

1993

# U.S. policy toward Vietnam, 1960-1990

An Ngoc Vu  
*San Jose State University*

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**Vu, An Ngoc, M.A.**

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**U.S. POLICY TOWARD VIETNAM, 1960 - 1990**

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**Presented to**

**The Faculty of the Department of Social Science  
SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY**

**In partial fulfillment**

**of the Requirement for the Degree**

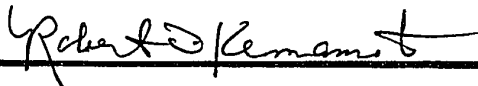
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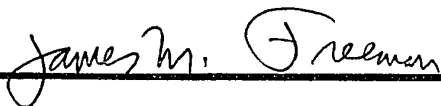
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**May 1993**

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# **ABSTRACT**

**U.S. POLICY TOWARD VIETNAM, 1960 - 1990**

**by An Ngoc Vu**

This thesis addresses the American foreign policy toward Vietnam during the 70's and 80's. It examines the reasons that caused the fall of South Vietnam and moreover, the impact on politics in the United States. This thesis also emphasizes the issues that influenced American policy and their consequences in political and economic aspects as well.

The body of this thesis is divided essentially into four parts. Chapter I and Chapter II deal with the historical background of the U.S. policy and the Fall of South Vietnam in 70's. Chapter III outlines the main factors of the U.S. policy toward Vietnam in 80's and their related problems. Chapter IV is a concluding section sums up the lessons from the Vietnam War.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I gratefully acknowledge the encouragement of Dr. Roger Heller and Dr. Robert Kumamoto during these past years. Without such encouraging and inspirational counsels, I would have abandoned final efforts in completing my work in San Jose State University. A special word of appreciation is also extended to Mr. Xuan Minh Tran, my colleague, for helping in gathering research materials.

I also wish to express special thanks to my family and my two close friends. Tuan K. Truong and Huyen Tran, who offered me enormous motivation for completing this study.

An Ngoc Vu

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**CHAPTER I**  
**U.S. POLICY AND THE FALL OF**  
**SOUTH VIETNAM INTO COMMUNISM IN 1975**

**Introduction**

"Vietnam"--even today, Americans often react to the word with mixed feelings of failure, frustration, and guilt. For 25 years, from the time when the first 35 members of U.S. Assistance Advisory Group arrived in Vietnam in August 1950 to the time when the last Marines were lifted by helicopter from the U.S. Embassy in Saigon in April 1975, the United States attempted to create a viable non-communist state in the Southeast Asian nation. For 25 years, that effort achieved less than the desired results, finally ending ignominiously with the rout of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and the collapse of the South Vietnam. During the years immediately after the fall of South Vietnam, Americans in general preferred to ignore and to forget the American experience there. But recently, new interest has developed about what lessons the U.S. should learn from its Vietnamese experience. To uncover these lessons, it is first necessary to understand how American policy-makers perceived the situation in Vietnam as they made the critical decisions which led to involvement.

## Geography and Historical Background of Vietnam

Vietnam is located in the southeastern extremity of the Indochinese peninsula and occupies about 331,688 square kilometers, of which about 25 percent was under cultivation in 1987. The S-shaped country has a north-to-south distance of 1,650 kilometers and is about 50 kilometers wide at the narrowest point. With the coastline of 3,260 kilometers, excluding islands, Vietnam claims 12 nautical miles as the limit of its territorial waters, and additional 12 nautical as a contiguous customs and security zone, and 200 nautical miles as an exclusive economic zone.

The boundary with Laos, settled on an ethnic basis, between the rulers of Vietnam and Laos in the mid-seventeenth century, was formally defined by a delimitation treaty signed in 1977 and ratified in 1986. The frontier with Cambodia, defined at the time of French annexation of the western part of the Mekong River Delta in 1867, remained essentially unchanged according to Hanoi, until some unresolved border issues were finally settled in the 1982-1985 period. The land and sea boundary with China, delineated under the French-China treaties of 1887 and 1895, is "the frontier line" accepted by Hanoi that China agreed in 1957-58 to respect. However, in February 1979, following China's limited invasion of Vietnam, Hanoi complained that from 1957 onward China had provoked numerous border incidents as part of its

anti-Vietnam policy and expansionist designs in Southeast Asia. Among the territorial infringements cited was the Chinese occupation in January 1974 of the Paracel Island, claimed by both countries in a dispute left unresolved in the 1980's.

Vietnam is a country of tropical lowlands, hills, and densely forested highland, with level land covering no more than 20 percent of the area. The country is divided into the highlands and the Red River Delta in the north, the Gai Truong Son (Central mountains, or the Chaine Annamitique sometimes referred to simply as the Chaine), the coastal lowlands, and the Mekong River Delta in the South.

The Red River Delta, a flat, triangular region of 3,000 square kilometers, is smaller but more intensely developed and more densely populated than the Mekong River Delta. Once an inlet of the Gulf of Tonkin, it has been filled in by the enormous alluvial deposits of the rivers, over a period of millennia, and it advances one hundred meters into the Gulf annually. The ancestral home of the ethnic Vietnamese, the delta accounted for almost 70 percent of the agriculture and 80 percent of the industry of North Vietnam before 1975.

The highlands and mountain plateaus in the north and northwest are inhabited mainly by tribal minority groups. The Gai Truong Son originates in the Xizang (Tibet) and Yunnan regions of southwest China and forms

Vietnam's border with Laos and Cambodia. It terminates in Mekong River Delta north of Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City).

Within the southern portion of Vietnam is a plateau known as the Central Highlands (Tay Nguyen), approximately 51,800 square kilometers of rugged mountain peaks, extensive forests, and rich soil. Before 1975 North Vietnam had maintained that the Central Highlands and the Gai Truong Son were strategic areas of paramount importance, essential to the domination not only of South Vietnam but also the southern part of Indochina.

The Mekong River, which is 4,220 kilometers long, is one of the 12 great rivers of the world. From its source in the Xizang plateau, it flows through the Xizang and Yunnan regions of China, forms the boundary between Laos and Burma as well as between Laos and Thailand, divides into two branches--the Song Hau Giang and Song Tien Giang--below Phnom Penh, and continues through Cambodia and the Mekong basin before draining into the South China Sea through nine mouths or "Cuu Long" (nine dragons). The river is heavily silted and is navigable by seagoing craft of shallow draft as far as Kompong Cham in Cambodia.

The Mekong delta, covering about 40,000 square kilometers, is a low-level plain not more than three meters above sea level at any point and crisscrossed by a maze of canals and rivers. So much sediment is carried by the Mekong's

various branches and tributaries that the delta advances sixty to eighty meters into the sea every year. About 10,000 square kilometers of the delta are under rice cultivation, making the area one of the major rice-growing regions of the world. The southern tip, known as the Ca Mau Peninsula, is covered by dense jungle and mangrove swamps.

Vietnam has a tropical monsoon climate, with humidity averaging 84 percent throughout the year. However, because of differences in latitude and the marked variety of topographical relief, the climate tends to vary considerably from place to place.

According to Hanoi, the population of Vietnam was almost 60 million at the end of 1985 (Western sources estimated about a half million more than that in mid-1985). Vietnamese officials estimated that the population would be at least 66 million by 1990 and 80 million by the year of 2000, unless the growth rate of 2 percent per year used for these estimates was lowered to 1.7 percent by 1990.

Census results of October 1979 showed that 52 percent of total population lived in the north and 48 percent in the south. About 19 percent of population was classified as urban and 81 percent as rural. Females outnumbered males by 3 percent, and the average life expectancy at birth was 66 for females and 63 for males. With 52 percent of the total under 20 years of age, the

population was young. Ethnically, 87 percent were Vietnamese-speaking lowlanders know as Viet or Kinh, and the remainder were Hoa or members of highland minority groups. In December 1986, Hanoi estimated that more than 1 million Vietnamese lived overseas, 50 percent of them in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

The Vietnamese trace the origins of their culture and nation to the fertile plains of the Red River Delta in northern Vietnam. After centuries of developing a civilization and economy based on the cultivation of irrigated rice, the Vietnamese began expanding southward in search of new ricelands. Moving down the narrow coast plain of the Indochina Peninsula through conquest and pioneering settlement, they eventually reached and occupied the broad Mekong River Delta. Vietnamese history is the story of the struggle to develop a sense of nationhood throughout this narrow 1,500 kilometers stretch of land and to maintain it against internal and external pressures.

The first major threat to Vietnam's existence as a separate people and nation was the conquest the Red River Delta by the Chinese, under the mighty Han dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), in the second century B.C.. At that time, and in later centuries, the expanding Chinese empire assimilated a number of small bordering nations politically and culturally. Although Vietnam spent

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<sup>1</sup> Library of Congress, Vietnam: a Country Study (Washington, D.C.: 1989), 84-90.



1,000 years under Chinese rule, it succeeded in throwing off the Yoke of its powerful neighbor in the tenth century.

The Vietnamese did not, however, emerge unchanged by their millennium under Chinese rule. Although they were unsuccessful in assimilating the Vietnamese totally, the Chinese did exert a permanent influence of Vietnamese administration, law, education, literature, language, and culture. Their greatest impact was on the Vietnamese elite, with whom the Chinese administrators had the most contact. The effects of this Sinicization (Han-hwa) were much less intensive among the common people who retained a large part of their pre-Han culture and language.

China's cultural influence increased in the centuries following the expulsion of its officials, as Vietnamese monarchs and aristocrats strove to emulate the cultural ideal established by the Middle Kingdom. Even for the Vietnamese elite, however, admiration for Chinese culture did not include any desire for Chinese political control. In the almost uninterrupted 900 years of independence that followed China's domination, the Vietnamese thwarted a number of Chinese attempts at military reconquest, accepting a tributary relationship instead. During this period, learning and literature flourished as the Vietnamese expressed themselves both in classical Chinese written in

Chinese characters and in Vietnamese written in "chu nom," a script derived from Chinese ideographs.

During the Chinese millennium, other cultural influences also reached the shores of the Red River Delta. A thriving maritime trade among China, India, and Indonesia used the delta as a convenient stopover. Among the array of goods and ideas thus brought to Vietnam was Buddhism from India. While the Vietnamese aristocracy clung to Chinese Confucianism during most periods, the common people embraced Buddhism, adapting it to fit their own indigenous religious and world views.

As the Red River Delta prospered, its population began expanding southward along the narrow coastal plains. The period from the twelfth century to the eighteenth century was marked by warfare with both the Cham and Khmer, the peoples of the Indianized kingdoms of Champa and Cambodia, who controlled lands in the Vietnamese line of march to the south. The Cham were finally defeated in 1471, and the Khmer were forced out of the Mekong Delta by 1749. Vietnamese settlers flooded into the largely untilled lands, turning them to rice cultivation. The southward expansion severely taxed the ability of the Vietnamese monarchy, ruling from the Red River Delta, to maintain control over a people spread over such a distance.

Between 1858 and 1873, the French conquered Vietnam, dividing it into three parts--Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin--roughly corresponding to the areas referred to by Vietnamese as Nam Bo (Southern Vietnam), Trung Bo (Central Vietnam), and Bac Bo (Northern Vietnam). To the Vietnamese, however, these were geographical terms, and the use of them to imply a political division of their homeland was as odious as the loss of their independence.

French colonial rule was, for the most part, politically repressive and economically exploitative. Vietnamese resistance in the early years was led by members of the scholar-official class, many of whom refused to cooperate with the French and left their positions in the bureaucracy. The early nationalists involved themselves in study groups, demonstrations, production and dissemination of anticolonialist literature, and acts of terrorism. Differences in approaches among the groups were exemplified by Phan Boi Chau, who favored using the Vietnamese monarchy as a rallying point for driving out the French, and Phan Chu Trinh, who favored abolishing the monarchy and using western democratic ideas as a force for gradual reform and independence. The success of these early nationalists was limited both by their inability to agree on a strategy and their failure to involve the Vietnamese peasantry, who made up the vast majority of the population. After World

War I, another Vietnamese independence leader arose who understood the need to involve the masses in order to stage a successful anticolonial revolt. Ho Chi Minh, schooled in Confucianism, Vietnamese nationalism and Marxism-Leninism, patiently set about organizing the Vietnamese peasantry according to communist theories, particularly those of Chinese leader Mao Zedong.

The defeat of the Japanese, who had occupied Vietnam during World War I, left a power vacuum, which the communists rushed to fill. Their initial success in staging uprisings and in seizing control of most of the country by September 1945 was partially undone, however, by the return of the French a few months later. Only after nine years of armed struggle was France finally persuaded to relinquish its colonies in Indochina. The 1954 Geneva Conference left Vietnam a divided nation, however, with Ho Chi Minh's communist government ruling the northern half from Hanoi and Ngo Dinh Diem's regime, supported by United States, ruling the south from Saigon (later Ho Chi Minh City). Another two decades of bitter conflict ensued before Vietnam was again reunified as one independent nation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Library of Congress, Vietnam: a Country Study (Washington, D.C.: 1989), 3-5.

### **Historical Background of U.S. Policy Toward Vietnam & Indochina**

Two million seven hundred thousand American soldiers served in Vietnam; 57,939 of them lost their lives. Many more came back as "walking wounded" emotionally or physically scared. None who served returned unaffected. Eventually, the war spilled over into America, touching off a wave of riots and social upheaval, and provoking a crisis of national self-doubt and reevaluation that rocked the foundation of American society. Few Americans who lived through the war will forget it.

But how did we get there? Why did the United States commit itself to a conflict which would take the lives of nearly 2.5 million Vietnamese, Cambodien, Laotians, French and Americans, and cost the United States more than \$150 billion in military aid?

America's involvement in Vietnam began during the Second World War. American OSS teams (Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA) joined with Vietnamese guerrillas in fighting the Japanese invaders. Leading these guerrillas was a Vietnamese revolutionary named Nguyen Ai Quoc, more widely known as Ho Chi Minh.

As the war drew to a close, the Allies turned their attention toward shaping the new world. In Vietnam, this meant, as far as American President

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was concerned, preventing the French from reestablishing their colony.

At the time, as an alternative, Roosevelt offered to turn the country over to the Chinese. However, the Chinese Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek vehemently declined the offer. Two thousand years of failed Chinese attempts to conquer and control the Vietnamese had taught him a lesson the French and United States would not learn for another 30 years.

In April of 1945, Roosevelt died, leaving his plans for Indochina unfulfilled. Meanwhile, in Europe, other events were taking place which would radically alter U.S. Indochina policy. With the Cold War already brewing, the United States sought a European alliance that would include France to offset the Soviet Union's growing influence.

Unwilling to risk a split with France, the new President Harry Truman backed down from Roosevelt's hard-line stance on Indochina. Under the new policy, which could be described as a guarded neutrality, the United States chose not to oppose the French occupation. But the U.S. insisted that any American military aid sent to France not be used in Vietnam. By the end of the year all American forces had been withdrawn from the country. Despite losing the support of the United States, Ho Chi Minh and his guerrillas continued to work toward their independence. Earlier that year, on September

2, Ho and several thousand Vietminh troops (along with members of the OSS) had marched into Hanoi and declared the independence of their country.

For three years the United States maintained its neutrality in Vietnam. However, in 1950, responding to the growing Chinese Communist presence in Southeast Asia, the United States shifted from what had become a pro-French neutrality to one of active aid. On February 7, President Truman officially recognized the French--supported Saigon government of Emperor Bao Dai. In June the United States followed its political support with military aid, sending several DC-3 Dakotas to Saigon. One month later, in July, after the outbreak of war in Korea, the first members of the United States Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) arrived in Saigon. It was the beginning of a buildup of American forces in Vietnam that would eventually reach 550,000 troops at the height of the war in 1968.

The first Indochina war ended on May 8, 1954, with the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in northwestern Vietnam. In a classic military battle lasting 56 days, the Vietminh led by General Vo Nguyen Giap smashed the French forces and with them France's hopes of regaining its colony. During the siege, President Dwight D. Eisenhower had nearly been persuaded to order American air strikes in support of French. Unable to secure approval

for the operation from the major American allies, he abandoned the idea even though he felt Indochina was vital to American interests.

The Geneva Agreement of 1954 which ended the war divided Indochina into four parts. Laos and Cambodia were again to become separate countries. Vietnam was divided along the 17th parallel with Ho Chi Minh's government ruling in the north and the southern half under control of the Saigon government. A key provision of the agreement called for national elections to be held in 1956 to settle the question of reunification.

In the year following the Geneva Agreement, France and United States both sought a hand in the emerging government in the South as American and French agents openly vied for political control. The Americans won out when Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic and anticommunist leader, ousted the French supported Bao Dai and became president of the newly formed republic. By 1956, France had withdrawn all of its troops from the south Vietnam, and the United States remained as a only foreign power supporting the new Diem regime. Neither the United States, which had already poured more than \$1 billion in aid into Vietnam, nor Diem wished to see the Communists gain control of South Vietnam. Both, therefore, refused to honor the terms of the Geneva Agreement, arguing that neither had signed it. Their refusal marked the beginning of the second Indochina War.



For the next three years the war in the south constituted only a small concern for Diem and the United States. Accordingly, the United States maintained a low profile. By 1954, there were still only 300 American military advisers stationed in Vietnam. Their main task was to streamline Diem's military forces and to prepare them for the invasion from the north which they assumed would come. That summer, the Communists set out to change that.

Over the next two years the war heated up steadily. In 1961, President Diem sent an urgent request to newly elected President John Kennedy for more aid. To help answer that request and to show the United States' continued support for the South Vietnamese Government, Kennedy dispatched Vice President Lyndon Johnson and then special military adviser Maxwell Taylor to Vietnam to review the situation there. Both advised the president to provide assistance both in men and equipment. In December Kennedy made his decision. Not convinced that remaining in Vietnam was the right choice, but unwilling to pay the price in terms of domestic opposition and loss of face abroad, Kennedy opted to increase the amount of United States aid to Vietnam just enough to maintain the status quo.

On December 11, 1961, the United States aircraft ferry Core docked at Saigon. It carried 33 H-21C helicopters along with their pilots and ground

crews. There were the first U.S. helicopters sent to Vietnam. The two helicopters companies raised the total of U.S. personnel in VN to 1,500. Many more were expected.<sup>3</sup>

### U.S. Policy During Vietnam War Era

#### From Ngo Dinh Diem to Application of the Domino Doctrine

The American decision to sponsor and finance Ngo Dinh Diem as the premier of Emperor Bao Dai's Associated State of Vietnam was from the onset a dubious political gamble. Diem did not have a personal following, and his previous administrative experience was limited to a mere three months of service to the new Bao Dai Emperor in 1933. On the positive side, he came from an influential mandarin family with Catholic affiliations in northern Annam. He was adjudged a man of integrity, a moderately anti-French nationalist, and an ardent anti-Communist.

Diem's contact with Americans, at first unofficial, dated from August 1950. By the spring of 1953, when he was a resident at the Maryknoll Father's Catholic mission in New Jersey, Washington was seriously interested in ascertaining his political views. It was with active American support that Diem, on June 18, 1954, finally accepted the emperor's renewed invitation to become premier. He took over as titular head of government on

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<sup>3</sup> George Esper, "The Eyewitness History of Vietnam War 1961-1975," The Associated Press, 1983, 5-17.

July 7, but was permitted no role in the ensuing Geneva Conference.<sup>4</sup> How far the United States would back him in his difficult assignment was unclear at the time.<sup>5</sup>

Policy statements prepared by the Joint Chiefs of staff as far back 1957 nevertheless reflected Washington's serious concern lest the Chinese military action exhibited in Korea be subsequently transferred to Southeast Asia. Such a move, the Joint Chiefs affirmed, could bring all of Southern Asia under Communist control and possibly even influence Japan to come to terms with China. A memorandum of 1952 suggested that the United States therefore be prepared to cooperate with the French and British in assisting the people of Southern Asia in economic development and in countering threatened Chinese aggression. The principle condition was that colonial authorities should agree to grant political freedom to their peoples and, at the same time, keep their own forces in place during the emergency. As a means of halting Chinese aggression, the Joint Chiefs as of May 1954 were prepared to contemplate the use of atomic weapons together with air and naval

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Scigliano, South Vietnam Under Independence (East Landing, 1963), 12-13 and 194-196.

<sup>5</sup> John Cady, The History of Post-war Southeast Asia (Ohio: The Ohio University Press, 1974), 316.

operations along the China coast, but opposed embarking on a ground war in Indochina.<sup>6</sup>

With respect to Indochina, President Eisenhower said "France would be expected to internationalize the conflict by permitting the United States to participate in the planning, while simultaneously granting to the associated Indochina States some real measure of freedom." He flatly refused to "bail out colonial France."<sup>7</sup>

The New Kennedy administration, which came to power in January 1961, faced a difficult decision with regard to the Diem government. Qualified expressions of official State Department satisfaction over Diem's survival of the November Coup also suggested that his authority could be substantially enhanced by implementing already approved reform measures and by taking strong disciplinary action against official corruption. As usual, Diem was unresponsive to Washington's suggestions. Official advisers to the American administration, including Frederick Nolting, the new ambassador at Saigon, stressed the lack of any satisfactory alternative to Diem and also questioned America's moral right to discard a government that was now completely dependent on continued aid.

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<sup>6</sup> Philippe Devillers, The Struggle for Unification of Vietnam, 29-34.

<sup>7</sup> P.J. Honey, Communism in North Vietnam, Its Role in the Sino-Soviet Dispute (Cambridge, 1963), 43-74.

The distressing dilemma of whether or not to support an unpopular dictatorship as part of the world struggle against communism was, of course, far from novel. Virtually the entire American newspaper corps in South Vietnam was convinced that, granted the mood of the Diem regime and its growing unpopularity among all elements of the population, Washington should find, before it was too late, an alternative government able to resolve the increasing disaffection in the cities and counter the influence of the communist agents in the countryside.

Operational agencies argued in rejoinder that additional advisory personnel could help Diem improve governmental operations and that intensification of covert activities might alter the discouraging situation. By May 1, 1961, Washington decided to withdraw from Laos if possible but to defend Thailand and South Vietnam from the assumed menace of communist domination. A New Treaty of Amity and Economic Relations had been negotiated with Saigon in April.

The expanded American advisory program was more psychological than military, partly because Diem flatly rejected any proposal to introduce alien troops. The "Program of Action for South Vietnam" prepared in Washington and dated May 8, assigned to ambassador Nolting at Saigon the difficult tasks of strengthening popular loyalty to the "free government of South Vietnam"

and of improving Diem's reputation in allied and neutral countries. The detailed operational plans included American penetration of the governmental, military, and political agencies of South Vietnam in order to obtain data covering possible anti-Diem coups and also to identify individuals with "potentiality of providing leadership in event of the disappearance of Diem."<sup>8</sup>

The concurrent Washington decision to increase economic aid to the Diem government raised no objections from Saigon, but it contributed nonetheless to long term problems. The contradictory considerations which Washington was attempting to reconcile were illustrated by the equivocal report that Vice President Lyndon Johnson submitted on May 23, at the conclusion of his special mission to Southeast Asia. The report accepted the domino theory of cumulative threat with no qualifications and also reflected the contradictory views he encountered at Saigon:

The battle against Communism must be joined in Southeast Asia with strength and determination to achieve success there.... On United States inevitably must surrender the Pacific and take up our defence on our own shores.... There is no alternative to United

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<sup>8</sup> Pentagon Papers, 108-114.

States leadership in Southeast Asia...[otherwise] the vast Pacific becomes a Red Sea.<sup>9</sup>

The Vice President also conceded that Diem was remote from his people and surrounded by persons less admirable than he; even so, Johnson argued, the United States should decide whether to support him or to let Vietnam fall.

A shift toward more active military involvement was recommended in the report submitted by General Maxwell Taylor following his own visit to South Vietnam in October 1961. Taylor was convinced that the rescue of South Vietnam would also require some U.S. troop commitment, including helicopters and air support up to the level of from eight to ten thousand men, whether Diem realized the need or not. Such a move, he argued, would improve morale in the South, exert a sobering effect on the enemy, and discourage escalation of aggression. Diem had to be persuaded to ask for assistance, and the immediate flood relief problem would provide a convenient cover. He concluded: "North Vietnam is extremely vulnerable to conventional bombing.... There is no case of fearing a mass onslaught of communist manpower into South Vietnam and its neighboring states."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Pentagon Papers, 141.

<sup>10</sup> Pentagon Papers, 147.

A formal Rusk-McNamara Memorandum of November 11 maintained that:

The loss of South Vietnam to communist would...make pointless any further discussion about the importance of Southeast Asia to the free world. We would face the near certainty that the remainder of Southeast Asia and Indonesia would move to a complete accommodation with communism.... The loss...would not only destroy SEATO, but would undermine the credibility of American commitment everywhere.<sup>11</sup>

Ambassador Nolting was assigned the additional task of insisting that in return for American aid, Diem should: expand the political base of his government; cooperate more effectively with his subordinate officials; and permit United States participation in decisions covering economic and military matters. Kennedy's final decision to bolster South Vietnam's military strength short of sending combat troops was announced on November 16, 1961.<sup>12</sup> This publicized action undercut completely the Ambassador's demand for reforms, which only elicited Diem's angry refusal to comply.

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<sup>11</sup> Pentagon Papers, 150-153

<sup>12</sup> Marcus Raskin and Bernard Fall, The Vietnam Reader (N.Y.: 1965), 384-386.



Nolting's proposals encountered bitter incriminations from the Palace at Saigon, coupled with planted newspaper stories suggesting the possible need for South Vietnam to reconsider its relations with America. Comparable tactics were being employed by General Sarit in Bangkok and by Prince Sihanouk in Phnom Penh. The net result was a defensive and apologetic effort on Washington's part to dispel this distrust of American motives and to reaffirm commitments to increased military and budgetary aid.

For better or for worse, the United States was committed by late 1961 to defeat the threat of Communist control of South Vietnam by strengthening rather than altering the Diem government, under the disquieting assumption that any attempted governmental change would probably lead to chaos.

But the final Washington authorization dated October 30, 1963, stated: "one a coup under responsible leadership has begun, it is in the interest of the U.S. government that it should succeed." Ngo Dinh Diem was overthrown on November 1, 1963 by conspiring Generals. Ambassador Lodge's tentative offer of safe evacuation to Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother had been refused on the previous day.<sup>13</sup>

The Ngo Dinh brothers escaped via an underground passage to an overnight refuge in Cholon. In a final act of pride and bravado, they attended

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<sup>13</sup> Pentagon Papers, 232.

mass the following morning at a Jesuit Church in Cholon, making no attempt at further concealment. A weapons carrier picked them up, and the officer in charge shot both brothers while en route to the Joint General Staff headquarters. President Kennedy's tragic assassination three weeks later in Dallas left Washington's monumental miscalculation of Vietnam to be handled by his successor in office, President Lyndon Johnson.

In December, 1963, Defence Secretary McNamara declared "we have every reason to believe that U.S. military plans will be successful in 1964."<sup>14</sup> By late 1964, however, the South Vietnamese Government and army were falling apart, while Americans were being killed by terrorists in the South Vietnamese Capital of Saigon. Johnson had not yet decided how to respond. He passionately wanted his Great Society at home more than a war 10,000 miles away. But he wondered whether Americans would support him in Washington if he appeared weak in Vietnam. His closest advisers, led by McNamara and NSC director Mc George Bundy, believed that an escalated response by the world's greatest power would compel Ho's forces to retreat. They also argued that LBJ had to move rapidly or the chaotic Saigon government would collapse.

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<sup>14</sup> John Cady, The History of Post-war Southeast Asia (Ohio: Ohio University Press), 337-353.

These arguments moved Johnson to action in February 1965, when communist guerrillas killed 7 Americans and wounded 109 at the U.S. base in Pleiku. Only American soldiers, he believed, could now pump life into Vietnam. By late 1965, Americans had found two military leaders who promised to provide the needed political stability: Premier Nguyen Cao Ky and President Nguyen Van Thieu. They were the most acceptable leaders whom U.S. officials could find.

Johnson made this Far Eastern commitment for many reasons. First, he believed that every president since Roosevelt had made a commitment to protect Vietnam. American "credibility" was, therefore, at stake world wide. If communists won in Asia, he said in 1966, they can "succeed anywhere in the world."<sup>15</sup>

Second, he believed that China posed the great threat. U.S. fear especially grew as Chinese scientists explored a small atomic bomb in 1964 and, within three years, set off a hydrogen bomb one hundred times larger than the first bomb.

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<sup>15</sup> U.S. Government Public Papers of the Presidents, The New York Times, 1966, 762. And: Richard Newstadt and Ernest May, Thinking in Time: The Use of History for Decision Makers (N.Y.: 1986), 86.

Third, his view of history appeared when Johnson raised the ghost of the 1930's: "We learned from Hitler at Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression."<sup>16</sup>

Fourth, Johnson assumed that the incredible U.S. power could do the job and do it alone, if necessary. Merely by picking up the phone, he could send hundreds of thousands of soldiers across the ocean. They could be accompanied by the genius of American technology.

Finally, Johnson believed that if he escalated slowly and did not demand too much of Americans and their economy, they would support his policy. The President, therefore, refused to ask for a congressional declaration of war that could justify a full scale effort. With good reasons, he believed that Americans would support a strong president who fought communism. Johnson thus tried to find a middle way that gained American support but avoided war with China and the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Tonkin Gulf Incident and the Buildup**

On a sunny Sunday afternoon, August 2, 1964, the U.S.S. Maddox moved through the Tonkin Gulf, electronically plotting North Vietnamese radar positions as part of a secret spy mission, code-named Desoto. The destroyer

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Walter La Feber, The American Age (N.Y. London: WW Norton & Company, 1989), 577-580.

was 15 miles off the coast of North VN in international waters. Five torpedo boats, presumably North Vietnamese, could be seen in the distance.

A special communications group picked up some intelligence that the Maddox might come under attack. The PT boats showed up as a pinpoint of light in a round, glowing green field in the destroyer's radar room. The Maddox and the torpedo boats had been running paralleled to the coast, separated by about 20 miles. The destroyer made a 90 degree turn to see what the torpedo boats would do. They turned to follow.

Aboard the Maddox, Captain John J. Herrick, the commander in charge of Destroyer Division 192, now gave the go-ahead to fire warning shots if the PT boats went within 5.6 miles. Apparently disregarding the warning, the torpedo boats continued to close at high speed. The Maddox doubled back to try destroy the PT boats once and for all. At that moment, three jet fighter-bombers from the carrier Ticonderoga arrived to help. By now three torpedo boats either had been hit or were throwing up a smoke screen to throw the Maddox off.

When news of the Maddox incident reached Washington, President Johnson called for reinforcements. The Carrier Constellation speed to the scene. So did the destroyer C. Turner Joy, who crew had been scheduled for liberty in Hong Kong.

At 11:37 P.M. on August, 1964, President Johnson went on national television to address the people:

Repeated acts of violence against the armed forces of the United States must be met not only with alert defenses, but with positive reply.<sup>18</sup>

As he spoke, fighter-bombers pounded P.T. boat bases and oil depots along the North Vietnamese coast in 64 strikes conducted over a five-hour period beginning at noon Saigon time. North Vietnamese gunners shot down two American planes and damaged two others.

Despite the nebulousness of the report of the Tonkin engagements, President Johnson had successfully used the incident as justification to launch air strikes against North Vietnam and to gain from Congress the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, Congressional authority "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression."

The year of 1964, the Year of the Dragon in the lunar New Year of the calendar, ended with stepped-up attacks by the Vietcong. In November, Vietcong gunners hit Bien Hoa Air Base, north of Saigon with mortars, killing five Americans and wounding 76. On Christmas eve, terrorists

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<sup>18</sup> George Esper, "The Eyewitness History of the Vietnam War 1961-1975," The Associated Press, 1983, 45.

bombed a Saigon hotel where American officers were staying, killing two and wounding 98.

Early in the morning of February 7, 1965, Vietcong guerrillas attacked an American Advisers' barracks in Pleiku and a helicopter base at Camp Holloway four miles away. Nine U.S. soldiers died, and 128 others were wounded. Within 14 hours, 49 U.S. Navy jets retaliated against North Vietnamese barracks and staging areas at Dong Hoi, 40 miles north of the demilitarized zone. The next day, 24 more planes launched a second attack against a military communications center in North Vietnam, again just north of the border. These raids, known as FLAMING DART, marked the beginning of an entirely new era of the war in Vietnam. Although the raids were originally designed as a limited reprisal operation, it soon became clear that they in fact were the first stage in a new wave of escalations.

What led to this new American firmness and the decision to upgrade American involvement in the conflict? The decision to launch Flaming Dart was reached in a 45-minute National Security Council meeting the night of February 6. In addition to the usual NSC members, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield and Speaker of the House John McCormack were present. Although no detailed description of the events of that meeting has been released, it is probable that the decision to launch the strikes was made

because of a growing feeling that something had to be done to indicate to the North Vietnamese that the United States did not, in fact, intend to abandon its ally. Three months after the raids, Ambassador Taylor reported to Washington that throughout February the North Vietnam and Vietcong's outlook was "probably still favorable" for victory in the South, implying that Washington had been at least partly motivated to agree to the strikes because of North Vietnam's expected success.

Similarly, Mc George Bundy, after a special mission to Saigon, had returned to Washington and issued a memorandum reflecting the mission's views of the Vietnamese situation. Originally filed as "top secret" and not released until the unauthorized publication of so-called Pentagon Papers, the Bundy memorandum pulled no punches about the seriousness of the situation in South Vietnam:

The stakes in Vietnam are extremely high. The American investment is very large, and American responsibility is a fact of life.... The international prestige of the United States, and a substantial part of our influence are directly at risk in Vietnam...any negotiated United States withdrawal today would mean surrender on the installment plan.



The policy of graduated and continuing reprisal...is the most promising course available.... Once such a policy is put in force, we shall be able to speak in Vietnam on many topics and in many ways, with growing force and effectiveness.<sup>19</sup>

The Tonkin incident and Flaming Dart had changed the face of the war and set the stage for the massive American buildup that would follow.<sup>20</sup>

There were no presidential speeches proclaiming crusades "to make the world safe for democracy" or days which "shall live in infamy." There were no Congressional declarations or United Nations resolutions. There were no banner headlines or home front mobilizations. But in April of 1965, America was at war.

Already on March 8, two marine battalions totaling 3,500 men had landed at Da Nang. Now, in mid-April, they were joined by two more battalions to augment the marine forces at Da Nang, as well as to establish a new base at Phu Bai, forty five miles north of Da Nang near Hue. By April 20 the 9th marine contingent commanded by Brigadier General Frederick J. Karch was

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<sup>19</sup> Daniel Papp, Vietnam From Three Capitals (N. Carolina: Mc Farland & Company Inc., 1981), 50.

<sup>20</sup> George Esper, "The Eyewitness History of the Vietnam War 1961-1975," The Associated Press, 1983, 42-46.

named, totaled 8,607 men, including one full battalion and ten UH-34 helicopters at Phu Bai.

In early May, the first U.S. Army ground combat unit arrived in South Vietnam. The 173rd Airborne Brigade landed in Vung Tau, at the mouth of the Saigon River. By the end of May approximately 20,000 American combat troops had increased the ranks of American forces in Vietnam to 46,000. The troops were digging in to fight a war. But the combat troops of the American armed forces represented only the head of a body with a very long tail--the logistical support.

Between March 1965 and early 1968, the number of U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam rose from 29,100 to over half a million. The logistical effort required for this massive troop build-up in an underdeveloped country halfway around the world was enormous. By 1968 monthly shipments of military equipment, ammunition, and supplies to south Vietnam had surpassed World War II figures. Supplying American troops in South Vietnam was significant logistical achievement and, as General William Westmoreland pointed out "Surely...one of the more remarkable accomplishments of American forces in Vietnam."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Edward Doyle and Samel Lipsman, The Vietnam Experience. America Takes Over 1965-1967 (Boston, MA: Boston Publishing Company, 1982), 18.

In the three years following the decision to escalate, Defense Department expenditures in Southeast Asia, not counting economic aid, rose from \$103 million to \$28.8 billion per year, of which over \$21.5 billion was directly attributed to the war. At its peak, MACV's military logistics personnel alone made up 45 percent of all U.S. forces in Vietnam.

The U.S. Army fought in Vietnam equipped with all the conveniences that the world's richest nation could provide. For the Vietnamese peasant who subsisted on a dwindling lot, the stream of American goods pouring into the country brought little benefit and frequently generated resentment.

### **The Nixon Doctrine**

As early as 1966, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger publicly admitted that the Vietnam conflict could not be won militarily. In his first day of office in 1969, top-secret studies informed Nixon that the United States could not win the war. The Pentagon believed that, under the best of conditions, it would take eight to thirteen years just to control all of South Vietnam. Those "best conditions" had never been found in the region. U.S. troops strength stood at 543,000. The war's cost to Americans had leaped to \$30 billion annually.<sup>22</sup> Some 14,600 U.S. troops had died in 1968 alone. Nixon decided to withdraw but slowly and on his terms. By the time he

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<sup>22</sup> Henry Kissinger, White House Years (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1989), 50-51

finished in 1973, another 26,000 Americans and at least 1 million more Southeast Asians had perished in the conflict.

### **Vietnamization and the Nixon Doctrine**

Through Vietnamization, the president planned to withdraw his forces slowly, replacing them with well-supplied Vietnamese. The idea had first appeared in the 1950's, when U.S. officials wanted "good Asians" to fight "bad Asians." It had not worked, but Nixon was now determined to support Vietnamization with other strategies. He wanted to sit down with the communists and negotiate a cease-fire and mutual U.S.-North Vietnamese withdrawal from South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Then he planned to launch massive bombing raids on the North until it agreed to withdraw. It seemed to be an offer the Communists could not refuse.

The president placed this approach into a much broader policy. The Nixon Doctrine, presented at Guam in mid-1969, indicated that the United States would help "the defense and development of allies and friends" but "cannot--and will not--conceive all the plans, design all the programs, execute all the decisions and undertake the defense of the free nations of the world."<sup>23</sup> By announcing that he would begin to pull U.S. troops out of Vietnam, Nixon showed that he meant business (with his plan). By late 1972, he had pulled

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<sup>23</sup> Henry Kissinger, White House Years (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1989), 227-228.

out all but 3,000 U.S. troops from Vietnam as well as one-third of the 60,000 American soldiers in South Korea, 12,000 from Japan, and 16,000 from Thailand. But, in Kissinger's words, "We could not simply walk away from an enterprise involving two administrations, five allied countries, and thirty-one thousand dead as if we were switching a television channel."<sup>24</sup>

Nixon combined the troop withdrawal with an incredible bombing campaign that, on average, dropped a ton of bombs each minute on Vietnam between 1969 and early 1973. Democratic senator J. William Fulbright from Arkansas agreed with the Washington Post that Nixon had become "the greatest bomber of all time."<sup>25</sup> The North Vietnam government, however, continued to refuse to accept a divided Vietnam.

Kissinger, now Secretary of State, flew secretly to Paris to talk with the North's negotiator Le Duc Tho. Nixon decided that the North's representative was stalling in the talks until the Communists could rebuild their forces. The President discussed the bombing of harbors and even considered using nuclear weapons. He pulled back at the last minute from expanding the bombing in October 1969, when massive anti-war rally marched on Washington. Nixon announced that he had ignored the marchers and had

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

coolly watched a televised Ohio State football game. In truth, the frightened president had ordered 300 troops armed with light machine guns to protect him in the White House.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Last Day of the Vietnam War**

"America's longest war," as historian George Herring calls the conflict in Vietnam, meanwhile ended with a series of bangs. The first and biggest bang went off in late 1972. After nearly three years of talks, Kissinger believed that he had an agreement with North Vietnam to end the conflict. But the South Vietnamese government refused to accept the deal because it was afraid that the Communists would obtain even more power in the South. Nixon, in the last days of his re-election fight, deserted Kissinger's agreement so that it would not appear that he (Nixon) was deserting South Vietnam. When Kissinger returned to the talks after the election and demanded nearly seventy changes, the North Vietnamese refused.<sup>27</sup>

The president then decided to show his willingness to use force. He unleashed the heaviest bombing raids of the war. Nixon declared he "did not care if the whole world thought he was crazy" dropping so many bombs, because "the Russians and the Chinese might think they were dealing with a

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<sup>26</sup> Walter La Feber, The American Age (N.Y. London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 605-606.

<sup>27</sup> Gareth Porter, Vietnam: A History in Document (N.Y., 1981), 419-420.

madman and so (they) had better force North Vietnam into a settlement before the world was consumed in a larger war." Only 24 percent of Americans polled opposed this "madness." Congress did nothing to stop Nixon.<sup>28</sup>

In January 1973, Kissinger and the North Vietnamese finally reached an agreement. In the view of some experts, the settlement could have been obtained months, perhaps even years earlier.<sup>29</sup>

To obtain South Vietnam President Thieu's acceptance this time, Nixon secretly told him that if the Communists violated the pact, "You can count on us" to protect the South.<sup>30</sup>

"I told President Thieu the actual military order battle and the analysis of the comparative forces each side could bring to bear provided a very grim picture," Ambassador Martin later recalled in testimony before the House of International Relations Committee. "I said it was my conclusion that almost all of his Generals, although they would continue to fight, believed defense was hopeless a respite could be gained through the beginning of the negotiating process. And they did not believe such a process could begin

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<sup>28</sup> Barry Hughs, The Domestic Context of American Foreign Policy (S.F., 1978), 39.

<sup>29</sup> Leslie Gelb, "The Kissinger Legacy," New York Times Magazine, 1976, 82-83.

<sup>30</sup> Washington Post, January 7, 1979, sec. A, p. 25.

unless the President left or took steps to see that the process began immediately. I said it was my feeling that if he did not move soon, his Generals would ask him to go."<sup>31</sup>

The fateful meeting between Martin and Thieu began shortly after 10 o'clock on Sunday morning, April 20, and lasted for an hour and a half. At no point, Martin stressed, did he recommend or even suggest, "directly or indirectly," that Thieu should resign. Instead he made it clear that this was a decision Thieu, and Thieu alone, would have to make. After listening intently to all that Martin had to say, Thieu assured the ambassador that he would do what he thought "best for the country."<sup>32</sup>

Martin was not the only foreign emissary who visited Thieu that day. Shortly before Martin's black Cadillac limousine pulled up in front of Independence Palace, French Ambassador Jean-Marie Merillon met with the South Vietnamese leader and impressed upon him the same message: If Thieu did not voluntarily step down soon, the military was prepared to oust him.

On April 21, 1975, Thieu announced his decision in a ninety minute address to the National Assembly and a national television audience. Often

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<sup>31</sup> Clark Dougan and David Fulghum, The Fall of the South (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1985), 36.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 38.



rambling and at times choked with tears, the president of the Republic of Vietnam devoted most of his speech to an acerbic attack on "our great ally" and "leader of the free world," the United States. He described how he had resisted signing the Paris agreement and relented only after receiving assurances of continued military aid as well as President Nixon's "solemn pledge" that the United States "would actively and strongly intervene... if North Vietnam renewed its aggression."<sup>33</sup> But the Americans, Thieu charged, had failed to honor Nixon's commitments, and in the process they had dishonored themselves.

Only after he finished his tirade did Thieu unveil his decision to turn over the government to Vice-President Huong. And immediately following the speech, Tran Van Huong was formally installed as Thieu's successor. Provisional Revolutionary Government (Vietcong Government) spokesmen declared that they had no interest in entering into negotiations with Huong or any other member of the "Thieu clique." Liberation radio denounced the new government as the "Thieu regime without Thieu, with a Cabinet of Thieu's henchmen."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 140.

The Communists also hardened their line toward the Americans. "Unless Ford and Kissinger give up their neo-colonialist policy" the official North Vietnamese news agency declared, "they will meet with bitter defeat." "The only way out" Hanoi warned, was for the United States to "end its interference, including military aid," and to withdraw all American advisors within "two or three days or even twenty four hours."<sup>35</sup>

French officials began promoting the "Big Minh solution" more actively than ever. By the morning of April 22, according to CIA analyst Frank Snepp, French intelligence Chief Brochand was "spending every waking minute with "Big" Minh, coaching and encouraging him, and warding off all potential challengers." On Saturday morning April 26, 125 members of the South Vietnamese National Assembly sat in hushed anticipation as President Tran Van Huong rose to speak and declared himself ready to yield power to General Duong Van Minh ("Big") with one condition: the approval by the Assembly.<sup>36</sup>

As North Vietnamese troops milled about outside the presidential palace, several of the victors entered the building to find President Minh, Prime Minister Mau, and their associates waiting quietly. When the first

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<sup>35</sup> Clark Dougan and David Fulghum, The Fall of the South (Boston, MA: Boston Publishing Company, 1985), 140.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 152.

Communist soldier burst into the red-carpeted reception room, Minh stood formally: "We have been waiting impatiently for you since this morning to hand over power." But said one officer derisively: "All power has passed into the hands of the revolution. You cannot hand over what you no longer have." With this remark, the former Republic of South Vietnam's leaders were led out of the building and whisked away. A short time later, Minh broadcast his second surrender speech of the day over Saigon radio.

Meanwhile, in Washington, the Ford administration, to a great degree, agreed when Thieu claimed that "decreased American aid had seriously affected the morale of our troops as well as the faith of the Vietnamese people in American promises."<sup>37</sup>

On April 10, President Ford asked "Congress and the nation" for \$972 million in military and humanitarian aid for the Saigon government. To give South Vietnam a chance "to save itself," \$722 million was requested for military aid, \$250 million was requested for economic and humanitarian aid.

On April 17, The Senate Armed Services Committee rejected a military aid bill for Saigon. On April 22, the House Armed Services Committee refused Ford's request for military aid to South Vietnam 21-17.

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<sup>37</sup> William Henderson, "South Vietnam Finds Itself," Foreign Affairs, (January, 1977): 284.

The United States' involvement in the Vietnamese war was finally for all practical purposes, at an end. Ford realized this. Speaking at Tulane University the day after the Armed Services Committee's vote, the President urged Americans to "regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam." That pride could be regained, he emphasized, but not by "refighting a war that is finished--as far as America is concerned."<sup>38</sup> Later that night, at 2:40 a.m., April 24, the House accepted a bill authorizing \$327 million for humanitarian aid and evacuation. For the United States, the war had truly ended.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 285.

## CHAPTER II

### WHY WE LOST THE WAR

#### Miscalculations

In part four of the previous chapter, we examined five reasons that President Johnson used to make his Far Eastern commitment in early 1960's. But by 1966-1967, each of these reasons had crumbled.

First, he believed that every president since Roosevelt had made a commitment to protect Vietnam. American credibility was, therefore, at stake world-wide. But, indeed, allies began to doubt American "credibility." The U.S. went to war because LBJ insisted on pouring resources into a bottomless war that many did not believe could be won. Moreover, many observers doubted that any links existed between communist advances in Asia and those in Latin America. Each region had its own peculiar conditions.

Second, he believed that China posed the great threat. However, experts on Asia noted that for a thousand years Vietnamese nationalists had fought China. In 1946, Ho had even preferred to work with the French: "It is better

to smell the French dung for awhile than eat China's all our lives."<sup>39</sup> Mao's government, moreover, had sunk into bitter fighting followed by a "cultural revolution in 1966-1967, in which young Chinese tried to restore revolutionary fever in the nation." Instead, they nearly drowned China in chaos. On the other hand, China did move 50,000 men into North Vietnam, partly to operate base complexes but mostly to warn Johnson that an invasion of the north could lead to a larger war. Johnson and McNamara admitted that if American power was not limited, it could "trigger Chinese intervention on the ground."<sup>40</sup> Having gone to war to contain China, Johnson now found that Chinese threats were being limited around the world--except in a pocket of North Vietnam, where the Chinese effectively contained American power!

Third, his view from history was: "We learned from Hitler at Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression."<sup>41</sup> But, Ho, or Mao's nationalism was not the same as Hitler's worldwide ambitions. The rugged peasants in the communist army hardly compared with Hitler's armored divisions, and the 1930s bore little resemblance to the nuclear world of the 1960's.

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<sup>39</sup> Allen Whiting, The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1975), 182-189.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Fourth, Johnson assumed that American power could do the job--and do it alone if necessary. However, the power of American technology proved to be less potent than the willingness of the North Vietnamese to die for their cause. As Johnson sent in more troops, Ho moved about 1,000 of his soldiers into the south each month in 1964, but 4,500 per month in 1965, and 5,000 each month in 1966. Secretary of State Rusk noted in 1971 that the communists suffered the loss of over 700,000 (the equivalent of killing 10 million Americans--given the size of the two populations) but "they continue to come." Johnson and his military leaders could come up with no better policy. American ignorance of Vietnamese history and customs seemed so limitless that it could never be made up by American technology.<sup>42</sup>

Many explanations have been offered as to why American policies in Vietnam were ones of blunder and miscalculation. First, there was a significant lack of Vietnam or Indochina expertise among United States policy makers. Secondly, miscalculation occurred through the interplay of various objective and subjective factors. Optimistic predictions about the success of various American policies and actions were based partially on information derived from field reports and intelligence sources that were biased to show the positive progress of American efforts. Field reports were

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<sup>42</sup> Walter La Feber, The American Age (N.Y. London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 579-581.

often biased because the evaluation and promotion of field personnel within their own military or civilian bureaucracies were to a large extent based on their job performance as measured by their own progress reports. They also knew that their superiors wanted to see "progress." Positive evaluations of this already biased information led to reinforced optimism and self deception. Thus, General Maxwell Taylor concluded: "The intelligence upon which we based our judgments or, for that matter, the intelligence supporting the government decisions...was very poor."<sup>43</sup>

The realities of the military and political situation in Vietnam were distant from the principal policy makers in Washington. Information was no doubt selectively passed up the chain of command in the military and civilian bureaucracies. Depending on that, the policy makers failed to choose the effective means to achieve the different objectives, especially to defeat the communists in Vietnam.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Failure of Vietnamization**

President Nixon's policy to Vietnamize the war was first avowed during the spring of 1969. It involved the continuing but unscheduled withdrawal of American ground combat troops and the systematic strengthening of the

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<sup>43</sup> Public Broadcasting Service discussion with Martin Agronsky, June 27, 1981.

<sup>44</sup> Jeffrey Milstein, Dynamics of the Vietnam War (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1974), 173-185.



South Vietnamese Armed Forces. From the beginning, the proposal was far from popular in Saigon. The political context of the Vietnamization proposal changed during the summer following the virtual abandonment of hope for progress in the peace negotiations and in broadening the political base of the Saigon government.

President Nixon declared that his program of Vietnamization, in his speech of November 3, 1969, was the only feasible alternative to an abrupt American withdrawal from South Vietnam, which would betray long standing commitments to the peoples affected and would precipitate a blood bath of incalculable dimensions. Nixon affirmed that the successful termination of the Vietnam war was "the last hope for peace and freedom of millions of people about to be suffocated by the forces of totalitarianism." If Hanoi should attempt to take advantage of the staged withdrawal of American combat forces as to threaten the safety of supporting troops remaining in the country, the president promised to take appropriate but undefined countermeasures.<sup>45</sup>

Press comments on the president's policy statement noted that the limited dichotomy he posed between immediate withdrawal and total support of the Saigon regime did not begin to exhaust the available alternatives. The policies

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<sup>45</sup> The New York Times, November 5&9, 1969.

pursued by Washington during the preceding year, with something less than full determination, had allegedly proved the contrary. Some reporters commented that a case could be made for complete American withdrawal by arguing that the United States had already honored its commitment to help defend South Vietnam. On other hand, an indefinite American commitment to provide support troops, money, and supplies for the South Vietnamese forces of one million men, very poorly led and badly motivated, was declared militarily bankrupt. Press comments concluded that unconditional American support of a military government that imprisoned its non-communist critics, including elected members of the National Assembly, had itself demonstrated minimal concern for freedom against totalitarian rule.<sup>46</sup>

The task of improving the discipline and performance of the South Vietnamese forces as part of the Vietnamization program was critically important. But, meanwhile the South Vietnamese forces' problem lay presumably at the very top: Saigon's two-score French-trained generals, admirals, and air marshals formed an exclusive club to which new members were seldom admitted. Lower ranking officers were drawn from the South Vietnamese armed forces well-to-do urban families who were able to finance their son's education through high school. The more attractive army posts

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<sup>46</sup> The New York Times, November 9, 1969.

were usually available via personal or family connections or through direct purchase.

The South Vietnamese forces often fought bravely, effectually in defense of a locality or population with which they were familiar, but seldom otherwise. The heavy desertions were attributable to homesickness, poor pay, bad living conditions, war weariness, and bad officering.<sup>47</sup>

The anticipated economic impact of Vietnamization was also disturbing. The continuance of large scale American financial aid was an integral part of the labored agreement reached between Saigon and Washington during 1969. Determining the nature and dimensions of this aid was an enormously complicated problem, which became the subject of a lively debate. American withdrawal from rear areas would in time sharply reduce dollar spending, which had provided during 1968-1969 some 80 percent of the foreign exchange earned by the Saigon government. Even if peace should be restored, the cost of security maintenance and the provision of housing, food, medical care, and refugee settlement would continue to be high.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Brummond Ayres Jr, "South Vietnam Soldier, Still Untested," The New York Times, November 21, 1969.

<sup>48</sup> John Cady, The History of Post-war South Asia (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1974), 601-604.

Meanwhile, the Vietnamization plan needed the continuing large scale of American support in the military and the economy for South Vietnam. However, during the last months before of the fall of Saigon, the American aid decreased dramatically. On April 4, 1975, Thieu condemned the United States for its decreased aid commitment, declaring that the United States was earning for itself the "label of traitor."<sup>49</sup>

The Ford administration, to a great degree, agreed with Thieu. On March 20, Ford himself maintained that uncertainty about continued United States aid had caused the South Vietnamese armed forces to pull back. Kissinger added his voice to the cry on March 26, asking whether the United States would "deliberately destroy an ally by withholding aid from it in its moment of extremity."<sup>50</sup>

With both Ford and Kissinger arguing that the South Vietnamese debacle was directly related to reduced aid, it was not surprising that Ford turned to Congress to demand an additional infusion of American military arms and equipment. But Congressional reaction to Ford's request was negative. On April 16, Ford argued that one reason North Vietnam and the Provisional

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<sup>49</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "United States-Vietnam Relations 1945-1967," U.S. Printing Office, 1971, Book I, III, A, p. A11.

<sup>50</sup> Daniel Papp, Vietnam From Three Capitals (N. Carolina: Mc Farland & Company Inc., 1981), 183.

Revolutionary Government were nearing victory was because the Soviet Union and China had "maintained their commitment" whereas the United States "had not."<sup>51</sup> Earlier, in mid-March, the Ford administration claimed that the Soviet Union and China had poured up to \$1.7 billion of military aid into North Vietnam in 1974 alone.<sup>52</sup>

By this time, however, events in Vietnam were proceeding faster than the newly cumbersome American governmental bureaucracy could react to them. On March 5, 1975, the North Vietnamese launched a series of attacks in the Central Highlands and rapidly succeeded in cutting Route 19, going from Pleiku to the Coast. On March 10, the United States Department of State revealed that 50,000 additional North Vietnamese troops had infiltrated the South since January 15.<sup>53</sup> The long awaited offensive had begun. In early April 1975, with two thirds of the country lost, South Vietnamese armed forces had disintegrated as an effective fighting force and Saigon itself appeared virtually indefensible.

What happened to the South Vietnamese armed forces? The reasons for their disintegration are numerous, and of course cannot be viewed

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<sup>51</sup> The New York Times, April 17, 1975.

<sup>52</sup> Daniel Papp, Vietnam From Three Capitals (N. Carolina: Mc Farland & Company Inc., 1981), 187.

<sup>53</sup> The New York Times, March 11, 1975.

individually. However, in retrospect, it is evident that South Vietnamese armed forces had become both psychologically and militarily dependent on American air power to extricate it from difficult situations--and now that air power could not be employed.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, due to political situations in United States, even the military supplies and equipment which they expected from the Vietnamization plan, had been discontinued dramatically a year before.

### **The Watergate Incident**

In the final years of his presidency, President Richard Nixon tried very hard to solve the Vietnam problem, ending a brutal war by using all of his means and powers. The Paris Agreement signed by all four parties of the conflict laid out the political solution for South Vietnam, and also brought all American troops home. In order to help South Vietnam face a new and difficult situation after all American forces left the country, President Nixon guaranteed high level military support for the Thieu Government. He also assured Thieu that if North Vietnam violated the peace accord, the United States would "react very strongly and rapidly" take "swift and severe retaliatory action" and "responded with full force."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Daniel Papp, Vietnam From Three Capitals (N. Carolina: Mc Farland & Company Inc., 1981), 181-182.

<sup>55</sup> The New York Times, May 1, 1975.

Nixon's assurances to Thieu were lent additional credibility by statements by Nixon and Kissinger during February and March 1973. At a February 1 news conference held before his visits to Hanoi, Kissinger was asked what the American response would be if Saigon requested United States bombing support. The Secretary of State coyly responded that it would be "unwise for a responsible American official at this stage...to give a checklist about what United States will or will not do."<sup>56</sup> Nixon was much more forthright a month later. After minimizing the significance of the on-going fighting in the South and acknowledging that the continuing infiltration from the North to the South "could be simply replacement personnel," Nixon scarcely veiled his threat:

Our concern (over the infiltration) has also been expressed to other interested parties and I would only suggest that based on my actions over the past four years, that the North Vietnamese should not lightly disregard such expressions of concern, when they are made, with regard to a violation.<sup>57</sup>

Through the first several months of 1973, then, American policy toward Vietnam was multifaceted. None of the facets indicated that American

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<sup>56</sup> Washington Post, February 2, 1973.

<sup>57</sup> Washington Post, February 2, 1973.

objectives in Vietnam had been substantially altered by the signing of the agreement. Rather, so far as Washington was concerned, the new political realities of the post cease-fire period necessitated changed methods of operation. To the United States, South Vietnam had to remain an independent nation under the Thieu Government. To achieve this, South Vietnamese forces needed to retain the military initiative. At the same time, North Vietnamese resupply and infiltration to the South had to be limited. All this had to be achieved without overt American military aid and without overwhelming the political fiction that peace had come to Vietnam. Consequently Nixon downplayed the level of fighting, tacitly supported Thieu's military policies, and warned the North Vietnamese that the United States would resume its involvement if they did not reduce it infiltration. In essence, then, Washington was attempting to permit Saigon's breaches of the agreement to continue while curtailing those of Hanoi.

This policy might have been successful but for the reduced credibility of American threats of reintervention. Hanoi had long believed that final victory would be achieved by victory on the political front in Washington, and from the spring of 1973 onward, this point of view became increasingly correct. The December 1972 bombing had undermined much of Nixon's own domestic political support, and there was almost no political support for a



resumption of bombing. Indeed, on May 10, the House of Representatives voted to cut off funds for continued bombing of Cambodia. Ten days earlier, the Nixon White House was shattered by the forced resignations of two key members of the senior White House staff, H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. The revelations of Watergate increasingly reduced Nixon's political freedom of action from this time on. Thus, by mid-May, the threat of renewed bombing was simply not credible, primarily because of the President's relations with Congress and the specter of Watergate. With Congress voting on June 31 to end all bombing in Indochina and to prohibit future military operations there without Congressional approval, and with the House and Senate voting four months later to override Nixon's veto of the War Powers Act, possibilities for American action undertaken only on the initiative of the President were further reduced. Nixon's multifaceted Vietnam policy had consequently been rendered inoperative.

From early 1973, the political deadlock that had existed between the Legislative and the Executive branches was disintegrating as Watergate exacted an ever-increasing toll from the Nixon administration. The changing congressional-presidential power balance had tremendous impact on the cease-fire war, for it was often over the issue of the level of support to be extended to South Vietnam that Congress and Nixon fought. Congressional

opposition to Nixon as well as the Watergate affair itself had destroyed the credibility of Nixon's threats against North Vietnam. In the first half of 1974, the same two factors cast doubt on the continued viability of American support to Saigon.

Due to the budget miscalculating and over spending for the first half fiscal year of 1974 in South Vietnam, the Pentagon, with Nixon's approval, requested \$447 million in supplemental military aid appropriations for the remainder of the year. On April 4, the House of Representatives rejected the request. Most observers termed the rejection "unexpected." Senator Barry Goldwater, long a supporter of administration policy, commented on his change of heart in explaining his opposition to supplemental appropriations. "For all intents and purposes, we can scratch Vietnam. In think it's evident that the South will fall into the hands of...North Vietnam."<sup>58</sup>

The change of heart in Congress was made even more apparent in the debate over aid to South Vietnam contained in the budget for fiscal 1975. Finally, the compromise bill set a ceiling of \$1 billion on military aid to South Vietnam for fiscal 1975. On August 5, in one of his final acts as President, Nixon signed the bill with "certain reservations."<sup>59</sup> After Nixon's

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<sup>58</sup> The New York Times, April 16, 1974.

<sup>59</sup> The New York Times, August 6, 1974.

resignation, erosion of support for high levels of aid accelerated. In December, the assault on high levels of aid to South Vietnam continued when it was proposed that military aid to South Vietnam be transferred from the sacrosanct Department of Defense budget to the highly vulnerable foreign aid budget by mid-1976.

The difficulties encountered by the aid requests should not be interpreted to imply that official American policy toward Vietnam had changed. Rather, the executive branch was no longer capable of following its preferred course of action. Even the August 8 change of administration in Washington did little to alter preferred American policy. In his August 12 address to a joint session of Congress, President Ford asserted that he was "determined to see the observance of the Paris Agreement on Vietnam."<sup>60</sup> By this time, however, there was little possibility of that.

The change in administrations if anything strengthened the resolve of the Hanoi and Vietcong to fight on. Generally speaking, Ford was considered "a political lightweight" in Asia.<sup>61</sup> Hanoi's radio declared that Ford must "prove" he was different from the departed Nixon, who had committed

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<sup>60</sup> The New York Times, March 16, 1973.

<sup>61</sup> Denzil Peiris, "Asia's New Goodfather," Far Eastern Economic Review, August 23, 1974.

"countless...horrible crimes" in Indochina.<sup>62</sup> The North Vietnam leadership simply expected "more of the same" from Ford.<sup>63</sup> There were indications, moreover, that Hanoi fully intended to take advantage of the Legislative-Executive confrontation and the turmoil of Watergate. In early August Vietcong units attacked South Vietnamese armed forces posts near Danang, and American officials in Vietnam reported that North Vietnam alerted its troops in South Vietnam as well as six home divisions on August 7-8. Following the alert, everyone speculated that communist forces were about to launch the long awaited offensive. Four thousand trucks, tanks and artillery pieces had been moved to forward positions during the alert, and a total of 650,000 troops had been placed at combat readiness.<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, according to one prominent observer in Hanoi, the North Vietnam leadership believed an "entirely new political situation" had evolved in South Vietnam. Nixon's resignation, the economic crisis in the United States, the uncertainty of the new Ford administration, and the deteriorating political,

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<sup>62</sup> Pentagon Papers: Facts of File (1974), 633.

<sup>63</sup> "Hanoi Resigned to War," Far Eastern Economic Review August 30, 1974, p. 20.

<sup>64</sup> Pentagon Papers: Facts of File (1974), 665.

economic, and military situation in South Vietnam after Nixon's resignation had combined to make the Thieu regime "increasingly unstable."<sup>65</sup>

The situation in South Vietnam had in fact deteriorated. An authoritative Foreign Affairs article declared that:

In the 23 months since the cease-fire, it has become clear that all three American achievements in South Vietnam--political, economic, and military--have begun to erode and are now in danger.<sup>66</sup>

From May onward, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces had been on the offensive. By the fall, the balance of military forces in the South had shifted to Communist control as they developed both logistics areas and high-speed roads in its zone of control. During mid-December, fighting flared to the highest level since the Paris Agreement was signed.<sup>67</sup>

Due to all of these conditions, in most of the encounters, South Vietnamese armed forces were defeated. Despite Nixon's pledge to Thieu, South Vietnam fell on April 30, 1975, twenty-one bloody years after

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<sup>65</sup> Gareth Porter, Report from Hanoi: Pressing Ford to drop Thieu (The New Public, February 8, 1975), 19-21.

<sup>66</sup> Maynard Parker, "Vietnam: The War That won't End," Foreign Affairs, Vol. 53, No.2, January 1975, 365-367.

<sup>67</sup> The New York Times, December 18 & 26, 1974.

Eisenhower had tied the United States to the anti-communist regime. In March 1974, the last United States troops had left. In August 1974, Nixon, facing impeachment, became the first United States President to resign his office. In October, North Vietnamese leaders concluded that even if the Americans re-entered the war, Thieu's government could not be saved. They believed that a two-year war would follow. Instead, The South Vietnamese Army now left on its own, melted away.

### An Expensive War

From 1971, the rising rate of inflation and unemployment were serious problems in the United States where the economy seemed about to collapse. True, the annual gross national product (GNP) had passed the \$1 trillion mark in 1970 for the first time. True, American exports incredibly quintupled between the 1950's and 1970's to \$107 billion, excluding services, and now accounted for the sale of nearly 20 percent of American factory and farm production. But not even those staggering figures were enough to pay for global American defense commitments and overseas investment. Americans were spending more than they could produce and sell.

Since the Bretton Wood agreement of 1944 (the post war economic system would rest on gold and United States dollars), the world's economy had largely rested on the dollars because Americans could back up the dollar

with their dynamic economy and \$15 billion to \$24 billion in gold. By 1970-1971, however, they had spent too many dollars. Some \$40 billion was held overseas, but only \$10 billion in gold remained in the United States to support it. Foreigners began to doubt that the dollars they held were truly "as good as gold." That doubt turned to near panic in 1971, when figures revealed that, for the first time since 1893-1894, the United States had imported more goods (such as oil and automobiles) than it had been able to sell abroad. It marked a moment of historic importance. Foreigners and Americans alike started to cash in their dollars for gold and other securities. Nixon recalled that, in 1958, the United States had "all the chips" in the "great poker game" of international economics and that no one else could play unless the Americans passed out some of their chips. By early 1970s, he sorrowfully noted: "the world (was) a lot different."<sup>68</sup> Others were now building up their pile of chips as the American pile disappeared.

The President had several choices. First, he could save dollars by reducing American defense commitments even below the level promises by the Nixon Doctrine. He and Kissinger, however, were determined to expand, not reduce, the nation's influence. Second, he could limit United States investment abroad. Nixon, however, refused to interfere in this marketplace.

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<sup>68</sup> Department of State Bulletin, (November 5, 1973), 555.

He decided upon a third choice: he would force allies to help the American economy. At Kansas City in mid-1971, Nixon declared that the world now contained "five great economic superpowers"--the United States, Japan, USSR, China and the European Common Market.<sup>69</sup> Because "economic power will be the key to other kinds of power" in the late twentieth-century, Nixon warned, Americans had to get their economic act together or they would go the way of ancient Rome. In August 1971, he tried to stop the erosion of American power by placing ninety-day controls on wages, prices, and rents. But that was only a band-aid. As the election approached, he could not safely demand more from Americans. Consequently he demanded more from allies who depended on American goods and military protection. He turned the job over to a tough Texan, Secretary of the Treasury John Connally. "My basic approach," Connally declared, "is that the foreigners are out to screw us. Our job is to screw them first."<sup>70</sup>

Nixon's and Connally's "new economic policy" imposed a 10 percent surcharge on American imports. Japan and Canada quickly felt the shock. So did western Europeans and newly emerging nations. Nixon did not care; he was determined to keep their feet to the fire until they promised to help

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<sup>69</sup> U. S. President Richard Nixon, Public Paper 1971 (Washington, 1972), 805-813.

<sup>70</sup> Frederick Adam, "Why Certain Ideas Count," review of America History September 11, 1983, 440.



support the dollar. In an agreement made at Washington's Smithsonian Institution in late 1971, the allies finally agreed to accept a cheaper dollar (a dollar that also cheapened American goods and so made them more competitive) and more expensive Japanese and European currencies. Nixon typically called it the greatest monetary agreement in the history of the world. But the following year, the dollar again sank. The second deal was needed to prop it back up. The American economy had contracted a fundamental sickness. The Smithsonian agreement, however, did help improve conditions enough to aid Nixon's re-election victory in 1972. It also enabled him to deal from greater economic strength as he made historic journeys to China and the Soviet Union.

By the end, the cost of the war had become enormous. About 58,015 Americans died, and 150,303 more were wounded. Some groups suffered more than others. Hispanics, who made up 7 percent of the population, suffered 20 percent of the battle deaths. Blacks, with 11 percent of the population, also suffered 20 percent of the deaths. The largest number of United States deserters were minorities and blue collar whites who knew little about Vietnam until they arrived there. The middle-class, especially whites,

used lawyers and college deferments to escape the war. On the other side, two million Vietnamese died; twice that number were wounded.<sup>71</sup>

### The Anti-War Movement in United States

In October 1969, due to a massive anti-war rally march on Washington, President Nixon had to pull back at the last minute from expanding the bombing; even before that he discussed the bombing of harbors and also considered using nuclear weapons in the war.<sup>72</sup>

While Vietnamization seemed to fail, Nixon was furious that the Communists used trails through Cambodia and Laos to supply their troops in the south. Nixon bombed the Communist bases in Cambodia. He did so secretly--a secret kept, that is, from Congress and the American people. The air strikes forced the Communists farther inside Cambodia, and the nation became more unstable. In March 1970, Cambodian Prince Sihanouk was overthrown by his prime minister, General Lon Nol, who was more willing to work with the Americans.

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<sup>71</sup> Walter La Feber, The American Age (N.Y. London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 634.

<sup>72</sup> Seymour Hersh, The Price of Power (N.Y.: 1987), 130.

The new regime was corrupt and incompetent, but Nixon seized the change and launched an invasion of eastern Cambodia on April 30, 1970, to destroy the camps of some 40,000 communists. It was a sudden, highly risky expansion of the war. But the invasion failed. American and South Vietnamese troops could not find and destroy the Communist forces. By late 1970, those forces had grown until they spread over, and controlled the entire country by early 1974.

At home, Nixon failed as well. The Cambodian campaign, known as a "sideshow" to the main event in Vietnam, triggered a massive protest when American students in nearly 450 colleges went on strike. Many students marched on Washington to lobby both the administration and Congress. President called the students "bums" who are "blowing up the Campuses."<sup>73</sup> Then, in early May, 1970, the Ohio National Guard fired on anti-war protesters at Kent State. Four students died. Ten days later, two black students were shot to death by Mississippi state police during protests at Jackson State College. The nation went into shock. On the night of the Kent State shootings, Nixon could not sleep, made fifty-one phone calls, and led Kissinger to conclude that the president was "on the edge of a nervous

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<sup>73</sup> Jonathan Schell, The Time of Illusion (New York: 1976), 100-101.

breakdown."<sup>74</sup> Amid the chaos, several thousand hard-hat construction workers paraded in New York City to support the president and beat up members of anti-war groups. But other New Yorkers, including Wall Street banking leaders, flew to Washington to warn Nixon that the threat of a wider war was threatening a stock market collapse and a possible financial panic.<sup>75</sup> The President announced that American soldiers in Cambodia would be out by June 30, 1970. Congress voted to prohibit American combat troops or advisers from re-entering Cambodia.

Nixon grew frustrated as he continued to withdraw American troops from Vietnam, but the Vietnamese soldiers could not fill the gap. He decided to try to shore up his collapsing Vietnamization policy by attacking neighboring Laos, along whose supposedly neutral territory the Communists marched their troops into South Vietnam. In February 1971, Nixon tried to drive back the Communists with an invasion of Laos. This time only South Vietnamese troops went in. Vietnamization, however, failed. The South Vietnamese broke and retreated before Communist attacks. When Laos was invaded, Nixon faced failure on nearly every side. In addition to problems with Vietnamization, he endured riots at home, Democratic victories in 1970

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Leonard Silk, *Nixonomics* (New York: 1972), 144.

elections, defeats in attempts to obtain conservative Supreme Court appointments, and rapid decline in public support. Consequently, the anti-war movement received additional fuel.

Between 1971 and 1974, however, the President opened a startlingly new chapter in American foreign policy, a chapter that historian Lloyd Gardner has titled "The Great Nixon Turnaround."<sup>76</sup> The President began by correctly estimating that he could stop much of anti-war protesting. As one of his aids phrased it, "If there is one thing the Americans are more sick of to day than fighting in the jungles abroad, it is fighting in the streets and campuses at home."<sup>77</sup> Many polls showed that Americans did not want to lose Vietnam, but neither did they want to send thousands of their sons and daughters to die for such a country. The United States military agreed. Its morale and fighting ability were being destroyed by the war. Nixon went far in stopping such protests by announcing that the draft was to end in 1973. College campuses began to quiet down. The President had created some political

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<sup>76</sup> Lloyd Gardner, The Great Nixon Turnaround: America's New Foreign Policy in the Post-Liberal Era (N.Y.: 1973).

<sup>77</sup> Washington Post, February 28, 1971, 133.

breathing space. To help Vietnamization, he increased the bombings. Americans now said little.<sup>78</sup>

### The Paris Agreement

Henry Kissinger, Nixon's newly appointed assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, made clear the new administration's thinking on Vietnam in a January 1969 article in "Foreign Affairs."<sup>79</sup> The United States had to find a strategy which was "sustainable with substantially reduced casualties." Kissinger believed that seeking an American military victory was futile. A negotiated settlement was the key, but it had to be delayed until South Vietnam developed confidence in its own political capabilities. Kissinger opposed a coalition government in Vietnam since it would "destabilize" South Vietnam. To Kissinger, the American posture should be to seek a mutual withdrawal of forces "over a sufficiently long period so that a genuine indigenous political process had a chance to become established."<sup>80</sup> In essence, a political balance of power would then have been created by American forces.

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<sup>78</sup> Walter La Feber, The American Age (N.Y. London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 609.

<sup>79</sup> Henry Kissinger, "The Vietnam Negotiations," Foreign Affairs, Vol. 47, No. 2 January, 1969, 211-234.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

The new Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, listed the policy options open to the Nixon Government as they were viewed during the first National Security Council meeting of the new administration. The President preferred to end the war by negotiations. But if the North Vietnamese refused, he had to have an alternative.<sup>81</sup> Vietnamization was "designed to be carried out regardless of whether North Vietnam negotiated seriously or not."<sup>82</sup>

During the first half of 1969, Vietnamization proceeded slowly. Nixon increased United States expenditures on training and equipping South Vietnamese forces in March. On June 8, 1969, the President announced the first phase of withdrawals would begin.<sup>83</sup>

The Paris negotiations themselves did not begin until January 24, 1970, almost three months after the total bombing halt. The three months delay was caused by South Vietnam's refusal to send representatives to Paris. Even after the negotiations began, however, they remained fruitless and hopelessly deadlocked for several months. Nixon's preferred "solution" to the problem of Vietnam was a political settlement on terms favorable to the Thieu-Ky regime. Nixon continued to deny the validity of the principle of "complete

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<sup>81</sup> Frank Linden, Nixon's Quest of Peace (N.Y.: Robert Luce, 1972), 42.

<sup>82</sup> William Roger, "United States Foreign Policy 1969-1970. A Report of the Secretary of State," U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971, 48.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

and total withdrawal" of United States troops that the North Vietnamese put forth throughout 1970 and at the same time rejected Hanoi's demand that the Thieu-Ky regime be moved from power. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, special advisor to the Hanoi delegation to Paris met four times during February and March, 1970, and each time the meeting foundered on the issues of unconditional American withdrawal and the legitimacy of the Thieu-Ky Government.<sup>84</sup> Since the United States firmly supported Thieu, only an agreement favorable to him was acceptable to the Nixon administration.

By the summer of the 1970, then, both the United States and North Vietnam were in essence "buying time." The United States, still trying to preserve an independent South Vietnam under Thieu, needed more time to strengthen the political and military structure of the South Vietnamese state. The strengthening was needed to compensate for the ongoing American military withdrawal. Hanoi, still intent on reunifying Vietnam, needed more time to strengthen its own armed forces and those of the Vietcong. That both sides viewed the conflict in Vietnam as an exercise in buying time was confirmed by the peace proposals which each side brought forward during the fall of 1970.

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<sup>84</sup> Kalb, Marvin and Bernard, Kissinger (Boston: Little Brown, 1974), 151.



On June 26, 1971, Le Duc Tho met with Kissinger and offered to release American prisoners simultaneously with American troop withdrawal. For all practical purposes, then, the two sides had resolved the issue of reciprocity. The issue of Thieu and Ky's participation in future coalition government, however, remained unsettled. Le Duc Tho continued to demand that the United States end its support for Thieu and Ky so a new government could be formed.

Thieu now became the single central issue blocking the consummation of an agreement. American support for Thieu and North Vietnamese opposition to him prevented any additional progress on the negotiations for over a year.

Eventually, Thieu ran unopposed and won the election with 82 percent of the vote in October 1971; to the United States, this was a disaster. The one election did not add any legitimacy to Thieu's claim to the presidency and the United States realized this. After the election, and possibly because of the questionable appearance of the election, the United States put forward another proposal in Paris for a reorganized South Vietnamese Government, the so-called "eight point position." The new United States proposal had two key provisions: Thieu would resign one month before the election was held, and an "independent body representing all political forces in South Vietnam"

would organize and conduct the elections.<sup>85</sup> Even so, the North Vietnamese rejected the proposal and, again, the reason was the "lackey American imperialism Thieu."<sup>86</sup> Under the United States proposal, Thieu could both participate in the organization of the election and even run in the election. To Hanoi, this was unacceptable.

During the summer 1972, Hanoi was well aware of Nixon's new freedom of action position--resulting from his increasing political popularity in United States--and did not look forward to the events implied by it.<sup>87</sup> At the same time, the North Vietnam leadership was disappointed by the results of its 1972 spring offensive.<sup>88</sup> Hanoi decided to drop its demand that Thieu be excluded from the South Vietnamese Government, but only if his government proved willing to abandon its claim to solve sovereignty in South Vietnam. By September 26, the North Vietnamese had dropped its demand for Thieu's removal. On October 8, Le Duc Tho gave Kissinger a document proposing a National Council whose sole duty was to administer elections in

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<sup>85</sup> The New York Times, February 1, 1972.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Washington Post, July 23, 1972.

<sup>88</sup> Trung Hoang, "A Report for the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Worker's Party," review of What Detente Means to the Vietnamese by Tom Hayden, July 1974.

South Vietnam and promote the implementation of any agreement.<sup>89</sup> For the most part, with the exception of several minor matters, Kissinger found this document acceptable.<sup>90</sup> By October 12, the two sides disagreed over only replacement of war materiel and the release of civilian prisoners.<sup>91</sup> Kissinger returned to Washington to present the tentative agreement to Nixon.

In Washington, the general assessment of the draft agreement was that it was "basically acceptable" although there were some areas that needed to be "tightened."<sup>92</sup> There were isolated instances of outright opposition to the draft, most notably from Alexander Haig, who felt that large sections of the draft needed to be renegotiated since, to him, they were more the result of Kissinger's desire to achieve a pre-election peace than self-interested bargaining.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, doubts were raised about the wisdom of signing the draft before the election. On October 19, Kissinger traveled to Saigon to present the draft to Thieu. Thieu termed the draft "a sell-out" and a

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<sup>89</sup> The New York Times, October 27, 1972.

<sup>90</sup> Gareth Porter, Report from Hanoi. Pressing Ford to drop Thieu (The New Republic, February 8, 1975), 122-136.

<sup>91</sup> The New York Times, October 27, 1972.

<sup>92</sup> Tad Szule, "Behind the Vietnam Cease fire Agreement," Foreign Affairs, (June 1974): 54-55.

<sup>93</sup> Kalb, Marvin and Bernard, Kissinger (Boston: Little Brown, 1974), 357.

"surrender" to the Communists.<sup>94</sup> To Thieu, the agreement was totally unacceptable.

In Washington, however, there was an additional major consideration. The Nixon administration had planned to give large quantities of aid to Saigon during 1973 to further the Vietnamization program. An early conclusion of a cease-fire agreement would prevent the shipment of this aid. To Nixon, the decision was clear. If Vietnamization were to succeed, additional arms had to be sent. Nixon felt that the agreement had to be delayed.

On October 26, 1972, Hanoi released a public statement charging that Nixon, not Thieu, was delaying the signing of the agreement. Nixon, facing an election in two weeks, now had to face a charge that he was using the draft agreement for political purposes. Kissinger was placed in the delicate position of trying to maneuver out of the charges of delaying the agreement and negotiating in bad faith. On October 26, 1972, he held a press conference and proclaimed that peace was "at hand" and could be achieved within a few days since only a few additional points needed to be negotiated. In the United States, North Vietnam's charges were quickly forgotten and Nixon's reelection proved to be a previously anticipated landslide. Pressure for a cease-fire agreement had once again decreased.

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<sup>94</sup> The New York Times, November, 1972.

On November 20, Kissinger submitted a list of demands to the North Vietnamese for alternatives to the October text. Throughout the remainder of November and early December, the two sides haggled over the terms of the agreement (demilitarized zone, the status of the Provisional Revolutionary Government and the areas under its control, and the nature of the National Council). Negotiations were deadlocked over all these issues, each of which was regarded as major by both sides.

The war went on and American supplies flowed into Saigon. By the end of 1972, South Vietnam's Air Force alone was the fourth largest in the world, with over 2,000 planes. On December 13, 1972, Kissinger warned the North Vietnamese that unless they accepted Washington's peace terms, they would suffer greater destruction than ever before.<sup>95</sup> Nixon himself sent an ultimatum to Hanoi: the North Vietnamese had 72 hours to accept American terms or Hanoi and Haiphong would face indiscriminate bombing.<sup>96</sup>

The North Vietnamese refused to be pressured. Consequently, at 7 P.M. on December 18, American bombers attacked Hanoi and Haiphong. Over 200 B-52s, as well as some F-111s and F4s, participated in the wave of attacks, dubbed LINEBACKER II. The raids went on for 12 days. During

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<sup>95</sup> Kalb, Marvin and Bernard, Kissinger (Boston: Little Brown, 1974), 412.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

that time, the United States lost 34 B-52s, a statistic that shocked American strategists.<sup>97</sup> Five thousand North Vietnamese were killed. However, North Vietnam had survived the penultimate sanction. Nixon realized this and reached a crossroads. By mid-January, he believed that his own political future required the signing of a peace agreement. And in a secret letter sent to Thieu later revealed:

Your (Thieu) rejection of (the newly negotiated) agreement would now irretrievably destroy our ability to assist you. Congress and public opinion would force my hand.<sup>98</sup>

On January 2, technical negotiations between the American and North Vietnamese delegations resumed. When Kissinger and Le Duc Tho met on January 8, it soon became apparent that the bombings had not influenced the North Vietnamese to alter its position. The North Vietnamese would stand by the positions it had advocated, and which the United States had accepted, in October. Once again, Hanoi had emerged victorious.<sup>99</sup>

On January 13, both sides agreed on the main text of a cease-fire agreement once again. This time Nixon had little choice. The military

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<sup>97</sup> Washington Post, February 4, 1973.

<sup>98</sup> The New York Times, May 1, 1975.

<sup>99</sup> Daniel Papp, Vietnam From Three Capitals (N. Carolina: Mc Farland Company Inc., 1981), 144.

pressure of the December bombings had not obtained any significant concession from the North and no other means of military pressure were available.

On January 27, 1973, the United States and Democratic Republic of Vietnam signed the "Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam."<sup>100</sup> American's longest war had officially ended after ten years of bitter war and four years of negotiating stalemate.

In summary, the Agreement called for an immediate cease-fire in place throughout Vietnam; for the withdrawal of all remaining American troops (about 27,000); and for the release of prisoners of war throughout Indochina. Hanoi's infiltration of troops and material into South Vietnam was prohibited. International supervisory machinery was to police the cease-fire and regulate the entry of replacement equipment through designated checkpoints. Another provision restored the seventeenth parallel as the Provisional Military Demarcation Line between North and South Vietnam, prohibited all military movement across it, and permitted civilian movement only by agreement between Vietnamese parties. Hanoi further agreed to withdraw its forces from Laos and Cambodia and not to use these countries' territory for military

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<sup>100</sup> Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, January 29, 1973, 45-64.

action against South Vietnam. The political settlement in South Vietnam was left to future negotiations between the Vietnamese parties.

Among the factors that contributed to the Paris Agreement were the great accumulated political and economic costs of the war to the United States. Political division in this country over the issue of the Vietnam War and American policy in Vietnam was as great as any since the Civil War and needed to be healed. The domestic economy and international economic position of the United States had been weakened by the war and needed to be strengthened.

Internationally, the bipolar system of a Communist bloc versus an anti-Communist bloc had changed. The Sino-Soviet split deepened into mutual hostility between these two Communist giants. The United States began a significant rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, and moved away from cold war confrontation with Soviet Union by negotiating important agreements in the control of strategic weapons and on economic issues. Meanwhile, conflicting economic interests strained relations between the United States and the Japanese and the United States and the Western Europeans.

The leaders of the United States, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China now recognize that their larger self-interests and mutual



interests are far more important than the distribution of power among Vietnamese, or among the Indochinese in general.

Thus, the leaders of the United States, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China all had good self-interested reasons to influence the contending Vietnamese parties to agree to a cease-fire so that United States could get its troops out of Vietnam, and its prisoners of war returned.<sup>101</sup>

Finally, in concluding this chapter, we first quote a Kissinger remark in 1973, when he blamed the Watergate scandal, Congressional opposition, and the Communist breaking of the 1973 agreement for the final collapse of the South Vietnam: "If we didn't have this damn domestic situation, a week of bombing would put this Agreement in force."<sup>102</sup> Secondly is an explanation by President Richard Nixon:

The twenty years story of Vietnam War is a long, complicated one with many characters and a wide variety of subplots. The drama is replete with missed cues and lost opportunities. Many must share the blame for missing those opportunities: the military commanders and political leaders who made political, strategic, and tactical errors in waging the war; those in Congress who

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<sup>101</sup> Jeffrey Milstein, Dynamics of the Vietnam War (Ohio: Ohio State University, 1974), 186.

<sup>102</sup> Henry Kissinger, Years of Upheaval (Boston, 1982), 12.

refused to do as much for our allies in South Vietnam as the Soviet Union was doing for North Vietnam; and those who irresponsible antiwar rhetoric hampered the effort to achieve a just peace. In the end, Vietnam was lost on the political front in the United States, not on the battlefield in Southeast Asia.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Richard Nixon, No More Vietnam (New York: Arbor House Publishing, 1985), 15.

## CHAPTER III

### US POLICY TOWARD VIETNAM IN THE 1980s

#### The Main Impact in United States Foreign Policy after the Fall of South Vietnam and Indochina

Hanoi's victory in April 1975 drastically modified the power balance in Southeast Asia. The helicopter lift off from the roof of the United States embassy in Saigon astounded and embarrassed America's friends everywhere. Cambodia had fallen to the Khmer Rouge two weeks earlier. In Laos, the Pathet Lao seized full power in August, thus completing the destruction of all of Indochina governments or coalition arrangements supported by the United States for more than two decades.

ASEAN now faced a victorious North Vietnam with an army of one million men. On its eastern border Thailand saw a Cambodia under control of the brutal, unpredictable Khmer Rouge of Pol Pot. In this uncertain situation, the noncommunist countries of the region had reason to doubt the constancy and re-liability of the United States. The dismantling of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), the most visible U.S.

commitment to the security of the region but long suspected of being a "paper tiger," was proposed in July 1975 and took effect in 1977. A civilian government in Thailand asked for the removal of what had become a very large U.S. military presence, reinforcing the image of the United States wounded and in retreat.

For the Ford administration, restoration of confidence in the United States as a reliable ally, not only in Southeast Asia but globally as well, became the number one priority. The Middle East, the commitment to NATO, and the uneasy relationship with the Soviet Union--each of these vital areas had felt the impact of Indochina. The reestablishment of American credibility thus became imperative.

Credibility had by 1969 already become the dominant consideration in continuing support for the U.S.-backed Republic of Vietnam. The policy of "Vietnamization," the military operations such as the 1970 Cambodia incursion, and the thrust of the protracted peace negotiations conducted by National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger and Senior Politician member Le Duc Tho had all been designed to facilitate, if possible, a graceful American exit from the Indochina involvement with its superpower credibility intact and "peace with honor."

As the Republic of Vietnam was disintegrating in March 1975, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Philip Habib stated bluntly, "We no longer see the security of the United States as directly, immediately at issue. Nevertheless, it remains true that failure to sustain our purpose in Indochina would have a corrosive effect on our ability to conduct effective diplomacy worldwide."<sup>104</sup> President Ford in his first press conference after the Saigon embassy evacuation declared, "I think the lessons of the past in Vietnam have already been learned... and we should have our focus on the future. As far as I am concerned, that is where we will concentrate."<sup>105</sup>

The Mayaguez incident a week later, when the United States took military action to rescue the 39 crew members of an American ship seized by the Khmer Rouge, was portrayed by some officials as an opportunity to prove that the United States was still a power to be reckoned with. The cost was 18 Marines killed or missing, and 50 wounded, and an adverse impact on our

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<sup>104</sup> U.S. Congress, House, Committee on International Relations, The Vietnam-Cambodia Emergency Part II (April 1975), 244

<sup>105</sup> Department of State, Bulletin No. 72, (Washington D.C.: CPO, May 26, 1975), 676-679

relationship with Thailand, from whose territory the United States operation was launched.<sup>106</sup>

One notable diplomatic effort to reassure American friends in Asia was President Ford's visit in December 1975 to Japan, the People's Republic of China, Indonesia and the Philippines after which a six-points Pacific Doctrine was put forward. The fourth point was our "continuing stake in stability and security in Southeast Asia."<sup>107</sup>

No broad plan for a future American role in Southeast Asia emerged during the two years after the Indochina disaster. The desire to put Vietnam behind us seemed to extend to all of Southeast Asia, despite the fact that the Vietnam War had been fought in large measure to protect our friends from aggression that Washington thought would certainly come without deep American involvement. Southeast Asia had, in fact, used the time of the American involvement in Vietnam to strengthen its political systems and to develop burgeoning national economies. The American disengagement of the 1975-76 period also spurred ASEAN into taking even greater responsibility for its own destiny.

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<sup>106</sup> U.S. Congress, House, Committee on International Relations, Seizure of the Mayaguez, hearing part III, Sept. 12, 1975.

<sup>107</sup> President Ford, A Pacific Doctrine of Peace with all and Hostility Toward None, address at the University of Hawaii, December 7, 1975 (Washington D.C.: Department of State Bulletin No. 73, GPO, December 29, 1975).

The Southeast Asia "dominoes" did not fall in the years after the departure of the United States. The countries survived because of their own strength. The American contribution to the economic development of the region by the infusion of capital and technology during the war years may have been more significant than anything the United States did militarily.

In the aftermath of the traumatic events of early 1975, the Ford administration addressed the question of normalization of relations with Vietnam guardedly. In June, Secretary of State Kissinger, acknowledging that "new regimes have come to power in Asia in the last few months," said that the United States was "prepared to look to the future" but would be influenced by how these regimes acted toward their neighbors as well as toward the United States."<sup>108</sup> By the end of the Ford administration this position remained substantially the same, but some particulars had been added. In September 1976, Assistant Secretary of State Arthur Hummel reiterated that the United States still looked to the future, not the past, but specified that "for us the most serious single obstacle in proceeding toward normalization is the refusal of Hanoi to give us a full accounting of those missing in action (MIA)." Regarding provision of postwar reconstruction assistance to Vietnam as part of the Kissinger--Le Duc Tho package,

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<sup>108</sup> Henry Kissinger, Japan Society, speech June 18, 1975 (Washington D.C.: Dept. of State Bulletin No. 73, GPO, July 7, 1975), 1-8.

Hummel now stated categorically that "...the (1973) Paris Agreement was so massively violated by Hanoi that we have no obligation to provide assistance, and in any case Congress has prohibited such assistance by law (under the Foreign Assistance Appropriation Act of 1976)." <sup>109</sup>

The United States embargo on trade and investment in Vietnam, in effect against North Vietnam since 1965, had been extended in May 1975 to all Vietnam and Cambodia, and South Vietnamese assets in the United States were frozen.<sup>110</sup> The United States vetoed Hanoi's application for membership in the United Nations in 1975 and again in 1976, focusing on the missing-in-action question, which had surfaced as the most galling residue of the war. Shrill Vietnamese demands for reparations under the Paris Agreement contributed to congressional hostility.

### **American Foreign Policy Toward Vietnam under the Carter Administration**

The normalization of relations with Vietnam was a Carter campaign pledge, though it received little prominence in speeches and debates. The effort to normalize eventually foundered on three issues: Vietnam's demands

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<sup>109</sup> U.S. Congress, House, Committee on International Relations, Special Committee on U.S. Policy in Southeast Asia, hearing September 1976, 6.

<sup>110</sup> Pregelj Vladimir, "U.S. Foreign Trade Sanctions Imposed for Foreign Policy Purposes in Force," Congressional Research Services, June 18, 1985.



for reparations, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, and American rapprochement with China. Together with the lingering uncertainty over the fate of American servicemen missing from the Vietnam War, these issues have continued to dog prospects for improved United States-Vietnam relations.

They say much about contrasting American and Vietnamese perceptions of what the war was all about and reflect some of Indochina's enduring geopolitical facts of life. The bureaucratic antagonism between the State Department and the National Security Council staff on a number of foreign policy issues, and the brittle relationship between Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, also complicated matters, particularly when normalization with China neared fruition in 1978.

President Carter seemed to look at an opening to Vietnam less as part of a new comprehensive Asian strategy for the United States than as symbolically writing finis to an unhappy chapter in history.<sup>111</sup> In an October 1976 memorandum setting out specific goals and priorities for a Carter foreign policy, Cyrus Vance placed heavy emphasis upon normalization of relations with Vietnam as "an opportunity for a new initiative...the Vietnamese are trying to find a balance between overdependence on either the Chinese or the

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<sup>111</sup> Nayan Chanda, Brother Enemy: The War after the war (N.Y.: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1986), 146.

Soviet Union. It is also to the interest of the United States that Vietnam not be so dependent."<sup>112</sup> Although Vance put normalization in the context of promoting the future development and stability of Southeast Asia, Vietnam was the dominant factor, and the 1976 memorandum made scant reference to the rest of the region. ASEAN, which had received declaratory importance beginning in 1977, began to take on more importance in American eyes only in 1978 after normalization showed signs of faltering and war in Cambodia loomed.

During 1976, United States and Vietnamese representatives held several official and private meeting on the missing-in-action issue. When President Carter took office, Vietnam was aware of American priorities, and the way had been paved for further contacts with the new administration. It is doubtful, however, that the Hanoi Politburo had by then really registered the depth of American feeling on this issue. Certainly they were ill-advised to use it as a bargaining chop, "bones for dollars," in the 1977-78 negotiations as had been done with the French after 1954.

President Carter's first foreign policy initiative was to send Leonard Woodcock, president of the United Auto Workers Union, to Vietnam to test Hanoi's attitudes on normalization and determine specifically what the

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<sup>112</sup> Cyrus Vance, Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 450.

Vietnamese were prepared to do to meet American requirements regarding MIAs. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and his assistant Secretary for East Asia and the Pacific, Richard Holbrooke, recognized that this was necessary in order to blunt domestic opposition to normalization from veterans groups and others outspokenly hostile to the victors in Hanoi. They believed the window of opportunity for such a move would not stay open long, and if the missing in action became a domestic political issue, normalization would be enormously complicated. Their judgment proved to be accurate.

Woodcock's delegation included Senator Mike Mansfield, Representative G.V. Montgomery, Ambassador Charles Yost, and human rights advocate Marian Wright Eldelman. Meeting with Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh and Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien, Woodcock made a strong case for putting the missing-in-action issue to rest through the Vietnamese providing full information and as many remains as possible. Then, the two countries could move on to new relationship that would dispel on both sides the war's pain and antagonism.

The Vietnamese at first held fast to their demand for economic assistance under the terms of the February 1973 Nixon letter to Pham Van Dong pledging "best efforts to contribute to postwar reconstruction in North Vietnam without any political conditions... in the range of \$3.25 billion in

grant aid over five years."<sup>113</sup> Woodcock rejected this summarily by pointing out that the 1973 Paris Agreement, the basis for Nixon's pledge, had been destroyed by North Vietnam's massive violations in 1974-1975. Eventually Phan Hien fell back to expressing a clear expectation of eventual humanitarian assistance in return for information on the missing in action. Woodcock deemed this response reasonable, as the demand for reparations under the defunct Paris Agreement appeared to have been dropped. Phan Hien announced the creation of a special office to seek information on the missing and to recover remains. He promised prompt action, making plain the Vietnamese position that this humanitarian gesture merited an American response. As the delegation departed, the Vietnamese presented them with the remains of twelve American servicemen as evidence of their sincerity, and Woodcock announced that the talk had "started a process which will improve the prospects for normalizing United States Vietnamese relations."<sup>114</sup>

On one level the Woodcock mission was a remarkable success. It had broken the ice on the United States-Vietnam relationship, given hope of further progress on sensitive American domestic concerns, and apparently established a favorable atmosphere for formal negotiations toward diplomatic

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<sup>113</sup> Congressional Record, June 22, 1977, 20920.

<sup>114</sup> The Washington Post, March 18, 1977.

relations. Yet there was also an element of imprecision and false hope. The seeds of miscalculation on both sides, which bedeviled subsequent negotiations, may have been planted in this initial encounter and by the almost euphoric reaction in Washington, including statements by the president himself.

The relationship between "humanitarian aid" and "full accounting" for MIAs was left vague as to timing and definition. Although Woodcock had tried to separate the issue, the Vietnamese clung to the notion of an inevitable quid pro quo quality to normalization. In Phan Hien's words after Woodcock had adamantly rejected linkage, "they are separate issues but closely interrelated."<sup>115</sup> The Vietnamese continued to operate on the presumption that the United States owed Vietnam economic assistance legally and morally, that American public opinion would pressure the administration, and that economic aid could cover a wide spectrum of things their shattered country needed. Woodcock's response may have encouraged this idea, as did President Carter's statement after the delegation's return that "if, in normalization of relations, there evolves trade, normal aid process, then I would respond well."<sup>116</sup> The president left open at what point aid might

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<sup>115</sup> Office of the White House Press Secretary, A Report on Trip to Vietnam and Laos, March 16-20, 1977 (Washington D.C.: March 23, 1977), 11.

<sup>116</sup> President Carter's Press Conference, March 24, 1977.

come as part of a normalization deal or after normalization had taken place. Whatever the definition, the Vietnamese chose to believe that the United States had not in fact foreclosed the possibility of large scale official aid.

In addition, there was no clear understanding on what Vietnam would do in the future to resolve the MIA problem. No plan of action was drawn up; the matter was left in the realm of imprecise Vietnamese good intentions and unclear American expectations.

Moreover, at this stage the Vietnamese mind-set was--in Lenin's words--"dizzy from success." Having conquered the South and humbled a superpower, while suffering immense human and material losses in the process, the Vietnamese leaders seemed blind to a central reality: Hanoi needed normalization far more than Washington. Having witnessed the power of the antiwar movement on behalf of their cause, the Vietnamese apparently believed that similar public pressure would force the Carter Administration's hand. Friends from the antiwar movement encouraged the Vietnamese to believe that the American guilt complex would yield multibillions of dollars in reparations as part of normalization.

Despite indications of flexibility, the Vietnamese remained adamant on aid. This attitude turned out to be an extraordinary blunder that cost valuable months during the 1977-1978 negotiations before reality finally dawned.

That was a year of frustration. American and Vietnamese negotiators met in Paris in May, June and December 1977. The United States had already pledged to support Vietnam's membership in the United Nations. During the first meeting in May, American representative Holbrooke proposed the unconditional establishment of relations, after which the United States trade embargo would be lifted. Phan Hien of Hanoi, however, again placed economic assistance front and center as a precondition to normalization, linking it to cooperation on the missing-in-action. Worse, he restated Vietnam's demands at a press conference after the meeting, producing immediate congressional reaction in the form of an amendment to the House of Representative's State Department authorization bill prohibiting use of any funds "for the purpose of negotiation reparations, aid or any other form of payment."<sup>117</sup> Later, the Senate followed suit with an amendment requiring United States opposition to loans to Vietnam by an international institution.<sup>118</sup>

Then, just prior to the June meeting, the Vietnamese published the text of the 1973 Nixon letter and rekindled their public campaign in the United States for aid. This was another tactical blunder. As Nayan Chanda points out,

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<sup>117</sup> U.S. Congressional Record, May 4, 1977, 13417

<sup>118</sup> U.S. Congressional Record, May 19, 1977, 15625.

"those who marched on the Pentagon calling for peace were not there now to demand help for Vietnam."<sup>119</sup> Hanoi's demands only served to arouse conservative criticism of the normalization gambit, and congressional actions narrowed still further Holbrooke's room for maneuver--the possibility of even humanitarian aid after normalization became remote. The window for normalization had begun to close earlier than expected. The June meeting produced information on 20 MIAs and from Phan Hien private expressions of flexibility as to the form and amount of United States assistance the Vietnamese expected.

Further movement was blocked when the State Department learned that the Vietnamese permanent representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Dinh Ba Thi, had received stolen classified documents from a United States Information Agency (USIA) officer who, through his amateur espionage, hoped to gain the release of his girlfriend from Vietnam.

When the USIA officer, Ronald Humphrey, and his associate, David Truong, were arrested in January 1978, and Ambassador Thi declared "persona non grata," any hope for a next Paris round in February and March was dashed. No negotiations were feasible during the well-publicized Humphrey-Truong trial, which lasted until June 1978. This small-time

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<sup>119</sup> Nayan Chanda, Brother Enemy: The War After the War (N.Y.: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1986).



spying escapade was a gratuitous blunder by Thi that cost Vietnam dearly on a vastly more important front. Not long after Thi's return from New York, Hanoi radio reported that Thi had been "killed in a road accident."<sup>120</sup>

During the winter of 1977-78, intelligence became available on the brutal incursions into southern Vietnamese border province by the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge regime of Pol Pot. Furthermore, Hanoi was preparing to invade Cambodia with the intent of deposing Pol Pot.<sup>121</sup> Given Thailand's vulnerability on its eastern border and presumed Vietnamese expansionist impulses, such an action raised alarming security implications for the region.

Another important matter was the quickening pace of Washington's normalization negotiations with the People's Republic of China. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and his Asia Deputy, Michel Oksenberg, held that normalization with Vietnam had become incompatible with normalization with China. In their eyes, the China gambit was far more valuable than a relationship with Vietnam. Early in the Carter administration Vance and Holbrooke expressed the view that a relationship with Hanoi would benefit long-term United States strategic interests, including the United States-Soviet and United States-China strategic equations. Brzezinski

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Vice Minister of Defense General Khue Doan, Report to the SRV Council of Ministers (Hanoi, Vietnam News Agency, June 19, 1989).

believed that normalizing with Vietnam, China's ancient enemy that was about to attack China's Cambodian ally, would damage and perhaps derail establishment of full diplomatic relations with China--there had been liaison offices in the respective capitals since 1973. He was ultimately joined in this view by Leonard Woodcock, who had become United States liaison office chief in Beijing.<sup>122</sup>

The decision of Hanoi to join COMECON of Soviet block in June 1978, was another nail in normalization's coffin. Long term, it would also make economic and political relations with the west far more difficult.

In July 1978, the Vietnamese did give public hints of flexibility by Phan Hien's statement in Tokyo that "a new forward looking attitude is being shown by the Vietnamese side." Phan Hien said Vietnam would not seek aid as a precondition for normalization but, when pressed to clarify, added "if they (Americans) come with something in their hands, they will be more welcomed than if they come with empty hands."<sup>123</sup> Congressional delegations visiting Hanoi received some MIA remains but could not pry a convincing renunciation of the aid demand from the top leadership.

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<sup>122</sup> William Dui Ker, China and Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>123</sup> Transcript of Hien Phan Press Conference, Brother Enemy, 270.

Thus the impression that Hanoi was still playing fast and loose on preconditions severely handicapped the State Department in its battle with the NSC staff over the compatibility of the twin-track normalization efforts with Beijing and Hanoi. Only on September 27, 1978, in New York, was Holbrooke finally able to extract from Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach the absolute acceptance of normalization of relations without preconditions that Holbrooke had sought for eighteen months. Acceptable, however, was "ad referendum" to Washington, and at this point only President Carter could resolve the conflict between the competing United States strategies toward China and Southeast Asia. On October 11, the president accepted the Brzezinski-Woodcock recommendation and decided to defer normalization with Vietnam. The reasons, given retrospectively, were concern over the implications expanding Soviet-Vietnamese ties, and the tide of "boat people refugees" fleeing repression in Vietnam. The "China card," however, was decisive.

On November 2, 1978, Vietnam and the Soviet Union signed a mutual security treaty. United States-Vietnam normalization collapsed before the year was out. With the December 1978 Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and the overthrow of Pol Pot's regime in January 1979, followed in February by China's three weeks punitive expedition into northern Vietnam, the

geopolitical chessboard was frozen. The Soviet installed a military presence at Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang, and the United States and China, which had consummated their normalization in December 1978, embarked on a multifaceted relationship that would have direct strategic impact upon both the Soviet and Vietnam.

Timing, of course, is all. In 1977 the time was ripe for Vietnam and United States to get together. A sympathetic new American administration was in office with some latitude in foreign affairs; feeling about MIAs was strong; and there was adequate support on Capital Hill for normalization. Vietnam was pro-Soviet but had not taken the plunge into COMECON or signed a security pact; there was genuine debate in the Vietnamese Politburo on future multiple links with the Capitalist world versus near-total reliance on the socialist bloc. China was aware of how normalization of United States-Vietnam relations might help blunt Vietnam's growing dependent on the Soviet Union. ASEAN was not opposed to normalization if it would help tame the Vietnamese tiger, and indeed its members warily pursued the same track.

Normalization? What if it had taken place? Historians will debate the wisdom of each side's judgment on the strategy and tactics of this aborted 1977-78 effort. Clearly, Vietnam missed an opportunity. Hanoi even could

have had normalization by mid 1977 on better terms--including good prospects for humanitarian aid later on--than it agreed to in late 1978.

Some analysts claim with no less certainty that the United States missed a valuable opportunity in mid 1978. Even granting Hanoi's blunders, prevarications, and ultimate intentions, it is arguable that the Carter administration in general, and the National Security Council staff in particular, approached the question of Vietnam in a narrow manner that gave unwarranted weight to Deng Xiaoping's hostility toward Vietnam and in the end shortchanged American strategic interests in the region.

There was an extremely painful question raising. If Vietnam had not removed Pol Pot, who would have done the job? Before 1978, few people in the West, including the United States, paid much attention to the reports of the Khmer Rouge's mass atrocities.<sup>124</sup> But the full horror of the Khmer Rouge's genocide was given publicity only when Vietnam occupied Cambodia. Neither Thailand, nor ASEAN, nor certainly the United States would have been prepared to intervene in Democratic Kampuchea's internal affairs to stop the horror.

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<sup>124</sup> Barron, John and Paul Anthony, Murder of a Gentle Land (N.Y.: Reader's Digest Press, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1977).

## American Foreign Policy Toward Vietnam under the Reagan and Bush

### Administrations

When normalization diplomacy ceased in 1978, Vietnam also ceased any semblance of cooperation on MIAs. Normalization was really dead in the water. On May 30, 1979, State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary Robert Oakley warned Vietnam Ambassador to the United Nation Ha Van Lau that Hanoi should "act with restraint in Southeast Asia, especially regarding Thailand" and made plain American concern "about the long term implications of the growing Soviet military presence in Vietnam." Subsequently the United States publicly rejected normalization as long as Vietnam occupied Cambodia and threatened its neighbors.<sup>125</sup>

In the early years of the Reagan Administration, there were some talks between America and Vietnam on humanitarian matters, and MIA discussions again became the main vehicle of communication with Vietnam. Three more issues were added to the dialogue: emigration of Vietnamese children of American fathers--the "Amerasian children" program; the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) permitting emigration of Vietnamese with connections to the United States; and the American attempt to gain the exit from Vietnam of former inmates of Vietnamese "reeducation camps."

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<sup>125</sup> Cyrus Vance, Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 123.

In February 1982, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Richard Armitage visited Hanoi to probe possibilities of renewing Vietnamese POW/MIA cooperation. The next two years saw expansion of technical level meetings, and in 1985 Vietnam permitted the excavation of a B-52 Crash site near Hanoi by American teams. About one hundred MIA remains were repatriated as a result of this fresh effort. Hanoi announced in 1985 that it would make a unilateral effort to resolve the MIA issue within two years. To test the water, in early 1986, Armitage and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Paul Wolfowitz led the highest level American executive branch delegation to Vietnam since the 1977 Woodcock mission. They received more assurances of unconditional cooperation on POW/MIA and some indications of greater flexibility on other issues.

On humanitarian matters--and on broader policy issues to the limited extent they were addressed at all--the Reagan administration's view of Indochina was shaped day-to-day by concern over the POW/MIA issue. Lurid publicity, stimulated in part through the "Rambo" movies, was given to rumors that American servicemen were still being held prisoner in Vietnam or elsewhere in Indochina, and reports of "live sightings" of prisoners caused greater concern. The administration was roundly criticized by activist veteran

groups for not doing more to rescue the supposed prisoners, and several private soldier-of-fortune forays into Laos were launched from Thai soil.

Vietnam found the humanitarian dialogue useful during this period; it was the only means to entice the United States into a more active role in Indochina affairs. On a broader level, Hanoi's longer-term strategy was to play American influence off against China-Soviet Union influence, and to seek American help to revive the Vietnamese economy after normalization. Humanitarian dialogue thus became the music for the United States-Vietnam mating dance.

Improvement of the bilateral climate, however, was valuable to the Vietnamese, and they listened attentively as every congressional or executive branch visitor to Hanoi reiterated the same theme: although humanitarian affairs were separate from politics, (i.e., Cambodia) normalization would proceed on those issues beforehand. It is fair to say that Hanoi came to understand this subtle nonlinkage and saw the political value of doing the honorable thing on these questions--at the proper time. It is not surprising that the pace of the United States-Vietnam humanitarian dialogue picked up after 1986 as the Cambodia stalemate began to break.

The POW/MIA issue, the Orderly Departure Program, and emigration for "reeducation inmates" still make up the substance of the abnormal bilateral



American agenda with Vietnam since 1975. The venues for discussions have included Hanoi, Geneva, Honolulu, Bangkok, New York, Ho Chi Minh City, and also some rather remote parts of the Vietnamese countryside (in the cases of MIA searches). As normalization unfolds, these particular humanitarian issues will continue to set the tone of the new bilateral relationship.

The missing-in-action question remains an important adjunct to the normalization process in President Bush's Administration. The administration is confident that the Vietnamese "...understand that the pace and scope of our relations would depend on continued progress on the POW/MIA issues. While this is a humanitarian issue which should be pursued separately on its merits, progress in this area must continue if there is to be political support in this country for a fully normalized relationship."<sup>126</sup>

The appointment in mid-1987 of retired General John W. Vessey, Jr., former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as Special Presidential Emissary for Humanitarian Affairs (by President Reagan and reappointed by President Bush) marked the beginning of a new phase in what is still the most neuralgia bilateral humanitarian issue--Americans missing in Southeast Asia. General Vessey visited Vietnam in August 1987 and obtained Hanoi's commitment to accelerate efforts to help find MIA remains and provide

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<sup>126</sup> Vice President Quayle's Speech before the Heritage Foundation (June 22, 1989).

information. In return, and for the first time, the United States agreed to look into certain humanitarian concerns of the Vietnamese as a result of the war. The nature of the dialogue was thereby changed. Since then, Vessey has been the senior point of contact with the Vietnamese.<sup>127</sup>

These results led to a decision by Vietnam to do what was necessary to satisfy the United States on the POW/MIA question. In an unprecedented display of cooperation, Hanoi accepted a standing American offer to conduct jointly funded searches in provincial locations believed to have MIA remains. As of July 31, 1989, 231 sets of remains had been recovered; 64 of these were positively identified as missing United States servicemen. The Vietnamese cooperated well, providing in addition numerous bits of information relevant to the fate of MIAs.

In late 1987, under the auspices of the Vessey mission, the first three American prosthetics teams visited Vietnam to survey the problem of the disabled. In February 1989, "Operation Smile," a private philanthropic medical organization based in Norfolk, Virginia, conducted an eight-day surgical visit to Hanoi during which American doctors performed cleft palate and burn scar reconstruction operations on 103 Vietnamese children.

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<sup>127</sup> The New York Times, September 6, 1987.

The American humanitarian commitment under the Vessey initiative was a gesture calculated to stimulate Vietnamese cooperation on POW/MIA, a sweetener the United States had not chosen to offer previously in such precise terms.

As for Amerasians, by summer 1989, about 7,000 Vietnamese of American parentage had left Vietnam for a new life in United States (with 13,000 addition relatives). The Amerasian program, after a difficult beginning, has worked quite well since 1982.

The Orderly Departure Program, which in fiscal year 1988 moved 12,230 Vietnamese to the United States, in addition to 6,838 to France, Canada, and elsewhere, presents more difficult problems. About 19,500 were moved in the fiscal year 1989 under the United States refugee quota. As many as 5,000 addition persons departed from Vietnam during 1989 for the United States with regular immigrant visas.<sup>128</sup>

The situation of former inmates of "reeducation camps" who seek to leave their country is especially poignant. About 11,000 such persons, most of whom held the rank of major and above in the army or an equivalent status in the police or civil bureaucracy of the former government, have declared their desire to emigrate. With immediate family members, they would number

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<sup>128</sup> Federick Brown, Second Change (New York, London: Council on Foreign Relations Inc., 1989), 109-112.

between 50,000 and 60,000. Some spent ten years or more under harsh conditions, and on being freed are barred from any but menial employment. Their children have limited educational opportunities, and other restrictions are attached to their families. These former inmates are likely to be third-class citizens for the rest of their lives.

In principle, the United States should accept for immigration any Vietnamese who is stigmatized by his previous association with the American presence. In 1984, President Reagan pledged to accept all reeducation camp inmates and their families.

However, the absence of progress between August 1988 and July 1989 in arranging emigration by former reeducation camp inmates is attributable in part to Hanoi's demand that the United States guarantee that Vietnamese-Americans (specially former inmates), if permitted to go to the United States, not threaten the Socialist Republic of Vietnam security.<sup>129</sup> The United States can enforce laws that might be applicable to armed incursions into Vietnam from American territory, and it can assure Hanoi that American policy does not condone such activity from any sources. But obviously no administration is going to abridge the rights of free speech, advocacy, assembly, or other

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<sup>129</sup> Foreign Broadcast Information Service East Asia, (December 1, 1987), 49.

constitutional rights of American citizens. The Vietnamese have been bluntly informed to this effect.

### Vietnamese-American Factor

There are more than 1.7 million Vietnamese who now live outside their country in the West. Another 250,000 have fled to China since 1975. Nearly one million live in the United States, with most of the remainder in France and Canada. Their adjustment generally has been excellent. Vietnamese workers have acquired a reputation for dedication, an ability to learn quickly, and for being highly intelligent. Vietnamese students tend to rank at or near the top of their secondary school and college classes.<sup>130</sup>

The Vietnamese-American community already wields influence in the politics of certain localities. Vietnamese language newspapers have sprung up throughout California and in the greater Washington D.C. area or elsewhere around the country.

The community's attitude toward imminent normalization and the dimensions of a new relationship with the home country is split, according to the judgment of Vietnamese-American activists in touch with sentiment in the various parts of the United States. Very few approve of the Hanoi regime; hatred and contempt is the prevailing sentiment. Yet when it comes to the

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<sup>130</sup> Federick Brown, Second Change (New York, London: Council on Foreign Relations Inc., 1989), 114.

practicalities of dealing with the regime, attitudes are confused and conflicted. Most Vietnamese-Americans, being political realists, seem to accept the inevitability of normalized diplomatic relations in the near future. Some are even preparing to do business, as indicated by the numerous "Viet Kieu" (overseas Vietnamese) circulating in Ho Chi Minh City as guests of the Chamber of Commerce. Supporting that direction, in early 1992, the former Vice-President of South Vietnam, General Nguyen Cao Ky, announced that he favored lifting a punishing U.S. trade embargo and restoring diplomatic ties with Vietnam. In a discussion on Vietnam by the World Forum at San Jose, California, on October 29, 1992, Ky urged his compatriots to "let bygones be bygones" and begin rebuilding their homeland. In his speech, he clearly sided with those who feel it's in the best interest of United States to normalize relations with Vietnam now in the hope that trade and economic reform will spark political reform. Ky also said:

The people (Vietnamese) will be willing to make the biggest sacrifices and accept the harshest national discipline if they believe that their leaders truly care about the country and about them. Ten, twenty, thirty years is not a long time for the task of national reconstruction, and they are willing to wait that long.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Ky Cao Nguyen, "World Forum Discussion on Vietnam," October, 29, 1992.

All Vietnamese-Americans have relatives and friends still in Vietnam, and a sense of uneasiness about their own prosperity and opportunities compared with the poverty and deprivation of their countrymen is part of the Vietnamese psyche in America. A fair number of the ones here would probably admit that since the United States is not going to try to overthrow the Hanoi regime, normalization is the only avenue for improving the lot of their mother country.

A minority of Vietnamese-Americans advocate minimal dealings with the Hanoi regime and would like indefinite political ostracism and economic isolation with the hope of popular upheaval in Vietnam, and even the disintegration of the communist party, if possible. This vocal group includes members of the nationalist parties formerly active in Vietnam and persons who served in reeducation camps who escaped by boat or emigrated under the ODP more recently. There are some strong voices among these groups. The strongest perhaps is from the National United Front For Liberation of Vietnam, a political party formed in 1980 to absorb Vietnamese at home and abroad into a mass organization to free Vietnam from the communist regime.<sup>132</sup> In the editorial message of their newsletter, the National United Front For Liberation of Vietnam stated:

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<sup>132</sup> Vietnam Insight Newsletter, Vol. III, No. 12, December 1992.

In order to maintain control of the political scene, the regime (Hanoi) has been forced to make some compromises on economics. The Vietnamese economy is on the verge of collapse, and Hanoi is desperate for aid. In other words, no matter how destabilizing it may be, Hanoi feels that it has more to gain from normalization of relations than it has to lose. We believe that freedom and human rights should be preconditions to any discussion on normalization of relations.<sup>133</sup>

Raising the same concern, in a open letter to their compatriots, the Vietnam Restoration Party, another party founded on December 23, 1978 in Los Angeles, California, stated:

In light of this struggle , the Vietnam Restoration Party urgently calls upon our compatriots inside Vietnam to firmly persist in their protest against the Vietnamese Communist Party's monopoly power. All means must be employed, and all potential forces must be mobilized, in order to weaken the machinery of this current government, thereby undermining its control over the nation.

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<sup>133</sup> "Human Rights on the Roadmap," Vietnam Insight Newsletter, Vol. III, No. 2, December 1992.



...This time in history is the best opportunity for the Vietnamese community overseas to convince the governments and peoples of the nations around the world to continue their political pressure and trade embargo against the Vietnamese Communist government. Normal diplomatic relations should not be established and the trade embargo should not be lifted until the Vietnamese Communist Party carries out all of the essential steps toward the democratization of Vietnam.<sup>134</sup>

The community is currently engaged in an internal debate on how best to face the prospect of normalized relations. Boycotts and incidents of violence have been perpetrated against individuals or newspapers speaking in favor of normalization.<sup>135</sup> More people realize that Hanoi, once its embassy opens in Washington, will take advantage of the division among the expatriates, and believe that they must therefore try to speak with one voice. While in a democracy there are many discordant voices, responsible community leaders want a consensus on controversial policy issues in the future in order to maintain a common front.

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<sup>134</sup> Appeal of The Vietnam Restoration Party to Inland and Oversea Vietnamese Compatriots.

<sup>135</sup> Toai Doan, who has expressed support for normalization, was shot by unknown assailants on August 19, 1989, in Fresno, California.

The attitudes of the Vietnamese-American community will not determine the pace of normalization. However, they will help shape the administration's thinking on specific aspects of our bilateral relations, notably human rights and the provision of financial support to families still in Vietnam. After normalization, such issues are likely to become a source of even greater friction. In the long run, contact with the oversea Vietnamese communities, particularly in America, will be a significant external influence in the evolution of Vietnam society at home.

### **The Cambodia Issue**

For more than a decade, Cambodia's neighbors--members of ASEAN, particularly Thailand, Vietnam--had not suffered quite enough to throw in their hands and seek a negotiated political solution. In 1989 a political settlement in Cambodia, comprehensive or otherwise, appeared to be on the horizon. The "external aspects" of Cambodia's problem seemed near solution simply because the conflict's patrons, China and the Soviet Union, concluded that their broader interests would be better served by removing this regional irritation from their bilateral dialogue. After three decades of foreign intervention and the hideous Pol Pot years, the Cambodia people are certainly ready for peace.

The question is, are their leaders ready and what price are they prepared to pay? Despite external signs of change for the better, internal peace seemed not at hand, and it is entirely possible that Cambodia still slip into the agony of civil war. The four Cambodian factions have not agreed among themselves about the internal aspects of a settlement (the future of political, military, economic and social shape of the country) and even the transitional arrangements necessary to achieve it.

The Bush administration inherited from its predecessors a Cambodia policy that was cautious, passive, and reactive to the inclinations of ASEAN and China. Through Thailand, the Reagan administration provided financial support to the Non-Communist resistance, and permitted the Thai and others to carry out the actual organization, sustenance, and strengthening of the resistance forces. By standing at one remove from the dirty business of insurgency, the United States had little ability to shape the military or political efficacy of the Noncommunist resistance; during the early and mid-1980s, this seemed perfectly agreeable to American interests. But regardless of this attitude, its status as a superpower, its rhetorical support for the Noncommunist resistance and ASEAN, as well as its funding, made the United States a player. In the end, the United States may have have gotten

the worst of both worlds--a gradual political commitment to an involvement without being able to shape its eventual dimensions.

The Reagan administration did not take into account the long lead time needed to prepare the Noncommunist resistance for participation in the negotiated political settlement. Until 1987 negotiations seemed a long way off. The administration turned a blind eye to the implications of the residual power of the Khmer Rouge. When the stalemate showed signs of breaking, the U.S. seemed reluctant to discuss with ASEAN--most importantly, Thailand--measures to curb the Khmer Rouge. More interested in strengthening the "strategic relationship" with China, the Reagan Administration declined to make the future of Cambodia and the fate of the Khmer Rouge priority issues in the bilateral dialogue with Beijing.

Goaded by congressional and public realization that the Khmer Rouge still posed a threat, and because of movement toward negotiations, the Bush administration began to address the Cambodia issue soon after taking office in 1989. In preparation for the July ASEAN ministerial conference, the administration formulated the general requirements of a settlement: a verified and complete withdrawal of all Vietnamese military forces, effective safeguards against the return to power of the Khmer Rouge, and genuine self-determination for the Cambodia people.

The administration has placed its weight behind the concept of an interim coalition government under Prince Sihanouk which will lead to free elections and genuine stability in Cambodia, and prevent the return to the Khmer Rouge "killing fields." It also intends to strengthen the Noncommunist Resistance "in as many ways as possible... to increase the political strength of the Noncommunist Resistance in the peace progress while simultaneously giving it the strength to hold its own in the event of a Khmer Rouge attempt to seize power."<sup>136</sup>

Statements by the secretary of State at the ASEAN ministerial conference in Brunei indicate that the United States would be prepared to support a government in which the People's Republic of Kampuchea has an important, if not leading role.

The Bush Administration, consequently, has been placed in the predicament of espousing public support for a political entity, the Noncommunist Resistance, which has little capability to defend itself either military or politically, in a rough-and-tumble fight, or so it appeared in the relatively early stages of the Paris Conference. Whatever, with the Cambodia end game moving forward, the Bush Administration had to work with what it had and chose carefully what additional measures it wished to adopt. The

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<sup>136</sup> Vice President Quayle's speech before The Heritage Foundation Asian Studies Center, "Conference on U.S. Policy in Asia: Challenges for 1990," June 22, 1989.

emphasis should be upon multilateral diplomacy, international cooperation, and use of the tools already at our disposal. Finally, all parties, internal and external, agree on the need for an internationalization of a Cambodia settlement. The problem already involves many countries directly and is a fixture on the United Nations General Assembly's Calendar year after years. Opinions differ on what form future international involvement should take. Gaining precise agreements on this aspect of a settlement may determine how soon peace comes to Cambodia and how long it will last. The international conference in Paris, which opened on July 30, 1989, appears to be the key venue for this process.<sup>137</sup>

The International Conference on Cambodia opened with the foreign ministers of France and Indonesia as co-chairmen, and with United Nations Secretary General Perez de Cuellar present. In attendance were the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and the six members states of ASEAN. The four Khmer factions, after initial wrangling over the right to represent their country, agreed to occupy jointly the chair for Cambodia.

The conference established three committees to pursue specific aspects of a comprehensive solution: creation of an international control mechanism to

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<sup>137</sup> Frederick Brown, Second Change (New York: The Council on Foreign Relation Inc., 1989), 93.

monitor military disengagement and supervise elections; securing Cambodia territorial integrity and neutrality; and repatriation of Cambodian refugees from Thailand and provision of post-settlement reconstruction aid.

The conference sent a fact-finding mission to Cambodia and to Thai border camps under Lieutenant General Martin Vadset, Chief of staff of the United Nations Truce and Supervision Organization (UNTSO). On August 30, 1989, the conference issued a final communique announcing the indefinite suspension of negotiations. Although the meeting had "achieved progress in elaborating a wide variety of elements," the participants concluded it was "not yet possible" to achieve a comprehensive settlement.

The French and Indonesian co-chairmen were to lend their "good offices" to ongoing efforts to reach a comprehensive settlement and were to conduct consultations with the various parties with a view to reconvening the conference in spring 1990.

Beyond Sihanouk's insistence that the Khmer Rouge be included in a transition government, the Paris conference foundered on several other major issues:

- The precise composition of an international control mechanism;
- The organization of a cease-fire;

- The use of the word "genocide" in describing Cambodia's past history in a final declaration; and

- The future of Vietnam settlers in Cambodia.

In addition, both China and Sihanouk objected to the use of the term "national reconciliation" in the final communique, since their position remained that the Hun Sen Government was a "Vietnamese puppet" without authority.

The United States Chief delegate, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Richard Solomon, blamed both of Cambodia's two communist factions for the lack of progress, noting that neither was in a compromising mood and as a result: "...if there is no constraint at all, clearly there is a basis for unfettered civil war."<sup>138</sup> Solomon added that the United States opposed such a development even though the unwillingness of the parties to participate in a coalition structure appeared to be forcing events in that direction. At the same time, in the absence of a comprehensive political settlement, the United States opposed creation of an International Control Mechanism (ICM) that would lend credibility to the Vietnamese withdrawal.

The suspension of the Paris Conference deepened the policy dilemma of the United States. The risk of placing American hopes so firmly on Sihanouk

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<sup>138</sup> The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Washington Time, August 1-30, 1989.



was glaringly evident. With the negotiating process suspended, the Bush administration again faced the question of increasing its material support for a Noncommunist Resistance without a coherent political program whose ability to influence events now lay primarily in military association with the Khmer Rouge. Yet who was there to place our bets on other than Sihanouk? The alternative seemed to be to adopt a hand-off policy, in effect to let ASEAN--and China--decide the fate of the Noncommunist Resistance. Worse yet, there seemed no effective instrument except the Khmer Rouge to unseat Hun Sen or drive him to the bargaining table one more. Once more the welfare of the Cambodian people seemed to be the least important concern of those forces--Communist and Noncommunist alike--seeking to shape Cambodia's political future.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

#### The Lessons of the Vietnam War

After nearly two decades, when the last helicopter rose to fly from the roof of the doomed United States embassy in Saigon, the Americans hoped they finally left Vietnam behind them. For years afterward there was a widespread effort in the United States to put the Indochina experience out of mind. In the late 1970s, Mike Mansfield, the professor of Far Eastern studies who became United States Senate majority leader and then ambassador to Japan, told an English radio audience:

It seems to me the American people want to forget Vietnam and not even remember that it happened. But the cost was 55,000 dead, 303,000 wounded, \$150 billion. With some of us it will never be forgotten because it was one of the most tragic, if not the most tragic, episodes in American history. It was unnecessary, uncalled for, it wasn't tied to our security or a vital interest. It was

just a misadventure in a part of the world which we should have keep our nose out of.<sup>140</sup>

Today the desire to forget Vietnam seems to have given way to a desire to learn about it, specifically to learn how to avoid getting involved in such disastrous misadventures again.

Increasingly one hears appeals to the lessons of Indochina--generally if inaccurately referred to as the lessons of Vietnam--in support or in opposition to current foreign policy initiatives around the world. There are certain undisputed practical lessons that can be drawn from the history of American involvement in the Indochina's affairs, but most of these are of an operational character--those relating to the techniques and technologies of warfare--and as such lie outside the realm of this study. I propose to direct our attention solely to the question of whether or not the Indochina experience can provide lessons about where and in what circumstances America ought to intervene militarily in foreign conflicts.

Can one draw lessons--in this broad policy sense--from history? Some professional historians say no, and even those who say yes caution that it must be done with the utmost care. Politicians often measure historical

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<sup>140</sup> Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff, Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam (N.Y.: Hill and Wanf, 1978), 67.

analogies; policymakers frequently misinterpret history and see parallels to current situations in past situations that were fundamentally different.

The future is unpredictable, and even history is uncertain and subject to revision by successive generations of historians. Yet to the extent that we now agree as to what should have been done at junctures in the past--as we are in general agreement that England and France ought not to have appeased Hitler at Munich, that the lesson of Munich is the need to oppose totalitarian dictators--history provides us with a common point of departure for public discourse about policy issues facing us today. It gives us an area of agreement about the past from which to build toward agreement about the present and future.

There is no question about what the central lesson of Munich is, only about whether or not it applies in a given situation. With increasing frequency we are told what Vietnam ought to have taught us about ourselves, about our allies and adversaries, and about the proper means of American foreign policy. This assumption seems to be that Americans share a common understanding of what happened in Indochina and what we ought or ought not to have done there.

Did the American government really know, for example, what it was doing in Indochina? Did it have the knowledge and the accurate information that was needed in order to make the right decisions?

In 1983, the knowledgeable George E. Reedy, former press secretary to President Lyndon Johnson, blamed the ignorance of Americans, from the President on down, for the errors that were committed in Indochina. Also in 1983, Senator Christopher Dodd (D. Conn.) drew a parallel between Indochina and Central America: "The painful truth is that many of our highest officials know as little about Central America in 1983 as we knew about Indochina in 1963." The lesson is that both government officials and private citizens should be better informed about world affairs.

In any event it is by no means universally conceded that we did not know what we were doing. Barbara Tuchman is among those who do not agree that we lacked the knowledge to make the right decisions in Indochina. In her book, The March of Folly, she claims that "ignorance was not a factor in American endeavor in Vietnam."<sup>141</sup> Instead, she concludes that American policy in that country was a principal illustration of governmental folly. By folly, Mrs Tuchman means irrationality: the pursuit of policies that run contrary to self interest by people who knew they were doing so. She writes

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<sup>141</sup> Barbara Tuchman, The March of Folly (N.Y.: Alfred Knopf, 1984), 236.

that in Vietnam, "All the conditions and reasons precluding a successful outcome were recognized or foreseen"<sup>142</sup> by American officials who willfully refused to draw conclusions or to act upon the basis of what they knew.

Support for her premise that American officials were well-informed of the realities of Vietnam is offered by Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts in their 1979 book, The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked. They assert that, throughout the various administrations involved in the Vietnam conflict, "virtually all views and recommendations were considered and virtually all important decisions were made without illusions about the odds for success."<sup>143</sup> The Pentagon Papers confirm that on the whole the American intelligence community supplied the government with accurate information, and that the Joint Chiefs of Staff took a more realistic view of American prospects than did the National Security Council and other civilian bodies. The lesson here would seem to be that the CIA and the Joint Chiefs should have a greater role in decision-making in the future, and civilian politicians less, but that is hardly an attractive idea for a democracy. For Barbara Tuchman, then, the lesson of Vietnam is that in the future the American

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Leslie Geld and Richard Betts, The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1979).

electorate ought to choose candidates for high office who have more courage and character.

Closely related to the dispute over whether ignorance was a key factor--either in general or at one particular level of government--is the argument over how Americans got involved so deeply in Vietnam. Some see it as having been a gradual process in which the government ended up somewhere it did not intend to go to when it began the process. Thus Representative Henry Gonzalez (D. Tex.) in the course of the congressional debate in March 1983, remarked that "Those of us who remember the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution know just how big a seemingly innocuous commitment can become."<sup>144</sup> Using the same illustration, during the War Power debate in the same year, Congressman Gene Snyder (D. Ky.) claimed that, "Obviously, even after he had the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in his pocket, it was not the President's intention to use it to expand the American presence in Vietnam."<sup>145</sup>

Theodore Sorenson, special counsel to President John F. Kennedy, wrote to The New York Times in August 1983 that, "As J.F.K. learned in Vietnam, each incremental increase in American military advisers and assistance, every escalation about "dominoes" or "national interest," makes it

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<sup>144</sup> David Fromkin and James Chace, "What Are The Lessons of Vietnam?" Foreign Affairs, Vol. 63, No. 4, 1985, 726.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

harder for us to reverse course."<sup>146</sup> Harder, presumably, because the political costs of doing so may be higher than an administration is willing to pay.

Many supporters of the American involvement in Indochina blame the media for stopping the war just at the point, they claim, when America had it won. General William Westmoreland, the commander of the troops, is only one of those who claim that the war was won militarily, but was lost because the United States no longer was willing to stay the course. As a witness in Westmoreland's lawsuit against CBS, Lieutenant General Daniel O. Graham, who directed the intelligence arm of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Vietnam War time, told the Jury that in 1968 the enemy in Vietnam was "whipped"--and that the United States lost the war later only because of political decisions and the press. Public opinion polls did show that a majority of the American public also believed that the war could have been won if we had had the willpower to continue with it.

General Westmoreland and his colleagues may be right when they say they lost the war on America's television screens. But if so, what have we learned from the experience? So long as the American public is free to read the news in newspapers, hear the news on the radio, and above all, watch the

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<sup>146</sup> The New York Times, August 1983.



news on television, can American armed forces ever wage and win a war again? President Ronald Reagan and President George Bush did not think so: during the United States intervention in Grenada (1984) and in the Iraq War (1991) press coverage were limited to the point of nonexistence. But except perhaps in the cases of the lightning operations such as that in Grenada and in Iraq, there is no way that a free society can accept such controls on its flow of information.

President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger believed that they knew the answer to the problem during their terms in office. They continue to believe that they succeeded in negotiating a satisfactory end to the war. In their view, it was the legislative rather than the executive branch of the government that was to blame for the Indochina disaster. In this respect, the role of the Congress in the final collapse of the American endeavor in Southeast Asia has come under strong fire. In his 1983 Wall Street Journal article, Nixon wrote that, "Between 1973 and 1975, Congress cut the arms budget for South Vietnam by 76%. The Soviet Union on other hand, doubled its shipment of arms to North Vietnam. It is not surprising that in 1975 the North Vietnamese...rolled into Saigon." Ellsworth Bunker, who was the United States ambassador to Saigon then, said much the same thing a year later in an interview with The New York Times, that by the end of 1972 "we

had achieved our objective, made it possible for the South Vietnamese to defend themselves." But, when "Congress decided not to put up any more money," South Vietnam's defeat became "inevitable."<sup>147</sup>

However, it is very much the president's job not merely to rally but also to sustain the Congress and the people behind his policies--and not to engage the United States in a war unless he can do so. If the Congress and the nation fail to back him, it might be his fault, not theirs.

Reagan's Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, wrote in his 28 November 1984 speech:

Before the United States commits combat forces abroad, there must be some reasonable assurance we will have the support of the American people and their elected representatives in Congress. We cannot fight a battle with the Congress at home while asking our troops to win a war overseas or, as in the case of Vietnam, in effect asking our troops not to win but just to be there.<sup>148</sup>

Concerning the nature of the enemy, in a statement about the lesson we learned in Indochina, former United States Ambassador to the United Nations Kirkpatrick wrote in May 1983, that, "we didn't know who the Vietcong

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<sup>147</sup> The New York Times, December 1972.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

were," but we "know now." She went on to state that, "western public opinion was manipulated into believing that the National Liberation Front... was a spontaneous product of deeper social causes," but that we now know that the Vietcong were sent into the South by North Vietnam, and the regimes they have established in Indochina are brutal, savage dictatorships. She wrote, "...the Congress that cut off aid to Vietnam could say that it did not guess what would follow."<sup>149</sup> Insofar as Ambassador Kirkpatrick distinguishes the moral difference between the Indochina regimes the United States backed and those backed by our adversaries, she is undoubtedly correct.

From a very different perspective, former Secretary of State Alexander Haig, like Mrs Kirkpatrick and Mr. Nixon, take the view that our undoing in Vietnam was in misunderstanding the nature of the enemy. The primary adversary, he believes, was Moscow, and that is where we should have gone from the very start. Haig writes in his memoirs Caveat: "If in the beginning we had been willing to go to the Soviet Union and demand an end to the aggression of Hanoi, and if Moscow had believed in our determination, there might very well have been no war."<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> The Washington Post, April 17, 1983.

<sup>150</sup> The New York Times, December 1972.

A very different picture--the mirror opposite of what General Haig and his former superiors imagine the nature of the enemy to have been--emerges from a reading of the Pentagon Papers. In this picture, North Vietnam made the decisions, and played off its Russian and Chinese sponsors against one another so as to retain its independence. As rivals for leadership of world communism, neither the Soviet Union nor China could afford to appear less ardent than the other in supporting Hanoi. By playing off one against the other, Hanoi had gained freedom of action. Therefore it was Hanoi alone that was free to stop the fighting.

For many Americans on both sides of the political fence, however, the cardinal mistake made by the United States concerned not our assessment of our enemies, but our allies, and specially the nature of the various Indochinese regimes that the Congress and American people were asked to support throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. One set of such criticisms is based on the belief that--in Saigon and elsewhere--our government locked us into opposition to the forces of change and thus allowed those forces to be captured by Communism.

General Westmoreland, on the other hand, believes that the government we initially supported in Vietnam was authentically indigenous. In his opinion we were right to support it and wrong to turn against it. In the

General's words, "Our country made a grievous mistake... in getting involved, not only in encouraging the South Vietnamese to overthrow Diem, but participating in that effort. And I think morally that pretty well locked us into Vietnam, because there was no leadership standing in the wing to take over." Thus the war was Americanized, and the Saigon government lost its indigenous roots and appeal.

Yet the late Henry Cabot Lodge, then the United States Ambassador to South Vietnam, advised Washington that the war could not be won if Diem and his family remained in power. The debate still continues as to whether or not Lodge was right; but if he was, we were at least as likely to be defeated with Diem as without him. Yet it was not only the Diem government that many United States critics believed was impossible to sustain. Those that followed--particularly the governments of Generals Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu--also drew condemnation from American critics of the war for being corrupt, and inefficient.

Many of us would agree with Ambassador Kirkpatrick and Mr. Nixon that the regimes America supported in Indochina were less evil than the regimes America opposed; as a moral matter we were right to choose the lesser of two evils. But there is a practical side to the issue too, and it can be expressed simply by saying that we want to win. What was wrong in

backing a weak, inefficient regime against a brutally powerful, fanatically puritanical, ruthlessly efficient adversary was that our side was likely to lose.

It is fundamental that when we intervene abroad we should do so on behalf of a cause powerful enough so that we stand a chance of winning. If we are among those who believe that none of the Saigon regimes were either strong or popular enough to stand alone without massive United States assistance, then the only lesson would seem to be that there are regions of the world in which local communist forces cannot be countered or contained. But if one believes it is vital to America interests to prevent such areas from succumbing to communism, then one emerges, not with a lesson, but with an apparently hopeless dilemma.

An attractive theory that points a way out of this dilemma emerges if we redefine the problem that faced us in Indochina. In 1961 John Kenneth Galbraith, then ambassador to India, advised President Kennedy against becoming involved in Vietnam militarily, but suggested that if we restricted our efforts to economic and social programs we could still strengthen the Diem government.

But, it is hard to see how any perceived threat could have been blunted by other than military means. And if the threat in Vietnam was, in fact, posed by the North Vietnamese army and its Vietcong ally, then how could economic

and social aid to South Vietnam have averted that threat? Another aspect that needs to be pointed out is that North Vietnam was poor too, but won the war nonetheless. And the vast amounts of money brought into South Vietnam by the American armed forces seem if anything to have demoralized the country, and to have destroyed the equilibrium of its society rather than to have strengthened it. If close examination of both our adversaries and our local allies provides us with no useful lesson of the Indochina experience, then we are left only with the question of why we intervened in Vietnam in the first place.

Roughly two decades ago a poll was taken of American army generals that showed 70% of them believed that it was not clear what America had hoped to achieve in the Indochina war. The lesson, according to 91% of them, was that if the United States ever were to fight such a war again, it should begin by deciding what it wanted to accomplish. In fact, the United States did pursue defined objectives in Indochina; the trouble was that the United States kept changing its mind as to what they were. From first to last there was consistent agreement only about what our objective was not: we were not fighting to make South Vietnam into an American colony. Unfortunately, that is exactly what a great many people thought that we were doing.

John Foster Dulles was a strong opponent of British and French colonialism, which he viewed with considerable contempt, but he initiated policy in Indochina that was viewed as colonialist too. Indeed, some opponents of American policy believe that colonialism was the fatal flaw in that policy.

What real vital national interest were we fighting in Vietnam to protect? Vietnam and Indochina do not prove the case one way or another. And Vietnam only raised the question of whether the American people are prepared to take on a major fight, if vital national interests are not at stake. Indeed, the American decision to intervene in Indochina was predicated on the view that the United States had a duty to look beyond its purely national interests. In this view, the United States has assumed global responsibilities that require it to serve the interests of mankind. The decision to intervene against perceived communist aggression in Indochina was made in Washington in the name of the whole non-communist world's need for international security and world order.

William Bundy, deputy assistant and assistant Secretary of Defense (1961-1964) and assistant Secretary of State (1964-1967) said in an interview that in the early 1960s, "the theory of containment was still the essential way of thinking." He said in Indochina "it was essentially what we were doing.



We were seeking to prevent the Chinese version of communism from expanding into the area of East Asia."<sup>151</sup>

Senator Robert Kasten (R. Wis.), stressing the analogy between El Salvador and Vietnam in the spring of 1983, said:

... But what must be remembered is that in reality Vietnam represents a successful case of Soviet aggression and the imposition of a brutal tyranny over the people of Vietnam and Kampuchea. I agree that there should be "no more Vietnam" and the United States must do what is necessary to prevent a repetition of that horror.<sup>152</sup>

What Vietnam proved, in this view, is that the consequences of communist aggression are so terrible for the people who fall under communist rule as a result of it, that the United States always and everywhere must act to prevent blatant acts of aggression by communism. This view rests on the premise that we have a "moral" duty to act. The troubling aspect is that moral judgments are not always universally shared. They often are subjective matters of conscience. There are many who view it as immoral for one country, if unprovoked, to intervene in the affairs of another. There are

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<sup>151</sup> David Fromkin and James Chace, "What Are The Lessons of Vietnam?" Foreign Affairs, Vol. 63, No 4, Spring 1985, 723-741.

<sup>152</sup> Congressional Record, 98th Congress, 1st session, April 27, 1983, p. H7587.

many who judge America's war to be morally wrong. It is feasible for the United States to pursue a policy grounded in morality only of the moral issues in question are one upon which Americans are agreed.

In every respect the Indochina war was a profound experience, not only for the men and women who fought there but for all of us who lived through it. It was also an intensely personal, subjective experience. Not only are there diverse political and historical visions of what happened, but there are also diverse moral conclusions that persist.

The common theme running through most of the retrospective judgments about Indochina is the assumption that once the lesson of Vietnam is pointed out, people will see it for themselves. The Vietnam war was surely the most tragic episode in the history of the United States in this century. If we could all look at that terrible experience through the same pair of eyes, it could teach us much. But we cannot, so it cannot. That may be the final tragedy of the Vietnam war.<sup>153</sup>

#### **How to Normalize Relations between the United States and Vietnam?**

Some American politicians and public groups may demand preconditions on a variety of issues, before establishment of diplomatic relations with

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<sup>153</sup> David Fromkin and James Chace, "What Are The Lessons of Vietnam?" Foreign Affairs, Vol. 63, No 4, Spring 1985, 746.

Vietnam, and before lifting the embargo. On the opposite side, it would be unwise to present Hanoi with a list of "demands" or new preconditions.

Once the political decision has been made, negotiations could last a week, or they could last several months. During this process, clear understandings on continued Vietnamese cooperation on the humanitarian issues (POW/MIA, ODP, Amerasians, reeducation camp inmates...) should be established as reasonable elements of a healthy and positive new relationship. The negotiations that set the term of "fully normalized relations" should include POW/MIAs: joint search, access to records that could determine the fate of the missing, an access to locations where Americans have been reportedly seen alive. In return, the Vietnamese should be able to expect continued, and probably expanded, programs of private and government-facilitated medical and other humanitarian assistance. Judging by Hanoi's actions over the past years, it is reasonable to assume that "unlinked" progress on POW/MIA will continue to move on its own track.

The children of American fathers from the war era have a special claim, not the least of which is entitlement to American citizenship. From Hanoi's political perspective, there would seem to be no reason why those Americans who want to come to the United States after normalization should not be

allowed to do so. The United States should expect, and make explicit in pre-normalization negotiations, that this would be the case.

In the course of negotiating normalization of relations, the United States should reach an unambiguous agreement with Hanoi on exit permits for all former reeducation camp inmates and other individuals of special concern.

The practical question is, how much leverage can be feasibly applied to obtain guarantees on issues other than Cambodia, POW/MIAs and Amerasians? The administration will have to study these and related questions carefully. Certain observations on this process would seem in order.

Diplomatic representation should be established at the embassy level with ambassadors present. There is no sensible half-way point. An "interests section," charge d'affairs status, or liaison office arrangements would inhibit the kind of full and authoritative exchanges that it is to our benefit to have with the Vietnamese.

Interests sections in Hanoi and Washington were proposed in the Congress in mid-1988 as a way of tackling humanitarian issues in the absence of a Cambodia settlement; the proposal was resisted by the Reagan Administration and eventually dropped by Congress. This idea makes even less sense now. Negotiations determining the building of Cambodia, and in

reality the direction of Indochina, are underway with the participation of all the major players in the region. And most bilateral humanitarian issues are moving ahead satisfactorily. That was not the case in mid-1988.

Looking beyond our current concerns, the United States should inform Vietnam that human rights considerations will be central, not peripheral, in the conduct of bilateral relations. These include our support for a free flow of information into Vietnam, relaxation of emigration controls and travel generally, greater respect for the civil rights of ethnic minorities, and an amelioration of the status of those in the South still suffering discrimination because of the war. Moreover, the United States should take a strong position on freedom of religion in Vietnam--the practice of Buddhism and Christianity, an unfettered operation of religious institutions. The latter should be permitted to receive private financial contributions from the United States in pursuit of traditional functions such as education and social welfare. Chaplains, monks, and other clerics who were imprisoned for their beliefs should be released and their rights restored. Before normalization occurs the Hanoi government should be left in no doubt that the regime's human rights performance will significantly affect the future course of relations.

Some observers have proposed that the United States maintain all or part of existing trade and investment restrictions until Vietnam complies with

United States requirements on a variety of issues, notably Cambodia and human rights observance. Concerning the former, full implementation of a Cambodia settlement and continued adherence to its terms by Vietnam is and must continue to be an international concern.

Once a satisfactory settlement is reached, however, it would be all but impossible to perpetuate United States sanctions against the policies of friends and allies on economic and trade relations. The United States could, however, use its influence in the Asian Development Bank and other international financial institutions as leverage on specific issues of concern, as it has in the past.

There is great potential for private humanitarian assistance to Vietnam, however, and the administration should cooperate in programs devised by over 100 NGOs already in Vietnam; some are American organizations to help the Vietnamese people, especially religious social-welfare activities. Moreover, official humanitarian programs currently part of the Vessey initiative should be expanded to demonstrate United States concern. Sometime in the future, donated food assistance under Public Law 480 should be considered in the context of improving bilateral relations.

Exchanges and people-to-people programs will be extremely important. As soon as relations are established, the administration should propose a

menu of cultural, educational, technical, and scientific exchange programs with Vietnam under government and private auspices. A number of pilot programs, exchanges, or one-time visits have already sprung up, even in the absence of normalization. Some of the American organization already involved are the Social Science Research Council, Georgetown University, the Harvard Institute for International Development, the United States Committee for Scientific Exchange, and the Universities of California, Hawaii, Wisconsin, Iowa, Michigan, and Massachusetts, to cite but a few. The United States Information Agency should immediately map out and coordinate a government-wide plan to stimulate a two-way flow of students, teachers, scientists, journalists, and young leaders. The Asia Foundation, The Asia Society, and similar organizations will automatically become engaged, as will professional groups such as the American Medical Association. This in an area of immense need and potential value in building a new relationship between Vietnam and the United States. In terms of accomplishing long-range United States objectives in Indochina, it is "strategic" in the best sense of the world.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Frederick Brown, Second Change (N.Y.: The Council on Foreign Relations Inc., 1989), 20.

### The United States and Indochina in the Future

America became involved in Indochina one blustery day in October 1776 when Benjamin Franklin set sail from Philadelphia to become the colonies' ambassador-plenipotentiary to the Court of Louis XVI in Paris. The early Franco-American relationship began a Eurocentrist American foreign policy that ultimately led to the decision taken by the Truman administration in 1946 to support reimposition of France's imperial hold on Indochina, despite misgivings expressed by President Franklin Roosevelt not long before his death. Then Vietnam became our "Asian Berlin," a test of American steadfastness against world communism, leading to the United States' taking charge of Vietnam War in 1963-1965.<sup>155</sup>

It is fashionable to speak of the 21st century as the "century of the Pacific." In truth, East Asia and the Pacific have been strategically important to the United States for most of the present century. East Asia has become the most dynamic region in the world economically with Europe and the Middle East; it is a critical crossroads for American interests. Japan's rise as an economic power, the growing frictions in United States-Japan relations, the turmoil in China, the continuing tensions on the Korean peninsula, on

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<sup>155</sup> Joseph Buttinger, The Smaller Dragon: A Political History of Vietnam (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Inc., 1958).



Indochina--these are but the most obvious indicators of a "Pacific Century" that holds complex problems as well as opportunities for the United States.

After the Vietnam War, Indochina for most Americans is not a crisis but a humiliation better forgotten. All three United States administrations since 1975 have assigned Indochina low priority. For policymakers, Southeast Asia has sunk to a third-rank priority on the global agenda, and Indochina has become almost invisible. Only since about 1988 have prospects for a settlement in Cambodia and the gruesome possibility of a return to power of the Khmer Rouge created interest in Washington. At the same time, leaders from both political parties are apprehensive over reinvolvement, however slight, in the affairs of Indochina. The wounds are still fresh and the domestic political risk still evident. Although Indochina still ranks well down in the administration's foreign policy priority, a more comprehensive process of examination is under way in the American public. The reactive blocking out of Vietnam and Indochina shows signs of giving way to a more mature attitude and to a desire to understand the reasons for our past involvement and prospects for the future. The profusion of College courses on the war and serious documentaries on Vietnam and Cambodia indicate as much. The process is slow; no one can predict what revisions of reality and belief will occur along the way.

The United States was no longer seen, and no longer saw itself, as the guardian angel of a region vulnerable to conquest by a monolithic communist, a threat taken almost for granted in the United States three decades ago. The noncommunist countries of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) matured and prospered. Collectively, they emerged as a valuable asset to the United States, thanks in no small part to their spirit of self-reliance and independence. Our former adversaries in Vietnam were mired in economic and social decay.

All these trends, with the obvious exception of the Cambodia tragedy, have yielded geopolitical gains for United States. Since the end of Vietnam War, United States policy has chosen to focus on issues beyond Indochina: the relationship with ASEAN; regional economic development and trade; and rapprochement with China as it touches the region. Improvement of bilateral relations with individual Southeast Asian countries and with ASEAN are often cited as success stories of American foreign policy since 1975.

Today such claims of success, if unexamined, would smack of complacency. Developments on the world scene and in Southeast Asia, particularly from 1985 onward, raise questions about the continued appropriateness of several aspects of United States policy. It is worth asking if the comfortable assumptions of the last near two decades are still valid.

Has the United States fully understood the ramifications of changes taking place not only within ASEAN but also with regard to Vietnam and the Chinese role in the region?

Why should the United States care much about what happens in Indochina, that sad part of the world which used to be so important to United States but which, strangely, now seems irrelevant?

Indochina does not exist in isolation but alongside some of our best friends in Asia. In computing the bottom line of American political and economic interests, and in devising a rational Indochina strategy, our collective relationships with the other countries of Southeast Asia loom larger than any we are likely to develop with three Indochina states in the next generation. But there does not have to be an "either-or" choice. If we act carefully, continued close ties with our current friends elsewhere in East Asia are not incompatible with a new relationship with Indochina. Indeed, they should be complementary.

The major East Asian powers care about and are already involved in Indochina: politically and militarily in the case of China, economically in the case of Japan. Politically and economically, there can be no question of the need for a continued major, active United States role--this is at the heart of the region's stability. The United States cannot dictate the course of events in

Indochina, even if it wished to do so, but it should not by default cede preponderant influence there to China, Russia and Japan.

With modest political and economic investment, and with higher policy priority assigned by the administration, the United States can improve its status in Indochina and more broadly in the rest of Southeast Asia.

With nearly 70 million people, the count now; therefore by the year of 2,000, Vietnam will have a very important role in regional affairs. One who does not admire the current government in Hanoi or its policies still have to admit that it exists. As leadership changes underway demonstrate, the Vietnamese leaders are not immortal nor, it would seem, are they totally blind forever to their failures. We should position ourselves now to influence not only the evolving policies of the current leadership, but also a rising generation of Vietnamese who may come to the world somewhat differently. Again, while American influence is modest, we and ASEAN can help shape the evolution of Vietnam's role in the region in the next century.

American interests would be of benefit if Vietnam ceased being a disruptive force and moved away from Marxism-Leninism and from China. The United States should do what is possible to promote such change. An imaginative and resourceful foreign policy should enable the United States to advance its interests in this environment.

Indochina offers economic opportunities. Our future commerce with Vietnam is not going to reverse the American international imbalance. The Vietnamese economy is a mean and opportunities are limited now, but the country has rich resources and a talented people. If and when reforms in dogma and in practice take hold, there will be attractive trade opportunities for foreigners. At least the hundreds of Japanese, Korean, Taiwan and ASEAN (particularly Thai and Singapore) business executives already streaming into Ho Chi Minh (Saigon) are banking on this. Why should the United States leave the Indochina markets to Japan and the "young tigers" of Asia? Life still goes on in Indochina despite the events of 1975. Saigon did not "fall," it became Ho Chi Minh city. Four million Vietnamese live there--and they still call it Saigon. <sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Frederick Brown, Second Change (N.Y.: The Council of Foreign Relation Inc., 1989), 9-11.

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