fight with gloves on, the casualty rate is going to be so high that you can’t stomach it, and you don’t get the enemy out anyway.” This was the kind of logic that forced one Saigon officer to complain bitterly, “We cannot go on destroying entire blocks every time a Vietcong steps into a house.” Again, these attacks exposed the nature of the American involvement and thereby scored some important political points for the NLF in the long run. In the short run, however, both the United States and the Saigon regime were forced to join the “Paris Talks on Vietnam” which began on 13 May 1968. But President Johnson was still very much committed to sustaining the struggle, and so he refused to stop the bombing over the North and de-escalate the war in the South.

The third and last phase of the offensive began on 17 August with the shelling of American installations and a series of coordinated assaults throughout South Vietnam. For the next six weeks mortars, rockets, and small local units were largely relied on in order to minimize the loss of manpower. To forestall a ground assault against Saigon, American B-52 bombers poured close to one million pounds of bombs a day on the surrounding areas and the suspected infiltration routes. This third phase proved to be the most costly for the NLF. Regular NLF troops were trapped in the environs of Saigon and other cities and towns, isolated from their rural base of support and killed in large numbers. As a result, that rural base of support was vulnerable to savage repression that we will discuss shortly. But during the first weeks of renewed fighting more than 700 Americans died in action, the highest rate in three months. This showed the American people that the war was not winding down, a relevant point to drive home during the final weeks of the presidential election. On 31 October, in a last-ditch effort to save Hubert Humphrey’s presidential bid, Johnson had to order the unconditional cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam and announce that a four-party conference with NLF and Saigon representatives participating would start on 6 November. But the American people had lost confidence in Johnson and his party whom they held responsible for the continuing war. With his promises of bringing about peace, Richard Nixon got himself elected president of the United States.

**Nixon’s “Peace Plan”: Vietnamization**

Just like Johnson before him, Nixon talked peace in order to make war. Ambassador Averell Harriman, who was still the chief U.S. negotiator in Paris in the period between November and Nixon’s inauguration on 20 January, later wrote that during that time Nixon manipulated the Nguyen Van Thieu regime to deliberately destroy the chances for a negotiated peace, and that after Nixon took over, Henry Cabot Lodge (who replaced Harriman) succeeded in destroying almost everything that had been achieved. Instead of talking peace, Nixon put into effect his “Vietnamization” program, which he called his “peace plan.” Harriman denounced Nixon’s “peace plan” in language about as strong as could be expected from a man in his position:


74. Quotes cited in ibid., pp. 146–47.
“The Administration’s program of Vietnamization of the war is not in my opinion a program for peace, but it is a program for the continuation of the war. . . . Furthermore, the Vietnamization of the war is dependent on an unpopular and repressive government. . . .”

The Vietnamization program involved the massive build-up of the Saigon forces in an attempt to get Vietnamese to kill other Vietnamese. The Nixon administration was able to carry this out thanks to the heavy U.S. bombing of Indochina and such programs as the Accelerated Pacification Program and the Phoenix Program. The United States dropped 5 million tons of bombs on Indochina, the great bulk of them on the countryside of South Vietnam in 1969 and 1970. This is more than twice the tonnage dropped on all fronts during World War II! The Accelerated Pacification Program increased massive relocation and destruction in the rural areas, whereas the Phoenix Program was a wholesale assassination plan that was responsible for the deaths of 20,000 NLF cadres and the “neutralization” of about 80,000 more, making it almost impossible to survive in the countryside. In these circumstances the Nixon administration was able to increase the regular forces of the Saigon army (the Army of the Republic of Vietnam—ARVN) to over 1.1 million men and the local forces to over 4 million out of a total population of about 18 million.

All this was being done not simply to save American lives but also to save American dollars. It cost the United States $38,000 to send an American to Vietnam to fight for one year. But it cost an average of only $400 to support an Asian mercenary—Koreans and Thais included—to fight for a year. Saving American lives and dollars served to persuade the American public that the war was winding down so that the American people should be more patient with Nixon’s conduct of the war. The press-ganging of Vietnamese youth into the army also served to deny the NLF fresh supplies of troops. Moreover, as Trinh Pho, a Vietnamese officer in the Political Warfare Section of the Saigon army, explained in a long article entitled “The Mobilization of Soldiers in a New Sweep” in the Saigon magazine *Quan Chung* (5 September 1969), the main reason for drafting so many people into the army was to keep them under government control.

While under military control, these people were forced to go out on some 300 mopping-up operations in South Vietnam every day in 1969 and 1970 to destroy such enemy fire so that American tactical air support and artillery strikes—which accounted for over a million tons of high explosives a year on the southern part of Vietnam—could destroy the enemy. Such mopping-up operations were also designed to pacify the countryside. As a result, according to hundreds of Vietnamese in the Southern provinces whom this writer has interviewed since 1979, the “darkest years” for the southern revolutionaries and their supporters were 1969 and 1970. Thousands of NLF fighters were either killed or forced to desert during this period. The losses of the NLF forces and cadres also contributed to increasing PAVN casualties in the South because the former had provided the political structure and hence the necessary logistical support for main forces. By the fall of 1969 some PAVN forces in the South had to play guerrilla by dividing into company-sized bodies, which in turn were partially broken down into sapper units in order to survive. Others had to move to Cambodian border areas.

**Invasion of Cambodia and NLF Recovery**

In May 1970, over 50,000 U.S. and Saigon troops invaded Cambodia to “clean up the sanctuaries” and dismantle the “Viet-cong Pentagon.” This invasion was preceded by the most massive air bombardments since the start of the Vietnam War, including for the first time B-52 bomber raids against towns, wiping out half a dozen frontier towns in as many minutes. The full story of this bloody act by Nixon in his “search for peace,” which ended in complete disaster, has been documented elsewhere. What should be mentioned here is that this was a mistake that gave the revolutionary movement in the southern provinces, especially the Mekong Delta, the space and time to reorganize itself and fight back. This recovery of the southern revolutionary forces helped the other areas in the country tremendously, especially in military terms. This was because the Mekong Delta forces pinned down more Saigon forces than all other areas combined and hence allowed the other areas the time and space to develop their forces and recover. By the end of 1970 and the beginning of 1971, the NLF recovered completely and became even stronger. This contributed to a series of disastrous military defeats for Saigon, which in turn led to massive anti-Saigon and anti-U.S. demonstrations in the urban areas in South Vietnam.

Because of its weak political and military situation, throughout 1971 the United States rejected all offers by the DRV and PRG (Provisional Revolutionary Government, a coalition of the NLF and other forces set up in June 1969) for a ceasefire and a tripartite coalition government in exchange for the United States setting a date for withdrawal of its forces from Vietnam. In February 1972, while suspending the Paris Peace Talks and stepping up the bombings in Vietnam, Nixon and Kissinger went to China to get Chinese leaders to put pressure on Vietnam to end the war on U.S. terms. In Hanoi the official newspaper *Nhent Dan* reacted strongly by saying that “the time when the great powers could decide the fate of small nations is past and gone.” In the South the “1972 Spring Offensive” began in March with the attacks and routing of Saigon main forces in several provinces. Nixon retaliated with the most massive bombing of northern towns and cities and its dams and dikes up to that time. All ports of the DRV were also mined so as to cut off supplies from the outside. But the bombing had no effect on the battlefields in the South. The U.S. and Saigon forces had completely lost any initiative and were reduced to defensive actions wherever the PRG-DRV forces chose to strike. This time the United States had nowhere to go but back

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78. This period of “talk-fight” struggle from 1971 to 1972 was much more complex than is indicated here. For a much more detailed treatment, see Kolko, *Anatomy*, pp. 412-37.
Saigon University students confronting plainclothes policemen in gas masks during one of the anti-Saigon, anti-U.S. demonstrations protesting the 1971 election. Many students died during these protests. Deputies also demonstrated, carrying banners saying things like “The October 3 election is a means of establishing a dictatorial and foreign-directed regime.”

to the negotiating table. Finally, it was announced in Hanoi on 26 October and confirmed by Kissinger at a Washington press conference later on the same day that full agreement had been reached. The agreement was to be signed “exactly on the 31st” of October. But at this press conference, while saying that “peace is at hand,” Kissinger tried to back away from what had been negotiated by pretending that there were some “minor linguistic difficulties” that would have to be solved in another negotiating session. The Vietnamese maintained that the agreement had been gone through by the two sides sentence by sentence, word by word, until there was total agreement on the texts. Nixon and Kissinger, however, put up all kinds of excuses for delaying the signing. The talks did not resume again until 20 November, two weeks after Nixon had used the agreement to defeat George McGovern. And for the next fourteen negotiating sessions Kissinger demanded 126 substantive changes in all, affecting all nine sections of the agreement. The Vietnamese refused to comply.

Late on the evening of 18 December, Premier Pham Van Dong received a communication from Nixon demanding that he consent to the changes Kissinger had proposed in the agreement or Hanoi would be heavily bombed. Within minutes waves of B-52s conducted their carpet bombing of Hanoi, and later Haiphong. Between 18 and 30 December, over 40,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Hanoi and 15,000 tons were dropped on Haiphong by B-52 attacks alone. But the Nixon-Kissinger team bombed themselves back to the negotiating table in Paris, and on 17 January 1973 signed the Paris Agreement—an agreement that was virtually unchanged from its October 1972 version.79

Saigon’s Peace Violations and Collapse

But both the United States and the Thieu regime believed that carrying out the Paris Agreement to the letter would lead to an eventual political takeover by the Vietnamese revolutionaries. Therefore, in spite of the fact that the Paris Agreements established two parallel and equal parties in South Vietnam—the Saigon regime and the Provisional Revolutionary Government—and that the two parties were supposed to reach a political settlement under conditions of full democratic rights without U.S. interference (Articles 1, 4, 9 and 11), the United States and Thieu consistently denied the PRG any political role in South Vietnam. For example, in an interview published in the 15 July 1973 issue of Vietnam Report, an English-language publication of the Saigon Council on Foreign Relations, Thieu stated: “The Vietcong are presently trying to turn areas under their control into a state endowed with a government, which they could claim to be the second such institution in the South. . . . In the first place, we have to do our best so that the NLF cannot build itself into a state, a second state within the South.”

To help Saigon achieve this end the United States supplied the Thieu regime with so many arms that, as Maj. Gen. Peter Olenchuk testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee on 8 May 1973, “We shortchanged ourselves within our overall inventories. We also shortchanged the reserve units in terms of prime assets. In certain instances, we also diverted equipment that would have gone to Europe.”80

79. For details of this “Christmas Bombing” and the signing of the Paris Agreement, see ibid., pp. 439–53.
“Tricky Dick Nixon, boy gangster” is what those who saw through Nixon’s hypocrisy, lies, and illegal and aggressive actions called him as early as the fifties. In this cartoon Nixon and his accomplice Kissinger are seen in a typical gangland shootout, the results of which would have been miniscule compared to the deaths in Indochina caused by the heavy bombing and assassination campaigns ordered by Nixon and the negotiations intentionally sabotaged by Kissinger.*

In fiscal year 1974, Congress gave Saigon $1 billion more in military aid. Saigon expended as much ammunition as it could—$700 million worth. This left a stockpile of at least $300 million, a violation of the Paris Agreement, which had stipulated that equipment only be replaced on a one-to-one basis. For fiscal year 1975, Congress again authorized $1 billion in military aid, but appropriated $700 million—about what was actually spent in 1974.

This fantastic amount of military aid, plus an explicit oral guarantee given to Thieu by Nixon that the United States would reenter the war—at least with airpower—to bail him out if worse came to worst, encouraged Thieu to sabotage the agreement by attacking areas controlled by the PRG. A study by the U.S. Defense Attaché office in Saigon revealed that “the countryside ratio of the number of rounds fired by South Vietnamese forces (since the signing of the Paris Agreement) to that fired by the Communist forces was about 16 to 1. In military Regions II and III, where South Vietnamese commanders have consistently been the most aggressive, and where some U.S. officials said that random ‘harassment and interdiction’ fire against Communist-controlled areas was still common, the ratio was on the order of 50 to 1.” In addition to the shellings, on the average about 15,000 bombs were dropped and 10,000 different military operations were conducted into the countryside every month.

According to “Vietnam—A Changing Crucible,” issued by the House Committee on Foreign Affairs on 15 July 1974, this military aggressiveness actually enthralled many Congressional supporters of the war. But it also inflicted untold death and suffering on the civilian population as well as exposed Saigon’s own armed forces to danger and death. As early as 30 August 1973 the respected French newspaper *Le Monde* reported that the Saigon high command had stated that about 41,000 of its troops had been killed and 4,000 were missing since the signing of the Paris Agreement. Saigon was never known for inflating its own casualty statistics. The suffering and death caused by Thieu’s sabotage of the Paris Agreement made his regime increasingly unpopular among the general population.

Worse still, because of the increase in economic aid to the Thieu regime in 1973 and 1974 it felt confident enough to carry out an “economic blockade” designed to inflict hunger for the Thieu regime in 1973 and 1974 it felt confident enough to carry out an “economic blockade” designed to inflict hunger...

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*This cartoon was on the front cover of the Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars vol. 5, no. 4 (December 1973), and came from the inside front cover of the Revista Mensual de la Organización Continental Latinoamericana des Estudiantes.
and starvation on the PRG areas. This blockade, which in this rice-centered country included prohibitions on the transport of rice from one village to another, rice-milling by anyone except the government, storage of rice in homes, and the sale of rice outside the village to any except government-authorized buyers, caused widespread hunger and starvation. According to reports by Saigon deputies and Catholic priests, up to 60 percent of the population of the central provinces were reduced to eating bark, cacti, banana roots, and the bulbs of wild grass. Children and aged people were the first victims. In some central Vietnam villages deaths from starvation reached 1 to 2 percent of the total population each month. And in the once rice-rich Mekong Delta, acute rice shortages became commonplace in many provinces.

The death and suffering caused by Thieu’s military attacks and “economic blockade” not only intensified the general population’s hatred of the Thieu regime, they also forced the PRG to fight back. As reported in the 31 August 1974 issue of the Manchester Guardian Weekly (England),

in the first year of the ceasefire, the Communists pursued a policy of comparative restraint as they tried through diplomatic means to put pressure on Saigon to accept the political provisions of the Paris Agreement. Representations to the U.S. government and meetings with Kissinger leading nowhere, they seem to have decided, sometime this spring, to go over to a limited offensive, which they announced on their radio and elsewhere, in a public way.

In the summer of 1974, the PRG’s counterattack forced Thieu’s armed forces to make one “tactical withdrawal” after another. Even in the heavily defended delta provinces, Saigon was forced to abandon 800 firebases and forts in order to “increase mobility and defense.” But instead of responding to the repeated calls by the DRV and the PRG for a return to the Paris Agreement, the United States increased economic aid to Saigon by $100 million, and the White House requested Congressional approval for another $300 million in supplemental military aid.

Father Nguyen Quang Lam, an ultraconservative anticommunist Catholic priest, wrote in the February 1975 issue of Dai Dan Toc:

Yesterday I wrote that whether there is an additional $300 million or $3,000 in aid, South Vietnam will still not be able to avoid collapse. . . . In the afternoon a reader called me up and said that I should have put it more strongly. I must say that the more the aid, the quicker the collapse of South Vietnam. All I had to do was to take a look at our society. . . . Come to think of it, the reader has a point there. The American dollars have really changed our way of thinking. People compete with each other to become prostitutes, that is to say, to get rich in the quickest and most exploitative manner. No wonder whenever our soldiers see the enemy they run for their lives, even though they might have a basement full of ammunition which they could presumably fire till kingdom come.

It was already perfectly clear to even the most conservative Vietnamese that Saigon was ready to fall even though at that

Guerrillas in the village of Gio Mi in the Gio Linh District of Quang Tri waylaying enemy troops intruding into the liberated area in January 1973. With the encouragement of the United States, Thieu sabotaged the Paris Agreement by attacking areas controlled by the PRG.
time it had 1.1 million men in its regular army and the world's third largest air force and eighth largest navy. Yet the American Congress was still debating additional war appropriations for Saigon in February of 1975. This forced the DRV and PRG to mount an offensive in early March to bring the point home. Saigon armed forces quickly disintegrated and fled from the highland areas to the coastal areas and then southward as one province after another fell with hardly a fight. On 26 March General Frederick C. Weyland, army chief of staff, was sent to Saigon to assess the situation as well as to help Saigon set up a last defense anchor thirty-five miles north of the city. Frantic diplomatic and political maneuvers were also embarked upon with the hope of stopping, or at least delaying, the offensive. This included getting China and the Soviet Union to put pressure on the DRV as well as installing the former general Duong Van “Big” Minh, with the connivance and support of the French government, as the new president of South Vietnam. This last act of the charade is described by Kolko as follows:

On the afternoon of April 28, during a thunderstorm, Minh in his inaugural speech called for a negotiated peace but also asked the revolution immediately to cease hostilities. His own troops he urged “to defend the territory which is left and to defend peace,” adding, “Keep your spirit high, your ranks intact, and your positions firm . . . .” He drew up plans not only to continue resisting but also to counterattack the Communist forces.

. . . . Minh’s utopian message reinforced definitely the Party’s natural reluctance to continue the charade with another puppet. . . . On the morning of April 29, the offensive against Saigon began, quickly cutting off the city on all sides. [American Ambassador Graham] Martin ordered the final evacuation by helicopter, and the last Americans left by 5 A.M. on April 30. By that hour all of the key approaches to the city were in PAVN hands, while local forces, sympathizers, and sappers fanned throughout the city itself.

. . . South of Saigon, in the Mekong Delta, the remnants of the RVN’s armies were surrendering and disintegrating to local NLF units, sometimes several guerillas capturing hundreds of superbly equipped soldiers. At 10:15 Minh broadcast a cease-fire to his own forces, urging them also to remain in their positions and asking the Communists to do the same until there was a discussion of the orderly transfer of power. It was a surrender, but scarcely an unconditional one which acknowledged the reality of the battlefield.86 Consequently, less than an hour later a group of three PAVN tanks went straight to the Saigon Presidential Palace and crashed through the huge iron gate. At about 11:30 A.M. the NLF flag was raised up a flagpole at the palace, and Minh was taken to the radio station to announce his unconditional surrender. Finally, the Vietnam War had ended—with a bang and a whimper.

VI. Postwar Conflict and Economic Performance, 1975–89

Even before the Vietnam War had ended, conflict with the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK, also variously known as the Khmer Rouge or Pol Pot group) and China had begun. The root reasons for this conflict have been documented in detail by Nayan Chanda, the veteran reporter for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, in his universally acclaimed book on the subject.87 Chanda reports that the ultranationalistic Khmer Rouge had become extremely wary of the Vietnamese precisely because the latter had provided what Prince Norodom Sihanouk called the “indisputably effective and heroic shield” to help the Khmer resistance forces grow in strength. Chanda continues: “The very success of the resistance meant the beginning of the end of [the] CPK-Hanoi alliance . . . . According to a CIA report in September 1970, Khmer troops fired on Vietnamese Communist forces from behind while the latter were attacking a Lon Nol [Phnom Penh regime] unit in Kompong Thom.”88 From then on, the situation got worse:

The simmering tension between the Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge reached a crisis in late 1972 when, during the final stage of U.S.-Vietnamese peace talks in Paris, an attempt was made to bring the Khmer Rouge into negotiation with Lon Nol. U.S. negotiator Henry Kissinger’s demand to this effect was passed on to the Khmer Rouge leadership in several clandestine meetings in late 1972 and, for the last time, in a January 24–26, 1973, encounter between Vietnamese Politburo member Pham Hung and

88. Ibid., p. 66.
Pol Pot. The idea was rejected scornfully. Pol Pot saw that the military situation could produce a quick victory, since the isolated and discredited Lon Nol regime was on its last legs. The Vietnamese warning to the Khmer Rouge that their refusal would bring heavy punishment from the United States was seen as a blackmail attempt. . . .

But the Vietnamese were right about the punishment. Free from duty in the rest of the Indochinese theater, American bombers dropped 257,465 tons of bombs on Cambodia between February and August 1973—50 percent more than the total tonnage dropped on Japan during World War II. There were a great number of civilian casualties. Four years later, sitting in the bunkerlike Democratic Kampuchean embassy in Hanoi, In Sivouth bitterly recalled "the Vietnamese betrayal" in signing a separate peace with the enemy, enabling the Americans to direct their full fury at Cambodia. This accusation is a classic example of how racial prejudice and feelings of historical enmity led the Pol Pot group to blame all their woes on the Vietnamese. . . . Ironically enough, if the peace agreement with the Vietnamese freed American hands in Cambodia, tacit support for the bombing, according to Kissinger, came from Zhou [Zhou Enlai, prime minister of China] who "needed our military actions in Cambodia for the effectiveness of his policy almost as much as we did." The U.S. bombing, according to him, was a bargaining chip for getting China's Khmer Rouge allies to accept a negotiated settlement with Sihanouk as the leader. . . .

The Paris Agreement in 1973 also marked the beginning of Khmer Rouge attacks on Vietnamese arms depots, hospitals, and base camps inside Cambodia—attacks that were explained away by the Pol Pot group as stemming from misunderstanding and unruly conduct by lower-level soldiers. . . . In February 1975 an entire NLF cultural troupe from My Tho died in an ambush while passing through Cambodian territory to visit liberated areas of Tay Ninh Province. . . . Hanoi's principal task was to liberate the South, not to exacerbate a conflict with wayward allies. Thus, despite growing tension between the two, the Vietnamese played along. In response to a Khmer Rouge request, they sent sapper and artillery units that helped to finally strangle Phnom Penh. 89

But the Khmer Rouge immediately turned their guns on the Vietnamese, killing many and causing at least 150,000 Vietnamese to flee from Cambodia to Vietnam during the first five months after the fall of Phnom Penh. The Vietnamese reaction was one of restraint because, in Chanda's words,

Vietnam's need for caution toward Cambodia was underlined by the fact that Phnom Penh had a powerful friend. . . . On June 21 [1975] Pol Pot got a hero's welcome from his ideological mentor, Mao. . . .

The friendship between Mao's China and Democratic Kampuchea was based on ideology and, more importantly, on identity of national interest. . . . As opposition to the Vietnamese domination of the Indochinese peninsula became the primary concern of the Pol Pot group, they naturally turned out to be China's key ally in its traditional strategy of preventing the emergence of a strong power on its southern border.

Not surprisingly, in August 1975, as a bedridden Zhou was explaining China's inability to help Vietnam to the top Vietnamese planner, Le Thanh Nghi, Peking was giving a grand welcome to the Cambodian deputy premiers Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary and promising them $1 billion in aid over a five-year period. . . .

While Samphan and Sary's triumphal visit, and the pledge of economic assistance, was a public demonstration of China's total support for Cambodia, secret negotiations on Chinese arms aid had begun in June—when Pol Pot made his unpublicized trip to China. In August and October, teams of experts from China's defense ministry conducted an extensive survey in Cambodia to assess defense needs, and, on October 12, submitted a draft aid plan to Phnom Penh for its approval. 90

Another reason for the Vietnamese restraint was the huge and urgent task of stemming hunger in the southern cities and of restoring production in the countryside. Before the war ended, even with all the American economic aid, the South Vietnamese economy was already a mess. Nguyen Van Hao, Saigon's deputy prime minister in charge of economic affairs, was quoted in the 16 October 1975 issue of Dai Dan Toi that one and one half million people—about a fifth of the adult workforce—had already lost their jobs. To this one must add the several million Saigon soldiers and the 300–500,000 prostitutes who suddenly found themselves out of work, as well as the 800,000 orphans and hundreds of thousands of war invalids who had to be fed. The immediate objective of the Vietnamese government at that time, therefore, was to restore economic—and hence social and political—stability in the South. The slogan in the North at that time was: "All for the brotherly South; all for the building of socialism." From the beginning of May to the end of the year the North sent several hundred thousand tons of food, tens of thousands of tons of chemical fertilizers, thousands of tons of fuel oil, several hundred thousand head of cattle and buffaloes, several hundred thousand fertilized eggs, and tens of thousands of tons of cotton and other supplies to the South. Hundreds of agronomists, engineers, and specialists in other fields were also dispatched quickly to the South. 91

Foremost Vietnamese Priority: Postwar Reconstruction

In fact, the foremost Vietnamese priority during the first couple of years was postwar reconstruction and economic recovery. This can be seen in the adoption in early 1977 of the "Second Five-Year Plan of 1976–1980," which was made with full expectation that massive amounts of foreign aid from Western capitalist countries and from socialist countries, including China, would be forthcoming. Hence, Vietnam did not want to do anything that would jeopardize this aid that was absolutely essential for realizing the ambitious targets set in the plan. For example, food production—rice and subsidiary crops converted into rice at a rate of three to one, that is, three tons of potatoes was equal to one ton of rice—was supposed to be increased from 12 million metric tons in 1976 to 21 million metric tons by 1980, and industrial output, labor productivity, and national income were to be raised by 16 to 18, 7.5 to 8.0, and 13 to 14 percent respectively per year.

However, by 1977 China had cut almost all aid to Vietnam while its increased military aid to the Khmer Rouge—including hundreds of Chinese military advisers on the ground in Cambodia—encouraged the latter to step up attacks on Vietnamese border provinces. The end result was that from 1977 to December 1978 tens of thousands of Vietnamese civilians (in

89. Ibid., pp. 68–73.

90. Ibid., pp. 16–17.

91. These facts are summarized from Vietnamese newspaper reports by this author and can be ascertained by reading Foreign Broadcast Information Service (a U.S.-government agency) reports for this period.
When Vietnam was focusing on economic recovery during the first few years after the war, China cut off almost all economic aid to Vietnam and increased its aid to the Khmer Rouge, encouraging them to step up their border attacks on Vietnam. Then China itself began massing troops along the northern border of Vietnam and attacked Vietnam almost daily. This picture shows the provincial town of Long San with its post office destroyed by Chinese bombardments in March 1979.

Vietnam and secretly push for establishing ties with Peking. Three decades after going to war in Vietnam to fight “Chinese expansionism,” the United States became a silent partner in Peking’s war against Vietnam.10

On 11 October 1978 the United States said that it was not going to normalize relations with Vietnam although both sides had already agreed to this—down to the nitty-gritty details as to where each other’s embassies would be placed and how many staff members were to be in each. On 15 December the United States announced that it would recognize China and would invite Deng Xiaoping, China’s “paramount leader,” to visit the United States to finalize things. Vietnam realized that a pincer attack was coming from the north as well as the southwest and decided to break the military encirclement by moving against Pol Pot on 25 December. The Khmer Rouge were driven out of Phnom Penh by 7 January 1979, only to find sanctuary along the Thai-Cambodian border. In mid-January representatives of China and Thailand met to formalize their common support of a guerrilla war against Vietnam. On 28 January Deng arrived in Washington and immediately advised President Carter of his planned invasion of Vietnam. On 17 February China launched an invasion against Vietnam—the very next day, an editorial in the Washington Post disclosed that the White House had encouraged Deng in his decision to attack Vietnam for a number of

unknown to the Vietnamese, Peking had decided to “teach Vietnam a lesson” and had intensified its effort to establish full diplomatic relations with the United States before undertaking that adventure. The Chinese design meshed well with that of Jimmy Carter and his national security adviser, seeking China’s partnership in a global anti-Soviet alliance. They decided to shelve normalization with

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reasons, one of which was to help cement China’s new relationship with the Western world by making her burn the bridge to other socialist countries behind her. Millions of dollars of American military aid were also subsequently channeled through Thailand in the guerrilla effort against Vietnamese and Cambodian troops.

**Negative Impacts of Conflict on Development**

The negative impact of conflict with China and the Khmer Rouge on Vietnamese economic development was enormous. Besides the fact that the Chinese almost completely razed the northern provinces they occupied, half a million Vietnamese soldiers were subsequently moved to the northern border areas to protect them against further Chinese attacks, and about 160,000 men were kept in Cambodia to prevent the return of Pol Pot. Partly as a result of this conflict, in 1978 and 1979 about 300,000 Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese also fled Vietnam and thereby deprived the country of much needed skill and labor for reconstruction and economic development. Meanwhile, as a reaction to Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia and under very strong U.S. pressure, almost all aid from capitalist countries to Vietnam was cut. In June 1978 China had terminated all trade with Vietnam, which amounted to 75 percent of all of Vietnam’s foreign trade, while the United States had already imposed a strict trade embargo on Vietnam. Therefore, the tremendous outlays for defense and economic aid to Cambodia as well as the huge food and other subsidies provided to the gigantic urban population—close to 5 million for Ho Chi Minh City alone—and the burgeoning bureaucracy created an ever-worsening budgetary deficit, which in turn created rampant inflation and difficulties in almost every economic sector. The impacts of these and other factors—which we cannot go into here for reason of space—on the overall economic performance of Vietnam during this period is summarized by a Vietnamese economist as follows:

By the end of the Second Five-Year Plan in 1980, Vietnam’s total food production was 14.4 million tons, compared to the target of 21 million. Between 1976 and 1980 food production increased only 6.45 percent, while the population grew by 9.27 percent. Per capita food production thus decreased from 274 kg to 268 kg, forcing Vietnam to import 8–9 million tons of food during the 1976–1980 period. Even so, malnutrition was widely evident, especially among young children.

Overall, industrial output (including handicrafts, which accounted for approximately half of the total) increased from 1976 to 1978, and then fell during the years 1979 and 1980 as a consequence of socialist transformation and other factors, such as poor management, lack of capital, and shortages of energy and raw materials. Over the full 1976–1980 period industrial production increased a mere 0.1 percent. Labor productivity decreased in the state sector, and many enterprises operated at only 30–50 percent of capacity.

**Reforms and Readjustments**

This situation called for a series of economic reforms beginning in the fall of 1979 that quickly brought about good results. From 1980 to 1984 food production increased by an average of about 6 percent, while industrial output rose by about 9 percent a year. As correctly observed by two Western economists:

> During the early 1980s the Vietnamese economy started to evolve rather rapidly. Grass-roots changes interacted with policy concessions and periodic drives to clamp down on selected targets such as the free market. . . . The overall effect was to show the scope for sharply improved short-term resource utilisation in some areas, where output increased without significant additional inputs. An important factor here was the effect of higher incomes upon labour inputs, especially in agriculture. However, the effects of such liberalizations were primarily short-term, and could not have sustained long-term results if the deep structural problems of the economy remained unsolved. Official policy failed to deal with this problem. 94

As a result of this policy failure, production plateaued in 1985 while population continued to grow at an estimated rate of 2.5 percent a year. This plus the increasing government budget deficit caused by the continuing wars with Pol Pot along the Thai-Cambodian border and China along the northern Vietnamese border, and rampant subsidies, inappropriate wage and price policies, and mismanagement created a hyperinflation that in turn affected production in almost all sectors. Food production decreased from 1986 on, and by early 1988, when inflation reached about 30 percent a month, widespread food shortage and hunger occurred.

All this forced the government to institute yet another series of reforms in 1988 that are quite fundamental and far-reaching. These reforms—which include allowing farmers in the cooperatives to keep at least 50 percent of the crop yields after all taxes and production costs, as well as reduction of government deficit, subsidies, and credit—have brought about some intended results. By the beginning of 1989 inflation was reduced to about 6 percent a month and then to about 3.5 percent by May. Agricultural production reversed its downhill slide to achieve a 4.1 percent rate of growth in 1988 as opposed to −1.3 percent in 1987. Overall, economic growth attained a reasonable rate of 5.8 percent in 1988 as opposed to only 2.2 percent in 1987. 95

The Vietnamese leaders have realized, however, that steady economic, social, and political stability in Vietnam requires a solution to the Cambodian situation and the conflict with China. Confident that it had already helped Cambodia back on its own feet, in early July 1988 Vietnam pulled its entire military command and half of its remaining troops out of Cambodia, placing the rest under Phnom Penh’s command, and stated that it would bring all of its troops home by the end of 1989 or much earlier.

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A pedicab driver in Hanoi pauses to read his morning paper. Vietnamese papers, long mouthpieces for official pronouncements, are venturing onto the uncertain ground of investigative reporting.

if there were a political settlement. Subsequently, because there was little movement in the direction of a political settlement and because of continuing hostility on the part of the United States and China, Vietnam announced many times that it would definitely bring all of its troops home from Cambodia by the end of September 1989 whether or not a political solution would be reached by then. The Vietnamese government still stressed very emphatically, however, that it would prefer a peaceful solution to the Cambodian situation. But the biggest stumbling block to this eventuality is still China, as can be seen, for example, in the following 17 May 1989 Bangkok Post report: “Khmer resistance leader Prince Norodom Sihanouk has said Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping strongly warned him against breaking his alliance with the Khmer Rouge, diplomats said yesterday. . . . Sihanouk told diplomats that Deng and other Chinese leaders had told him for some time they completely opposed an alliance between him and Phnom Penh premier Hun Sen.”

On its part, the United States has sought to strengthen Sihanouk by trying to give him more lethal aid so that he can have leverage against Hun Sen, whom the United States considers pro-Vietnamese, although, in the opinion of most experts, much of the aid would end up in Pol Pot’s hands and would also prolong the military conflict. This prompted the following reaction in a New York Times editorial of 3 June 1989: “The Bush Administration seems determined to supply lethal aid to the non-Communist resistance in Cambodia. Prince Sihanouk, ostensibly the main recipient, says he does not need the aid. Congress shows no willingness to vote for it. Yet with a determination worthy of a better cause, the Administration has evidently decided to make the aid covert to avoid Congressional scrutiny. Thus the means are as objectionable as the end.”

In its fear of making China lose face, the United States has allowed many innocent people to lose their lives. Obviously in its actions the United States still regards Vietnam—and by extension Cambodia—as the real enemy in spite of all the accommodations that Vietnam has made during the past few years, and in spite of the recent human rights abuses in China. The United States is now in a better position than ever to help bring peace back to Indochina by disassociating itself completely from the Chinese policy of supporting Pol Pot against the Cambodian and Vietnamese people, by endorsing a tripartite coalition composed of the Hun Sen government, the Sihanouk faction, and the Son Sen faction, as well as taking steps toward normalizing relations with Vietnam.