

The Vietnam War... Historical Analysis

As World War I came to a close, a young Vietnamese patriot named Nguyen That Thanh arrived in Paris to speak with the powerful men negotiating the terms for peace. On behalf of his people living within the French empire in Indochina, Thanh sought to lobby the Western leaders for greater rights. He hoped to take American President Woodrow Wilson up on his promise of "self-determination," the principle of national sovereignty, and free Vietnam from colonial rule. But Thanh, like many other advocates of colonial independence who descended upon the Paris peace talks, discovered that the pledge was too good to be true. The British and the French refused to enforce self-rule for their colonies, and despite Thanh's direct appeal to President Wilson, the three powers ultimately ignored the young Vietnamese nationalist.

In the following years, Thanh, disillusioned by the Western democratic process, pursued new and more radical solutions to imperial rule in his country. He had been deeply impressed by the success of the 1917 Russian Revolution, and by the ability of the Bolsheviks to rally support among the Soviet masses. So in the 1920s, while still in France, he joined the Communist Party. With the adopted name Ho Chi Minh, meaning "enlightened one," he planned to take his teachings home to Vietnam to awaken his own people, to unite and train them, and to lead them in their own revolution.

Ho Chi Minh's Declaration of Independence

By 1941, Ho Chi Minh was preparing for the independence movement in Vietnam; but it appeared that the struggle would not be against French rule after all. World War II was under way, and the Japanese—allied with Germany and Italy against Britain and France—had seized French Indochina. Minh, along with fellow Vietnamese nationalists, organized the Viet Minh, a military league committed to the fight for Vietnamese self-rule. Aided by both the Soviet Union and the United States during the war years, the Viet Minh waged a guerilla campaign against the Japanese occupation. When in August 1945, Japan surrendered to the Allied powers and relinquished its holdings in Indochina, Ho Chi Minh became confident that he and the Viet Minh would at last gain control of the country. So sure was the nationalist leader of this fate that in early September he announced the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Directly referencing the American Declaration of Independence, Minh addressed his people: "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. Among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

But another opportunity for decolonization had been only an illusion. Allied leaders overruled Ho Chi Minh, agreeing that postwar Vietnam would be split in two; Minh's nationalist forces did not gain control over either the North or the South, and no Western power recognized his Democratic Republic. What's more, France wanted to reclaim its lost colony. But Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh were well prepared to resist those efforts, and by the end of 1946, the Franco-Vietnamese War had begun.

To Prevent the Spread of Communism

Meanwhile, with the end of World War II, the United States and its one-time ally, the Soviet Union, clashed over the reorganization of the postwar world. Each perceived the other as a significant threat to its national security, its institutions, and its influence over the globe. To the United States, the USSR was a Communist menace, intent on spreading its anti-democratic ideals by any means necessary. American foreign policy, then, became increasingly dedicated the destruction of governments perceived as friendly to the Soviet power, and to the preservation of those regimes willing to fight Communism.

World War II had sparked anti-colonial movements across the globe, and the United States government had, for the most part, supported self-determination for colonized nations. But the U.S. knowingly contributed to the expansion of imperialism by vowing to support the French against Ho Chi Minh's struggle to establish an independent—and Communist—Vietnam. With the Soviet threat growing, concerns over a Communist takeover in Vietnam far outweighed anti-imperialist ideals.

Sacrificing Democracy for Democracy

But the Communists succeeded in Vietnam; in 1954, with the decisive Viet Minh victory at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, French forces surrendered and agreed to a set of treaties. In these Geneva Accords, the French accepted the Viet Minh's demands to evacuate all troops from Vietnam. Though northern and southern regions remained divided, the Accords stated that in two years unification would be possible through the implementation of nationwide free elections. In July 1956, the Vietnamese people would have a chance to decide whether they preferred to unite under a Communist regime (based in the North) or under a pro-Western (pro-French) government.

As the first President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North, Ho Chi Minh hoped to avoid further setbacks and see national elections administered in 1956 as promised. Minh considered by many Vietnamese—in the North as well as the South—to be the valiant hero of their liberation, was confident that he would win the election against any opponent representing the government in the South. But Minh's plan for the peaceful reunification of Vietnam all depended on whether the Geneva Accords would be observed by the South Vietnamese government, its leader Ngo Dinh Diem, and the Western power supporting both—the United States. Diem's regime and the United States government refused to acknowledge both the Accords and the plan for national elections. Again, Ho Chi Minh's plan for Vietnamese independence had been foiled.

In an effort to strengthen a democratic, anti-Communist state in South Vietnam in opposition to Minh's Communist regime in the North, the United States inadvertently produced a tyrannical, autocratic government. Premier Diem, much to the dismay of leaders in Washington, was an extremely unpopular leader who refused to allow his people to participate in the democratic process and instead punished his opposition. Still, for eight years, the U.S. government poured military and economic aid into South Vietnam to bolster Diem's regime, a partnership that would set the stage for the most disastrous war in American history.

America's Fatal Illusions

By the end of 1964, the American War in Vietnam was in full swing. But against whom, exactly, were the Americans fighting? It wasn't entirely clear to U.S. political and military leaders. By the early 1960s, the communist-led National Liberation Front (NLF) and its military arm, the Viet Cong, had launched a full-scale guerrilla revolution against Ngo Dinh Diem and the American-supported Republic of Vietnam in the South. The NLF and the Viet Cong were founded in the South and largely independent of the North. Yet, in order to crush the resistance in South Vietnam, the United States launched an aggressive campaign against Ho Chi Minh and the government in North Vietnam. Why?

It may seem illogical, but in fact it made perfect sense to leaders in Washington who assumed that revolting factions in South Vietnam were controlled by Communist powers in the North, who were, in turn, supported by the Communist regimes in China and the Soviet Union. To destroy the resistance in the South—and to defend against the spread of Communism throughout the globe—it seemed vital to crush the regime in North Vietnam.

American leaders made grave errors in escalating the war in Vietnam. Several presidents, and their political and military advisors, presumed that aerial bombardment in the North would ease the ground war in the South by cutting off supply lines to the Viet Cong and ultimately forcing Communist leaders to surrender. During the ten most brutal years of the Vietnam War, the United States clung to two fatal illusions: it assumed that military might and superior firepower would win the war, and it underestimated—and, frankly, misunderstood—the fierce nationalism that drove the Vietnamese resistance and justified inconceivable sacrifices. Cluster bombs, napalm air strikes, search and destroy missions, water torture, deadly chemical sprays, and huge numbers of casualties (by 1967, some 3,000 Vietnamese casualties were reported each month) did little to break the will of the American enemy, and never ensured a U.S. victory.

The Unwinnable War

The reality was that the Vietnam was not about two separate countries; for the Vietnamese, this was a war about one country with two warring factions, and the weaker of those two had essentially been created and certainly bolstered by the U.S. The aim of the American war campaign—to grind down the enemy until the Communists in the North agreed to abandon their bid for control of the South—was impossible.

By the time the United States realized that the war was utterly unwinnable, it was already too late. In 1973, when President Nixon withdrew the last U.S. ground troops, nearly 60,000 Americans were dead, thousands more suffered from the physical and psychological repercussions of the brutal warfare in the jungles of Vietnam, and the American people had learned to distrust their leaders and to question their nation's essential values.

In 1975, South Vietnamese government forces surrendered to the NLF and the North Vietnamese Army. Vietnam was, at last, united—and united under a Communist government. The U.S. had officially failed to achieve its original objectives. A nation accustomed to grand victories suffered its first major defeat; the "longest war" was a military, political, and social disaster, one that would haunt Americans for decades.

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