

## The War in Vietnam

direct U.S. military participation in The Vietnam War, the nation's longest, cost fifty-eight thousand American lives. Only the Civil War and the two world wars were deadlier for Americans. During the decade of Vietnam beginning in 1964, the U.S Treasury spent over \$140 billion on the war, enough money to fund urban renewal projects in every major American city. Despite these enormous costs and their accompanying public and private trauma for the American people, the United States failed, for the first time in its history, to achieve its stated war aims. The goal was to preserve a separate, independent, noncommunist government in South Vietnam, but after April 1975, the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) ruled the entire nation.

The initial reasons for U.S. involvement in Vietnam seemed logical and compelling to American leaders. Following its success in World War II, the United States faced the future with a sense of moral rectitude and material confidence. From Washington's perspective, the principal threat to U.S. security and world peace was monolithic, dictatorial communism emanating from the Soviet Union. Any communist anywhere, at home or abroad, was, by definition, and enemy of the United States. Drawing an analogy with the unsuccessful appeasement of fascist dictators before World War II, the Truman administration believed that any sign of communist aggression must be met quickly and forcefully by the United States and its allies. This reactive policy was known as containment.

In Vietnam the target of containment was Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh front he had created in 1941. Ho and his chief lieutenants were communists with long-standing connections to the Soviet Union. They were also ardent Vietnamese nationalists who fought first to rid their country of the Japanese and then, after 1945, to prevent France from reestablishing its former colonial mastery over Vietnam and the rest of Indochina. Harry S. Truman and other American leaders, having no sympathy for French colonialism, favored Vietnamese independence. But expanding communist control of Eastern Europe and the triumph of the communists in China's civil war made France's war against Ho seem an anticommunist rather than a colonialist effort. When France agreed to a quasi-independent Vietnam under Emperor Bao Dai as an alternative to Ho's DRV, the United States decided to support the French position.

The American conception of Vietnam as a cold war battleground largely ignored the struggle for social justice and national sovereignty occurring within the country. American attention focused primarily on Europe and on Asia beyond Vietnam. Aid to France in Indochina was a quid pro quo for French cooperation with America's plans for the defense of Europe through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. After China became a communist state in 1949, the stability of Japan became of paramount importance to Washington, and Japanese development required access to the markets and raw materials of Southeast Asia. The outbreak of war in Korea in 1950 served primarily to confirm Washington's belief that communist aggression posed a great danger to Asia. Subsequent charges that Truman had "lost" China and had settled for a stalemate in Korea caused succeeding presidents to fear the domestic political consequences if they "lost" Vietnam. This apprehension, an overestimation of American power, and an underestimation of Vietnamese communist strength locked all administrations from 1950 through the 1960s into a firm anticommunist stand in Vietnam.

Because American policy makers failed to appreciate the amount of effort that would be required to exert influence on Vietnam's political and social structure, the course of American policy led to a steady escalation of U.S. involvement. President Dwight D. Eisenhower increased the level of aid to the French but continued to avoid military intervention, even when the French experienced a devastating defeat at Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954. Following that battle, an international conference at Geneva, Switzerland, arranged a cease-fire and provided for a North-South partition of Vietnam until elections could be held. The

United States was not a party to the Geneva Agreements and began to foster the creation of a Vietnamese regime in South Vietnam's autocratic president Ngo Dinh Diem, who deposed Bao Dai in October 1955, resisted holding an election on the reunification of Vietnam. Despite over \$1 billion of U.S. aid between 1955 and 1961, the South Vietnamese economy languished and internal security deteriorated. Nation building was failing the South, and, in 1960, communist cadres created the National Liberation Front (NLF) or Vietcong as its enemies called it, to challenge the Diem regime.

President John F. Kennedy concurred with his predecessor's domino theory and also believed that the credibility of U.S. anticommunist commitments around the world was imperiled in 1961. Consequently, by 1963 he had tripled American aid to South Vietnam and expanded the number of military advisers there from less than seven hundred to more than sixteen thousand. But the Diem government still failed to show economic or political progress. Buddhist priests, spiritual leaders of the majority of Vietnamese, staged dramatic protests, including self-immolation, against the dictatorship of the Catholic Diem. Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's brother, led a brutal suppression of the Buddhist resistance. Finally, after receiving assurances of noninterference from U.S. officials South Vietnamese military officers conducted a coup that ended with the murders of Diem and Nhu. Whether these gruesome developments would have led Kennedy to redirect or decrease U.S. involvement in Vietnam is unknown, since Kennedy himself was assassinated three weeks later.

Diem's death left a leadership vacuum in South Vietnam, and the survival of the Saigon regime was in jeopardy. With a presidential election approaching, Lyndon B. Johnson did not want to be saddled with the charge of having lost Vietnam. On the other hand, an expansion of U.S. responsibility for the war against the Vietcong and North Vietnam would divert resources from Johnson's ambitious and expensive domestic program, the Great Society. A larger Vietnam also raised the risk of a military clash with China. Using as a provocation alleged North Vietnamese attacks on U.S. Navy vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964, Johnson authorized limited bombing raids on North Vietnam and secured a resolution from Congress allowing him to use military forces in Vietnam. These actions helped Johnson win the November election, but they did not dissuade the Vietcong from its relentless pressure against the Saigon government.

By July 1965, Johnson faced the choice of being the first president to lose a great war or of converting the Vietnamese War into a massive, U.S. directed military effort. He chose a middle course that vastly escalated U.S. involvement but that stopped short of an all-out application of American power. Troop levels immediately jumped beyond 300,000 and by 1968 the number exceeded 500,000. Supporting these ground troops was a tremendous air bombardment of North Vietnam that by 1967 surpassed the total tonnage dropped on Germany, Italy, and Japan in World War II.

Gen. William Westmoreland, the U.S. commander in Vietnam, pursued an attrition strategy designed to inflict such heavy losses on the enemy that its will to continue will be broken. By late 1967, his headquarters was claiming that the crossover point had been reached and that enemy strength was being destroyed faster than it could be replenished. But the communists' Tet offensive launched in January 1968 quickly extinguished the "light at the end of the tunnel". The Vietcong struck throughout South Vietnam, including a penetration of the U.S. embassy compound in Saigon. American and South Vietnamese forces eventually repulsed the offensive and inflicted heavy losses on the Vietcong, but the fighting had exposed the reality that a quick end of the war was not in sight.

Following the Tet offensive, the American leaders began a slow and agonizing reduction of U.S. involvement. Johnson limited the bombing, began peace talks with Hanoi and the NLF, and withdrew as a candidate for reelection. His successor, Richard M. Nixon, announced a program of Vietnamization, which basically represented a return to the Eisenhower and Kennedy policies of helping Vietnamese forces fight the war, Nixon gradually reduced U.S. ground troops in Vietnam, but he increased the bombing; the tonnage dropped after 1969 exceeded the already prodigious levels reached by Johnson. Nixon expanded air and ground operations

into Cambodia and Laos in attempts to block enemy supply routes along Vietnam's borders. He traveled to Moscow and Beijing for talks and sent his aide Henry A. Kissinger to Paris for secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese. In January 1973, the United States and North Vietnam signed the Paris Peace Agreement, which provided for the withdrawal of all remaining U.S. forces from Vietnam, the return of U.S. prisoners of war, and a cease-fire. The American troops and POWs came home, but the war continued. Nixon termed it "peace with honor," since a separate government remained in Saigon, but Kissinger acknowledged that the arrangement provided primarily for a "decent interval" between U.S. withdrawal and the collapse of the South. In April 1975, North Vietnamese troops and tanks converged on Saigon, and the war was over.

Why did the United States lose the war? Some postmortems singled out media criticism of the war and antiwar activism in America as undermining the will of the U.S. government to continue fighting. Others cited the restrictions placed by civilian politicians on the military's operations or, conversely, blamed U.S. military chiefs for not providing civilian leaders with a sound strategy for victory. These so-called win arguments assume that victory was possible, but they overlook the flawed reasons for U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Washington had sought to contain international communism, but this global strategic concern masked the reality that the appeal of the communists in Vietnam derived from local economic, social, and historical conditions. The U.S. response to the Vietnamese communism was essentially to apply a military solution to an internal political problem. America's infliction of enormous destruction on Vietnam served only to discredit politically the Vietnamese that the United States sought to assist. Furthermore, U.S. leaders underestimated the tenacity of the enemy. For the Vietnamese communists, the struggle was a total war for their own and their cause's survival. For the United States, it was a limited wa