

The Vietnam War – The Never-Ending Tunnel

Introduction

The shared nature of conflicts in and around Vietnam after the Second World War is that of a national struggle to free the country from the grip of an outside power and unify it. However to many people the road to American involvement is rarely discussed as is the question of why the American effort ultimately failed. Here the perceptions of both sides of the conflict will be discussed, along with how the different perceptions of the conflict in Hanoi and Washington would result in a much higher commitment to victory for the North Vietnamese.

Conflicts past and present

One key relationship that needs to be understood in relation to conflict in Vietnam is the French colonial presence in Indochina, of which Vietnam was a part. The French solidified their presence in the region in the 1880s, but as Robert Schulzinger points out, they would not conduct themselves efficiently due to a harsh administering of justice towards the Vietnamese and the lack of a coherent policy of colonial administration¹. When France was defeated by Germany in 1940, the Japanese moved into Vietnam and occupied the entire country by 1941; though they let the French maintain authority on paper².

During the war, Ho Chi Minh formed the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh – Vietminh – the League for the Independence of Vietnam³. The Vietminh's goal was to fight the Japanese and the French in order to achieve an independent Vietnam, so when the Japanese overthrew the French puppet regime in March of 1945, Ho used this to spur on a Vietnamese Revolution during which the Vietminh were able to capture the cities of Hanoi and Hué in August of 1945⁴.

¹ Schulzinger, Robert D. *A Time for War – The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* Paperback edition. Oxford University Press, 1998. P. 6

² *Ibid* p. 12

³ *Ibid* p. 12

⁴ *Ibid* p. 19

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Ho declared independence for the new Democratic Republic of Vietnam on September 2, 1945. International recognition did not follow, however as the British undermined the Vietminh's standing in Saigon and the United States valued their relations with France higher than they did the wishes of the Vietminh, thus indicating they would not object to France resuming control over Vietnam. These factors combined would lead to continued fighting between the French and the Vietminh in the years that followed.

Based on this, the continuing conflict in Vietnam can be framed as a nationalist struggle for independence. The Vietminh continued their fight against the French, straining French resources to the point where, according to Mark Moyar, France was warning the United States that they could not keep fighting the war in Indochina and maintain their NATO commitments⁵. Though the French were able to gain some degree of success against the Vietminh in 1951 through the efforts of General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, the general soon succumbed to cancer⁶. None of de Lattre's replacements were able to measure up to his efforts and the final blow to the French presence in Vietnam came during the winter of 1953-54 as the Vietminh prepared to strike against the French garrison at Dienbienphu. The Vietminh forces, under the command of General Vo Nguyen Giap spent months encircling the base and placing artillery in the surrounding mountains in order to counter the French fortifications in the valley⁷. At the same time, China and the Soviet Union were encouraging the Vietminh to respond to French peace feelers or risk losing some of their support, and Ho Chi Minh publically stated that he was willing to attend an international conference to discuss Vietnam's political future.

A conference was arranged to be opened on the issue in Geneva on April 26, 1954⁸. This agreement did not forestall the battle at Dienbienphu, which Giap initiated on March 12. The battle lasted for almost two months, with the French failing to gather aid from the international community and the Vietminh finally conquering the base on the night of May 6-7, 1954⁹. Though a military victory for the Vietminh and the DRV, Dienbienphu would not lead directly to

⁵ Moyar, Mark *Triumph Forsaken – The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* Paperback edition. Cambridge University Press, 2010. P. 24

⁶ *Ibid* p. 25

⁷ Schulzinger, Robert D. *A Time for War – The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* Paperback edition. Oxford University Press, 1998. Pp. 59-60

⁸ *Ibid* p. 61

⁹ *Ibid* p. 71

a unified Vietnam, but it would set in motion a chain of events which would see the United States becoming ever more entangled in the conflict.

Negotiations continued in Geneva, until the participants came to an agreement of cease-fire on July 21. A key part of this agreement was a point detailing the division of Vietnam between the Vietminh-controlled North and the French forces still present in the South. The agreement also called for free elections to determine the future of a unified Vietnam within twenty-four months¹⁰. The Vietminh struggle for independence had succeeded, but not their struggle for a Vietnam free from outside manipulation.

The Division Widens

After the French departure in late 1954, the North began the process of turning their movement into a working government. Although subscribing to Communist theories, President Ho Chi Minh adopted a conciliatory tone towards capitalists both foreign and domestic, saying that they would be allowed to conduct legitimate business activities in the new DRV¹¹. According to William Duiker, the North's policy on this issue was very much intended to promote calm among non-Communists, many of whom were fleeing to the South after the DRV was given formal control of the northern part of the country. They were also moving ahead towards a socialist system in preparation for the expected vote on reunification in 1956. By presenting a moderate face of Vietnamese Communism, the North hoped to gain more sway among supporters in the South. In private however, expectations that the elections would even be held were very low among North Vietnamese leaders¹².

In the South, the United States became the principal supporter of the new government led by Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem was a Catholic with an “almost messianic sense of his own mission to save his compatriots from the threat of godless communism”¹³. Diem was not satisfied with the terms of the Geneva Conference and he had government security forces harass Vietminh supporters in the South once he took office. He also moved to close the Vietminh election committee offices at the same time and in 1955, after he had consolidated his powerbase in

¹⁰ *Ibid* p. 77

¹¹ Duiker, William J. *Ho Chi Minh – A Life* Paperback edition. New York. Hyperion, 2000. P. 465

¹² *Ibid* p. 467

¹³ *Ibid* p. 468

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South Vietnam he rejected holding election consultations with Hanoi¹⁴. This did raise concerns in the North, especially since the United States continued to offer aid to Diem, even after he declined to hold elections, but at the time Ho Chi Minh could not count on support from his traditional allies in China and the USSR since both were pursuing a less confrontational strategy towards Washington¹⁵.

Diem's continuing anti Communist rhetoric, combined with the lack of elections, began to shift perceptions in the North during 1955. With the United States emerging as Diem's chief ally, they were also now the adversary of the Vietnamese people, and it made the Northern plans for a speedy, peaceful reunification very difficult¹⁶. The North Vietnamese now had a more or less formal opponent in the United States, as Diem's regime was dependent on American aid.

If the time between 1954 and 1956 was defined by political tension between Hanoi and Saigon, the ultimate abandonment of peaceful reunification can be said to be the failure to hold national elections in 1956. Diem's firm consolidation of power and his crackdown on religious dissidents during 1955 added to the North's skepticism that any elections would be held because Diem, in Schulzinger's words: "had no intention of submitting the fate of his rule to voters throughout the country."¹⁷ Thus it would seem that outside influences had once again prevented the unified Vietnam that the Vietminh had fought for.

The Northern Perspective

For the North Vietnamese leaders, who had fought for independence from the French and the Japanese, this was undoubtedly frustrating, but rather than push for renewed conflict, Hanoi instead embarked upon a campaign of political image construction. They focused on winning support for the Communist regime and tried to build good relationships with the mountain people by granting them autonomy¹⁸. Furthermore the North Vietnamese government admitted to cruelties during their land reform program and their attitude towards the Catholic population.

¹⁴ *Ibid* p. 469

¹⁵ *Ibid* p. 471

¹⁶ *Ibid* p. 473

¹⁷ Schulzinger, Robert D. *A Time for War – The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* Paperback edition. Oxford University Press, 1998. P. 89

¹⁸ *Ibid* p. 92

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Meanwhile, the conditions for Communists in the South were getting worse to the point where the senior Vietminh leader in the South, Le Duan was calling for the DRV to begin sending more organizers south and prepare for armed uprising against Diem's regime. Hanoi initially resisted, but as the fighting grew more intense in 1957, with around 2,000 suspected Communists killed, Le Duan's argument began to take hold among leaders in the DRV¹⁹. By 1959, Le Duan had decided that the time had come to begin armed struggle with the aim of driving forward the Communist movement in South Vietnam. Although Ho Chi Minh counseled caution, the leaders of the Workers Party of the North that decided that armed struggle was necessary to ensure the safety of Communists in the South²⁰.

With the road to conflict seemingly inevitable, it is not difficult to imagine Communist leaders in the South, such as Le Duan seeing themselves in a repeat of their struggle for independence against the French. They were fighting a regime that brutally oppressed them, a regime which seemingly had no interests in honoring the Geneva Conference agreements, while being backed by the United States after the departure of the French military. But was this perception the reality of the Saigon regime?

Ngo Dinh Diem and the Republic of Vietnam

The regime among Ngo Dinh Diem is a contentious issue among scholars, even today. While it can be said that Diem might have done his best to rally South Vietnam to stand firmly against the North, the perceptions of the policies he enacted widely vary. His crackdown on religious groups did not endear him to the wider population, but one aspect that would increasingly become Diem's Achilles' heel was his autocratic tendency. As Fredrik Logevall writes:

“From the moment of Ngo Dinh Diem's appointment as prime minister in 1954, American officials had been concerned about his shortcomings as a leader – his political myopia, his tendency towards paranoia, his unwillingness to delegate authority beyond his immediate family.”²¹

One key part of Diem's rural development policy involved creating “agrovilles” which meant putting three to five hundred farmers into encampments and thus try to deprive Communist

¹⁹ *Ibid* p. 93

²⁰ *Ibid* p. 94

²¹ Logevall, Fredrik *Choosing War – The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* Paperback edition. University of California Press, 2001. P. 5

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guerilla fighters some of their resources. But this program of relocation was met with resistance from farmers and was abandoned in 1960²². In addition, Diem's support within the South Vietnamese military was not absolute, and that same year the presidential palace was attacked by paratroopers under the command of two colonels, who isolated Diem, his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu and Madame Nhu in a wine cellar. The colonels demanded governmental reform, but after they had been released, Diem reneged on his agreement and had loyalist army units hunt down the dissidents. Diem's regime showed no sign of relinquishing any control and even his ally, the United States were having difficulties in getting Diem to listen to their advice²³. But a greater consequence of Diem's hard line policies as well as his reluctance to share power was the 1960 formation of the National Front for the Liberation of Vietnam (NLF) or as the United States would come to know them – the Viet Cong.

The NLF and Growing American Involvement

So why did the Americans continually support Diem and why were they not prepared to handle the increased tensions in South Vietnam? According to William Duiker, the case seems to be that President Eisenhower was mostly unaware of the conditions in South Vietnam, including the massive anger directed at Diem and his brother Nhu. Anger was no longer confined to any one group but now spread into many parts of South Vietnamese society²⁴. Deciding that reunification by peaceful means was no longer a possibility, the North took measures to increase the level of political and military conflict by organizing the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) as the military wing of the NLF. The NLF was able to find ample recruits in the villages of South Vietnam due to the strong anti Diem sentiment. Faced with this, President John F. Kennedy ordered an increase of American advisers in South Vietnam as well as the training of South Vietnamese armed forces in counter-insurgency tactics²⁵.

Thus the United States began getting ever more involved in the conflict, a conflict which among many in South Vietnam had a clear villain in Ngo Dinh Diem's regime. Even those not supportive of Communism often had reason to dislike the regime in Saigon. Diem's strategic

²² Schulzinger, Robert D. *A Time for War – The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* Paperback edition. Oxford University Press, 1998. P. 94

²³ *Ibid* p. 95

²⁴ Duiker, William J. *Ho Chi Minh – A Life* Paperback edition. New York. Hyperion, 2000. P. 526

²⁵ *Ibid* p. 529

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hamlet program was a re-tooling of the earlier agrovilles, re-locating peasants to armed compounds where the Viet Cong could not recruit and would be strained for supplies. The North responded by ordering its commanders in the South to do whatever they could to destroy the hamlets²⁶. They succeeded in destroying nearly half of them.

Diem's harsh methods, combined with his seeming disrespect for Vietnamese peasant culture is ultimately what hastened his downfall. The Viet Cong were able to maintain recruiting efforts and by 1963, the South Vietnamese military had grown increasingly frustrated with Diem's government. In spite of the loyalty of his core supporters, Diem ultimately failed to hold any wider appeal, and his lack of success in rooting out the Viet Cong was causing tension among some of the generals. In November of 1963, a military coup was launched, which not only ended Diem's regime, but ended his life. Diem and his brother Nhu were executed in the coup²⁷.

The American View

Based on the facts available, the conflict in Vietnam following the Second World War can be best described as a war for independence. Ultimately, the root of the conflict is the schism that developed between the supporters of Communism in the North and the non-Communists in the South, following the formal division of Vietnam in 1954. Both sides laid claim to nationalistic aspirations, but it is clear that the North was much more successful in communicating their intentions to the poor people of Vietnam. The Diem regime may have been stable for a period following 1956, but it was built around the personal authority of Diem and his brother Nhu. With this in mind, it is easy to see how the NLF was able to recruit as effectively as they were.

But why did one nation's struggle for independence from a colonial power become such a concern to the United States? Why did the United States not deescalate, even after it became clear that Diem was not interested in trying to share power and growing increasingly defiant of Washington's requests? The task of dealing with the Diem regime's ever growing defiance and harsh policies since 1960 fell to the Kennedy Administration. Kennedy's response to Diem's defiance and the increased Viet Cong attacks in South Vietnam was not one of direct escalation. Kennedy opposed committing American ground troops in South Vietnam, opting instead for an

²⁶ *Ibid* p. 530

²⁷ *Ibid* p. 534

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increase in the U.S. advisory effort²⁸. Kennedy's reasoning, according to Logevall was that although he was committed to preventing the fall of South Vietnam, the conflict there did not represent a clear case of aggression. Proponents of American de-escalation in Vietnam made the case that Diem's regime was so unpopular that the only recourse for the United States with regards to Vietnam would be a negotiated peace, based on the 1954 agreements²⁹. They also argued that there was no way the United States would be able to win a full-on military engagement in Vietnam, especially given the weakness and unpopularity of the Saigon regime³⁰. Kennedy's reasoning was different than Eisenhower's in that he did not subscribe to the "domino-theory", the idea that if Vietnam would fall under Communist rule, the rest of South East Asia would follow, even if many on his staff and his vice president, Lyndon Johnson, did. However, he was very much concerned with how the image of the United States would look around the world if Vietnam fell to the Communists after years of intensive American aid³¹. To Kennedy, other nations would begin to doubt the power of the United States if it completely removed itself from Vietnam. The increase of advisers was meant to buy Kennedy time while he focused on other issues and because in 1961 when the issue was being discussed, Diem's government still seemed like a viable option³². However, the escalation of commitment did make it more difficult for the United States to restrict future commitment in South Vietnam, given that American military personnel would be moving around the South Vietnamese countryside and in some instances be participating in combat.

The military results were uplifting as 1962 began, with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) achieving some measure of success against the Viet Cong through the use of American helicopters³³. The success was not a permanent one, though, since the Viet Cong bases were well hidden and more often than not, they could simply re-take the area once ARVN left.

In addition, the corruption of Diem's regime was starting to openly show, as much of the aid money did not go to the villagers relocated as a part of Diem's strategic hamlet program but into

²⁸ Logevall, Fredrik *Choosing War – The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* Paperback edition. University of California Press, 2001. P. 27

²⁹ *Ibid* p. 28

³⁰ *Ibid* p. 29

³¹ *Ibid* p. 31

³² *Ibid* p. 32

³³ *Ibid* p. 33

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the pockets of Diem's officials. Logevall describes Kennedy's objectives regarding Vietnam in 1962 as "not losing", but also mentions how Kennedy failed to enter into potential negotiations with North Vietnam when the opportunity presented itself in July 1962. The terms his team dictated to the North were nothing short of a demand for the North's complete surrender, an option that would never be acceptable to Hanoi³⁴. As Diem's regime entered its final days in 1963, Kennedy still believed that staying the course and maintaining only limited engagement in Vietnam was the best option, even if it would mean tacitly agreeing to the Generals' planned coup against Diem³⁵.

The Johnson Escalation

After Lyndon Baines Johnson assumed the presidency following Kennedy's assassination, U.S. policy on Vietnam initially continued in the same spirit as it had in the Kennedy years. Johnson was concerned about electoral victory in 1964 and thus did not seek to escalate the commitment to Vietnam at that time. However, the military coup against Diem's regime failed to lessen the influence of the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, and the lack of American troop commitments only added to the problem³⁶. Johnson was planning for contingencies however and he made it clear that he believed the focus for the U.S. should not be social reforms in Vietnam but to win the war³⁷.

Before the election in 1964, Johnson was given the grounds on which to pursue that course, following a North Vietnamese attack against U.S. destroyers operating in the Gulf of Tonkin on August 2³⁸. Following this incident, Johnson went to Congressional leaders, asking for a resolution that would grant him a wide mandate in taking the fight to the North Vietnamese in retaliation. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was passed on August 7 and Johnson's victory in the elections in November allowed him essentially free reins in dealing with Vietnam³⁹.

The continued instability of the South Vietnamese government, which was still in complete disarray following multiple coups by early 1964, led the Johnson administration to consider

³⁴ *Ibid* p. 38

³⁵ *Ibid* p. 42

³⁶ Schulzinger, Robert D. *A Time for War – The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* Paperback edition. Oxford University Press, 1998. P. 125

³⁷ *Ibid* p. 127

³⁸ *Ibid* p. 151

³⁹ *Ibid* p. 153

South Vietnam an unreliable partner. The stage was set for more direct American involvement in the Vietnam conflict which took the form of Operation Rolling Thunder, the bombing campaign against North Vietnam in mid-February⁴⁰, and with the realization that the Saigon government was not dependable followed the deployment of one hundred thousand American ground troops in July of 1965⁴¹. The United States was now fully involved in the Vietnam War.

Beyond simply a numerical escalation, this shifted the role of American troops in Vietnam from advisers to combatants. Johnson's call for restraint during his 1964 presidential campaign had won him support among much of the population⁴². However, the war the American troops faced in Vietnam was not one in which soldiers faced their enemy on the battlefield, save for a few select engagements like the Battle of Ia Drang in November 1965⁴³. Instead the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong continued to fight a guerilla war, utilizing ambushes and traps. In addition, they were able to hide themselves among a civilian population, and effectively instill a sense into many peasants in South Vietnam that the Americans were simply foreign imperialists coming to take over their country.

On the ground, U.S. troops were conducting search and destroy operations with the principle goal of luring out the enemy and inflicting enough casualties on the North Vietnamese that eventually they would be losing more men than they could replace. The North Vietnamese had much the same in mind, except they were willing to endure the casualties and be patient, confident that eventually opposition to the war in the United States would force out the troops⁴⁴.

In an effort to counter the continued North Vietnamese and Viet Cong success at evading American military power, the Department of Defense, under Robert S. McNamara began authorizing ever increasing aggressive and destructive tactics in their efforts to root out the enemy, and an enemy able to hide easily among the civilian population, which meant that civilian casualties during American operations would also rise. And although some progress was measured during 1966 and 1967, the fact that the Americans managed to kill more enemy combatants would rarely work to their long-term advantage.

⁴⁰ *Ibid* p. 171

⁴¹ *Ibid* p. 180

⁴² *Ibid* p. 155

⁴³ *Ibid* p. 185

⁴⁴ *Ibid* pp. 185-186

One of the best examples of this was the Air Force's conversion of their B-52 bombers – designed to deliver nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union - to conventional weapons for deployment in South East Asia. Flying from bases in Guam and Thailand, these bombers were used for Arc Light; three plane formations raining down enough bombs to render large parts of the countryside completely uninhabitable.

Even with searches, the American ground troops sent in after the bombing would rarely stay in the area, and thus when they left, the Viet Cong could come back, and find peasants there potentially more sympathetic to their cause, having just lost most of their possessions due to the American attacks⁴⁵. Thus, the tactics employed in Vietnam might win a battle for the Americans but in a very real sense they were losing the war because of them – something which would become emblematic of Lyndon Johnson's and Robert McNamara's war. They were fighting with tactics intended to overwhelm a conventional opponent with superior force. They expected to be seen as liberators and defenders by the local population. None of these things occurred, instead the animosity towards the American presence in Vietnam steadily increased, both in Vietnam and among the American people. And of course the culmination of this happened in January 1968, when the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong managed to stage the Tet Offensive, hitting U.S. and ARVN installations all across South Vietnam, something which completely undermined statements made in the fall of 1967 by both Lyndon Johnson and the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland that the enemy was nearing the breaking point.

The Tet Offensive was in fact a breaking point, but not for the North Vietnamese, in spite of them suffering heavy casualties during the offensive. General Vo Nguyen Giap had planned for the offensive to crush the American will to stay in the war, much like his defeat of the French garrison at Dienbienphu had managed in 1954⁴⁶. It may not have directly convinced Johnson to immediately pull out of the war, but the damage to the domestic support of the American war effort was catastrophic, due in no small part to how the offensive was shown on television across the United States⁴⁷. The American anti-war movement gained momentum especially after Tet, and the Johnson administration was never able to properly convey success in the war after the offensive, in spite of the fact that it was defeated from a military perspective.

⁴⁵ *Ibid* p. 193

⁴⁶ *Ibid* p. 260

⁴⁷ *Ibid* p. 261

Conclusion

Thus we return to the question of why the United States stayed involved in Vietnam for as long as it did and why no one saw how small the chance of success actually was. Perception of the conflict is definitely a key aspect of it, especially given Eisenhower's departure and his failure to recognize and pass on the knowledge that Diem's regime was growing steadily unpopular among the people of South Vietnam. This is perhaps the most important aspect of how the post-1963 involvement would play out, because by supporting the Diem regime with little or no oversight until the very end, it could be said that to the people of Vietnam, the Americans were simply another extension of the Saigon regime. They were thus complicit in Saigon's actions, in particular when one considers that without American aid, there is little chance the Diem regime would have survived long past 1956. In this regard, it was easy for the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong to successfully portray themselves as the benefactors of the poorer people in the South, with the Americans being seen as outside invaders and the real force behind the policies of the Saigon government. And this reality is one that neither Kennedy nor his successors in the White House seem to have understood when they considered their handling of the Vietnam conflict.

Unlike World War II, the Americans were not liberators in the eyes of much of the indigenous population of South Vietnam. Their presence drove the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong to become even more determined in their goal of reunifying Vietnam under communist rule. The Americans were fighting a battle that was a part of the wider Cold War. The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were fighting for independence and reunification. The fundamental difference there speaks to the commitment of Hanoi, a commitment that overshadows that of Washington. Hanoi's engagement was a long-term one. Taking only recent history into account, they had sought re-unification since the end of World War II. They were willing to keep fighting until Washington would not be able to politically continue the war, no matter the cost.

The misreading of the nationalist aspect of the DRV's motivation, combined with the lack of understanding of the true nature of the Diem regime is what set America on an ever increasing course of escalation. That it caused no calls for a re-evaluation of the American commitment to South Vietnam, especially in the face of ever-increasingly brutal tactics employed in-country by U.S. forces is also one of the hallmarks of this war. Far from being seen as liberators, in

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Vietnam, the United States found itself in the role of the villain, seen as trying to protect an autocracy and deny the people freedom while a ragtag independence movement fights them with all their heart. The analogy to the American Revolution is uncanny, with the United States having assumed the role of the British conquerors.

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