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THE LONG WAR IN VIETNAM: A HISTORY

By IVER PETERSON

Invaders, Ancient and Modern

War and rebellion have shaped the major chapters of Vietnam's history ever since the first mention of the Viet people in the writings of Chinese historians some 2,200 years ago.

It has been a history of expansion by a tough and supple race, a movement southward from the cradle of the Red River delta, where Hanoi now stands, to the steamy mangrove swamps of the country's tip 1,800 miles to the south. From the Thai, Cambodian and Cham people who were displaced in this expansion, the Viets earned a reputation for bellicosity that was not to be diminished by later events.

For the Chinese emperors, French colonialists and American generals and diplomats who were later to shape Vietnam's history, resistance and rebellion against foreign control became the principal memory.

The French, seeking trade routes to China, encountered this spirit from the people they slowly subdued and colonized beginning in 1858.

The French made Vietnam one of Europe's most profitable colonies in the Far East. But their colonialism produced a nationalist independence movement that nourishes the spirit of North Vietnamese troops in the South even today.

With the collapse of France to the Nazis in 1940, the Japanese occupied Vietnam and allowed Vichy French administrators to direct the country during most of World War II. The early Japanese victories over Europe's Asian colonies shattered the image of invincibility that the West had cultivated among the Asians. With the collapse of Japan on Aug. 15, 1945, Vietnamese nationalists were ready to open the next chapter of their history.

On Sept. 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh stood under gray skies on the balcony of the old French Municipal Theater in Hanoi, a huge red flag with a gold star at its center draped over the balustrade before him, and read a declaration that began:

"All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

It was a declaration of independence and the proclamation of a new republic in Vietnam. But before the capituation of the Japanese occupation forces in Indochina on Aug. 15 the French had laid plans to return.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt had opposed them. The Vietnamese "are entitled to something better than this," the President said.

The objections were overcome, and in late September, 1945, French troops arrived in Saigon on British warships and immediately took control of Vietnam's main southern city. On Sept. 25 nationalist groups in Saigon launched an insurrection against the French.

The First Indochina War

With the shooting in Saigon, the First Indochina War, as it came to be known, began.

The insurgency embodied the twin ideals of a Vietnam unified the length of its long sinewy body and the eradication of foreign control.

With the return of the French, Ho Chi Minh, at the head of a Communist-dominated nationalist movement in the north, was still too weak militarily to achieve those ideals. With the help of the British, who quickly recognized the French-dominated government in Vietnam, the French expanded their presence in the country.

A last-ditch effort to expel the French from Hanoi militarily failed in November, 1946. A last appeal for negotiations to Léon Blum, the French Premier and a Socialist, went unanswered. Having fled to guerrilla bases in the countryside, Ho Chi Minh sent out a call for war against the colonialists.

The First Vietnam War lasted eight years, nearly bankrupted France and took on international dimensions and importance far greater than any previous colonial war, opening the way for later American involvement.

The French, eager to gain international support and material aid for their war against the growing Communist guerrilla forces, pursued two related policies. They projected their war with the Vietminh, as the Communist-led guerrillas came to be known, into the broad realm of international politics, depicting themselves as standing alone against the forces of Communism. To reduce the taint of colonialism that attached to their effort, they established a series of "autonomous" Vietnamese governments with broad but largely theoretical powers.

As a result a number of men of genuine nationalist spirit and ability among the French-backed leaders were assassinated by the Vietminh lest they become rallying points.

When in January, 1949, the Chinese Communists took Peking, apprehensions in the West about growing Communist strength in East Asia were intensified.

By this time, the Vietminh had gained firm control of large sections of the countryside, with French power secure only in the cities. Meanwhile, the French had persuaded Bao Dai, the last of a line of Vietnamese emperors, to form a government of a unified state. As the newly victorious Mao Tse-tung recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh and sent Chinese troops to Vietnam's northern border, Britain, and then the United States, gave recognition to Emperor Bao Dai's Government.

On May 8, 1950, the United States announced that it would aid the French war effort in Indochina—a commitment that was to cost the United States $4-billion before the French defeat four years later.

The French military and political position in Indochina deteriorated steadily, especially as Chinese military aid to the Vietminh began to register on the battlefield.

A fatal step was taken in November, 1953, when French paratroops occupied and began fortifying the valley at Dien Bien Phu, on Vietnam's far western border with northern Laos.

At the same time Ho Chi Minh, evidently under pressure from his Soviet and Chinese allies and increasingly certain of his forces' eventual victory, declared that he was ready to talk peace. The Big Four—the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union and France—agreed to convene a conference in Geneva.

The French were giving Washington pessimistic reports about their war effort and spoke of seeking a compromise. But President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, and the American military as well, considered a compromise with Communism to be appeasement of aggression. Offering more aid, and holding out the possibility of bombing intervention, they urged the French to keep fighting.

Nonetheless France's military position crumpled that spring. The end of her rule in Indochina was finally signaled on May 6, 1954, when the Vietminh swarmed over the central command post at Dien Bien Phu.

The 1954 Agreements No One Liked

The United States had by this time reluctantly gone to Geneva to bargain with the Communists; the talks opened on April 26, 1954.

The principal feature of the Geneva accords—they were not signed by any of the governments present, only assented to—provided for the temporary partition of Vietnam at its waist, in the area of the 17th Parallel, into two zones for the regroupment of the two sides' military forces after a cease-fire. The accords, stressing that the demilitarized zone was not to be considered a permanent political boundary, provided, circuitously, for a referendum on the form of government for the whole country to be held in July, 1956.

The Vietminh strongly disliked these provisions, considering themselves victorious. But Moscow prevailed on Hanoi to accept the ostensibly temporary partition on the ground that a Vietminh victory at the polls and reunification were assured.

With the partition, close to a million North Vietnamese, most of them Roman Catholics, fled to the South. There Ngo Dinh Diem, an ardent nationalist, had agreed to head a government under Emperor Bao Dai, on assurance that the French were finally leaving.

Mr. Diem, stiff and mystically Catholic, iron-willed and secretive, was not expected to last long as Premier. Because of his nationalism he was hated by the French, who retained effective control of the national army and the civil bureaucracy. The business community disliked him as a threat to privilege and profit. The Buddhist majority mistrusted his Catholicism. The armed sects — Hoa Hao, Cao Dai and piratical Binh Xuyen, which had gained control of the national police—saw him as a threat to their autonomy.

Mr. Diem had one ally whose support—while it lasted—was to be conclusive: the United States. Through a series of intricate deals and frequent double-crosses, he managed to divide and defeat his opponents one by one.

At the end of 1955, after an election in which 450,000 voters in Saigon managed to cast 605,000 ballots, Mr. Diem deposed the frivolous and ineffectual Bao Dai as head of state and declared South Vietnam a republic with himself as its President.

Although he was successful in consolidating and holding his power, the process had two important consequences.

First, he lost popular support through his repressive, devious and occasionally murderous methods.

Second, the United States, seeing Mr. Diem as the only alternative between Communism and colonialism, became inextricably committed to his political survival.

The commitment to an anti-Communist policy, and later to support of Mr. Diem, was a result of several factors.

There was Washington's adherence to the "domino theory" of Communist expansion. First publicly enunciated by President Eisenhower and most recently reiterated by President Ford, the concept was that one country's absorption into the Communist camp would undermine its neighbors.

Washington foreign - policy planners were deeply concerned that a Communist victory might lead to a public outcry and to renewed McCarthyite accusations of a Communist conspiracy.

Official American attitudes were also hardened through the subtle process by which a bureaucracy—the State Department in this case—pursues and enforces a policy in order to prove its own effectiveness.

On the political front, the referendum called for in the Geneva accords never took place after President Diem announced that, not having signed the accords, he would not be bound by them.

Hanoi, feeling itself cheated by the West, once again resumed preparations for a military solution in what was to become the second war in Vietnam.

Underwood & Underwood

Khai Dinh, Emperor of Annam, in 1922. Behind him, at center, is his son, Bao Dai, who succeeded him in 1925.

Diem's Deteriorating Position

By 1959, insurgent sabotage and terrorism had increased sharply, and on July 8 two American military advisers were killed in an attack at Bien Hoa, north of Saigon, becoming the first Americans to lose their lives in the new Vietnam war.

There was evidence of North Vietnamese infiltration of the South through Laos by late 1960

During this early stage not all the southern guerrillas considered themselves Communists or bound to Hanoi, but acted as nationalists who had joined the Communist-led guerrilla movement out of hatred for the Diem Government and out of concern over the growing influence of the Americans.

Despite hopeful beginnings, when Mr. Diem's personal integrity and his sense of mission seemed to promise advances toward a stable republic in South Vietnam, the President's position had deteriorated badly by the spring of 1963. Political intrigues against him required constant attention from him and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, whose wife was also a political force.

As the Pentagon Papers showed, the South Vietnamese Army was already demoralized by the two brothers' stress on political loyalty in military appointments. Americans at home learned of the widespread popular dissatisfaction with Mr. Diem through the Buddhist riots and self-immolations that began on May 8, 1963.

President John F. Kennedy and his advisers were deeply troubled by the popular unrest in South Vietnam and tended to put most of the blame on Mr. Nhu, Mr. Diem's brother. When in early June American intelligence agents in Saigon got word of a possible coup against Mr. Diem, President Kennedy's response was to seek the removal of Mr. Nhu and to force Mr. Diem to placate the Buddhists. The United States Ambassador, Frederick E. Nolting Jr., a strong supporter of Mr. Diem, prevailed on the Vietnamese President to promise to make peace with the monks.

Yet a week later, on Aug. 20, after Mr. Nolting had been replaced by Henry Cabot Lodge, Mr. Nhu sent Vietnamese Special Forces troops to raid important pagodas and arrest Buddhist leaders.

Outraged at this apparent repudiation of Mr. Diem's agreement with Mr. Nolting, the State Department sent Mr. Lodge a fateful cablegram on Aug. 24 saying that pressure should be brought on Mr. Diem to remove his brother and sister-in-law from positions of power.

Mr. Lodge cabled back that the chances of Mr. Diem's complying with the demand to remove the Nhus were nil.

"We are launched on a course," Mr. Lodge wrote, "from which there is no respectable turning back: the overthrow of the Diem government."

Accordingly, in its contacts with the anti-Diem plotters, the United States stressed that while it would take no active part in a coup, it would not seek to prevent it nor would it cut off aid to a new government if it succeeded. The Americans also urged that Mr. Diem's life be spared.

On Nov. 1, 1963, Mr. Diem and Mr. Nhu were chased from the presidential palace and were assassinated the following day. A military junta took power and vowed to prosecute the war.

The American acquiescence in Mr. Diem's overthrow sealed a shift in American strategy that had been growing for some time. From that point, as events

United Press International

President Johnson was host to South Vietnamese Premier Nguyen Cao Ky, right, and President Nguyen Van Thieu on Guam in 1967. Others present were Secretary of State Dean Rusk, left, and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara.

have shown, the United States was to place its trust and support in the South Vietnamese military establishment.

The first six months of 1964 brought an intensification of the American commitment to the military Government and to the principle of defeating the Communists. Lyndon B. Johnson, succeeding to the Presidency after Mr. Kennedy's assassination in November, opened the year by pledging an increased war effort.

In April a meeting of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization declared that the defeat of the Communist insurgency was essential to regional security—thus solidifying the concept of an American pledge to South Vietnam that could only be broken at the expense of American credibility.

The Administration had by this time developed a "scenario" of gradually increasing military pressure against North Vietnam, to be tied to a Joint Resolution of Congress granting a free hand to the President in conducting the war.

Such a resolution had already been drafted at the White House, and bombing targets in North Vietnam had been selected, when on Aug. 2, 1964, the American destroyer Maddox, on an intelligence patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin off North Vietnam was attacked by a North Vietnamese PT boat. The next night. the Maddox was joined by a second destroyer, the C. Turner Joy, and both ships were attacked again.

President Johnson ordered immediate air strikes against North Vietnamese shore facilities on Aug. 4, inaugurating the bombing of the North.

The next day, Aug. 5, the President presented his Joint Resolution to Congress, asking for support for United States forces "to promote the maintenance of international peace and security in Southeast Asia." On Aug. 7, Congress approved what became known as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

After an assault on Pleiku, in which eight American servicemen died, President Johnson launched the first bombing raids against inland North Vietnamese targets, and the United States began regular bombing of Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam

Associated Press

President Nixon with American soldiers during his visit to Di An, South Vietnam, in 1969. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Vietnam was completed by 1973.

America's Growing Commitments

The President ordered the first regular combat troops to Da Nang, on South Vietnam's northern coast, on March 7, 1965. Ostensibly brought in to defend the huge allied air base there, the 3,500 marines found themselves deployed in "dynamic defense" tactics, moving far out into the field and engaging the Vietcong for the first time.

With the Americans' troop strength in South Vietnam and their financial commitment to the war rising rapidly, war protests and demands for peace grew stronger at home, and teach-ins against the war were held on American campuses.

Both sides began offering peace negotiations, but the efforts got nowhere. By June, 1965, the Administration confirmed that American troops were being deployed to fight on their own but denied a change in their basic mission.

Misgivings about the effectiveness of the war began to be heard in official circles as Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara conceded in July, 1965, that the military situation had deteriorated since the coup against Mr. Diem.

President Johnson, pursuing a policy of seeking to "drive the North Vietnamese to the conference table," increased his calls for a negotiated settlement, offering $1-billion for reconstruction of both parts of Vietnam once the war ended while drawing new military appropriations from Congress.

As American strength increased and troops fanned out into the countryside to provide a shield behind which the South Vietnamese were to secure territory and win the "hearts and minds" of the people, the United States launched a second effort, dubbed "the other war"—the pacification campaign.

Thousands of civilians were sent into province and district capitals to help build the rural economy and in theory, to help win the support of the peasants for the Saigon Government.

Their functions, always labeled advisory, ranged from building fishponds and teaching English to printing propaganda leaflets and, through Central Intelligence Agency operatives, conducting clandestine terror campaigns against the Vietcong political structure.

As critics of this system pointed out, the American domination of what was supposed to be a South Vietnamese effort tended to weaken the Government in dealing with the people.

Much the same charge was made against the military advisory effort. American advisers, prodded to produce South Vietnamese victories, simply took command in many cases. Although it was not true of all South Vietnamese units, this approach often led South Vietnamese officers to say, "Let the Americans do it."

Dissension in Vietnam and the U.S.

Meanwhile, fundamental changes began to be felt in South Vietnamese society as a result of the vast American presence. Bombing and fighting in the countryside drove peasants from the fields and into the cities and refugee centers, disrupting the rural economy. Inflation, spurred by huge American expenditures, made paupers of the traditional élite, the civil servants and intellectuals, and made millionaires of entrepreneurs, many of them with military connections, who rode the American boom.

The effect of the changes was expressed in Buddhist demonstrations in Hue and Da Nang in May, 1966. Premier Nguyen Cao Ky, who had emerged as head of government in the most recent coup, used American planes to suppress the movement, which, though non-Communist, protested the military Government and the influence of the United States.

By this time talk of a "third force"—a neutralist, non-Communist and non-American alignment to end the war—had gathered urgency. But American participation in the suppression of the Buddhist riots had left the enduring impression that Washington was committed to the military Government against all opposition.

The United States was routinely bombing North Vietnamese targets by the end of 1966, increasing troop levels in the South and appealing for a negotiated settlement. A number of intiatives failed when the North Vietnamese refused American offers to submit a timetable for troop withdrawals if Hanoi would do the same. The Communists insisted that the United States stop the bombing of the North first.

In addition to the American and South Vietnamese forces, aiding the allies were 54,000 troops, most of them South Koreans and Thais, whose deployment under the SEATO Treaty was paid for by the United States. Australia also sent a small contingent of fighting men to the jungles east of Saigon.

For American ground troops, fighting a war without a real front line to drive toward and without a thankful and supportive nation behind them, the Vietnam war was one of special confusion and pain. The emotional terror and confusion seemed to erupt for a few men on March 16, 1968, when, in the aftermath of the Tet offensive, Task Force Barker of the 11th Brigade, Americal Division, entered the sandy little hamlet of Mylai 4 on South Vietnam's northern coast. With First Lieut. William L. Calley Jr. leading, a group of soldiers inexplicably gunned down Vietnamese civilians, most of them old men, women and children. As an inquiry into the most heartbreaking episode of the long war was to reveal, at least 175 unresisting Vietnamese, and possibly more than 400, were killed in Mylai that day.

Fresh doubts about the war fanned protests in America and around the world by mid-1967, and elicit more cautious pronouncements from the Administration in Washington. Secretary of State Rusk spoke of a "long, tough job ahead" but repeated refusals to scale down operations without a concomitant move by the North Vietnamese.

The war reached a new turning point on Jan. 30, 1968. Over the length and breadth of South Vietnam the Communists launched an offensive under cover of Tet, the Lunar New Year. Some 84,000 Communist troops simultaneously attacked all major cities — and briefly occupied the grounds of the United States Embassy in Saigon—plus 36 province capitals and 64 district headquarters. The allies struck back with bombs and rockets against areas of the occupied cities, reducing whole sections to rubble.

In one of the memorable comments of the war, an American Army adviser to the South Vietnamese, surveying the ruins of Ben Tre, in the Mekong Delta, said, "We had to destroy it in order to save it."

The Communists' Tet offensive was repulsed, but only after weeks of fighting in Saigon and in Hue. In the latter city, the former imperial capital, South Vietnamese troops failed to dislodge North Vietnamese, and American marines were called in for bloody house-to-

Vietnam News Agency

Ho Chi Minh, left, Truong Chinh, center, and Vo Nguyen Giap planning strategy in 1954. Vietminh victory at Dien Bien Phu that year ended French rule in Indochina.

house fighting that left many American casualties and undermined the United States' confidence in the South Vietnamese forces.

American military and diplomatic leaders, reacting in anger, charged that the Tet fighting proved that the North Vietnamese would not negotiate, but American public support for the war plummeted.

Senator Eugene McCarthy, running as an antiwar candidate, won 40 per cent of the vote in the New Hampshire Presidential primary in March, 1968.

Three weeks later, in a decision that American leaders in Vietnam viewed as the beginning of the end, President Johnson stopped the bombing beyond the 20th Parallel in North Vietnam and declared that he would not run for re-election.

On April 3 Hanoi announced its readiness to meet with the United States to discuss the end of American operations against North Vietnam "so that talks may start." On May 3 Xuan Thuy, Hanoi's representative, met in Paris with W. Averell Harriman and Cyrus R. Vance of the United States.

Meanwhile, war in the South continued unabated. In June, 1968, Nguyen Van Thieu, now South Vietnam's President, authorized the first general mobilization, declaring that his country was prepared to assume more of the fighting. The policy of "Vietnamixing" the war took hold further in July when President Johnson, at a Honolulu conference with President Thieu, repeated a pledge of support for the South Vietnamese to help them carry a greater burden.

Vietnamization was the principal plan of Richard M. Nixon, who won the Presidency in November with a pledge to reach an early settlement. In January, 1969, the first meeting of the Paris peace parley took place, but a Communist offensive in February brought a stiffened response from the new Administration in Washington.

From Stalemate to Withdrawal

As 1970 opened, the Paris talks were still stalemated and the United States pullout was continuing, but fresh fighting erupted again after the overthrow of Cambodia's leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, on March 18. On April 30 the allies, led by American tanks, plunged across the Cambodian border west of Saigon in what was described as an "incursion" against Communist base areas.

The Cambodian fighting brought antiwar demonstrations to a new pitch in America. Although American troops were withdrawn from Cambodia by June 30, the South Vietnamese remained.

The Cambodian invasion led the United States Congress to its strongest opposition to the war. In June, 1970, the Senate repealed the Tonkin Resolution and a week later barred military operations in Cambodia without Congressional approval.

In November the United States declared its concern over a huge build-up of supplies in North Vietnam and began talking about preventing them from being carried south. On February 8, 1971, the United States launched its last major offensive in South Vietnam.

The operation provided the first real test of South Vietnamese fighting abilities alone in the field—without advisers but with American air support—and it was a disaster for the South.

Fighting, which intensified throughout South Vietnam during the rest of 1971, was met with increased American bombing as United States withdrawals continued. But the bombing did not stop Communst advances.

Responding to setbacks throughout the South, Mr. Nixon ordered the mining of North Vietnamese ports to put pressure on the stalemated Paris talks and to block war supplies. The talks sputtered through most of 1972, broken by frequent suspensions, but gathered momentum again with secret negotiations between Henry A. Kissinger and Xuan Thuy toward the end of the year.

American fighting on the ground ended with the withdrawal of the last United States troop on March 29, 1973, two months after the signing of the cease-fire agreements in Paris, and 8 years and 22 days after the first Marine contingent went ashore at Da Nang to begin the United States' longest war.

A total of 56,717 American servicemen had lost their lives in combat and otherwise in Vietnam; some 900 are still listed as missing and may add to that figure. American wounded totaled more than 300,000. The material cost far exceeds $100-billion.

South Vietnam has lost more than 180,000 soldiers killed and haf a million wounded. The North Vietnamese and Vietcong have yet to release their casualty figures, but their death toll has been put at more than 925,000, with estimates of the wounded running in the millions.

Further, hundreds of thousands of civilians lost their lives—some assassinated by the Vietcong—or were maimed or wounded.

The end came with a rush. In March, after a series of military setbacks, President Thieu ordered a retreat from the Central Highlands which turned into rout. Mr. Thieu resigned, leaving Tran Van Huong to transfer power to Duong Van Minh, who surrendered to Communists.