During the period from 1941 (the year of the Japanese takeover and the founding of the Viet Minh by Ho Chi Minh) to March 1945, the Japanese allowed the Vichy French bureaucrats to continue to administer Vietnam. At this time, ironically, the French seemed more conciliatory; they granted Vietnamese more opportunities to participate in government and even did away with salary differentials between themselves and Vietnamese. Because France was cut off from Vietnam by the war, Vietnamese industries were more able to function on their own. The urban middle class generally enjoyed prosperity and the number of students increased by 55 percent, from 450,000 in 1939 to 700,000 in 1944. However, this relatively good time was but the prelude to three decades of destructive, bloody war.

**The Viet Minh and the August Revolution**

Vietnamese revolutionary politics from 1941 to 1945 were complicated—"constantly shifting configurations of alliances and truces, temporary cooperation, and betrayals." The Viet Minh jockeyed for advantage with the VNQDD (the Vietnamese Nationalist Party) and the Greater Vietnam People’s Rule Party (Dai Viet), which cooperated with the Japanese, expecting them to eliminate French control. In reunification conferences sponsored by the Chinese Nationalist government in 1943 and 1944 in the Chinese city of Liuzhou, representatives of the various parties and factions tried to thrash out their differences. The upshot was a power shift to the Communists and their front, the Viet Minh, who continued to stress their primary identity as nationalists. Indeed, in an open letter to Vietnamese, noted for its "unabashed patriotism," Ho Chi Minh in June 1941 appealed to "[a]ll Vietnamese who loved their country . . . to contribute whatever they had most of, be it money, physical strength, or talent." There was not a word about class struggle or Marxism.

Part of the appeal of the Viet Minh was the character of Ho Chi Minh, whom most people viewed as soft-spoken and pragmatically flexible. Truong Nhu Tang, who would later become a leader in the National Liberation Front in the 1960s, met Ho Chi Minh in Paris when Tang was a student there in 1946. Tang noted that "Ho exuded a combination of inner strength and personal generosity that struck me with something like a physical blow. He looked directly at me, and at the others, with a magnetic expression of intensity and warmth." Later Ho invited Tang and another student to afternoon tea, after which Tang swooned that he "had been won by [Ho's] simplicity, his charm, and his familiarity." Ho insisted that people call him by the familiar name Bac Ho (Uncle Ho). Two other key Viet Minh leaders, frequently in Ho’s company, were Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap, who in December 1944 directed a small force in the northern Vietnamese highlands in ambush attacks and in stirring up political agitation.

On March 9, 1945, the Japanese, on the verge of defeat in the Pacific war, overthrew the French and imprisoned almost all French troops. The Japanese named Bao Dai the chief of state; but the government that he headed, while composed of people with some ability, was incompetent in dealing with the great problems it faced, the largest of which was a devastating famine. Neither the French before the overthrow nor the Japanese nor the Bao Dai government seemed to be able to move rice supplies from the south to the north. At least one million people in the north died in the summer of 1945. The Viet Minh endeared themselves to many in the north by seizing rice stocks from the rich and distributing grain to those who were starving. This peasant support provided them with a political advantage they never lost.

By August 1945, there was no effective functioning government in Vietnam. The Viet Minh spent the summer preparing for what would become known as the *August Revolution*, establishing a regime that could finally achieve national independence. They also actively assisted the U.S. military. When he was in China in early 1945, Ho Chi Minh had visited the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS, the forerunner of the CIA) in Kunming. The OSS offered "small arms and explosives sufficient to equip 100 guerrillas" and the training of a nucleus of 200 in "using automatic weapons, demolition equipment, [and] infiltrating and exfiltrating [sic] into various dangerous areas." In return the Viet Minh supplied intelligence on
At first sight there was nothing exceptional in his appearance. Of medium height, rather short in fact, thin, and seemingly fragile, there was something about him that was secretive and shy. Contrary to what his Vietnamese biographers say, his hair had not turned white in the Chinese prisons; it was still brownish, as was his goatee, which, with his high and bulging forehead, made him look more like the typical Annamese scholars one sees in the Latin Quarter of Paris than a fighting chief or a party leader. His most striking features were his eyes—lively, alert, and burning with extraordinary fervor; all of his energy seemed to be concentrated in those eyes. As for the rest, he was usually dressed in the uniform now attributed to Mao, but Ho's uniform was rather shabby, and the tunic was rarely buttoned up to the neck. On his feet he wore the Yunnan cord-soled canvas slippers, and his socks always more or less sagged down over his ankles. Obviously he paid no attention whatsoever to his appearance.


Japanese forces to the U.S. 14th Air Force. From all accounts, the working relationship between the Viet Minh and U.S. forces was close. In the spring and summer of 1945, Giap strengthened the Viet Minh position for action at the end of the war by establishing guerrilla bases with revolutionary regimes in six provinces around the Red River delta.

When the Japanese surrender came on August 15, the Viet Minh were ready. They declared Vietnam's independence. On August 16, a provisional government was established, with Ho sworn in as president the next day. On August 19 Viet Minh forces marched into Hanoi without military action; Bao Dai resigned, voicing the belief of many Vietnamese that "the government of Ho Chi Minh had the support of the Americans." On August 28, Nationalist Chinese troops crossed the border into Vietnam, as planned, to accept the surrender of the Japanese in the northern sector of the country; Britain temporarily took over in the south.

On September 2 in Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square, Ho Chi Minh announced to the crowd of about half a million the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and read the Declaration of Independence. It began, "[a]ll men are created equal; they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. This immortal statement was made in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776." In Giap's address after the reading of the declaration, he stated, in the presence of OSS officers who were there to celebrate the occasion, "The United States of America . . . has paid the greatest contributions to the Vietnamese fight against fascist Japan, our enemy, and so the great American Republic is a good friend of ours." At that point the good will between Vietnamese and Americans was almost tangible.

But the new regime faced gigantic problems in both the south and the north. When the Japanese gave up direct rule, a United National Front, a coalition of Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Dai Viet, and Trotskyites, held power in the south for a week. A Provisional Executive Committee headed by southern Viet Minh leaders tried to take the reins of power. The British occupiers, however, would not even give them the time of day. The commander, General Douglas Gracey, said later, "They came to see me and said 'welcome'
Ho predicted that the war would be “the war of the tiger and elephant. The tiger could not meet the elephant in an equal contest, so he would lay in wait for it, drop on his back from the jungle, and rip its flesh with his claws. Eventually the elephant would bleed to death.”¹⁵ It was an accurate prediction of both Vietnam wars. The French cause was not economic; by 1950 the costs of the war were greater than all of the French investments in Indochina. The French fought the war for political and psychological reasons: they needed Indochina to maintain the “grandeur” of the French empire and perhaps especially out of fear of a sort of domino theory: if one piece of their empire broke away, then all French colonies would also spin out of the French orbit.
For the Vietnamese, the motive for fighting was expressed by a Viet Minh soldier:

The French were physically large and they had many weapons. But we Vietnamese had something which we could use as a weapon: our courage. We were determined to fight the French until the end because the French came here to steal our land and oppress us. That was why I felt..."\(^{18}\)

One of Ho Chi Minh’s oft-repeated slogans also expressed the Vietnamese motive in the context of French imperialism: “Nothing is more precious than independence and liberty.”\(^{17}\)

Early on in the fighting, the French determined that their role would be more palatable, especially to Vietnamese who opposed the Viet Minh, if they had a Vietnamese regime that was an ally. In June 1946 Georges d’Argenlieu, high commissioner for Indochina, set up the Republic of Cochin China as a foil against the Viet Minh and called on the former emperor, Bao Dai, to become its leader. This Bao Dai solution—putting a Vietnamese face on the French effort to maintain control over Vietnam—was implemented in April 1949, when, after years of negotiation, Bao Dai returned to lead the State of Vietnam as part of the French Union.

Events outside Vietnam in 1949 and 1950 considerably changed the meaning of this colonial war. In October 1949, the Communist victors in the Chinese civil war announced the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. The PRC immediately became an ally and a source of weaponry and equipment for the Viet Minh; furthermore, the Viet Minh now had a “sanctuary” where they could refit and retrain their troops with full impunity in Chinese Communist training camps.\(^{18}\) About nine months later, North Korea invaded South Korea, igniting a three-year war with the UN (read, the United States). For the United States, the Communist victory in China and Communist aggression in Korea put the war in Vietnam into the automatic category of Communist expansion. If there had been any perception in the minds of U.S. policymakers that the Vietnamese war was about imperialism and nationalism, it was now gone forever. Vietnam became another test case of international Communism’s efforts to take over the world. U.S. policymakers believed that the French were the bulwark against Communism in Vietnam. In May 1950, the United States sent $10 million in direct aid to the French; by the end of that year, it had sent aid worth $150 million in tanks, planes, ammunition, fuel, and napalm. By 1954, the United States was paying roughly 78 percent of the costs of the French war in Vietnam.

This war, like the one the United States would fight later, was not a war of lines and fronts but, in the main, a guerrilla war of points: ambushes, sniper attacks, booby traps, land mines—sudden explosions killing and maiming, then quiet until another explosion. There were also some larger-scale traditional settos. In 1950 Giap trapped an entire French army in Cao Bang province in northeastern Vietnam, a humiliating defeat for the French, who lost 6,000 soldiers, 450 trucks, and enough artillery pieces, mortars, and guns to stock a Viet Minh division. In the words of the journalist Bernard Fall, it “doomed all French chances of full victory” because it meant that the French could no longer insert themselves between the Viet Minh and China.\(^{19}\) Vietnam north of the Red River was forever out of French hands.

Another “meat-grinder” battle came west of Hanoi at Hoa Binh from November 1951 to February 1952. There the French commander, Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, emboldened by more U.S. military aid, chose to initiate a battle on the main Viet Minh road between the Viet Minh’s tightly controlled territory to the northeast of the Red River delta and the southern delta. Unprepared for the number of Viet Minh soldiers that Giap was able to marshal against them, the French had to call for additional forces from bases in Laos and Cambodia, thus weakening those outposts. That necessity pointed to one of the main flaws of the French in the war: they never committed enough troops to win a predominantly guerrilla war. Though the Viet Minh perhaps sustained over ten times the number of casualties of the French in this battle, “their divisions gained firsthand experience in fighting the French and learned enemy strengths and weaknesses.”\(^{20}\) Further, the French held on
the town of Hoa Binh did nothing to stop the Viet Minh from continuing their drive into the Red River delta. Only in Cochinchina were the French successful; in central Vietnam, they were able to retain control over limited territory around the old imperial capital of Hue and the cities of Danang and Nha Trang.

For the French, Vietnam was like quicksand. Political and military realities militated against any success. During the war, the government in Paris was constantly unstable, changing approximately every three or four months. As defeat followed defeat, new military commanders were sent to try their hand: there were seven different French commanders before war’s end. A critical problem in giving the war some sense of direction was defining clearly what the French hoped to gain. The words of French Captain Jean Pouget ring ominously in this regard:

> When General Navarette [the seventh commander who came in mid-1955] arrived, he opened a file right away, and on that file I wrote “War Goals.” We looked for what to tell the troops. Well, until the end this file remained practically empty. We could never express concisely our war goals.¹²

The French had been unabashedly overconfident when the war began, dismissing the Viet Minh as “the barefoot army.” But the guerrilla war was like some Sisyphean nightmare: the French “pacified” an area, left it, and it slipped almost immediately back to Viet Minh control. The French controlled the cities, the Viet Minh the countryside. The French controlled the day, the Viet Minh the night. Under such frustrating and deadly conditions, troop morale was bad, and officers were being lost faster than new ones could be trained. As with the Bao Dai solution, the army began to try to put a more Vietnamese face on the military by building up the army of the State of Vietnam in a policy known as *le jaunissement* (yellowing). Meanwhile, the French at home soured on the war that they called the *dirty war*, frustrated by the lives and money that were, it seemed, being thrown away with little thought.

France faced different problems in different areas of Vietnam. Most of the fighting with the Viet Minh came in the north, where the French were almost continually beseamed. In the early 1950s the DRV made it clear that it was part of the international Communist community and looked to its longtime cultural model, China, for direction. In the early 1950s, two hundred thousand copies of forty-seven key Chinese Communist writings were published. Following the CCP model, the DRV conducted its own rectification campaign in 1952 and 1953, putting some sixteen thousand party cadres through reeducation in order to “purify” both party and government. In the central and extreme southern parts of the north, militant Catholic groups with their own militias staved off both the French and the Viet Minh.

In the south the political situation was chaotic, with a hodgepodge of groups, many of which were practically states unto themselves. Bao Dai had ruled the south since 1949 but in name only. The Cao Dai sect flexed its muscles with its own militias, courts, schools, and social welfare programs. South of Saigon lay Hoa Hao headquarters, with its own flag and with lands protected “by fiercely wielded machetes and rifles.”²² In addition, there was a gang of river pirates, the Binh Xuyen, who had branched out, heading in congruously enough, the Saigon police department and organized crime and vice. As diverse as the social, political, and religious landscape was, Bao Dai legitimately claimed that all groups were cooperating against the Viet Minh. One once and future key southern figure, Ngo Dinh Diem, had worked tirelessly to achieve leadership for Bao Dai but had refused to serve as his prime minister. Diem had left Vietnam in August 1950 for a four-year sojourn in Japan, the United States, Rome, Belgium, and Paris. By late 1953 Bao Dai’s government was in serious trouble, having antagonized many groups with proposed reforms; consequently, the government stalemated.

Though no one knew it in 1953, the war was moving to a dramatic climax. Vo Nguyen Giap’s strategy in the spring of that year was to invade Laos and, with the help of Communist Pathet Lao troops, take Laos, then seize Cambodia, and eventually join those forces to attack Saigon—truly an Indochinese strategy. The
French, however, stopped the Viet Minh from seizing the Plain of Jars in northern Laos. That defeat did not end Giap's plans to take Laos; in fact, in December 1953 and January 1954, he won most of southern and central Laos. However, a battle on the invasion route into Laos at the village of Dienbienphu ended the war.

The Battle of Dienbienphu, one of the great battles of the twentieth century, began when French planes dropped 2,200 paratroopers into the area of the village completely surrounded by high hills. General Henri Navarre believed that he could lure the Viet Minh to the area and defeat them in a more conventional battle.
Navarre made several strategic blunders. He estimated that Giap would not be able to send more than one division and could not get artillery up the mountains to attack the French on the plain. These predictions, like others throughout the war, were based on overconfidence and almost out-of-hand negation of Viet Minh capabilities; one of the French soldiers captured at Dienbienphu disdainfully dismissed the Viet Minh as "red termites."23 In essence, Navarre ceded the hills to the Viet Minh and did not even try to camouflage French artillery positions, making them easy targets for Viet Minh artillery.

In the end, Giap sent four divisions of troops. In the hills surrounding the plain, the Viet Minh had 49,500 combat troops and 31,500 support personnel; in addition, there were 23,000 maintaining supply lines to the Chinese border. (The French side had only 10,814 men, one-third of whom were Vietnamese from the State of Vietnam.) The artillery—which brought far greater firepower than the French possessed—was dragged and inched up the hills, with men shoving boards under the wheels of caissons after an inch or two of forward progress to prevent them from rolling back. A song sung at the time reveals the motives of those who participated in what was a gargantuan task:

Dienbienphu was a nightmare for the French. From the beginning of the battle on March 13, 1954, the Viet Minh artillery blasted the French day and night from the heights; artillery shells destroyed the airstrip, on which the French depended for getting supplies, on the second day. The Viet Minh initially utilized (under Chinese advice) human wave assault attacks; within four days, they completely controlled the perimeter. "The French command staff was shocked. Colonel de Castries [the commander] became withdrawn, uncommunicative. On the second night the artillery commander committed suicide, saying, 'I am completely dishonored.'"25 Giap then changed tactics, stopping the artillery attacks and the human wave assaults and instead digging trenches and tunnels to tighten the noose around the French.
Then the rainy season came early, and the drenching downpours caused French shelters and dugouts to collapse. There was no clean water. "Medical supplies ran out. No planes could land to evacuate the wounded. Men who were wounded in the trenches sunk under the yard-high mud to die." At this desperate impasse, the French asked the United States to intervene. Washington and Paris discussed air strikes to relieve the French and even the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Some in the Eisenhower administration were ready to act, but the president would not implement such a policy without British support. The British refused, for on April 26 an international conference was opening in Geneva, Switzerland, to deal with the crises in Indochina and Korea. The United States did not act. Dienbienphu fell on May 7, the day before the conference took up the Indochina crisis. The Dienbienphu toll: French—1,500 dead, 4,000 wounded, and some 10,000 taken prisoner (many of whom died in Viet Minh camps); Viet Minh—8,000 dead, 15,000 wounded. But the larger toll from the eight years of war is staggering. For the French and their Indo-Chinese allies, there were 189,162 killed or missing and 156,968 wounded. The estimated Viet Minh toll was probably three times higher, and perhaps as many as 25,000 civilians had been killed.

At the time of their military victory, it is estimated that the Viet Minh held up to 80 percent of the territory in Vietnam; they went to the Geneva Conference warily, fearing diplomatic loss of what they had won on the battlefield. Indeed, that is what happened. China and the Soviet Union both stressed the importance of Viet Minh compromise; with the U.S. actions in Korea in stark memory, China was especially fearful of U.S. intervention should the Viet Minh be inflexible. As a result, the Viet Minh did not become rulers in their own country: the Geneva Accords of July 1954 temporarily split Vietnam into two zones, north and south of the seventeenth parallel. This was not a permanent division into two countries; the two zones were to be reunited following nationwide elections in the summer of 1956. The cease-fire, other details of the accords, and the elections were to be overseen by an International Control Commission composed of representatives from Canada, India, and Poland. Neither zone was allowed to increase the number of its armaments or military bases, nor could either zone adhere to military alliances. The United States, acting contrary to the Geneva Accords, which it and South Vietnam did not sign, made South Vietnam by special protocol a country linked to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).

But the promise of reunifying elections was never fulfilled. As the French left Vietnam, the Bao Dai government appointed Ngo Dinh Diem prime minister. Diem had served as provincial governor in the 1920s and as minister of the interior under Bao Dai in the 1930s. He was a devout, conservative, and ascetic Catholic who had spent two years at Maryknoll Junior Seminary in Lakewood, New Jersey, meeting and cultivating prominent individuals like Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, Francis Cardinal Spellman, and John F. Kennedy. Indeed, part of Bao Dai's interest in Diem for his government came from what he perceived as Diem's American connections. From the viewpoint of the United States, terrified of the spread of Communism during the Red Scare of the Joseph McCarthy era, finding someone who could stabilize southern Vietnam to keep it properly anti-Communist was essential. Diem became the Americans' man in Saigon. The United States therefore set out to build a new nation, the pre-Dienbienphu State of Vietnam becoming the Republic of Vietnam and the temporary seventeenth parallel zone divider becoming a hard-and-fast boundary between two countries. It was no small order.
Ngo Dinh Diem Comes to Washington

President Dwight Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles greet President Diem at Washington's National Airport on a 1957 visit. They touted him as the "miracle man of Asia."

Diem essentially had no power base in Vietnam and lacked the charismatic political personality to help build one. The United States sent CIA operatives to create paramilitary units to destabilize Ho's regime in the north and to undertake a propaganda campaign to encourage northern Catholics to move south during the three-hundred-day free movement period specified in the Geneva Accords. Over eight hundred thousand did so, many moved by the U.S. navy and resettled with $282 million in support from the U.S. government—providing Diem with something of a political base. But Diem showed considerable early ability at establishing his control. In March 1955, the three southern "states unto themselves"—Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen—joined in an ultimatum calling for the establishment of a new government; they were not ready to play under Diem's rules. Diem succeeded in bribing the religious sects and in 1955–1956 defeating their militias. In May 1955, encouraged by the United States, five loyal army battalions moved against the Binh Xuyen in Cholon, the Chinese sector of Saigon, with tanks. Though much of Cholon was destroyed and many ethnic Chinese were killed, Diem ended Binh Xuyen's reign.

The United States was ever more determined to support Diem, who, emboldened, called for a national referendum on whether to retain the monarchy under Bao Dai or establish a republic with Diem as president. After the October 1955 referendum, Diem announced that he had received 98.2 percent of the votes, obviously a fraud (in many places, he received more votes than there were registered voters). Diem established not a democracy but a dictatorship, one supported by U.S. leaders who came to see Diem as the indispensable man in preserving "democracy" in the Republic of Vietnam. Diem announced that he was canceling the nationwide elections called for in the Geneva Accords; the United States supported him. Indeed, "if Diem served as a mandarin under the aegis of the United States, he was a puppet who frequently pulled his own strings." In the late 1950s, the United States supplied Diem with almost $300 million annually in economic and military assistance. "Without American support, Diem would never have survived. With it, he seemed to have done the impossible. Washington held him up as the model of anti-communism, the miracle man of Asia."

But Diem alienated large segments of South Vietnamese society. The Viet Minh veterans who had remained in the South were angered by Diem's refusal to hold nationwide elections and uncertain about how to respond. Fearful of U.S. intervention and needing time to industrialize and gain economic stability,
the North initially advised them to use peaceful means to try to gain power. Farmers were upset; Diem had allowed former landlords who had abandoned their land during the war to return and take it back from peasants who had farmed it. The United States pushed for land reform that would limit landholdings and fix a rent ceiling, but although Diem talked about it, he never implemented it. The fact that he even considered it alienated the landlords; that he did nothing antagonized the peasants (15 percent of the population owned three-quarters of the land in the South in 1961). Diem’s decision to abolish elected village councils embittered those in the countryside. He also antagonized the ethnic Montagnards by trying to impose Vietnamese culture on them, something the French had never attempted.

Diem’s regime became increasingly authoritarian. It censored the press and attempted to place controls on Buddhists. It banned contraceptive use, dancing, and sentimental songs. “Divorces, passport applications, promotions and reassignments of military commanders and civil servants, and property transfers involving foreigners all required Diem’s personal approval.”

It is little wonder that, beginning in 1958–1959, an anti-Diem insurgency began to grow. Led by the Viet Minh, it was a coalition of the disaffected and disgruntled: former Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen adherents, peasants, students, and intellectuals. In December 1960 they came together in the National Liberation Front (NLF), supported by Hanoi. Leaders in the North came to believe that a military insurgency might be the only way to reunify the nation and that it had greater potential for success, given Diem’s miserable record. Thus, Hanoi committed itself to resuming armed struggle in the South, a position formalized at the Third Party Congress of the Vietnam Workers’ Party (the name of the Communist organ in Hanoi) in September 1960, “assigning liberation of the south equal priority with consolidation in the north.” The level of violence in the South rose dramatically; whereas in 1958 about 700 local government officials were assassinated, in 1960 the number reached 2,500.

Diem’s regime dubbed the NLF’s partisans Viet Cong (a derogatory term for Vietnamese Communists). To protect farmers (including the Montagnards), the regime adopted the Agroville (1959) and Strategic Hamlet (1962) programs, which forcibly relocated farmers in fortified settlements to protect them from the Viet Cong. The relocated population deeply resented this uprooting from their ancestral homes; when the Viet Cong began to target these fortified settlements for attack, their resentment turned to hostility against the regime.

Diem’s reaction to dissent and the insurgency was to throw suspects into prison and introduce terrorism into the increasingly combustible situation. In May 1959 he had the National Assembly pass Law 10/59, which “created special military tribunals to arrest any individual ‘who commits or intends to commit crimes . . . against the State.’ Equipped with portable guillotines, the tribunals rendered one of three verdicts: innocent, life in prison, and death.” Many of those who staffed the tribunals were members of the increasingly hated secret police, headed by Diem’s brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, the gray eminence of the regime. Nhu was head of the Vietnamese Special Forces, in effect his own private army, and his pet programs were the Agroville and Strategic Hamlet fiascos. The Diem regime reported that there were twenty thousand political prisoners by 1956, and over the years the numbers grew to hundreds of thousands.

Opposition to Diem and his policies seemed omnipresent. When eighteen prominent South Vietnamese leaders issued a statement detailing and protesting government abuses in April 1960, they were immediately arrested. Coup attempts occurred in November 1960 and February 1962. The United States sent increasing numbers of military advisors to the South from 1961 on and repeatedly told Diem to undertake reforms, but he sat on his hands. The United States had little leverage with him. As the Viet Cong presence, threat, and terror against its opponents grew and the overall political situation deteriorated, the United States made renewed efforts to strengthen the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), by sending even more military advisors to train them.
In 1963, Diem and Nhu went too far. On May 8, Buddhists in Hue protested an order forbidding them to display flags in honor of the Buddha; government troops fired, killing nine demonstrators. Demonstrations then spread across the country. On June 11 a Buddhist monk burned himself to death on a street in Saigon, triggering what amounted to an uprising of Buddhists, students, and disaffected urban residents. Douglas Pike, an American analyst, noted that he could see "the whole fabric of Vietnamese society coming apart." In Washington, the view was just as bleak. Diem and Nhu in a sense dug their own graves by continuing to persecute the Buddhists, raiding and ransacking pagodas and arresting monks. When key figures in Diem's army plotted a coup, the United States supported the effort. The overthrow of the Diem regime on November 1, 1963, ended, unhappily for America's sense of moral rectitude, with Diem's and Nhu's murders. Though Diem had been an obstreperous ally, his voice from beyond the grave might well have warned, "après moi le deluge."

Changing Civil War into an American War

After Diem's murder (and that of John Kennedy three weeks later), there seemed to be no way to restore stability to South Vietnam. Coup after coup brought in a series of military figures, none of whom were able to govern effectively; there were seven changes of government in 1964. Against that backdrop the war escalated. On August 2, a U.S. intelligence-gathering ship, the U.S.S. Maddox, was attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin. Two days later, reports (later found to be erroneous) came that the North Vietnamese had struck again at the Maddox and another ship, the Turner Joy. President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered retaliatory strikes on North Vietnam, the first bombing of the North in the war. They destroyed 90 percent of the oil storage facilities at Vinh and twenty-five patrol boats. More ominously, the U.S. Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which gave the Johnson administration the go-ahead "to take all necessary steps including the use of force to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom." The resolution was a blank check allowing the U.S. administration to do whatever it pleased in dealing with the war.

Six months later, in February 1965, the United States began a campaign of continuous bombing of the North to try to force the North to come to terms. The campaign expanded each year—from 25,000 sorties in 1965 to 79,000 in 1966 to 108,000 in 1969. Early on, the bombers hit military bases and facilities...
Spraying Agent Orange In order to defoliate dense jungle, U.S. planes sprayed eighty million liters of poisonous chemicals, including forty-five million liters of Agent Orange, a defoliant containing dioxins, which accumulate in the body to cause cancers. Agent Orange was sprayed over 10 percent of the country. Birth defects were a common result.

and infiltration routes into the South. In 1966 the targets were industries and transportation facilities, and the bombing area stretched farther to the North. In 1967 the missions zeroed in on power plants, steel mills, and sites around Hanoi and Haiphong. The United States had destroyed most of its targets by 1967, but in the end the bombing had no demonstrable effects on the war, with the possible exception of strengthening the North Vietnamese determination to resist. Indeed, as bombing grew heavier, the rate of infiltration into the South increased, from 35,000 soldiers in 1965 to an estimated 90,000 in 1967. Each B-52 mission cost the United States $30,000; overall it lost 950 planes costing about $6 billion. The bombing both crippled and redirected North Vietnam’s efforts to develop a modern industrial economy. Under the slogan “The mother factory gives birth to many child factories,” almost all factories that employed more than 100 workers were divided into many “small-production agencies” and then scattered throughout nonindustrialized provinces where there was less of a possibility that they would be destroyed in the bombing.34

The bombing was devastating to the North. Even U.S. government officials admitted that there were likely a thousand civilian casualties each month, even though the bombing was not directed at the civilian population. And as in the Korean War, racial prejudice among U.S. forces in the South was overt or just beneath the surface of everyday life. The Vietnam War was the third war the United States had fought in Asia in three decades in which all women were called mama-san, san being only Japanese: in effect, it was a way of saying that all Asians were alike and denying their cultural differences.

Soldiers referred to Vietnamese—friends and enemies alike—as “cooks,” “slaves,” “short-eves,” or “dinks.” Many just gave up trying to separate friendly from patricially Vietnamese and considered them all as enemies. Some Americans used a modified Wild West analogy, mounting such sentiments as “The only good Viet is a dead Viet.” In the minds of many soldiers, the Vietnamese had become some subhuman species—reptilian, duplicitous, and deadly.35
These attitudes produced many killings, even massacres, of civilians, the most horrifying being the massacre of over five hundred civilians and the rape of at least twenty women at the village of My Lai on March 16, 1968.36 Racism appeared perhaps most overtly in comments made by General William Westmoreland, the U.S. commander from 1964 to 1968, who said, “Vietnam reminds me of the development of a child”: it is clear that “if adults of lower races are like children, then they may be treated as such—subdued, disciplined, and managed. . . .”37 But the most telling comment was: “Well, the Oriental does not put the same high price on life] as the Westerner. Life is plentiful. Life is cheap in the Orient. And as the philosophy of the Orient expresses it, life is not important.”38

By 1965, the leadership situation in the Saigon government had stabilized under two military men, Nguyen Cao Ky (1965–1967) and Nguyen Van Thieu (1967–1975). Ky became premier about three months after the United States upped the ante and began sending U.S. combat troops in March. By the end of the year there were 200,000 troops in South Vietnam; that number swelled to 543,400 in April 1969 before troop withdrawals began.

Even though there was an ongoing war, it did not embroil all, nor did it become an obsessive problem until the 1960s. Hanoi was trying to pull off a revolution, the core of which, as in China, was land reform. In order to keep as many non-Communist supporters for the Viet Minh as possible, land reform was moderate in the beginning. Only landlords who supported the French had their land confiscated, and for Viet Minh supporters, land reform only entailed rent reduction. Starting in 1953, however, the state moved to a more radical phase, beginning land confiscation and redistribution in Thai Nguyen province north of the Red River. In two provinces south of the Red River delta, Thanh Hoa and Ninh Binh, land reform turned brutal and violent. The longtime Communist leader Truong Chinh, a zealot who revealed his inflexibility by denouncing his own father over land reform issues, headed the campaign. Thousands defected from the Viet Minh, whose leaders halted the radical land reform until after the war and the three hundred days of civilian movement across the seventeenth parallel ended. Ho Chi Minh dismissed Chinh, who was forced to admit his “left-wing deviationism.”

In the land reform, over 2 million acres of land were confiscated and redistributed to 2,104,000 peasant families. But, as in China, the ultimate goal of land reform was not giving land to individual farmers but increasing agricultural production by setting up cooperatives to achieve greater efficiency. Collectivization began almost immediately after land reform was completed. By 1960, over 68 percent of all farmland and 85 percent of peasant families had been brought into cooperatives. The Vietnamese cooperatives were different from those in China, which were multifunctional and very large. In Vietnam they focused on one or two socioeconomic roles and were usually limited in size to the population of a village; sometimes a village had more than one cooperative.

In prosecuting the war, the North Vietnamese received assistance from both the Soviet Union and China; this support was stepped up when the U.S. bombing became more severe. Until January 1968, the Soviet Union provided 1.8 million rubles in aid, with about 60 percent earmarked for military materiel—primarily tanks, fighter planes, and surface-to-air missiles. In addition, Moscow sent three thousand technicians who, among other tasks, manned antiaircraft batteries and surface-to-air missile sites. The Chinese, who had had advisors at Dienbienphu, let it be known that, as in Korea, they would send in Chinese forces if the United States invaded North Vietnam. Beijing sent many supplies: vehicles, small arms, ammunition, uniforms, shoes, and rice. It also dispatched 320,000 engineering and artillery troops who helped build highways, bridges, and railroads to facilitate the transport of supplies from China.
I was twenty-eight years old when I received my draft notice. My father had been a deputy village chief under the French regime, so I was classified as what was called a "middle farmer element." This was an undesirable classification, and of course my father had worked with the French. So even though he died when I was four I still had this bad classification. In addition I was an only son, and the head of my own family as well. By law I should have been exempt from service, but by 1967 there was such an emergency in the South that the authorities were taking everyone they could between eighteen and thirty-five. It didn't matter if you were a good element or a bad one. So in April 1968 I found myself in the army.

When I got the draft notice I knew I was destined to go South. And I knew the chances of coming back were very slim. About a hundred guys from my village had gone, starting in 1962, and none had returned. Their parents and wives were waiting for them up to their eyes in fear. But nobody had gotten any news. The government was very explicit about it. They said, "The trip has no deadline for return. When your mission is accomplished you'll come back." Uncle Ho had declared, "Your duty is to fight for five years or even ten or twenty years." So it was clear to me that the whole business was going to be long and dangerous. I was really agitated when I left for the army.

I especially resented the government's callousness about my family situation. After I received my draft notice, my wife began crying at night. She wanted me to petition against being called up. I knew that wasn't possible. So I had to swallow my bitterness and convince her that sooner or later my fate would be set, so I'd better go. It hurt to see my baby and wife left alone. But I didn't dare say anything openly.

But once I was at the training camp, I began to understand that the fight for the South had to be done. Actually I must say that I already believed the Americans were a hundred times crueler than the French.

In addition, in 1965, Chinese, Soviet, and North Korean engineers and advisors worked on improving the Ho Chi Minh Trail for truck transport. The trail was a network of roads that led from North Vietnam through eastern Laos into South Vietnam on which men and supplies from the North made it into South Vietnam. Started as a footpath in 1955, by 1971 it had "fourteen major relay stations in Laos and three in South Vietnam. Each station, with attached transportation and engineering battalions, served as . . . storage facility, supply depot, truck park and workshop. Soviet . . . trucks, with a capacity of five to six tons, traveled day and night on all-weather roads."39

At the Fourteenth Plenum of North Vietnam's Central Committee in late 1967, Hanoi's leaders committed themselves to launching a general offensive in the South. It was planned to coincide with the Lunar New Year, Tet, the most important holiday festival in Vietnam. It was massive and ambitious: units of the NLF
and the North’s People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) struck five of six major cities, thirty-six of forty-four provincial capitals, and sixty-four district capitals. Targeted in Saigon was U.S. Commander Westmoreland’s headquarters, the headquarters of South Vietnam’s general staff, the U.S. embassy, the Presidential Palace, and Tan Son Nhut Airport. Americans had spent late 1967 hearing propaganda about the great progress American forces were making (Lyndon Johnson, December 22, 1967: “All the challenges have been met. The enemy is not beaten but he knows that he has met his master in the field.”40) In this context, such a massive military campaign by the NLF and PAVN was astonishing; Washington was in “a state of ‘troubled confusion and uncertainty.’”41 In this sense, the Tet offensive was a psychological victory for the North Vietnamese and the NLF.

In truth, however, it marked a military defeat for the two opponents of the United States. South Vietnam did not collapse, the ARVN did not collapse, and South Vietnam’s general population did not rally to the northern cause, all of which had been hopes of North Vietnam’s strategists. PAVN and NLF battle deaths may have been as high as forty thousand. The biggest loser was the NLF: they had led all the major attacks, and they suffered huge loss of life and the disruption of their organizational infrastructure. For the remainder of the war the Viet Cong was never a major factor in battle; the war from this point on was run completely by the North.

The shock and disillusionment that Tet created for the United States led to peace talks that began in Paris in May 1968 and eventually bore fruit in late 1972. They also led to the policy of Vietnamization adopted by President Richard Nixon in 1969, a reprise of the French jaulissement. The U.S. policy of withdrawal did not, however, call for a direct or rapid exodus. Nixon began a secret bombing campaign of Cambodia in 1969, which ultimately paved the way for the success of the Khmer Rouge (Cambodian Communists) and their holocaust of the Cambodian people. The bombing was kept a secret for four years. In spring 1970, the United States invaded Cambodia to find the elusive Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the alleged headquarters of the NLF, but it was never found. In 1971 the South Vietnamese invaded Laos.

In the early 1970s, South Vietnam’s President Thieu solidified his control, calling for a number of reforms. He took a more enlightened view of Buddhists, peasants, and the ethnic Montagnards. He distributed
This mausoleum sits on Ba Dinh Square, where, twenty-four years before his death, Ho Chi Minh had read Vietnam's Declaration of Independence and declared the founding of the DRV. It is visited annually by millions.

Source: Vision Photo Agency

PacificStock.com.

land to about fifty thousand families, compensating the landlords whose lands were confiscated. In addition, he had laws passed to freeze land rents and to prohibit the eviction of tenants by their landlords. However, even as he mandated reforms, Thieu moved to dictatorship. In 1971 he rammed through the National Assembly a bill that in effect disqualified all major opposition forces in the October election. In 1972 he pushed through laws that forbade workers to go on strike, allowed the arrest and imprisonment of people without trial and shut down all political parties.

In North Vietnam, President Ho Chi Minh died on September 2, 1969, of congestive heart failure. One-man rule gave way to the joint leadership of Pham Van Dong, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Le Duan, the last longtime lieutenant of Ho Chi Minh and former director of the Viet Minh in South Vietnam. Dong oversaw foreign policy, Giap managed defense issues, and Duan was in charge on the domestic front, but all three had to sign off on crucial issues, a practice that hampered decisive action. After Ho Chi Minh’s death, a heated debate arose over how to win the war. The erstwhile land reform leader and now chief theoretician for the Workers’ Party, Truong Chinh, called for caution since “time was on their side”: the United States had begun to withdraw, and North Vietnam should not act precipitously to stimulate a new U.S. commitment.\footnote{42}

Until 1972 this policy, emphasizing defense and building up forces for a victory drive, held sway. On March 30, 1972, however, the North Vietnamese launched a major invasion of the South at a time when ninety-five thousand U.S. troops were left, only six thousand of which were combat troops. Accompanied by two hundred Soviet tanks and attacking under a heavy artillery barrage, over thirty thousand PAVN troops moved south of the DMZ, taking the provincial capital, Quang Tri City, on May 1. The battle in Quang Tri was in many ways a feint: Giap hoped that it would draw forces from farther to the south to improve the chances of success in two other attacks. One came from Cambodia and was aimed at taking Saigon; the other was aimed at cities in the Central Highlands, with the ultimate goal of cutting South Vietnam in two. There were minor successes in the Central Highlands, but the ARVN, backed by massive U.S. air power, held and blunted the offensive by July. The cause of South Vietnam was aided by aggressive actions of the United States. During the offensive, on May 8, the Nixon administration resumed bombing of Hanoi and ordered, for the first time in the war, a blockade of Haiphong and the mining of its harbor, helping to take pressure off the ARVN.

The peace talks at Paris since May 1968 had borne no fruit. Throughout the talks, Hanoi’s position continued to be that, for the war to end, U.S. troops had to be withdrawn; that the present South Vietnamese
The war of resistance against American aggression may be prolonged. Our compatriots may have to consent to new sacrifices in property and human lives. No matter what, we must be resolved to combat the American aggressor until total victory is ours. Our rivers and mountains and men will be here forever. The Yankees having been defeated, we will build up our country much finer than ever.

No matter what the hardships and privations, in the end our people will surely conquer. The American imperialists will surely take to their heels. Our fatherland will surely be reunited. Our compatriots of the North and of the South will be reunited under the same roof. Our country will then have the distinction and honor of being a small nation that, through heroic combat, vanquished two great imperialisms—the French and the American—and brought a worthy contribution to the national liberation movement.

As to personal affairs. Throughout my life I have served the fatherland, the revolution, and the people with all my heart and strength. Now that I am about to leave this world, I have nothing with which to reproach myself. I merely regret that I am unable to serve longer and better.

I hope there will be no great funeral ceremony after my death. I do not want to waste the time and money of the people.

Lastly, I bequeath my unlimited affection to all our people, to our party, to our armed forces, and to my young nephews and nieces.

Likewise, I address fraternal greetings to my comrades, friends, and the youth and children of the world.

My ultimate desire is that all our party and all our people, closely united in combat, will raise up a Vietnam that is peaceful, unified, independent, democratic, and prosperous. Thus we will make a worthy contribution to world revolution.

Source: Jean Sainteny, Ho Chi Minh and His Vision (Chicago: Cowles, 1972), 168–70.
As time passed, the North Vietnamese also seemed to have second thoughts. The American diplomat John Negroponte set forth their likely reactions to the U.S. inability to get South Vietnam to go along:

For a moment put yourself in the North Vietnamese shoes. They had gone through this entire negotiating process, [sic] they had reached agreement with us. They had even begun giving instructions to their cadre to prepare for a cease fire. Some of the North Vietnamese leaders might have begun to think that they had been the victims of the biggest con job in history and that we had simply led them down the garden path, and then we're going to welsh on the deal.  

In these circumstances, Nixon exercised one of the options set forth by Huo Duc Nha: to bomb the North. Beginning on December 18, 1972, the United States unleashed the most intensive bombing campaign of the war. The thirty-six thousand tons of bombs dropped in the eleven-day Christmas bombing, were more than were dropped in the period between 1969 and 1971. Targets included power plants, rail yards, communication facilities, docks and shipping facilities, petroleum storage areas, bridges, highways, and military sites. Over 1,600 North Vietnamese civilians were killed, and large sections of Hanoi and Haiphong were laid waste. “The North Vietnamese believed that the raids were a deliberate act of terror.” World opinion was outraged.

When talks resumed, agreement came fairly quickly. The final agreement to end U.S. involvement in the war was essentially the same one that had been acceded to in October before the Christmas bombing. This time Washington gave Thieu an ultimatum—sign or else, the latter being the loss of any further U.S. support for his regime. Though Thieu never signed the Paris agreement, he indicated that he would not oppose it. Signed in Paris on January 27, 1973, the agreement provided for complete U.S. troop withdrawal and a return of prisoners of war within sixty days. The cease-fire was to be overseen by an International Commission of Control and Supervision made up of representatives from Canada, Hungary, Indonesia, and Poland. Elections were to be held in the South after negotiations between the Thieu government and the PRG. The U.S. phase of the war thus ended with one hundred fifty thousand North Vietnamese troops in the South and with recognition of the PRG.
In October 1974, Le Duan, who had emerged as first among peers in government decision making, argued in an address before the Politburo that “The U.S. imperialists would find it very difficult to intervene directly. . . . They cannot save the Saigon regime from collapse.” The leadership’s perception was that U.S. domestic problems and general opposition to continuing the war militated against any further U.S. action; the decision to launch the final offensive came rather easily. North Vietnam already had one hundred fifty thousand completely equipped troops in place in South Vietnam, along with a wealth of tanks and artillery pieces. The general in charge, Van Tien Dung (who replaced Giap in 1974), had overseen the infiltration of more troops into the South, a process, as he put it, of “strong ropes inching gradually, day by day, around the neck, arms, and legs of a demon, awaiting the order to jerk tight and bring the creature’s life to an end.”

Dung used an attack on the province of Phuoc Long, along the Cambodian border some forty miles north of Saigon, as a test to see if the United States would intervene and if the ARVN could put up any resistance. The attack began on January 5, 1975, and led to a smashing victory. The United States sent no B-52s, and the one ARVN division that Thieu dispatched was no match for the two full PAVN divisions.

Confident that they could move in for the kill, North Vietnamese leaders decided to cut South Vietnam in two by driving to the South China Sea from the Central Highlands. In early March they easily took the provincial capital of Ban Me Thuot. When that city fell, Thieu made the fateful decision to surrender the Central Highlands and pull ARVN troops back to protect the major cities of the South. But to avoid creating panic among the population, Thieu did not announce the withdrawal or his rationale for it. Rumors went wild, creating the very panic he had hoped to stifle, because people did not know what to believe. While Dung achieved more victories in the Central Highlands, hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese along with thousands of ARVN soldiers poured south, fleeing the military clashes. North Vietnamese heavy artillery attacked these refugees. It is estimated that over one hundred thousand civilians and up to fifteen thousand ARVN soldiers died in this panicked flight.
Identities: Bùi Tín (1924–):
The Vagaries of Revolution

It has been said that a revolution eats its own revolutionaries. Bùi Tín is a case in point. Little is known about the first two decades of his life. He joined the Việt Minh in 1945 and served for a while as a bodyguard for Hồ Chí Minh. He fought against the French in the Red River delta in the early 1950s and at Dienbienphu, becoming an important member of the Workers’ Party and rising to the rank of colonel in the People’s Army. In 1963 he was dispatched to South Vietnam to assess the situation there, traveling by foot down the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. On his return in early 1964, he reported to the Hanoi leaders that the NLF needed more northern assistance. In 1973 he was the official spokesman for the North Vietnamese delegation sent to Saigon after the Paris Accords to arrange for the handling of U.S. prisoners of war.

Bùi Tín became editor of the People’s Army Daily (Quan Doi Nhan Dan), and in the final offensive in 1975 he served as a war correspondent. He was on one of the tanks that broke through the fences around the presidential palace in Saigon on April 30, 1975; as the senior officer on hand, Bùi Tín accepted the surrender of President Minh. Later he became deputy editor-in-chief of the party newspaper People’s Daily (Nhan Dan). Unfortunately, as a journalist, he began to rub some of the leaders of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam the wrong way. In spite of the government’s great reluctance, he reported on the growing tensions between Vietnam and Cambodia in the run-up to Hanoi’s overthrow of Pol Pot’s Cambodian regime. When that happened, Bùi Tín was one of the first journalists to visit Phnom Penh. Colleagues reportedly said that “He was always in the right place at the right time.”

Frustrated by Hanoi’s authoritarian policies and lack of material progress, Bùi Tín journeyed to Paris in 1990, allegedly for medical treatment. Though his family remained in Vietnam, he went into self-imposed exile. His memoirs, Snowdrop (Hao Xuyên Tuyết) and The Real Face (Mat That), were published in 1991 and 1993, respectively—both of which argued for major changes in Vietnam.

Bùi Tín continued to lambast the Hanoi government from Paris, often broadcasting on the BBC. His lack of reverence for Hồ Chí Minh infuriated the Hanoi leaders. When he argued that Hồ made mistakes, including adopting the Stalinist economic and political models, they called him a traitor. Bùi Tín also excoriated the Hanoi government for its press censorship and its “half-baked” economic reforms (see Chapter 17). In 1991 Bùi Tín was stripped of his party membership. As if to underscore his characterization of the government’s authoritarianism, his house in Vietnam was under constant surveillance; his family was forbidden to communicate with him; his daughter was forced to leave her position as an eye surgeon and to become an eyeglasses clerk; and his son-in-law was not allowed to accept a fellowship from Harvard University. The trajectories of Bùi Tín’s life reflect the roller-coaster ride of the Vietnamese revolution.

2 This charge can be found at http://www.venguon.org/Post-doc/News/VNg_HanoiIndignant.html.
... At the same time, their military orientation deflected American attention away from the internal fissures in our own camp. The Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations had chosen to regard Ho Chi Minh as a tool of Chinese expansionism, ignoring the separate integrity and strength of Vietnamese national aspirations. Just so, the Johnson and Nixon administrations persisted in treating the NLF as part of a North Vietnamese monolith, casually shrugging aside the complex realities of the Vietnamese political world. As a result, the Americans were constantly trying to stamp out fires in their own front yard but never lighting any themselves in our garden. Kissinger was as maddened by this situation as his predecessors had been. More imaginative than they, he responded by striking back through the Soviets and Chinese, hopeful that our allies would eventually pressure us into moderation. But he never went for the jugular. Indeed, his strategic perspective prevented him from seeing where the jugular was.

In looking back at this period and at the negotiations that flowed out of it, some writers have taken pains to denigrate Henry Kissinger’s abilities. If the purpose of observing history is to learn from it, such exercises are not only nonsensical but dangerously misleading. The flaw in Kissinger’s thinking was in fact hardly personal. In considering the problem of Vietnam, he had inherited a conceptual framework from his American and French predecessors that he either could not or would not break out of. And it was this conceptual framework that led him to disaster. Along with their political forebears, both Nixon and Kissinger suffered from a fundamental inability to enter into the mental world of their enemy and so to formulate policies that would effectively frustrate the strategies arrayed against them, the strategies of a people’s war.


When the final offensive was planned, North Vietnamese strategists believed that victory would come after a two-year campaign. But the rout of ARVN troops and the blunders of the Saigon government brought success much more quickly. In late March the PAVN began a huge offensive in the northern part of South Vietnam, attacking Quang Tri province and moving toward Hue. Thieu abandoned Hue, hoping to draw the line at Danang, fifty miles down the coast. PAVN forces took Hue on March 24, and their seemingly inexorable march led to the seizure of Danang on March 29. Thieu’s plans crumbled into ashes: “South Vietnam was imploding.”48 The losses in the Central Highlands and the northern sector of the country had brought the deaths of one hundred fifty thousand ARVN troops and the loss of countless pieces of military equipment.

Thieu, who had isolated himself in the presidential palace, saw the inevitable and resigned on April 21. By that time, Saigon was surrounded on all sides by PAVN forces. On April 28, Thieu’s longtime rival, Duong Van Minh, became South Vietnam’s president. The United States completed its evacuation on April 30, transporting 7,100 U.S. and South Vietnamese personnel by helicopter to aircraft carriers off the coast and sending over 70,000 South Vietnamese via naval ships to other U.S. ships in the South China Sea.

North Vietnamese forces entered Saigon from six different directions that same day, completing the final offensive in only fifty-five days. Colonel Bui Tin (see Identities) accepted the surrender of President Minh. He later reflected on that day:
### Chronology

1945—Japanese overthrow the French (March)
  - Japanese surrender (August 15)
  - Establishment of the DRV (September 2)
1946—French bombard Haiphong
1946–1954—The French war
1953–1960—Land reform in the North
1954—Battle of Dienbienphu
  - Geneva Conference undoes Viet Minh victory
1955—Referendum makes Ngo Dinh Diem president of the Republic of Vietnam
1958–1959—Insurgency in the South against Diem
1960—Hanoi commits itself to resume armed struggle (September)
  - NLF recognized by the North (December)
1963—Diem overthrown and killed
1964—Gulf of Tonkin incident
1965—U.S. Marines sent to South Vietnam (March)
1968—Tet offensive
1969—U.S. troop numbers reach 543,400 by April
  - Death of Ho Chi Minh
1973—Paris Accords end the U.S. involvement in the war.
1975—North Vietnamese victory over the South

### Suggested Reading

Chanoff, David, and Doan Van Toai, eds. *"Vietnam": A Portrait of Its People at War*. London: I. B. Tauris, 1996. This book of interviews with North Vietnamese and members of the Viet Cong dispels any idea that they necessarily shared similar attitudes and views; it underlines the diversity and complexity of that side of the war.