

Chapter II

WHY (NOT) VIETNAM?

THE VIETNAMESE, THE FRENCH, AND THE AMERICANS TO 1960

The area that today encompasses Indochina emerged as a coherent community in the first millennium B.C., and its people have spent the better part of the next twenty-five centuries fighting off foreign invaders. According to their creation myth, the Vietnamese descended from dragons and fairies, and the traits embodied by these characters--the fierceness of the dragon and the serendipity of fairies--would serve them time and again throughout their history. At various times, the Chinese, French, Japanese, and Americans would try to take over Vietnam; all ultimately met harsh resistance and failure.

In the second century B.C., the Chinese conquered Vietnam and, until the decline of the Tang dynasty in the tenth century A.D., held control there, although patriots such as the Trung Sisters [c. 40 A.D.] or Lady Trieu [c. 245 A.D.], and others, led uprisings against the Chinese in this period. In 939, the Vietnamese gained their independence and then lived under the Ly and Tran dynasties, both with capitals at Hanoi in northern Vietnam, for the next four centuries. In the late 1200s, Mongol armies from China invaded Vietnam, only to be defeated by the forces of Tran Hung Dao, perhaps the first in a long line of nationalist heroes whose strategic brilliance would be used to repel foreign invasions. Tran inspired the Vietnamese to fight the Mongols, whose “ambassadors stroll about in our streets with conceit, using their owls’ and crows’ tongues to abuse our court, flexing their goats’ and dogs’ bodies to threaten our ministers . . . They have extracted silver and gold from our limited treasures.” The Chinese, however, again invaded

Vietnam at the beginning of the fifteenth century and held control until repelled by the armies of Le Loi, who established the Le Dynasty in 1428. Le Loi too expressed strong nationalist sentiments, boasting that “we have our own mountains and rivers, our own customs and traditions.” Centuries later, Ho Chi Minh would convey thoughts similar to Tran Hung Dao and Le Loi and, like them, he would use his “virile, martial patriotism” to oust the invaders.¹

The French Connection

Foreign adventurers and imperialists, however, would continue to challenge Vietnamese autonomy. In the sixteenth century, Portuguese traders arrived in Vietnam to develop silk and spice markets and establish a settlement along the coast of central Vietnam at Da Nang. The Portuguese left after a century, their fantasies of riches from Vietnam unfulfilled. Other Europeans, particularly French Jesuits, remained interested, however, and by the mid-1800s posed a great challenge to Vietnamese independence. In the early 19th century the northern and southern provinces had been unified under the Nguyen dynasty, centered at Hué, a bit northwest of Da Nang. The Nguyen, however, administered Vietnam erratically, could not maintain harmony between the north and south, and had to contend with tax protests, smallpox, locusts, and constant breaks in the Red River dike system. In 1858, a French fleet with three thousand troops arrived in Da Nang and began to attack the Nguyen and, within a decade, had established control over Vietnam. In 1862, a collaborator in the Vietnamese court ceded the southern third of Vietnam, Cochinchina, to the French, and it became a French colony with its capital at Saigon. A year later, hoping to create a trade route along the Mekong River all the way into China, the French established a protectorate in Cambodia, which lay immediately west of Cochinchina. But the Mekong was not navigable to China’s borders, so the French turned their attention northward,

and by the 1880s they held protectorates in the central (Annam) and northern (Tonkin) regions of Vietnam, and in Laos, north of Cambodia and west of Vietnam, as well. For the next seven decades, this area would be known as French Indochina.

Like the forces of Tran Hung Dao or the Tay Son, Vietnamese nationalists in the 1880s and thereafter began to rebel against the brutal conditions created by an outside power. The French established rubber plantations and coal mines with Vietnamese workers virtually enslaved, and the colonial administration used *corvée* labor--forcing peasants to work on public projects like roads or bridges in place of paying taxes--to build up the infrastructure. In a short story by the Vietnamese writer Ngo Tat To, he illustrates the burdens of life under the French and their Vietnamese lackeys. A woman, Mrs. Dau, travels to the home of Representative Que, a collaborator with the French, to negotiate the release of her husband from prison, where he had been sent for not being able to pay his "body tax." In exchange for Mr. Dau's freedom, his wife is forced to trade four valuable puppies, and, tragically, her daughter Ty. Adding insult to injury, before gaining her husband's release, she also has to pay a body tax for her brother-in-law, even though he had died months earlier. On her way out, Mrs. Dau's fine is increased because she had paid in coin, not paper currency, and there was a "transfer fee" as well.²

Ngo Tat To's story not only reveals the colonial administration established by the French, but also the role of the Vietnamese upper classes who worked with the Europeans to exploit their own people. To the Vietnamese, those countrymen, usually large landholders and converts to Catholicism, were a threat to national sovereignty. Nationalists might refer to a collaborator as a "God-cursed traitor who acted like a worm in one's bones," while Court officials were "cowards excessively anxious to save their lives." Confronted by such Francophiles, Nationalists pledged

to fight--often in verse:

We possess our life, but we must know how to give it up
 Shall we remain silent and thereby earn the reputation of cowards?
 As long as there exist people on this earth, we shall exist
 As long as there is water, we must bail it out
 We must read the Proclamation on the victory over the Wu
 We shall follow the example of those who exterminated the Mongols³

In fact, the greatest patriot of this generation was a poet, Phan Boi Chau, a founder of the “Association for the Modernization of Vietnam” in 1904. To Phan, the Vietnamese Mandarin class as well as the French had refused to listen to the people, who, for their part, did not assert themselves strongly enough. As a result, Phan saw a land “splashed with blood. The whole country has a tragic hue.” Phan and other Nationalists believed that Japan, where the monarch and the people allegedly respected each other, could serve as a model for the too-often greedy and selfish Vietnamese, and many of them began a “Travel East” movement to encourage young nationalists to train and raise funds in China and Japan. These Poets-Freedom Fighters, however, also saw great hope in the future. To Phan, almost all Vietnamese had reason to forcefully oppose French rule. As he explained:

Ten thousand Vietnamese can at least kill one hundred Frenchmen,
 One thousand Vietnamese can kill ten Frenchmen,
 One hundred Vietnamese can kill one Frenchman.
 In this way four to five hundred thousand Vietnamese can wipe out four to five thousand Frenchmen!
 Those grey-eyed, heavily-bearded people cannot live if Vietnam is to live!⁴

Phan’s words describing the extent of Vietnam’s will to resist would be prophetic in the coming decades as his ideological descendants would come to the fore.

The New Left

The generation of Vietnamese Nationalists that came of age in the aftermath of World

War I would carry on the tradition of Tran Hung Dao, Quang Trung, Phan Boi Chau and others and ultimately gain national independence and make a revolution. By the 1920s, younger, more militant patriots, inspired by the likes of Lenin, Bakunin, and Sun Yatsen, and imbued with the growing spirit of anti-colonialism, were moving to the forefront of the resistance, led by a young Annamite born in 1890 who was variously called Nguyen Sinh Cung, Nguyen Tat Thanh, and Nguyen Ai Quoc, but who would become known to the world as Ho Chi Minh. As a young boy, so the legend goes, he sat at the feet of Phan Boi Chau and listened to his nationalist poetry; he heard his father, a civil servant, attack the French administration and refuse to learn its language, thereby getting fired from his job, although the French made up charges of drunkenness and embezzlement to justify the dismissal; and he saw his neighbors in Nghe An, in Annam, forced to do corvée labor.

Ho quite obviously was raised on resistance. Phan Boi Chau even tried to persuade his father to send the young man to Japan or China to be educated, but instead he enrolled his son in the program of French studies at Hué. There he saw imperial troops violently suppress a tax rebellion and his father lose his job, so Ho dropped out and became a merchant seaman. After two years at sea, he spent the early war years in London, then moved on to Paris in late 1917. In France, he fit in with a large group of East Asian expatriates, radicals, and Socialists and began to develop the political ideology and strategy that would take him through the next half century. In Paris, Ho allegedly worked as a pastry chef by day--until, the joke goes, he was fired for refusing to bake Napoleons--and helped draw up a program for Vietnamese liberation with his leftist compatriots by night.

At this time, adopting the name Nguyen Ai Quoc (“Nguyen the Patriot”) he apparently

rented a tuxedo and tried to arrange a visit with Woodrow Wilson to discuss his plans for Vietnam while the American president was attending the postwar peace conference at Versailles. Wilson, despite his anti-imperialist rhetoric, had little interest in the non-white colonies, so Ho turned even further to the left, befriending Chinese Communists like Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqui, joining the *Parti Communiste Français* and the Comintern, and making his first trip to the Soviet Union, where he wrote articles using the name Nguyen O Phap, or “Nguyen the anti-French.” In Moscow, the Comintern appointed Ho to organize the “League of East Asian Oppressed Peoples” in Guangdong, China, the site of Phan Boi Chau’s exile and the center of the Vietnamese resistance in Asia. While there, Ho, now known as “Wong,” and other Vietnamese radicals at the Whampoa Military Academy, which had been established by Sun Yatsen, were trained by both Jiang Jieshi and Zhou, who would become blood rivals in the Chinese Civil War. As Ho’s major biographer, Jean Lacouture, explains, while in China Ho “began a practical course in political philosophy and behaved in general in the manner of a secular saint, chopping wood, stopping the barber from beating his wife . . . and feeding the little boy; he played a role that was part Buddha and part Lenin-in-Finland.”⁵

Reds

As a consequence of his time in Guangdong, Ho’s nationalism merged more strongly than ever with his study of communism, and he also began developing contacts with many other Vietnamese Leftists who would help him make the Revolution, including Ho Tung Mau, Le Hong Phong, Le Hong Son, and, especially, Pham Van Dong, Truong Chinh, and, later, Vo Nguyen Giap. In February 1930, many of them formally established the Indochinese Communist Party [ICP, or the “Dang Cong San Dong Duon.”] . With an appeal to both “the oppressed

colonies and the exploited working class,” the ICP offered a ten-point program that stressed nationalist objectives such as ousting the French and establishing Vietnamese independence, along with Communist goals like land redistribution, while also promising civil rights, public education, and equality between men and women.⁶ The establishment of the ICP, however, was marked by a strategic dispute between Nguyen Ai Quoc and many of his comrades. Quoc [Ho] had announced that the Vietnamese resistance should be peasant-led but also should seek the active support of middle-class landlords, based on their common hatred of the French. But in October 1930, under pressure from the Comintern and far Left of the ICP, the Party deleted references to such alliances from its program and stated that it would be “the party of the working class.” At that point, “there was no longer any doubt that the movement led by Ho Chi Minh was dedicated to social revolution” as well as national liberation.⁷

While the ICP debated the relative places of nationalism and class struggle, the Vietnamese and the French took to the streets. From the 1930s forward, Ho and the Party would often have to respond to pressures for action from below, and that was the case in 1930 and 1931. Ho was in Hong Kong [where he was now known as “Tong Van So”] in the early months of 1930, as workers, protesting the dire impact of the world depression on their wages and prices, spontaneously staged strikes at a Haiphong cement works, a Saigon rubber plantation, and a Nam Dinh textile mill, while also organizing work stoppages and demonstrations at various sites in Tonkin and Annam on 1 May, International Labor Day. The most serious actions took place in Ho’s home region of Nghe Tinh, in northern Annam. Peasants and workers there had established “soviets” to guide the protests and, in some cases, had unseated the local administration, reduced rents, and redistributed land, all without any centralized control from the ICP. Ironically, Ho and

the French authorities both were displeased with these rebellions. The Nghe Tinh uprising lacked effective organization, so Ho feared that the French would crush it and seriously damage the entire movement. He was right. The French did respond fiercely. In September 1930, their airplanes bombed thousands of peasants as they marched in protest. Local police arrested over 1000 Vietnamese suspected of being Communists or taking part in the rebellions, executed over 80 protestors, and handed long prison sentences to over 400 others. The ICP estimated that, nationwide, over 2000 militants were killed and over 50,000 arrested, including Pham Van Dong, Truong Chinh, and Vo Nguyen Giap in Vietnam, and Ho in Hong Kong. Bad planning and a lack of weapons, along with the French repression, caused the ICP severe damage; Ho's efforts to build up an organized and disciplined movement would have to begin from scratch.

Although in disarray in the aftermath of the Nghe Tinh affair, the Party would emerge from the French attacks stronger than before. Exile groups in China and Thailand would oversee protest activities, and in Vietnam remnants of the ICP met underground and published a newspaper while peasant strikes and demonstrations occurred in 1932-1933 despite the French crackdown. More importantly, world politics, as they would repeatedly, created conditions that Ho and his allies would exploit to Vietnamese advantage. The 1933 rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis alarmed Europeans, especially the Left. As a result, many nations, including France, moved into their "Popular Front" phase, establishing governments that included all anti-Fascist elements, including Socialists and Communists. The French government thus took a less harsh view of the Vietnamese resistance, offering amnesty to thousands of political prisoners, allowing the ICP to exist on a "semi-legal" basis if it renounced violence, and even accepting the election of two Communists to the Saigon city council. This Vietnamese "glasnost" also enabled Pham

Van Dong, Truong Ching, Le Duan, and Vo Nguyen Giap to openly organize and rise to leadership in the ICP.

Despite the political opening in Vietnam, Ho remained abroad after his release from Hong Kong prison. In Moscow, Stalin was suspicious of Ho's versions of nationalism and peasant communism. The Soviet leader expected Popular Fronts to be under the authority of local Communists, but Ho insisted that the ICP *not* demand leadership of the movement in Vietnam but instead "show itself to be its most loyal, active and sincere member." Many ICP members, however, challenged Ho on this point as well. In an article in the *Communist Review* Vietnamese party leaders criticized Ho's "opportunist theories" about working with non-Communist groups and attacked him for his "erroneous and collaborationist tactics" of accepting rich peasants and bourgeoisie into the anti-French campaign.⁸

Ho accordingly spent the 1930s organizing from outside Vietnam, principally in China. Although criticized for his attempts to work with "class enemies," he understood and emphasized as an overall organizing principle the one issue certain to appeal to all layers of Vietnamese society--*land*. Indeed, the Vietnamese struggle in the 1930s, and thereafter, revolved around the central issue of land ownership. French landholders and Vietnamese collaborators held vast tracts of the countryside. In Cochinchina, for instance, just 6200 landlords owned over half the rice acreage, while another 60,000 owned about 40 percent. The remaining 4.5 million Vietnamese held little land or were tenants, with 60 percent of the rural population [approximately 2.7 million] altogether landless. In Tonkin, 2 percent of the landholders controlled nearly half of the rice lands, and tenants on those plantations had to pay their landlords between 40 and 60 of their crops as rent. Worse, these percentages were fixed amounts based on

a “normal” year’s yield. If flood, drought, or other such problems occurred, rents could reach eighty percent or higher in real terms.

And the War Came

Wars fundamentally transform social conditions, and just as the Vietnam War would change America in the 1960s, World War II was a major turning point in the Vietnamese struggle for national liberation and social revolution. While Popular Front politics and land issues undoubtedly helped the ICP and Nationalist movement, the world war brought great difficulty to Vietnam but also created the conditions for future struggle and, in the long run, success. The path from the outset of World War II to the war against the Americans, however, involved more twists and turns than is easily imagined, with shifts in alliances and enemies, changes in strategies, and apparent and real victories, with frequent setbacks, constant along the way. Indeed, the American phase of Vietnam’s wars can be directly linked to the events of 1939-1945. Though the United States had little knowledge of or interest in Vietnam during the war, American leaders would make it a central battleground in their efforts to remake the world after World War II.

As war broke out in Europe in the Fall of 1939, the situation in Vietnam for the resistance was, as always, precarious, and quite confusing as well. In Asia, the Japanese were trying to establish what they called the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, an alliance of Asian states under Japan’s control. Already brutally occupying China and Korea, Japan could be expected to expand throughout the continent. Thus Ho Chi Minh, along with Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap, operating out of southern China, trained Jieng Jieshi’s troops in guerrilla warfare to use against the Japanese. Simultaneously, the French began another crackdown in

Vietnam. Because the Soviet Union had signed a non-aggression treaty with Hitler in August 1939, Communists everywhere were held in greater suspicion, and the French declared the ICP to be illegal and arrested over 2,000 activists, mostly from urban areas. Eventually, however, the French repression forced the Nationalists to shift their focus to the countryside, thus building the foundation for later struggle, and once more demonstrating the Vietnamese capacity to take advantage of apparent setbacks. Though under attack at home by France and threatened externally by the Japanese, Ho and his comrades working out of China were able to revitalize and expand the resistance.

In November 1939, meeting at Gia Dinh Province near Saigon, the ICP broadened its appeal beyond those attracted to Vietnamese communism and established the “Antiimperialist National United Front” with national liberation, not class struggle, as its number one goal. The conflict with the French, however, took a new turn in 1940, and events in both Europe and Asia would again change the direction of Vietnamese efforts. In Europe, German armies swept through France in just weeks, causing the government to fall and be replaced by a Nazi puppet state with its capital at Vichy. At the same time, Japan was unable to force China to surrender and so set its sights on Indochina, demanding that the French close railway traffic from Hanoi to southern China because shipments of war-related items into the Kunming area were being used against Japanese troops. The French gave in on that point and in August gave the Japanese military facilities and transit rights through Indochina, and allowed them to station troops in Tonkin. In September 1940, Japanese troops thus landed at Haiphong, along the northern coast; another outside power was entering Vietnam.

Immediately, Japan’s forces began to attack French troops at outposts along the Chinese

border, aided by the Vietnamese troops of Prince Cuong De, a Nationalist who naively believed Japan's promise to grant his country independence. After brief skirmishing in Bac Son, the Japanese withdrew and the French crushed Cuong De's troops. Amid the various conflicts, however, the Vietnamese Communists were able to move into the vacuum and establish control, again without any central orders from ICP leadership. Once more, as in Nghe Tinh in 1931, the Vietnamese rebels, disorganized and outgunned, had to retreat, but spontaneous uprisings soon took place in western Cochinchina [November 1940] and Nghe An [January 1941]. These rebellions too were premature and ineffective, but forced the leadership of the resistance in the ICP to hold a general conference to discuss the future of their movement. Thus in May 1941, it met in Pac Bo, along the Chinese border. For the first time in thirty years, the man now calling himself Ho Chi Minh ["He Who Enlightens"] entered into his homeland. In Pac Bo, Ho lived in a cave he named "Karl Marx" with a stream next to it that he called "Lenin," and he secretly wrote and distributed a newsletter titled *Viet Lap*, or "Independent Vietnam."

The Pac Bo meeting was a crucial step in the liberation struggle, for there Ho and the ICP established the *Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh*, "The League for Vietnamese Independence," better known as the *Viet Minh*. Ho and the Viet Minh stressed nationalist sentiments, emphasizing Vietnamese history and culture. They called on all "rich people, soldiers, workers, peasants, intellectuals, employees, traders, youth, and women who warmly love your country" to join the cause. "National liberation is the most important problem," he insisted. "We shall overthrow the Japanese and French and their jackals in order to save people from the situation between boiling water and boiling heat."⁹ Ho and his chief military officer, Vo Nguyen Giap, an expert in Maoist guerrilla warfare, also decided on the military strategy to be used against the

occupying forces. The Japanese, with an eye on the oil fields of the Dutch East Indies [Indonesia], had entered Indochina in force in the summer of 1941, ousted French officials, and set up a brutal administration of their own which, between 1941-1945, created conditions of famine and dire poverty that would kill between one and two million Vietnamese. Some ICP hardliners were urging prompt military action against the Japanese, but Ho and Giap cautioned that the Viet Minh was not yet prepared for battle, and instead they advocated patience and building up an armed movement until Japan was weakened and on the verge of defeat by the Americans and others.

Before taking on the Japanese, however, Ho would again have to contend with his old friends and enemies--and they were often one and the same--in China. In 1942, he traveled to China again, but this time was arrested by authorities of the same army he had just trained. Jiang Jieshi feared Ho's independent, nationalist streak and wanted to establish a puppet Vietnamese party of his own. While serving his fifteen-month sentence under terrible conditions in Chinese prison, Ho continued to work for liberation, often defiantly challenging his captors in verse:

Being chained is a luxury to compete for.
 The chained have somewhere to sleep, the unchained haven't . . .
 The State treats me to its rice,
 I lodge in its palaces,
 Its guards take turns escorting me.
 Really, the honor is too great . . .

Ho's saga then took another twist upon his release, as the Chinese began *paying* him, perhaps as much as \$100,000 per month, to fight against the Japanese and for Vietnamese independence.¹⁰

Inside Vietnam, however, Vo Nguyen Giap had different plans than Ho. In July 1944, at Giap's urging, the Revolutionary Committee of Cao Ban Region voted to begin armed struggle

against the Japanese in the northern provinces. While Ho agreed that “the phase of peaceful revolution is behind us,” he also warned Giap that “the time for general insurrection has not yet come.” Instead, Ho wanted to establish a “brigade of liberation” with political, not military, aims. Toward that end, in December 1944 he established the “Propaganda Unit for National Liberation,” which “shows by its name that greater importance should be attached to the political side than the military side.” At the same time, Ho sought “national resistance by the whole people,” who would be mobilized and armed for a long, guerrilla struggle. Again he stressed patience. Although “we may not have strength on our side,” he saw “no reason for simply letting ourselves be crushed.” Finally, as he said goodbye to Giap, he reminded him, “Stealth, continual stealth. Never attack except by surprise. Retire before the enemy has a chance to strike back.” It was advice Giap would never forget, and Ho’s general ideas from the Summer of 1944 would serve the Vietnamese cause well time and again in the coming years.¹¹

To the August Revolution

In some ways, late 1944 marks the beginning of the armed struggle, as Ho envisioned the Propaganda Unit as the “embryo” of a Vietnamese Liberation Army. Accordingly, Viet Minh guerrillas, at times fighting with French troops, began engaging the Japanese in Thai Nguyen Province, northeast of Hanoi not far from the Chinese border, and even successfully convinced several French garrisons to desert. Viet-French cooperation was not typical, however. Anticipating that the allied powers would defeat a badly weakened Japan in 1945, the French planned to regain full control over Indochina after the war. A year prior, Ho had offered economic concessions and issued moderate demands--political autonomy with full independence delayed for ten years--but the French would not consider negotiations on those, or any, terms.

Worse, the French were preparing for a concentrated assault on the Viet Minh in March 1945, and Giap's forces, outnumbered and outgunned, might have been crushed. Again, though, "the gods were on Ho's side" as the Japanese, on 9 March 1945 (just three days before the planned French attack), arrested and jailed every French official with even the slightest authority. The Japanese then returned Emperor Bao Dai to the throne and nullified the 1884 treaty that had established French control over Indochina. Any thoughts of Vietnamese independence, however, were short-lived as the Japanese maintained their authority and placed their own Vietnamese puppets in power.

Although the events of March 1945 seemed to be another setback to the movement, they worked to Viet Minh advantage ultimately. By attacking the French, Japan prevented them from destroying Viet Minh bases and capturing its leaders. And the Japanese army, now in charge, was not as experienced or efficient in dealing with the resistance. The Japanese had come as conquerors but ironically "acted as a catalyst, leading to a fundamental transformation of Vietnamese political configurations," as Huynh Kim Khanh, an authority on Vietnamese affairs in this period, put it. "By bending the French will, setting limits to their political monopoly, and finally destroying their power," he explained, "the Japanese exposed . . . the myth of the white man's invincibility and . . . the bankruptcy of the concept of the 'white man's burden.'"¹² As a result, Ho again had a window of opportunity. With the French out of the way, the Viet Minh declared the Japanese the new number one enemy, and Giap began moving units southward for armed struggle. Ho's strategic concepts of the "favorable moment" and concentrating against "the main adversary" had fortuitously converged. Though still warning against "overadventurousness," Ho nonetheless saw the movement entering a new phase, and in June

1945 he established a “free zone” of Viet Minh areas and united the various military units into an “Army of Liberation.” Throughout Vietnam, the conditions seemed ripe for Revolution. Labor unrest was rising, Communist propaganda units were successfully recruiting, peasants--angry and hungry due to famine--were joining the cause, and Viet Minh fighters were even seizing government granaries to feed the people. By mid-1945, all northern provinces had active Viet Minh organizations, while over 100,000 peasants in the central region had enlisted in the resistance as well.

In the Summer of 1945, the Viet Minh and other nationalists were prepared for power and liberation. The years of exile, repression, famine, and struggle seemed to be leading inexorably to the recreation of an independent Vietnam. Western leaders had been critical of colonialism during World War II; the French had been ousted by Japan; and the Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 had ended the Japanese hope of establishing an Asian empire. In Vietnam, Ho called for a “national insurrection” at the ICP’s Ninth Plenum, and the Party’s Secretary General, Truong Chinh, took direction of the uprising. On 16 August, Ho addressed the National Liberation Committee, introduced the movement’s new flag--a gold star on a red background--and emotionally called for a countrywide rebellion and described the Front for national independence: “At present, the Japanese army is crushed. The National Salvation Movement has spread to the whole country. The . . . Viet Minh has millions of members from all social strata: intellectuals, peasants, workers, businessmen, soldiers, and from all nationalities . . . In the Front our compatriots march side by side without discrimination to age, sex, religion, or fortune.”¹³

Inspired by Ho’s appeal and energized by Japan’s defeat, Viet Minh forces conducted

mass rallies and seized control in various villages and towns in the northern and central regions in mid-August. In Hanoi, ICP cadre and local militia units overthrew Japanese authorities in a bloodless coup, and in late August Viet Minh representatives traveled to the Imperial Capital at Hué to demand Bao Dai's abdication. Facing the prospects of losing his throne or his life, he formally resigned on 25 August, and four days later invested Ho with the Confucian Mandate of Heaven and handed over to him the imperial sword and seal. As the French scholar Philippe Devillers observed, "ten days after the Japanese capitulation, the Vietminh controlled the entire territory of Vietnam. With disconcerting ease, through the combined effects of negotiation, infiltration, propaganda, and--above all--Japanese 'neutrality,' it had gained power."¹⁴ After a lifetime of struggle, Ho and his fellow Nationalist-Communists had achieved independence and gained power--it seemed. Thus on 2 September 1945, Ho faced a half million of his fellow Vietnamese in Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi and proclaimed the independent Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam [DRVN], with himself as president and minister of foreign affairs. Ho's words that day were quite remarkable, and ironic: "All men are created equal," he began; "they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." He deliberately chose words from the United States Declaration of Independence to connect the Vietnamese Revolution with other such historical movements, to announce to the world the democratic nature of the DRVN, and to try to convince America of his good intentions. After a long condemnation of the French and Japanese, Ho concluded that "Vietnam has the right to be a free and independent country--and in fact is so already," and he was "now convinced that the Allied Nations [then organizing the United Nations] . . . will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Viet-Nam."¹⁵ Ho, this time, was wrong. His country was still occupied, with

British, Chinese, and French military forces deployed in Vietnam and all preferring that a regime other than his be in charge.

Independence Denied

Ho assumed control of a “nation” that had received no international recognition and was structurally damaged by the years of occupation and the recent famine. The Vietnamese lacked technology and capital and had suffered at least one million deaths from the famine of 1944-1945, with another million likely to die by the end of the year. In some areas, bodies were just piled up along the roadside. The new government, then, had to deal with fundamental problems like hunger and poverty simply to stem the disaster. Accordingly, Ho took a moderate approach in his domestic policies and foreign affairs, trying to respond to the crisis at home but not frighten off foreign observers. He abolished the head tax and removed restrictions on the transport of rice from the southern to northern regions. Ho also announced an austerity program, encouraging an already-hungry people to fast, but also intensifying cultivation and banning the distillation of liquor to save grains for food. To somewhat ameliorate those hardships, the DRVN also began a land reform program in which it seized property from French and Japanese holders and their collaborations for redistribution. To gather public support and assure other nations, the government accepted the concept of private property and did not proclaim the establishment of a communist society. In fact, the DRVN, as Ho envisioned it, should be a broad alliance of all patriotic groups, including progressive bourgeoisie and large landowners. Toward that end, the ICP formally dissolved itself on 11 November. Though communism would remain a vital force in Vietnamese life, the DRVN would have a Vietnamese, not Communist, government.

None of these measures seemed to matter to the French, who quickly moved to restore control in Indochina. At war's end, Jieng Jieshi's Chinese troops were occupying northern Vietnam, while British troops were stationed in the south. The British, however, delayed in disarming the Japanese and, using French Prisoners of War and their own Indian troops, overthrew the Viet Minh committee in charge of Saigon. In the north, France announced that its forces would replace the Chinese, who were only too happy to leave Vietnam and get back to China to confront Mao's CCP in their own civil war. Britain too would quit Vietnam, ceding its responsibility to the French. France, despite its collapse in 1940 and collaboration with the Nazis in World War II, would be back in control of Vietnam. For Ho, it was a nightmarish scenario. World War II, the years of resistance, famine, struggle, and ultimate success notwithstanding, the Vietnamese liberation movement found itself in much the same situation it had been a decade earlier.

Indeed, the French were determined to turn back the clock. Their commander, General Jean Leclerc, publicly promised that they would retain control over Indochina, by force of arms if necessary. Thus Ho, lacking international support and trying to rebuild at home, had to negotiate with his former colonial masters. The French, however, were not of one mind on Vietnam. Jean Sainteny, the French representative to the talks with Ho, did not believe his country could afford to commit soldiers and resources to Vietnam, and he was impressed to some degree by the Revolution there, a view shared by some of the younger French officers. But older colonial administrators still viewed the Viet Minh as a rebel band, not terribly popular and unlikely to hold onto power. Sainteny, for his part, was thus predisposed to deal with Ho, a position Leclerc came to share as well. In fact, Leclerc, in early 1946, cabled Paris that it was urgent to settle the

Vietnam situation and suggested it be prepared to discuss “independence” to conclude an agreement. Ho was flexible as well, stating his willingness to negotiate membership in the French Union as a precondition to later autonomy.

Ho, Sainteny, and Leclerc all sought accommodation, and so reached an agreement in March 1946. In the pact, France agreed to “recognize the Republic of Viet Nam as a free state having its own government, its own parliament and its own finances, and forming part of the Indochinese Federation and the French Union.” In return, Ho accepted France’s continued economic and cultural influence in the north and the deployment of 15,000 of its troops there. Hated as the French were, Ho figured that it was better to have them in Vietnam than the traditional Chinese enemy. As he reminded his critics in Hanoi, “Don’t you remember your history? The last time the Chinese came, they stayed a thousand years. The French are foreigners. They are weak. Colonialism is dying. The white man is finished in Asia. But if the Chinese stay now, they will never go. As for me, I prefer to sniff French shit for five years than eat Chinese shit for the rest of my life.”¹⁶

Though Ho had hedged his bets by advising Viet Minh units to conduct guerrilla operations in the south while he negotiated, many of his associates berated him as a traitor, a puppet of the French, and a sellout. In an open letter, many Viet Minh followers lamented, “little did we suspect that we should have to renounce all hope after [the March pact]. You have signed an agreement to accept self-government, not independence! The strength of our faith in you in the days when your name stood for the great revolutionary idea is equaled today by the rage in our hearts--we are ashamed that we should have chosen the wrong elder . . . But the Vietnamese people never lose hope for long . . . They will continue along the path which you have been

unable to follow to the end.”¹⁷

Such criticism seemed more valid than ever in mid-1946. On 1 June, the High Commissioner in southern Vietnam, Admiral Thierry d’Argenlieu, declared that Cochinchina was “a free state having its own government, its own parliament, its own army and its own finances, forming part of the Indochinese Federation and the French Union.” D’Argenlieu’s proclamation came just as Ho was en route to a conference with the French at Fontainebleau Palace, outside of Paris. Immediately, the Vietnamese delegation walked out in protest and the talks were suspended, but Ho stayed behind to try to cobble together some type of deal. While at Fontainebleau, he and Sainteny developed a strong working relationship, with the French representative calling Ho a “person of the highest caliber” whose “intelligence, vast culture, unbelievable energy, and total unselfishness had earned him unparalleled prestige and popularity in the eyes of his people.”¹⁸ Ho had similar feelings about Sainteny and so both sought ways to avoid war throughout the summer of 1946. In September, after more compromises by Ho, the parties signed the *Fontainebleau Agreement*, which reaffirmed the March pact, gave France new economic concessions in the north in exchange for “democratic rights” in Cochinchina, and established a cease fire in the southern half of the country beginning on 30 October. The agreement did not mention independence or even discuss the relationship between Vietnam and the French Union. Again, the Vietnamese would have to wait for national liberation and autonomy.

From Haiphong to Dien Bien Phu

Despite Ho’s efforts to reconcile with the French and pacify Viet Minh hardliners, skirmishing between the two sides continued into the Fall. Then, in November, the French began

to provoke the Vietnamese, first by opening a charnel house in Haiphong. Days later, after the Viet Minh fired on a French ship in the harbor at Haiphong, the French, violating Fontainebleau, ordered all Vietnamese troops removed from the area. General Jean Valluy, the French commander in Vietnam, instructed the officer in charge at Haiphong, Colonel Dèbes, “to give a harsh lesson” to the Viet Minh. “By every means at your disposal you must take control of Haiphong and bring the government and the Vietnamese army to repentance.”¹⁹ On 23 November, Dèbes did just that, ordering a full evacuation of Haiphong. Three hours later, with the Viet Minh still in positions there, Debes opened fire and called in naval artillery support. By the end of the day, over 6000 Vietnamese had died, another 25,000 were wounded, and Haiphong had fallen to the French. The DRVN then declared the agreements with the French null and void and, on 19 December, General Giap called for armed resistance. The next day Ho appealed to the entire population to rise against the French: “Men and women, old and young, regardless of creeds, political parties, or nationalities, all the Vietnamese must stand up to fight the French colonialists to save the Fatherland. Those who have rifles will use their rifles; those who have swords will use their swords; those who have no swords will use spades, hoes, or sticks. Everyone must endeavor to oppose the colonialists and save his country. . . The hour for national salvation has struck! We must sacrifice even our last drop of blood to safeguard our country.”²⁰ The First Indochina War was about to begin.

Barely a year after gloriously proclaiming Vietnamese independence with Thomas Jefferson’s words, Ho Chi Minh faced war against a European power while being accused of “rightist deviationism” and “bourgeois opportunism” by many of his own followers. But again, through unrivaled strategic skills, and at times what appeared to be magic, Ho rallied his people

and emerged victorious. In 1954, the Viet Minh defeated the French and appeared to have won national independence. As in 1945-1946, however, things were not as they appeared to be.

As the war began, French forces held huge advantages over the Vietnamese in terms of manpower, weapons, transport, and military organization. Native forces, however, were fighting in their own country for their own liberation and livelihood. In warfare, Napoleon estimated, morale was overwhelmingly--90 percent he believed--the most important factor, far more crucial than material, and the Vietnamese proved that repeatedly, though they were fierce fighters as well. The French Union Forces [FUF]--comprised of French and Vietnamese troops--grew from 70,000 men in the early 1940s to over 500,000 by 1954; the French Expeditionary Corps [FEC], the occupying army, increased from 70,000 troops at the outset of World War II to 115,000 in 1947, and 180,000 by the 1950s; the Vietnamese National Army [VNA], created by the French and consisting of Vietnamese soldiers, had about 375,000 troops in it by 1954. General Giap, meanwhile, had about 300,000 Viet Minh and militia fighters under his charge, with only a third equipped with small arms initially, and no naval or air forces. Even as they acquired military supplies from China during the war, Ho and Giap would always be outgunned by the French and their western supporters.

But in the end technological power would not be decisive. The Viet Minh controlled the loyalty of the population and Vietnamese morale remained high. To his people, Ho was a daily living symbol of resistance and freedom, and he was one of them. As one of his assistants, Hoang Quoc Viet, described it, he “used to live among the peasants, wear brown cotton clothes like theirs, and live by the same restrictions as everybody else.” This was the “Uncle Ho” persona that the world would come to know in the following decades. In addition to this

“common touch,” Ho could be a hardheaded military strategist, telling a French official that “you would kill ten of my men for every one I killed of yours. But even at that rate you would be unable to hold out, and victory would go to me.”²¹ The French Minister of War did not really disagree with Ho’s assessments. “It is evident that the greater part of the country remains in the hands of the Viet Minh,” he recognized. “I do not think that we should undertake the conquest of French Indochina. It would necessitate an expeditionary corps of at least 500,000 men.” And General Leclerc questioned the possibility of military success altogether, conceding that “the capital problem is now political. It is a question of coming to terms with an awakening xenophobic nationalism.”²²

French military superiority, all sides recognized, would not be the key factor in the war. Like the American rebels in their war for independence against the British in the 1770s and 1780s, the Viet Minh was more dedicated to its cause, willing to sacrifice, familiar with its own land, politically popular, and maintained discipline and morale. And that would make all the difference. The Vietnamese were fighting a “People’s War.” All segments of their society--including women, children, and the aged--contributed to the resistance; indeed one of the more crucial support groups was that of “combat mothers,” older women who adopted soldiers into their own families. Militarily, people’s war, derived from Maoist doctrine in the Chinese Civil War, emphasized constant movement and flexibility. As Truong Chinh explained, “if the enemy attacks us from above, we will attack him from below. If he attacks us in the North, we will respond in Central or South Vietnam, or in Cambodia and Laos. If the enemy penetrates one of our territorial bases, we will immediately strike hard at his belly and back . . . cut off his legs, destroy his roads.” Such tactics would anger and frustrate the French, with one of their officers

complaining “if only the Vietnamese would face us in a set battle, how we would crush them!”²³

Ho and Giap realized that too, and would spend the next generation eluding French, and American, forces.

Ultimate victory, however, would not come without great difficulty and cost to the Viet Minh. Beginning around 1950, Giap, contrary to people’s war doctrine, began large-scale engagements with the French. In October the Viet Minh attacked enemy forts along the Chinese border, with the French losing 6000 troops and large numbers of mortars, trucks, machine guns, and rifles. Hoping to build on that success, Giap, in January 1951, began a general offensive, hoping for a Tet victory. About 15,000 Viet Minh who had been hiding in the mountains outside the Red River delta launched a “human wave” attack on French garrisons at Vinh Yen, near Hanoi. But the French reacted forcefully, rushing in reserves and dropping American-made napalm bombs on Giap’s men. One Viet Minh, Ngo Van Chieu, described the French bombardment: “Another plane approaches and spews more fire. The bomb falls behind us and I feel its fiery breath which passes over my entire body. Men flee, and I can no longer restrain them. There is no way to live under that torrent of fire which runs and burns all in its route.”²⁴ The French thus repulsed the assault on Vinh Yen with 6000 Viet Minh killed. Giap did not retreat, though, striking French positions along the delta. In bitter fighting, the French held. The Viet Minh suffered more heavy losses and had little reason to celebrate Tet. In the spring, the situation worsened when Giap tried to cut off the French by sea by occupying Haiphong. The battle, “Operation Hoang Hoa Tham II,” ended in another defeat. Just two months later, in the battle of “Ha Nam Ninh,” French aircraft and armor blunted Giap’s charges. By mid-June, the Viet Minh was backtracking and bloodied.

After the early 1951 setbacks, many of Giap's comrades criticized him harshly for being unduly aggressive and impatient and even called for his removal. Ho intervened on behalf of his commander, but he and Giap also shifted to a strategy of *protracted war*--from then on, the Viet Minh would try to spread out French forces in defensive positions throughout the country so that they could be attacked in smaller engagements and, in time, French morale would collapse. When the time and conditions were right, Giap could then conduct big-unit engagements to gain decisive victories. Beginning in mid-1951, the Viet Minh, working with local tribes, successfully struck at many French district capitals in the mountains of the northwest, and did the same in league with Communist Pathet Lao guerrillas in Laos. Also at this time Chinese Communist forces, flush off their 1949 victory in their civil war, sent larger quantities of arms, equipment, and supplies to Ho--thousands of tons monthly by the end of the war--while a quarter million Chinese troops along the border served as a warning to the French and others against expanded warfare.

The French were thus concerned about the Viet Minh's growing capabilities, so General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, their commander, directed his troops to seize the town of Hoa Binh, at the southern edge of the Red River delta, to disrupt Giap's communications network and reduce the movement of supplies and troops. The Viet Minh took huge losses--over fifty percent of its 40,000 troops were killed or wounded--but managed to blunt the offensive, infiltrate the entire delta area, and move freely in and out of liberated zones. Finally frustrated and weary from chasing Viet Minh troops, the French withdrew from Hoa Binh in February 1952. French morale began to slip, as their enemy infiltrated or bypassed supposedly secure points along the "de Lattre Line." Indeed, French soldiers had so much difficulty clearing Viet Minh from the

major north-south route, Highway 1, that they began to bitterly refer to it as “*la rue sans joi*,” the street without joy.

By 1953, French prospects were fading. Their new commander, General Henri Navarre, proposed a major expansion of the Vietnamese National Army, reinforcing French forces in Indochina and attacking Viet Minh positions in the delta. The United States backed the “Navarre Concept” with \$400 million in aid. Navarre, however, blundered terribly. To secure access to the delta and cut enemy supply routes into Laos, Navarre established a base at an isolated mountain valley near the Laotian border in northwest Vietnam. It was Dien Bien Phu, and it was destined to become one of the more memorable battle scenes in the twentieth century.

Navarre committed 12 battalions [about 15,000 soldiers], ten tanks, and six aircraft to Dien Bien Phu. In the surrounding hills the local commander, Colonel Christian de Castries, had further protected the main base by establishing strongpoints in the surrounding hills and, with typical *élan*, had named them after his mistresses: Beatrice, Gabrielle, Dominique, Elaine, and Claudine. The French, it seemed, were confident and daring the Viet Minh to attack. Giap took his time, though. The area near Dien Bien Phu seemed impassable, but thousands of Vietnamese peasants cut trails by hand, laid roads, and moved supplies as much as 500 miles to the front by bicycle and on foot. As four divisions of combat troops [about 50,000 men] moved on the base, they were daily bombed and napalmed by the French Air Force, but the advance continued. At times dragging heavy artillery by rope for fifty miles, the Viet Minh’s dedication and willingness to sacrifice was decisive. At one point, a veteran of the Dien Bien Phu campaign related, a rope being used to pull a heavy artillery piece broke and a Vietnamese soldier dove in front of it to prevent it from rolling downhill, dying in the process. Meanwhile, de Castries, legend has it,

was bringing in local prostitutes for his troops. The Viet Minh, to be sure, was emotionally and physically prepared for battle and was positioned to attack in the early months of 1954. When they reached Dien Bien Phu, Giap's men and material disappeared into caves they had dug into the hillsides, and they encroached on the French via the hundreds of miles of tunnels and trenches they had dug clandestinely.

For the French, the waiting was the hardest part, with Navarre even dropping leaflets on the Vietnamese daring them to fight. Giap moved according to his own pace, however, and finally struck on 13 March 1954. Initially Giap advanced his units en masse to try to overrun French positions on the perimeter, but such tactics cost him dearly, with about 2000 Viet Minh lost in the first few days of battle alone. At that point, the commander became patient, digging and operating out of trenches while raining artillery on the French in the valley below. In time, French forces began to take heavy casualties, and the airfield at Dien Bien Phu became inoperable. By April, the Viet Minh were successfully assaulting fire bases along the perimeter as Giap's strategy of "steady attack and steady advance" was paying off. The commander pressed the attack throughout April and the French, taking heavy losses and short on supplies, were in dire straits. On 6 May, Dien Bien Phu fell. Ho Chi Minh, it once more seemed, was primed to become president of an independent Vietnam.

Vietnam, America, and the Cold War

The Viet Minh defeat of the French, it appeared, had cleared the way for Ho, as in 1945, to proclaim independence and assume the presidency of Vietnam. That would not happen. Just as the French had returned to Indochina to prevent the establishment of the DRVN after World War II, the United States would thwart Vietnamese autonomy after Dien Bien Phu, and in the

process set off the Second Indochina War--one that would continue until 1975. Indeed, the Vietnamese Revolution, throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, was closely linked to various international developments. While the United States had little knowledge of or interest in Vietnam at the end of World War II, it quickly became an important national interest due to factors that lay far beyond Indochina, including the Cold War, European politics, and western economic expansion.

Ho had sought American support throughout his struggle against the French. In 1943, he initiated contacts with U.S. intelligence agents in southern China and the Viet Minh, it was reported, helped rescue American pilots downed behind Japanese lines, and may have even received light armaments from the Office of Strategic Services [OSS]. Just as he had approached Woodrow Wilson at Versailles, Ho wrote letters to President Harry S Truman in 1945 seeking friendship and assistance, but Washington D.C. never even acknowledged his overtures. In 1945 and 1946, various American military officials had close contact with the Viet Minh and came away impressed. One OSS agent called Ho "an awfully sweet guy." Other American operatives in Hanoi had helped him write and translate his declaration of independence speech in September 1945. Major Allison Thomas, head of an intelligence mission to Indochina, wrote quite positive reports about the Viet Minh to his superiors. And General Philip Gallagher, a U.S. advisor in northern Vietnam, called Ho "an old Bolshevik," but nonetheless hoped that the Vietnamese "could be given their independence." Even General George Marshall, who served as both Secretaries of State and Defense, understood early on that the French "have no prospect" of victory in Vietnam, and he warned that their war against the Viet Minh "will remain a grievously costly enterprise, weakening France economically and all the West generally in its relations with

Oriental peoples.” And the Joint Chiefs of Staff [JCS] recognized in 1949 that it was the “widening political consciousness and the rise of militant nationalism” among the Vietnamese that was motivating the war against France; any attempt to stop the Viet Minh would thus be “an anti-historical act likely in the long run to create more problems than it solves and cause more damage than benefit.”²⁵

Despite these prophetic military warnings regarding the danger of intervention in Vietnam, the United States became progressively more involved there. Although U.S. military officials saw Ho’s popularity, the rise of nationalism, and French weakness as huge barriers to success, American civilian officials took an opposite view. To them, it was crucial to support France and stop Asian communism. Over the military’s objections, then, the United States began to send hundreds of millions of dollars to French Indochina, even though Air Force Chief of Staff Hoyt Vandenberg compared it to “pouring money down a rathole.”²⁶ To American officials in the White House and Department of State, such policy was necessary for three interrelated reasons: to maintain French support in the European Cold War, to contain communism in Asia, and to encourage economic development. Whereas military officers looked at conditions *inside* Vietnam and saw great risks, civilian officials had a *global* outlook and they saw Vietnam as part of a much larger contest--the Cold War.

Supporting France. During the Second World War, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt spoke often of the need to end European colonialism in Asia and Africa. While Roosevelt’s rhetoric encouraged nationalist groups in the Third World, many were suspicious of western motives. Even Ho, though he wrote to Truman for support, nonetheless complained that the Americans were “only interested in replacing the French . . . They want to reorganize our country

and control it. They are capitalists to the core.”²⁷ U.S. behavior bore him out. Although not thrilled with the French reentry into Vietnam, the United States believed that events in Europe were much more important than Indochina and did not want to alienate its allies in Paris. After 1945, the U.S was pursuing containment, and to do this cooperation from the western Europeans--the British, Germans in the western zones, and of course the French, was essential.

Complicating matters, French President Charles De Gaulle was trying to reestablish his country’s prestige and influence after the debacle of Vichy, while the political Left--the Communist and Socialist Parties and the Trade Unions--was quite popular and netting impressive numbers of votes in free elections. If the United States tried to push France out of Vietnam, American officials feared, it might endanger DeGaulle politically and encourage the Left, which in turn could lead to the loss of a valuable ally in the fight against Euro-communism.

Asian Communism. Although containment, as envisioned by its intellectual father, the American diplomat George Frost Kennan, was to be applied politically in Europe, the focus of the Cold War shifted eastward and led to hot wars in Asia. At the end of World War II, the United States had two principal economic-strategic objectives in Asia: to rebuild Japan along western, capitalist lines and to maintain the pro-American government of Jiang Jieshi in China. While America met its goals in Japan, China appeared to be a disaster. When, in 1949, Mao won the Civil War and established a Communist government in the world’s most populated country [about a half billion], American leaders found it imperative to halt any other such advances in Asia. As a result, the United States intervened in the Korean War in 1950 to prevent victory by the Nationalist-Communist forces of Kim Il Sung. In Vietnam, the spectre of Mao loomed just as large. Despite U.S. military recognition of Ho’s nationalist credentials, American civilian

officials saw him simply as a Communist, a puppet of Mao and Stalin. From 1949 on, then, U.S. policy toward Vietnam would be determined according to the greater need to keep the People's Republic of China [PRC] isolated and to make sure that unfriendly governments did not emerge in proximity to Japan. "The East is Red," Chinese Communists boasted, but "the West is Ready," Americans responded.

Economic Development. The escalating Cold War and the extension of containment had a powerful economic component, which was a fundamental and vital factor in the U.S. intervention into Vietnam. In 1945, at war's end, the United States hoped to construct a "new world order" based on free trade and global investment. The major barrier to that, however, was a shortage of American dollars in Europe. Because of this "dollar gap," other nations, especially the British and French, could not buy American goods, thus hurting both the European and U.S. economies and hampering Japanese reconstruction in Asia, which depended in large measure on trade with Southeast Asia, including Indochina. To address those problems, American leaders believed that it was necessary to purchase goods from Europe's colonies in Southeast Asia, and thus put dollars into their hands that would in turn be used to buy products made in the United States. But in the two most important areas--British Malaya and French Indochina--Communist insurgencies were already strong and growing. Thus, to help the domestic economy and rebuild their allies, American officials had to support the British and French wars against the Malayan Communists and the Viet Minh. As Andrew Rotter, who has given the most attention to this subject, explains, "if British economic recovery required British control of Malaya, so it must be. If the security of Malaya demanded support for the French-sponsored, anti-Communist government in Vietnam, the United States would offer its support."²⁸

Civilian Hawks and Military Doves

The combination of these factors--maintaining French support in the Cold War, containing Asian communism, expanding markets--created a new sense of urgency with regard to Vietnam. Thus in 1950 the United States supported the return of the deposed Emperor Bao Dai from the brothels and casinos of the Riviera to the Vietnamese throne. Bao Dai did not have a deep interest in governance and would rather be playing baccarat or escorting beautiful blondes, but his presence gave the appearance of legitimacy. So the United States recognized his government and sent \$25 million, mostly in military aid, to Indochina in the spring, and another \$130 million later that year. Giap saw the American support as a watershed: "The aggressive war waged by the French colonialists," he pointed out, "gradually became a war carried out with 'U.S. dollars' and 'French blood.' It was really a 'dirty war.'"²⁹ Despite that support, American military officials remained staunchly opposed to U.S. involvement in Vietnam. "France will be driven out of Indochina," the Army's Chief of Staff J. Lawton Collins predicted, and was "wasting time and equipment trying to remain there." If the French requested air or naval support, the JCS insisted, "they will have to be told point blank that none will be committed." Indeed, military officials--despite the intensity of the Cold War--continued to recognize that the Viet Minh's appeal was widespread. Ho enjoyed the support of 80 percent of the population, Army planners reported, yet 80 percent of his followers were *not* Communists.³⁰

The Truman and Eisenhower administrations, however, essentially disregarded military warnings regarding Vietnam. While armed forces officers might have recognized the political and military peril of war against the Viet Minh, civilian officials had more global concerns. Vietnam was thus a pawn in a geopolitical Cold War game. Though not strategically or even

economically critical in its own right, Vietnam became the centerpiece in the effort to contain communism when viewed within the context of French needs, Chinese communism, and economic development. So Charles Cabell, an Air Force General and JCS official, might conclude that “terrain difficulties and the guerrilla nature of Vietminh operations” would make it impossible to dislodge the enemy, but President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, with the “big picture” in mind, would send another \$785 million to Vietnam in 1953 alone.³¹

Indeed, this gap between civilian and military views on Vietnam would become crystal clear during the Dien Bien Phu crisis. The besieged French made overtures to the United States for air support, though not, as rumors then and since have maintained, for atomic weapons. Secretary of State Dulles, Chair of the JCS Admiral Radford, and others urged Eisenhower to meet the French request. The military emphatically said “No!” Admiral A.C. Davis, a Pentagon official, feared American leaders would dupe themselves into making a “limited” commitment to Dien Bien Phu even though, as he put it, “one cannot go over Niagara Falls in a barrel only slightly.” Marine Commandant Lemuel Shepherd worried that U.S. involvement would “greatly increase . . . [the] risk of general war” in Asia. Among officers, no one attacked the idea of intervention more vigorously than General Matthew B. Ridgway. Ridgway was a genuine American hero, having parachuted on D-Day, commanded U.N. troops in Korea after Douglas MacArthur was fired, and served as Army Chief of Staff from 1953 to 1955. Ridgway and his planning chief, General James Gavin, believed that the United States had no vital interests in Indochina, that American units were “too ponderous” for guerrilla warfare in the jungles, that war in Vietnam would be financially costly, that Vietnam lacked the logistics capacity--ports,

roads, communications--needed for war, and that the United States would suffer over 25,000 casualties per month. The JCS, except for Radford, agreed with Ridgway, understanding that any initial commitment to Vietnam would, inevitably, “expand considerably even though initial efforts were indecisive”; and in due time, Vietnam would be an American war.³² With the military so deeply opposed to intervention, and the British discouraging Eisenhower as well, the president did not commit troops to save Dien Bien Phu in the Spring of 1954, and so the French fell. Writing later, Ridgway would cite this as one of his proudest moments, calling American plans to intervene a “hare-brained tactical scheme” and including American nonintervention in “that list of tragic accidents that fortunately never happened.”³³ But Ridgway’s triumph was temporary, for the U.S. let France fall but did not allow Ho to claim victory and move on. In fact, for the Americans, the war was just beginning.

Defeat in Victory

Giap had pressed his attack on Dien Bien Phu in April in large measure to have his troops in strong positions when a conference on East-West affairs opened in Geneva in the first week of May. The conference, long-scheduled, would surely take up the Vietnamese situation and, DRVN leaders hoped, validate the Viet Minh victory. And, with dramatic timing, Dien Bien Phu fell just as the proceedings began. Ho and Giap, however, emerged from Geneva with their glass only half full. The United States, represented by Dulles, remained hostile to the very idea of negotiating with Communists such as the DRVN or PRC and so refused to recognize Ho as the leader of a unified Vietnam. Vietnam’s allies did not serve it much better. Zhou Enlai, the Chinese representative, did not back Ho either. To the Chinese, Vietnam was not a principal concern--they were much more concerned with international recognition and gaining Taiwan’s

seat at the United Nations--and traditional mistrust between the two countries was still strong. Thus, Ho, with dedicated enemies and no effective allies, had to accept compromise at Geneva: rather than unifying Vietnam under his rule, he acquiesced in the temporary partition of his country at the seventeenth parallel, in Annam, with the DRVN recognized north of the demarcation line and some type of anti-Communist entity to be established south of it. In 1956, according to the Geneva settlement, elections would be held to unify Vietnam and elect a president. The Viet Minh, feeling betrayed and isolated, was furious, but Ho counselled patience once more. Declaring that Geneva was a “great victory,” he urged the Vietnamese to be “capable of enduring the present. Doing so will bring them great honor.”³⁴ With little outside support, but great confidence in victory in 1956, Ho could do little else.

Indeed, American officials recognized the Viet Minh’s strength too. Military leaders, the Department of State, and the White House all conceded that Ho would win 80 to 90 percent of the vote in any free election. The JCS, for instance, was aware that any settlement “based on free elections would be attended by the almost certain loss of [Indochina] to Communist control.”³⁵ Rather than accept the Viet Minh as elected representatives of an internationally-recognized DRVN, the United States assumed the French role in Vietnam and created the conditions for the Second Indochina War. Within a year after the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu, the United States would, most importantly, essentially invent a nation, the Republic of Vietnam [RVN] below the seventeenth parallel. It would moreover establish a military training mission to Vietnam and a regional anti-Communist force, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization [SEATO]. With these decisions, the United States created a rival government to the DRVN and backed it with American arms and dollars. In 1956, the RVN, with U.S. encouragement, canceled the

Geneva-scheduled elections and thus left Ho and his supporters in the south with little choice but to again wage a war for liberation, unification and Vietnamese socialism.

Decades later, as we study Vietnam, the events of 1954-1955 are still decisive. Because of the Viet Minh's popularity and nationalist credentials, there was no real opposition to Ho inside Vietnam. Thus the United States had to establish and nurture the RVN with little indigenous support. Like the French, the Americans had to find and put in power Vietnamese officials, who would remain tainted as U.S. puppets throughout the next generation. As a result, the RVN could never be seen as a legitimate alternative to Ho. The Vietnamese people, with their legacy of conquering the Chinese, Mongols, Japanese, and French, were not about to accept the rule of Americans and their clients. But the United States would try. In June 1954, Americans persuaded Bao Dai to appoint a Vietnamese elite named Ngo Dinh Diem to be Prime Minister. In so far as he hated the French, Diem was a nationalist, but he had little knowledge of Vietnamese society and no concern for the Vietnamese people. He had spent the previous decade in a monastery in the United States where, quite unlike Bao Dai, he practiced sobriety and celibacy. He did, however, have influential friends, including Cold War icons such as Francis Cardinal Spellman and Senators Mike Mansfield and John F. Kennedy. So when it came time for the Americans to find a leader for the RVN, they looked no further than Diem.

At the same time, the United States took steps to protect the RVN and other countries against the DRVN and other Asian Communists by sending a training group to the RVN and establishing SEATO. The training mission, the Military Assistance Advisory Group [MAAG], originally consisted of a few hundred American advisors whose duty was to help reorganize and improve the Vietnamese army so that it could eventually resist outside forces, namely the DRVN,

without U.S. help. More broadly, the SEATO, comprised of anti-Communist nations in Southeast Asia, would prevent Ho, Mao, or others from exporting communism throughout the region. American military leaders, again, resisted this expansion of their role in Vietnam. Air Force General and psychological warfare expert Edward Lansdale, a strong supporter of Diem, nonetheless admitted that the Viet Minh had “exemplary relations” with Vietnamese villagers, while the southern soldiers were only “adept at cowing a population into feeding them [and] providing them with girls.” Army officers reported that Ho and Giap had about 340,000 troops at their disposal, with nearly 100,000 *below* the seventeenth parallel. And General J. Lawton Collins, whom Eisenhower sent to Saigon as his personal representative, consistently advised the White House to consider abandoning the unpopular and repressive Diem regime. Likewise, Ridgway and others warned that it was “hopeless” to expect the training mission to succeed in the absence of popular government and political stability in the south, while General Gavin feared that American troops would get stuck in the middle of a “civil war” in Vietnam. The JCS meanwhile pointed out that a training program for the RVN would cost almost a half billion dollars, a steep price for an area of “low priority” such as Vietnam.³⁶ Eisenhower and Dulles dismissed such critiques though, and, after Diem survived an overthrow attempt in early 1955, were set to put American money, soldiers, and credibility on the line to preserve the RVN.

“The Mandarin in the Sharkskin Suit” . . .

The American commitment to Diem was momentous, for not only did the United States become the guarantor of the RVN but in large measure of Diem himself. By sending money to the regime--\$322 million in 1954-55 alone--canceling the elections, and not holding Diem accountable for any political reform, Americans sent a clear signal that the partition at the

seventeenth parallel could become permanent and that they would not abandon their new client. Diem, who had no commitment to democracy to begin with, thus had free reign to run the RVN as a personal fiefdom--and he did. To give himself an air of legitimacy, Diem held elections in 1955 that would have embarrassed a Chicago alderman, winning more votes than eligible voters in some areas and 98 percent of the vote in the entire RVN. The American ambassador had to admit that the ballot was “a travesty of democratic procedures.”³⁷ In office, Diem established the *Can Lao*, or Personalist, Party as an appendage of the Ngo family, not as a governing institution. His brother and sister-in-law, Ngo Dinh Nhu and Madame Nhu, were the power behind the throne--he as secretary of the interior, and she, the stereotypical Asian “dragon lady,” as the head of the Vietnamese Women’s Movement. Madame Nhu’s father was in the cabinet also, and her uncle was Diem’s foreign minister, while another relative was minister of education. Diem’s brother Ngo Dinh Canh ran the northern provinces around Hué without any official title and another brother, Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc, was head of the Vietnamese Catholic Church. Although less than 10 percent of Vietnam was Catholic, disciples of Rome had huge power inside this Buddhist country, a major point of conflict already and one that would worsen in the coming years.

To solidify his power further, Diem and Nhu fired about 6,000 army officers and replaced them with more loyal, if less qualified, soldiers, while forcing military personnel to join the Can Lao Party. The army also assumed civil police functions, and officers took over civil administration duties. Under the Ngos the civil order was steadily militarized, and the army’s responsibility was not to fight the Communists but to protect the first family. Thus secure, the Ngos went after their enemies, both real and imagined. Diem closed newspapers, made it illegal

to criticize his government, and made it a capital offense to be a “communist.” By 1958, he had jailed over 40,000 political prisoners and executed over 12,000 dissidents. By 1961, those numbers had tripled. The United States apparently had little trouble with the Ngo’s behavior: Washington supplied the RVN with 85 percent of its military budget and two-thirds of its overall budget. Despite American rhetoric about building a better life for the Vietnamese people, 78 percent of all American monies were used by Diem for military purposes, but that meant that it was being utilized to keep the regime in power, not to fight the enemy.

The United States also accepted Diem’s regressive land policies. As always, property ownership was the crucial political issue in Vietnam. In 1954, after the victory over France, the Viet Minh began to seize lands held by the French and Vietnamese collaborators and to redistribute over 600,000 hectares of it to landless peasants. Once in power, Diem began to reverse those agrarian programs and took personal control of 650,000 hectares, much of it by denying the titles of peasants or by seizing it in place of tax payments. He then gave out about 250,000 hectares to loyal military officials and Catholic cronies, while keeping the rest, and the best, for his family. By the later 1950s, the land situation for southern peasants was not appreciably different than it had been in the French period. Diem at the same time put friends and supporters in charge of all the village councils, increased taxes, and intimidated and arrested those criticizing his land policies. In May 1959, in Law 10/59, he authorized his military-political forces to arrest any “subversives,” which was a blank check for roving bands of armed forces and Can Lao zealots to arrest, try, convict, and execute anyone suspected of disloyalty. Such oppression worked in one important respect, however; the Viet Minh in the south was on the ropes, its membership in hiding, in prison, or dead. American support of Diem seemed to be

paying off. Little wonder, then, that *Time Magazine* called him “The Mandarin in the Sharkskin Suit” who was saving Southeast Asia from the Communists.

. . . and “Uncle Ho”

The later 1950s were a dark time for Ho and the Viet Minh. While trying to organize society and the economy in the north, they also suffered through the Diemist repression in the south. The triumph of Dien Bien Phu had been replaced by the reality of reconstruction and continued struggle. The promise of elections and reunification in 1956 was unfulfilled, and Ho and his associates on both sides of the seventeenth parallel had no alternative but to accept it. With western, namely American, pressure against the DRVN and internal problems to confront, Ho faced a major challenge in any event. Most of the fighting against the French had taken place in Tonkin, so the north had been terribly damaged and faced acute food shortages, especially since 60 percent of the rice crop--the staple of the Vietnamese diet--was produced in the south. To alleviate food shortages and help rebuild the north, Ho even made overtures to the RVN about economic integration, but they were dismissed, helping drive the DRVN closer to the PRC and Soviet Union.

Internally, the reconstituted Communist movement--the *Lao Dong*, or Worker’s Party--took control in Hanoi, nationalizing banks and some large businesses but mixing the economy by maintaining private manufacturing and trade firms. In the agricultural sector, Ho tried to continue the reforms he had attempted in 1946 and 1954 by redistributing land to peasants. The government transferred over two million hectares of land to the people, turning about half of northern families into property owners, an exponential increase over the French years. To keep the support of “middle” or “rich” peasants, Ho allowed many of them to retain their holdings

while channeling anger toward the “local despots,” the big landlords. Unfortunately, local officials often became overzealous in enacting land reform and assaulted many peasants who held land but supported the government. In various areas, including Ho’s home province of Nghe An, peasants protested the land takings. Lao Dong officials turned on the protestors, killing perhaps 2,500 of them (but by no means the half million Richard Nixon would later claim as justification for the U.S. war). Ho, realizing he had overreacted, chastised the peasants for rising up but also dismissed those officials, including his old friend and Communist leader Truong Chinh, responsible for the crackdown.³⁸ Though a disaster, the assault on the peasant protestors offered a strong contrast to the Diem regime’s behavior. While the Ngos boasted of arresting and executing their enemies, the DRVN recognized its mistakes and moved forward. Even after a tragic blunder, the DRVN’s leader could remain “Uncle Ho” to his people.

Events below the seventeenth parallel, however, were not as easily handled. Diem’s attacks on Viet Minh cadre and political supporters had badly destabilized the resistance in the south and damaged its morale. Ho and Lao Dong officials advised southern activists to lay low, agitate for elections, and develop political organizations. Ho wanted to “combat the idea of violent, reckless, and dangerous armed struggle,” but many of the anti-Diem groups in the RVN wanted to act with force. Some ignored Ho’s orders and formed secret cells, established bases, and even conducted ambushes, sabotaged facilities, and killed southern officials. By 1959, with the southern situation deteriorating and Hanoi facing pressure from its loyalists in the RVN, Ho and the Communist Central Committee endorsed “violent struggle” as well as political action. About 5,000 “regroupees,” southern party members who had trained in the north, returned to the RVN and the DRVN began to send military equipment and supplies into the south, by foot or by

bicycle at first. While Hanoi remained hesitant to take on Diem, the southern resistance began to more openly urge armed struggle. By 1960, Ho and his lieutenants were lagging behind the southern rebels, but being forced into a more militant approach to liberate the south and unify the country.

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2. Ngo Tat To, "When the Light's Put Out," in Ngo Vinh Long, ed., Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants Under the French (New York, 1991), 161-75.
3. Marr, Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 46.
4. Marr, Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 108, 118-9.
5. Jean Lacouture, Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography (New York, 1968), 71-2.
6. "Appeal Made on the Occasion of the Founding of the Communist Party of Indochina," 18 February 1930, in Bernard Fall, ed., Ho Chi Minh on Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-'966 (New York, 1967), 129-131.
7. William J. Duiker, The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam (Boulder, CO., 1981), 31-33; Idem., Sacred War: Nationalism and Socialism in a Divided Vietnam (New York, 1995), 33-4.
8. Duiker, Sacred War, 36; Idem., The Communist Road to Power, 48-9.
9. "Letter from Abroad," 1941, in Fall, Ho Chi Minh on Revolution, 132-4.
10. Lacouture, Ho Chi Minh, 82
11. "Instruction to Establish the Viet-Nam Propaganda Unit for National Liberation," December 1944, in Fall, Ho Chi Minh on Revolution, 138-9; Lacouture, Ho Chi Minh, 89.
12. Huynh Kim Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945 (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), 238.
13. "Appeal for General Insurrection," 16 August 1945, in Fall, Ho Chi Minh on Revolution, 138-9.
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15. “Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam,” 2 September 1945, in Fall, Ho Chi Minh on Revolution, 141-3.

16. In Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History (New York, 1983), 153. I would like to thank Amy Klemm for bringing Ho’s quote to my attention.

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18. In Marilyn Young, The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990 (New York, 1991), 16.

19. In Lacouture, Ho Chi Minh, 162-3.

20. “Appeal to the Entire People to Wage the Resistance War,” 20 December 1947, in Fall, ed., Ho Chi Minh on Revolution, 162.

21. In Lacouture, Ho Chi Minh, 175-6, 171.

22. In Gary R. Hess, Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of War (Boston, 1990), 38, and in George McT. Kahin, Intervention: How the United States Became Involved in Vietnam (Garden City, N.Y., 1987), 24.

23. In Duiker, Sacred War, 67.

24. In Duiker, Sacred War, 74; see also Bernard Fall, Street Without Joy (Harrisburg, PA., 1961), 35-8.

25. Gallagher in Gareth Porter, ed., Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions (Stanfordville, N.Y., 1979), I:77-8; Marshall in Ibid., I:145-6 and 176-7; JCS 1992/4, “U.S. Policy Toward Southeast Asia,” Record Group [RG] 319, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

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36. Lansdale in PP-Gravel, I:573-83; Army study, 2 November 1954, RG 319, National Archives; Collins in FRUS, 1955-57, I:200-370, passim.; JCS 1992/367, 3 August 1954, RG 218, National Archives; Gavin and Adams to Ridgway, 10 August 1954, RG 319; JCS to Secretary of Defense, 22 September 1954, RG 218.
37. Frederick Reinhardt to State Department, 14 October 1955, FRUS, 1955-57, 1:562-3.
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