



Essential Histories

# The Vietnam War 1956–1975

Andrew Wiest

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# Introduction

## The importance of the Vietnam War

Historians usually judge the Vietnam War to be one of the most important conflicts of the twentieth century. At first glance, though, the significance of the conflict in Vietnam is sometimes difficult to ascertain. The war in Vietnam was, in many ways, smallinvolving only limited action by a world superpower on distant battlefields of the Third World. During the nine years of official American involvement in the Vietnam War over two million Vietnamese and 58,219 Americans lost their lives. Such numbers truly represent a great tragedy, but pale in comparison to the millions of casualties of the two



Three US soldiers drag a captured Viet Cong soldier away for questioning in 1966. The brutal nature of the struggle in Vietnam exacerbated societal turmoil on the homefront making Vietnam the most controversial of American wars. (TRH Pictures)

World Wars. In fact more Americans die every year in traffic accidents than died during the entire Vietnam War. Why, then, is the Vietnam War so important?

The importance of a conflict is gauged not only on casualty figures and geographic spread, but also on the impact that conflict has on the wider world. Using such a scale the conflict in Vietnam ranks as possibly the most important American event of the twentieth century. The war took place during, and became intertwined with, the turbulent 1960s. The volatile mixture of Vietnam, the counter culture, and the Civil Rights Movement led to a near breakdown in the American body politic. In 1968, amid a spate of riots and assassinations, many observers thought that the United States was on the brink of a second American Revolution. The societal tension was so high that the US slowly backed out of a war that it felt it could no longer win. In the years that have passed since the end of American involvement in the Vietnam War it has become clear that the conflict formed a watershed in American, and certainly Vietnamese, history. Indeed the impact of the Vietnam War was felt worldwide—from the ‘Killing Fields’ of Cambodia and the ethnic cleansing of Hmong tribesmen in Laos, to social upheaval in Europe and societal discord in Australia over that nation’s controversial role in the combat in Vietnam.

The war in Vietnam was also of great importance in a geopolitical sense, as a flashpoint in the Cold War. In the wake of the Second World War the US and the Soviet bloc countries faced off against each other in diplomatic and ideological hostility, while generally avoiding open warfare. Instead the United States chose to counter the perceived threat of the spread of communism across the globe by relying on a system of containment. In each case the scale of the threats precluded the use of massive force, so avoiding the buildup to a nuclear exchange. The US chose to adopt a policy of limited war, hoping to avoid a superpower showdown and in many ways the war in Vietnam became the main example of US limited war policy. It



was a war that the United States had to enter in order to contain the spread of communism. It was, however, a war that the United States could not win due to serious limitations placed on the use of American military might. Thus the experiment in limited war failed, coloring all subsequent conflicts from Afghanistan to the Gulf War. However, in some ways Vietnam can be seen as a success. The war did not escalate into a Third World War and, if viewed as only part of the Cold War, one can see a US victory in Vietnam with the eventual fall of the Soviet Union.

The nature of the conflict in Vietnam took the United States by surprise. Trained for battle on the plains of Western Europe, the US military, with its high level of technological developments, found itself involved in a war with Third World guerrilla fighters. Baffled by the enemy tactics the US military responded, in the main, conventionally, relying on firepower to overcome enemy willpower. Though the US resorted to the heaviest bombing in the history of warfare and won every battle, its tactics were ill suited to overcome what was essentially an insurgency rooted in internal political turmoil. Such military advances as were made during the struggle, including the use of air mobility and the beginnings of electronic warfare, had little impact on the political basis of the conflict. Following the Vietnam War, and despite the 'Revolution in Military Affairs' that saw the technology in warfare progress apace (perhaps best demonstrated in the Gulf War) the military has also come to learn its limitations. Careful not to become enmeshed in a political war the commanders in the Gulf, themselves Vietnam veterans, quickly halted the conflict. Even now, as the war against terror rages, military leaders are careful to ensure that they do not become embroiled in the political chaos of Afghanistan.

Finally, in a much more personal sense, the Vietnam War changed America forever. After the great moral crusade of the Second World War, most Americans were convinced that their country could do no wrong. However, defeat in Vietnam and the attendant social discord of the 1960s, forced a cathartic reappraisal of American society. American soldiers had won every battle, but the war itself had been lost, which indicated a more fundamental failing on the part of America. America, it seemed, could make blunders, could commit atrocities, could lose. In many ways, then, Vietnam forced a reluctant nation to come of age.

One question that often goes unasked lies at the heart of the importance of the Vietnam War and its cathartic effect on American society: "How did the world's greatest superpower fall to defeat at the hands of a Third World insurgent guerrilla force?" The answer to that basic question is as complex as was the Vietnam War itself. Though many at the time saw Vietnam as a simple issue of freedom versus communism the struggle in Vietnam in fact represented myriad geopolitical, social, and military ideas. Vietnam was one struggle within the Cold War, involving communism, decolonization and the domino theory. It was a guerrilla war, a technological war, a total war, and a limited war. For the US it was a war that it had to enter but which it had no hope of winning, due in part to the storms that beset its own society. For the Vietnamese, who had lost all the major battles and still remained undefeated, the conflict continued long after the US had exited.



The Vietnam Veterans War Memorial best represents the continuing pain caused by the Vietnam War. (TRH Pictures)

# Chronology

- 1954**      **21 July** Signing of the Geneva Accords
- 1955**      **16 July** Diem renounces the Geneva Accords  
**23 October** Diem becomes president and declares the Republic of South Vietnam
- 1956**      **28 April** US Military and Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) takes over the training of the South Vietnamese armed forces
- 1957**      **October** Fighting breaks out between the forces of Diem and the Viet Minh
- 1959**      **May** North Vietnam begins moving men and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail
- 1960**      **20 December** The National Liberation Front, dubbed the Viet Cong by its adversaries, takes control of the insurgency in South Vietnam
- 1961**      **May** President Kennedy approves sending Special Forces to South Vietnam and approves the “secret war” in Laos
- 1962**      **8 February** MAAG becomes the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) under General Paul Harkins  
**22 March** Launching of the Strategic Hamlet Program
- 1963**      **2 January** Battle of Ap Bac  
**11 June** Thich Quang Duc immolates himself on a Saigon street corner  
**1 November** Diem is overthrown and killed in a military coup
- 1964**      **20 June** William Westmoreland takes over MACV  
**2-4 August** The Gulf of Tonkin Incident  
**7 August** US Congress passes the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution  
**November-December** Viet Cong attacks on American interests in South Vietnam
- 1965**      **February** President Johnson authorizes Operation Flaming Dart bombing raids  
**2 March** US begins Operation Rolling Thunder  
**8 March** First US combat forces arrive at Da Nang  
**October-November** Battle of the Ia Drang Valley
- 1966**      **5-25 November** Operation Attleboro  
**December** Number of US forces in Vietnam reaches 385,000
- 1967**      **8-26 January** Operation Cedar Falls  
**22 February-1 April** Operation Junction City  
**May-October** North Vietnamese siege of marine base at Con Thien  
**November** Battles for Dak To and Hill 875

- December** US forces reach 500,000
- 1968**     **22 January** 77-day siege of Khe Sanh begins  
**31 January** Tet Offensive begins  
**28 February** Westmoreland requests 206,000 additional troops  
**16 March** My Lai massacre  
**31 March** Bombing north of 20th parallel ceases and Johnson decides not to run for reelection  
**10 May** Peace talks open in Paris  
**10 June** Westmoreland replaced by General Creighton Abrams  
**26-29 August** Riots at Democratic National Convention in Chicago  
**5 November** Richard Nixon elected president
- 1969**     **March** Secret bombings of Cambodia begin  
**10-20 May** The Battle of Hamburger Hill  
**8 June** Troop ceiling in Vietnam reduced by 25,000  
**3 September** Death of Ho Chi Minh  
**October** Largest anti-war demonstrations in US history
- 1970**     **18 March** Prince Norodom Sihanouk overthrown by Lon Nol in Cambodia 1 May US forces invade Cambodia 4 May National Guard troops kill four at Kent State University in Ohio  
**December** US forces in Vietnam down to 335,000
- 1971**     **February-March** Operation Lam Son 719  
**29 March** Lt. William Calley convicted of mass murder at My Lai  
**December** US forces in Vietnam down to 156,800
- 1972**     **30 March-8 April** Nguyen Hue Offensive  
**6 April** Operation Linebacker begins  
**8 May** Nixon announces the mining of Hai Phong harbor  
**12 August** The last US combat unit leaves South Vietnam  
**22 October** South Vietnamese President Thieu rejects peace treaty  
**18 December** Operation Linebacker II begins
- 1973**     **27 January** A peace agreement is signed by the US and North Vietnam  
**12 February-29 March** US POWs come home  
**21 February** A ceasefire agreement is reached in Laos  
**7 November** The US Congress passes the War Powers Act
- 1974**     **9 August** Nixon resigns  
**December** 80,000 people have died during the year, making it the most bloody of the entire conflict.
- 1975**     **January** North Vietnamese forces overrun Phouc Long province  
**March** North Vietnamese forces launch invasion of South Vietnam  
**24 March** North Vietnamese forces launch the Ho Chi Minh Campaign  
**8-21 April** Battle of Xuan Loc

**29-30 April** Operation Frequent Wind, the evacuation of Saigon

**30 April** Saigon falls

**24 August** Pathet Lao forces take control of Laos

**December** Khmer Rouge forces take control of Cambodia

# Background to war

## The Cold War

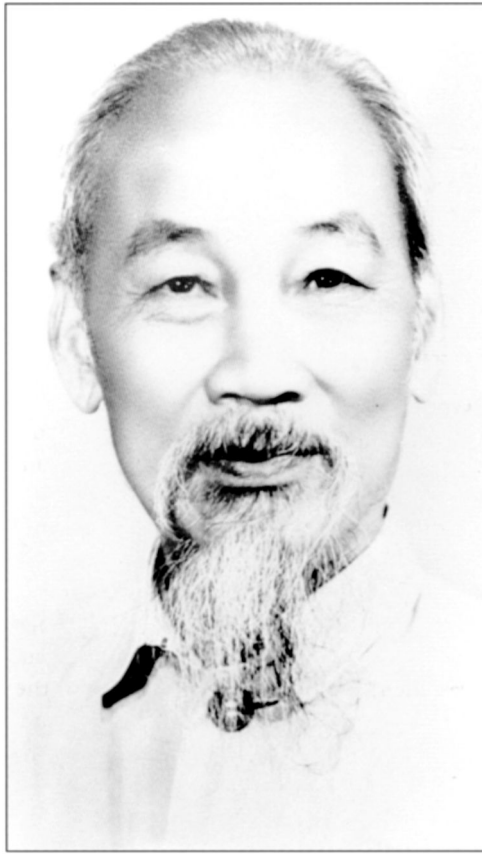
At the close of the Second World War the United States emerged as a somewhat reluctant superpower. With Western Europe in tatters America, contrary to its history of isolationism, made the conscious decision to stand guard across the world against the new threat of global communism. In 1946 President Harry Truman gave voice to the new geopolitical position of the United States by stating that America would, “assist all free peoples against threats of revolution and attack from without.” The world had learned at Munich in 1938 that appeasing dictators was impossible and that the only alternative was the use of brute force. It thus became the policy of the United States to oppose the new archenemy of freedom, the Soviet Union, at every turn. The theory of containment was born and the Cold War began.

The Soviet Union, though battered by war, seemed to pose a direct threat to the United States. Eastern Europe had been overrun by Soviet armies and in the wake of the chaos of war communist revolution haunted the globe—finding fertile ground in the colonial holdings of now weak European powers. To many policy makers in America it seemed that the Soviet Union was strong and that the entire world, whether by direct attack or revolution, was in danger of falling to communism. The geopolitical situation became worse in 1949 when the Soviet Union successfully tested its own atom bomb and the communist forces of Mao Zedong overran China. The rather simplistic American view that communism was monolithic in nature perhaps exaggerated the significance of these events, but American theorists believed that China and the Soviet Union would act together, joined by revolutionaries from Africa to South America in a vast conspiracy to destroy US power around the world.

As the Cold War became a reality the countries of Western Europe struggled to deal with the legacy of the Second World War. France had suffered quick, ignominious defeat in 1940, leaving her Asian colonies easy pickings for Japanese aggression. By 1941 French forces in Indochina had ceded their control of the area to the Japanese and even facilitated the Japanese rule over the countries that would become Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. When the United States entered the war against Japan the situation in Indochina became complicated. In Europe the US was allied with free French forces, but the French in Indochina were allied with the Japanese enemy. In Vietnam only one group, an umbrella nationalist organization known as the Viet Minh, stood against Japan. Heading the Viet Minh was the charismatic leader Ho Chi Minh, also leader of the Indochinese Communist Party. He and his military commander Vo Nguyen Giap, stood for communism and independence from French colonialism. The United States chose to overlook its obvious differences with the Viet Minh, and aided them in their efforts to harry Japanese forces in the region.

The demise of Imperial Japan presented the Viet Minh with a wonderful opportunity. Before any other allied nations could step into the breach Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and drafted a declaration of independence based on the American model, hoping for continued American support. France, though, had different ideas. Still smarting from their defeat, the French needed to reassert their status as a world power and chose to do so in part by taking back their lost colonies in Indochina. As a





Ho Chi Minh, the architect of revolution in Vietnam. (TRH Pictures)

result, war broke out between the French and the Viet Minh in November 1946. Outnumbered and outgunned, the Viet Minh fled into the countryside and relied on a protracted guerrilla war in an effort to outlast the French. Ho Chi Minh warned the French: “If we must fight, we will fight. You will kill ten of our men and we will kill one of yours. Yet in the end, it is you who will tire.”

The French expected to score a quick victory against the Viet Minh, but had not bargained on fighting such a determined enemy, and one willing to absorb tremendous losses in terms of manpower in order to protract the war while waiting for the French to tire. As the war dragged slowly on it presented the United States with a problem. America stood against continued European colonialism and had been the ally of Ho Chi Minh. In the Cold War, though, Asia was but a sideshow. US military theorists consistently expected the showdown in the Cold War to take place in West Germany. In this predicted cataclysm the US would have to rely on the strength of its NATO partners, including France. The retention of French support in the Cold War was therefore of paramount importance to the US and consequently America abandoned its support of the Viet Minh. After all Ho Chi Minh was a communist leader in a tiny country that mattered little in world affairs. He could be sacrificed.

The French war in Indochina, initially about the re-implementation of colonialism, quickly became a war that the United States had to view in terms of the ongoing Cold War. In 1949 the French established

Emperor Bao Dai as an intended puppet leader. From this point on the French could define their war in Vietnam in terms that the United States could not ignore. South Vietnam was an “independent” nation struggling for its freedom against communist aggression. Also in 1949 Ho Chi Minh, who had downplayed his communist affiliations in the past, began to obtain meaningful support for his war from the new communist regime in China. Having already been abandoned by the US, Ho now began to refer to his war as a communist revolution. The terminology of the war in Vietnam had changed, making it a war about containment that America could not allow the French to lose.

### The Korean War

On 25 June 1950 the Cold War became hot in Korea and containment was put to the test. In hindsight the wars in Korea and Vietnam were dissimilar and, in the main, unrelated, but the reasoning of the Cold War era would not allow such a conclusion on the part of the United States. Communists in Korea and Vietnam were regarded as part of the greater war, and their attempts at expansion had to be contained. With these beliefs American involvement in the Vietnam War became inevitable. Vietnam could not be allowed to fall, lest containment fail. President Dwight Eisenhower put the new position of the United States into words in his inaugural address in 1952 when he remarked that, “the French in Vietnam are fighting the same war we are in Korea.”

Though the Viet Minh had been bested in most major battles, by 1953 their policy of protracted war had brought considerable success. Having suffered more than 100,000 casualties the French people began to question whether the long war in Vietnam was worth the continued effort and sacrifice. By 1953 the new French military commander in Vietnam, General Henri Navarre, realized that his forces required a great victory of arms against the elusive Viet Minh to rekindle dwindling French national support for the conflict. His plan, dubbed Operation Castor, was designed to lure the Viet Minh into open battle where French forces could destroy them by making use of their firepower edge in artillery and air support. Navarre chose the isolated village of Dien Bien Phu as the place to make his stand. It lay astride the Viet Minh route into Laos, and was so remote that he believed the Viet Minh would not be able to bring substantial numbers of troops or artillery support to bear in the fighting there. In November 1953 the first French troops parachuted into the area and began to fortify the valley, surrendering the surrounding hills to the Viet Minh. The trap had been set, and the overconfident French, supplied only by air, awaited their coming victory.

The Viet Minh, under the leadership of General Giap, though, decided to make the coming battle at Dien Bien Phu their major action of the entire conflict. Giap knew, as did the French, that a superpower conference was scheduled for spring 1954 in Geneva, Switzerland, that would settle the war in Vietnam. Both the Viet Minh and the French desired victory at Dien Bien Phu to strengthen their bargaining position. At Dien Bien Phu a French force of 12,000 men under the command of Colonel Christian de Castries manned a series of defensive fortifications surrounding an all-important airstrip. The Vietnamese spent months bringing their forces through the trackless jungle to prepare for an assault on the French positions. Nearly 200,000 Vietnamese workers did the impossible and manhandled artillery pieces through the difficult terrain, placing them in impenetrable caves on the hills surrounding Dien Bien Phu. Giap also gathered some 50,000 main force troops and 50,000 support troops for the coming attack. French air reconnaissance failed to detect the scale of the Viet Minh buildup, leaving de Castries in a state of shock at the sheer volume of enemy fire that rained down on his troops on 13 March 1954.

The Viet Minh fire quickly knocked out the French airstrip, leaving only parachute drops to supply the defending forces. French counterbattery fire and air strikes were unable to silence the Viet Minh barrage, leaving the defenders of Dien Bien Phu in desperate straits. In April Giap followed up on the continuing

siege of Dien Bien Phu with human wave attacks on several of the strong points. French defensive fire, though, took a fearsome toll on the Viet Minh attackers. Amid the carnage Giap decided to revert to more conventional siege tactics. After further constricting the French lines on 1 May Giap launched his final assault. Viet Minh soldiers overwhelmed French firepower with sheer numbers, leading on 7 May to a French surrender. The cost for the Viet Minh had been high, with some 25,000 casualties but the French had suffered a humiliating defeat the very day before the opening of the Geneva Conference.

Though the Viet Minh had won a clear victory over the French and had the support of the Soviet Union and China, the United States stood staunch in the defense of the containment policy at the Geneva talks. In the end the superpowers did not want to risk global war over Vietnam and on 21 July reached an acceptable compromise in the Geneva Accords. The agreement divided Vietnam at the 17th Parallel and established a Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) along that line. The Viet Minh would rule north of the line, and the French would retain control in the south prior to their imminent withdrawal. The border between the two zones would remain open for 300 days to allow people to relocate as they wished. The Geneva Accords specifically stated that the division of Vietnam was not intended to be political in nature or permanent. The country would be reunified by an internationally monitored election in July 1956. Neither Ho Chi Minh nor the Americans were pleased with the compromise. Ho believed that he had won complete victory, but had been abandoned by his erstwhile international allies. He realized, though, that he would easily win the 1956 election and that his victory had only been delayed by two years. The US was upset to lose the northern half of Vietnam to communism and had no intention of losing the southern half. Thus the US prepared to build and support an independent regime in South Vietnam that could stand firm in support of containment in violation of the Geneva Accords.

The United States chose Ngo Dinh Diem as the ruler of the new South Vietnam. With CIA support Diem went about the task of solidifying his power base and took control of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), the native force of French colonial origin. A US Military Assistance and Advisory Group took over the task of readying the ARVN for the defense of South Vietnam and American taxpayers paid to structure and equip the burgeoning force. Meanwhile Diem created a constitution for South Vietnam. The democratic document was hardly an effective cover for his dictatorial rule. His was a regime of intense corruption and one that cared but little for the economic well being of the massive Vietnamese peasant population. Though American aid flowed liberally into the country little of it reached the people and poverty haunted the countryside. Thus Diem did little to earn the support of his own people.

In a military sense the regime appeared to be healthy. Most of the Viet Minh had moved north while the border was open. In addition the communist regime in the north was momentarily weakened by a mistaken effort to implement Stalinist economic reforms. Thus Diem had something of a grace period and Ho Chi Minh could do nothing more than protest when the elections scheduled for 1956 were cancelled. Across South Vietnam Diem's forces hunted down and destroyed the Viet Minh who had remained and by 1958 the communist forces in the South had all but disappeared. Ho Chi Minh, though, remained steadfast in his desire to reunify Vietnam, and in 1959 the politburo of North Vietnam gave its blessing to an armed uprising in the South. It also directed the foundation of a transportation network through Laos and Cambodia to supply the southern insurgency with men and material—a transportation network eventually dubbed the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Hanoi decided to send south those Viet Minh cadres that had moved north (returnees) as the armed force of the insurgency. Newly trained and equipped these men and women would form the core of the People's Liberation Armed Force, eventually referred to by their enemies as the Viet Cong. Thus Diem and his ARVN had to face an insurgent guerrilla force that operated as part of a disaffected population, not a communist invasion across the DMZ. For his part Ho Chi Minh realized that he was walking an international tightrope. He wanted to exert enough military pressure to topple Diem but



The French colonial presence in Indochina encompassed the modern-day nations of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. For much of the period of French rule Vietnam was divided into Tonkin (northern Vietnam), Annam (central Vietnam) and Cochinchina (southern Vietnam). It was around Saigon—dubbed the “Paris of the Orient”—in southern Vietnam that French colonialism was the most pervasive.

did not want to draw the United States into the conflict. The Americans, though, could not allow their client



US General J. “Lightning Joe” Lawton joins French Colonel Jean de Lattre on a tour of Hanoi—signifying increasing unity with the French. (TRH Pictures)  
state to fall and the road to war began.



French prisoners being led into captivity in the wake of their defeat at Dien Bien Phu. The Viet Minh victory in the battle signified the end of French colonial rule over Vietnam. (TRH Pictures)





Henry Cabot Lodge, leader of the American Delegation, 25 February 1955. (Topham Picturepoint)