

# **TRIUMPH FORSAKEN**

**The Vietnam War,  
1954–1965**



**Mark Moyar**

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## TRIUMPH FORSAKEN

Drawing on a wealth of new evidence from all sides, *Triumph Forsaken* overturns most of the historical orthodoxy on the Vietnam War. Through the analysis of international perceptions and power, it shows that South Vietnam was a vital interest of the United States. The book provides many new insights into the overthrow of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963 and demonstrates that the coup negated the South Vietnamese government's tremendous, and hitherto unappreciated, military and political gains between 1954 and 1963. After Diem's assassination, President Lyndon Johnson had at his disposal several aggressive policy options that could have enabled South Vietnam to continue the war without a massive U.S. troop infusion, but he ruled out these options because of faulty assumptions and inadequate intelligence, making such an infusion the only means of saving the country.

Dr. Mark Moyar holds a B.A. summa cum laude in history from Harvard University and a Ph.D. in history from Cambridge University. He is the author of *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: The CIA's Secret Campaign to Destroy the Viet Cong*. Dr. Moyar has taught at Cambridge University, Ohio State University, and Texas A&M University. At present, he is Associate Professor and Course Director at the U.S. Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia.

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THE VIETNAM WAR, 1954–1965

**Mark Moyar**

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For Kelli, Greta, Trent, Luke, Bert, and Marjorie

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## Preface

This project began as a single-volume general history of the Vietnam War that would, like most histories spanning such a large conflict, rely primarily on existing books and articles for information, creating a long braid, as it were, by weaving together strands and shorter braids crafted by others. Initial research on the early years of the Vietnam War, however, revealed that many of the existing strands were flawed, and that many other necessary strands were missing altogether. Historical accuracy, therefore, demanded the rebuilding of existing strands and the creation of new strands. The history of the war had to be constructed through the use, whenever possible, of primary sources, rather than another's filtration and interpretation of those sources. This construction process, which involved prolonged exploration of the vast diplomatic, military, and political records of the period, dramatically lengthened the time needed to complete the project, and it increased the number of pages needed to provide the necessary evidence. As a consequence, the history has been divided into two volumes, split at July 28, 1965, the date on which President Lyndon B. Johnson publicly announced the first of many huge increases in the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam. This book is the first of the two volumes.

The inadequacy of the existing historical strands has not been a function of low production volumes. In recent years, new historical books on the Vietnam War have been appearing at an impressive pace, adding considerably to what was already a large body of histories. Like the earlier scholarship, however, the recent historical literature has been concentrated in a relatively small number of areas, and it has been dominated by one major school of thought. Most of the new works are concerned primarily with American policymaking in Washington and Saigon. Most of them come from what is known as the orthodox school, which generally sees America's involvement in the war as wrongheaded and unjust. The revisionist school, which sees the war as a noble but improperly executed enterprise, has published much less, primarily because it has few adherents in the academic world.<sup>1</sup>

Within the last decade, orthodox historians have written a substantial number of prominent books on policymaking during the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson presidencies, as well as several noteworthy histories spanning the entire Vietnam conflict.<sup>2</sup> In addition, some recent specialized books of orthodox persuasion have made significant contributions to the literature on the period from 1954 to 1965.<sup>3</sup> Other specialized works have challenged some interpretations of the orthodox school while still embracing its overarching tenets.<sup>4</sup> Still other specialized works do not clearly fit into either the orthodox or the revisionist camp, largely because most of the fundamental questions dividing the camps lie beyond their scope. Several such histories have incorporated valuable evidence from Soviet and Chinese archives.<sup>5</sup> The increased accessibility of Vietnamese and French sources has led to the production of new publications on Vietnamese Communism and Vietnamese anti-Communism, some of them high in quality.<sup>6</sup> Although most of the recent military histories of the Vietnam War focus on the period from August 1965 onward, when American ground forces were fully engaged in the war, a small number examine military events in the period that ended in July 1965.<sup>7</sup> David Elliott and Eric Bergerud have produced thorough and informative histories of the conflict in a single province throughout the course of the war.<sup>8</sup> Recent biographies of American presidents and other high-ranking figures have also brought new discoveries on strategic decision making.<sup>9</sup> Studies of other countries and regions have illuminated international perspectives on the Vietnam War.<sup>10</sup>

The orthodox–revisionist split has yet to become a full-fledged debate, because many orthodox historians have insisted that the fundamental issues of the Vietnam War are not open to debate. As Fredrik Logevall has stated in one of the most widely acclaimed of the recent orthodox histories, most scholars consider it “axiomatic” that the United States was wrong to go to war in Vietnam.<sup>11</sup> Some prominent orthodox scholars have gone so far as to claim that revisionists are not historians at all but merely ideologues, a claim that is indicative of a larger, very harmful trend at American universities whereby haughty derision and ostracism are used against those whose work calls into question the reigning ideological orthodoxy, stifling debate and leading to defects and gaps in scholarship of the sort found in the historical literature on the Vietnam War. David L. Anderson, the president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations and an orthodox historian of the Vietnam War, asserted in his 2005 presidential address that revisionists interpret the war based on an “uncritical acceptance” of American Cold War policy rather than analysis of the facts, in contrast to orthodox historians, who strictly use “reasoned analysis” to reach their conclusions.<sup>12</sup>

Anderson’s assertion about revisionists’ “uncritical acceptance” of America’s overarching policies can be discredited readily by examining my first book on the Vietnam War, a revisionist history that was known to Anderson. In that book, which focused on counterinsurgency during the latter years of the war, I

advanced the revisionist arguments that the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies fought effectively and ethically, and that the South Vietnamese populace generally preferred the South Vietnamese government to the Communists during that period. But I also contended that U.S. politicians were wrong to view the preservation of South Vietnam as a vital U.S. interest.<sup>13</sup> In the course of writing *Triumph Forsaken*, analysis of hitherto unappreciated facts caused me to alter this and other conclusions, an approach diametrically opposed to the ideologically driven approach deplored by Anderson.

During the past ten years, moreover, other revisionist historians have produced some well-researched, well-reasoned works covering the Vietnam conflict between 1954 and 1965, carrying on a relatively small, but strong, tradition of revisionist literature that dates back to the mid-1970s.<sup>14</sup> Drawing on a wide range of new archival sources, Arthur Dommen's history of the two Indochina wars provides a large amount of new information and analysis.<sup>15</sup> *Dereliction of Duty* by H. R. McMaster has shed much new light on U.S. policymaking in 1964 and 1965, particularly with respect to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.<sup>16</sup> Michael Lind has persuasively criticized a variety of orthodox interpretations,<sup>17</sup> and C. Dale Walton has effectively challenged the conventional wisdom on America's strategic options.<sup>18</sup> Several other works have presented new interpretations of the Diem government and the 1963 coup.<sup>19</sup> The strength of the recent revisionist works provides ample evidence that the orthodox school needs to analyze its own interpretations more critically.

There are numerous points of agreement between this volume and the orthodox histories, but there is little agreement on most of the key controversies. This history arrives at some of the same general conclusions as previous revisionist works, as the facts brought it to those points, but differs from them in that it contains many new interpretations and challenges many orthodox interpretations that have hitherto gone unchallenged. It differs from all of the existing literature in its breadth of coverage both inside and outside the two Vietnams and in its use of a more comprehensive collection of source material.

This account first examines the Vietnam War's central characters and countries in the years leading up to 1954. According to the orthodox view, the Vietnamese Communist leader Ho Chi Minh followed in the tradition of numerous Vietnamese nationalists who had defended the country against foreign aggression and who had despised the Chinese and other foreigners. A careful look into Vietnam's past, however, supports no such contentions. Almost all of the conflicts in Vietnamese history before the twentieth century had involved Vietnamese fighting against Vietnamese, not against external enemies. Neither Ho Chi Minh nor Vietnamese of previous generations hated the Chinese, and in fact they both worked amicably with Chinese allies. Ho Chi Minh would serve in the Chinese Communist Army in World War II, he would do whatever his Chinese Communist allies recommended during his war with France, and he would ask the Chinese to send troops to help him in Vietnam

on several occasions. Ho generally showed greater deference toward his foreign patrons than did his nationalist rival in South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, who would ultimately suffer death for refusing to yield to the demands of his American allies. Ho was a fervent believer in the Communism of Marx and Lenin, committed so deeply to Communist internationalism that he would not have sacrificed Communist solidarity for the sake of Vietnam's narrow interests. Thus, contrary to widely accepted interpretations, he never would have turned against his Chinese Communist neighbors, or any other Communist countries, had the United States allowed him to unify Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh would not have let the United States transform his country into an Asian Yugoslavia.

From 1954 to 1965, American leaders correctly perceived that China and North Vietnam were working together to spread Communism across Southeast Asia. They did not view the Communist threat to Vietnam as monolithic in nature, for they were aware of the Sino-Soviet rift that had opened in the 1950s and they knew that the Soviet Union was providing minimal support for Communist expansionism in Southeast Asia. As the war in Vietnam grew in intensity, leading figures in the Johnson administration predicted that the conflict would widen the rift between the Chinese and Soviets, and subsequent history would prove them right.

Whereas the very top leaders of the Vietnamese Communist Party fought the war for ideological reasons, the South Vietnamese peasants who joined the Viet Cong insurgency were attracted primarily by the Viet Cong's leadership capabilities and military strength. They were easily swayed by its charismatic leaders and they wanted to be on the winning side when the fighting ended. Concerned exclusively with local rather than national matters, the peasant masses had little interest in fighting for nationalist causes, and even less interest in Marxist theories or in the collectivization of agriculture that the Communists had in mind. The Viet Cong's temporary land redistribution program did help attract the support of landless peasants, but in the peasants' minds, leadership and strength always outweighed economic policies.

South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, who has been incessantly depicted as an obtuse, tyrannical reactionary by orthodox historians, was in reality a very wise and effective leader. In 1954 and 1955, with few resources at his disposal, he brought order to a demoralized, disorganized, and divided South Vietnam. A man deeply dedicated to the welfare of his country, Diem governed in an authoritarian way because he considered Western-style democracy inappropriate for a country that was fractious and dominated by an authoritarian culture. The accuracy of this belief would be borne out by the events that followed his assassination. Diem attempted, with some success, to create a modern Vietnam that preserved Vietnamese traditions, an objective that resonated with his countrymen and with other Asian nationalists to a greater degree than did Western liberalism or Communism. Diem did not stifle religion or kill tens



of thousands in the process of redistributing land as Ho Chi Minh did, and he was more tolerant of dissent than his northern counterpart. Most South Vietnamese citizens and officials had a high opinion of Diem, though some disliked his brother and close adviser Ngo Dinh Nhu.

For most of Diem's tenure, the South Vietnamese government held the upper hand in its struggle against the Vietnamese Communists. In the late 1950s, Diem virtually wiped out the secret Communist networks in South Vietnam, thereby precipitating Hanoi's decision to move from political struggle and limited assassinations to a large-scale Maoist insurgency. During 1960 and 1961, the insurgents succeeded in eliminating or reducing the government's power in some areas, and the Diem government was not very effective in employing countermeasures. The problem was not that Diem and his American advisers were interested only in conventional military power, as some would have it. Diem and America's military representatives in South Vietnam fully understood the importance of both conventional forces and counter-guerrilla forces to the defense of South Vietnam. Much of the responsibility for the travails of 1960 and 1961 belonged to U.S. Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow and other American civilians, who chose to provide the South Vietnamese militia and other counter-guerrilla forces with fewer funds and lighter weaponry than they needed. The other key factor was the ability of the Viet Cong to field better leaders on average than the Diem government, the result of political and cultural differences.

During 1960, Diem's forces did score a major success by severing the first Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was located solely within the territory of North and South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese responded by shifting their logistical lines from South Vietnam into Laos, enabling them to intensify the insurgency and mount a very effective, but ultimately inconclusive, offensive in the fall of 1961. President Kennedy, preferring to fight alongside the South Vietnamese rather than the Laotians because of the former's much greater pugnacity, chose not to intervene in Laos and instead tried to solve his Laotian problems through a neutralization agreement. When the North Vietnamese failed to withdraw their forces in the fall of 1962 as stipulated in the agreement, Kennedy refrained from sending American forces into Laos to stop the continuing infiltration. It was a disastrous concession to the enemy, a concession that would haunt South Vietnam and the United States for the remaining fourteen years of the war. Yet despite the heavy influx of Communist personnel and materiel via Laos, the years 1962 and 1963 saw a dramatic turnaround in the war within South Vietnam. Capitalizing on major increases in U.S. military assistance and the coming of age of young leaders whom Diem had begun developing in the 1950s, the South Vietnamese government implemented the strategic hamlet program with great vigor and strengthened its conventional and militia forces. By permanently infusing large numbers of devoted militiamen and officials into the strategic hamlets and by inflicting numerous defeats on the Viet Cong's

armed forces, the government reestablished control over most of the territory where the Viet Cong had made inroads in the preceding two years.

Diem's critics were wrong to believe that the Buddhist protest movement of 1963 arose from popular dissatisfaction with a government guilty of religious intolerance. It was, in truth, a power play by a few Buddhist leaders whose duplicity became clear over time as they showed themselves impervious to government attempts at reconciliation and as their charges of religious persecution were disproved. These leaders had close ties to the Communists or were themselves covert Communists, and other Communist agents participated extensively in the Buddhist movement's protest activities. In Vietnam, where a government lost face if it tolerated sharp public dissent, Diem ultimately had to suppress the Buddhist movement if his government were to remain viable. He suppressed it very effectively on August 21, 1963, by arresting its leaders and clearing the pagodas where it was headquartered. This maneuver was actually the brainchild of Diem's generals, a critical fact lost on those Americans who turned against Diem for his alleged heavy-handedness against the Buddhists. Most remarkably, the anti-Diem Americans would decide that Diem should be replaced with those very generals. While his generals thought that Diem remained the best man for the Presidency, the ensuing renunciations of Diem by the U.S. government and press ultimately caused some of them to remove him from power.

In 1963, the American journalists David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan played pivotal roles in turning influential Americans and South Vietnamese against the Diem regime. Their reporting on military events was inaccurate at times, and it regularly overemphasized the South Vietnamese government's shortcomings. Colonel John Paul Vann, a U.S. Army adviser and the central figure in Sheehan's book *A Bright Shining Lie*, was more dishonest in dealing with the press than Sheehan ever acknowledged. Vann fed the journalists an extremely misleading version of the Battle of Ap Bac, one that the journalists transformed into the accepted version of the battle. Halberstam and Sheehan presented grossly inaccurate information on the Buddhist protest movement and on South Vietnamese politics, much of which they unwittingly received from secret Communist agents. Ignorant of cultural differences between the United States and Vietnam, they criticized the Diem government for refusing to act like an American government when, in fact, Diem's political methods were far more effective than American methods in treating South Vietnam's problems. South Vietnam's elites, who regularly read Vietnamese translations of American press articles, viewed the *New York Times* and other U.S. newspapers as mouthpieces of the U.S. administration, with the result that negative articles on the Diem government undermined South Vietnamese confidence in Diem and encouraged rebellion. Although the American journalists hoped that their reporting would bring about the installation of a better South Vietnamese government, it actually caused enormous damage to South Vietnam and to

American interests there. Once the coup that they had promoted led to a succession of ineffective governments, exposing them to blame for the crippling of South Vietnam, Halberstam, Sheehan, and fellow journalist Stanley Karnow disparaged Diem with falsehoods so as to claim that South Vietnam was already weak beyond hope before the coup. This turn of events would distort much of the subsequent analysis of the Diem government.

President Kennedy did not consent to the coup that ousted Ngo Dinh Diem on November 1, 1963. Until the very end, Kennedy had serious reservations about the plotting against Diem, in considerable part because many of his senior subordinates opposed Diem's removal, and he unsuccessfully tried to slow the anti-Diem conspiracy. U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge, who was much influenced by Halberstam and Sheehan, instigated the coup without notifying Kennedy and in direct violation of Presidential orders. A few days before the coup began, Kennedy discovered that Lodge was encouraging a group of South Vietnamese generals to rebel and was not informing Washington of his contacts with the conspirators. President Kennedy tried to rein in Lodge and the plotters by sending instructions to the Saigon embassy, but to no avail. He did not take decisive action to stop Lodge, primarily because Lodge was a leading candidate for the Republican Presidential nomination in 1964, and Kennedy did not want campaign accusations that he had kept the Republican ambassador from taking the required actions. Kennedy had appointed Lodge with the intention of hamstringing him and the Republicans by enmeshing them in Vietnam, but it would turn out to be the President who was hamstrung.

Supporting the coup of November 1963 was by far the worst American mistake of the Vietnam War. Contrary to later assertions by the coup's advocates, the South Vietnamese war effort had not entered into a period of decline during the last months of Diem's rule. Proof that the war was proceeding satisfactorily until the coup comes from North Vietnamese as well as American sources – disproving the thesis that American officials were mindlessly optimistic at the time – and also from the 1963 articles of the journalists who would subsequently propagate the myth of a pre-coup collapse. The deterioration did not begin until the period immediately following Diem's overthrow, when the new leaders failed to lead, feuded with each other, and arrested untold numbers of former Diem supporters. Within a few months of the coup, the pacification effort would collapse in most parts of the countryside, and the regular armed forces would be in the first stages of a lengthy period of decline. These changes would help propel Hanoi toward a strategy of seeking a decisive victory through the destruction of South Vietnam's armed forces, which in turn would eventually force the Americans to decide either to introduce U.S. ground troops or to abandon South Vietnam.

Throughout his Presidency, John F. Kennedy was firmly committed to preserving a non-Communist South Vietnam, and he had no plans to abandon his South Vietnamese allies after the 1964 election. Convinced that the defense

of South Vietnam was vital to U.S. security, Kennedy vastly expanded the U.S. aid and advisory programs in South Vietnam over the course of his term. Prior to his assassination, Kennedy took no actions that might suggest an intent to abandon Vietnam to the Communists after reelection, and those who knew him best said afterwards that he had never given serious consideration to such a withdrawal. Had Kennedy faced the crisis in Vietnam that Johnson faced in the middle of 1965, he most likely would have come to the same conclusion as Johnson: that saving South Vietnam was so important as to warrant the use of U.S. combat forces.

The effects of the South Vietnamese government's poor performance from Ngo Dinh Diem's death until the middle of 1965 have been understood widely, but its causes have not. According to one standard explanation, the Saigon government failed because its leaders and its American advisers selected the wrong methods for combating the enemy. In truth, however, the problem was not in the concepts but in the execution. An explanation more commonly advanced, closer to the mark but still only partially correct, is that the South Vietnamese government faltered at this time because the country's ruling elite was bereft of strong leaders. Many individuals who occupied positions of power in the post-Diem period, it is true, did lack the necessary leadership attributes, and none was as talented as Diem, but the caliber of the elites as a whole was not a critical problem. The critical problems, rather, were the exclusion of certain elites from the government and the manipulation of governmental leaders by the militant Buddhist movement. From November 1963 onward, the top leadership in Saigon repeatedly removed men of considerable talent, either because of their past loyalty to Diem or because of pressure from the militant Buddhists. And in spite of these purges, the government still had some men, even at the very top at times, who possessed leadership capabilities that would have made them successful leaders had it not been for militant Buddhist conniving. The Buddhist leaders tried to bridle every government that held power after Diem, and in most instances they succeeded, largely because government officials feared resisting the Buddhist activists after watching Diem lose American favor, and his life, for resisting them. As its American advocates had desired, the 1963 coup led to political liberalization, but rather than improving the government as those Americans had predicted, liberalization had the opposite effect, enabling enemies of the government to undermine its prestige and authority, as well as to foment discord and violence between religious groups. Not until June 1965, by which time the United States and most South Vietnamese leaders had come to realize the necessity of suppressing the militant Buddhists and other troublemakers, would political stability return. By then, however, South Vietnam had sustained crippling damage and Hanoi was pushing for total victory.

Lyndon Johnson's lack of forcefulness in Vietnam in late 1964 and early 1965 squandered America's deterrent power and led to a decision in Hanoi to

invade South Vietnam with large North Vietnamese Army units. According to the prevailing historical interpretation, the leadership in Hanoi relentlessly pursued a strategy of attacking in the South until it won, with little regard for what its enemies did. In reality, however, North Vietnam's strategy was heavily dependent on American actions. Although Johnson's generals favored striking North Vietnam quickly and powerfully, he chose to follow the prescriptions of his civilian advisers, who advocated an academic approach that used small doses of force to convey America's resolve without provoking the enemy. Because of his chosen strategic philosophy and because of international and U.S. electoral politics, Johnson made only a token attack on North Vietnam following the Tonkin Gulf incidents of 1964 and undertook no military action thereafter. Rather than inducing the North Vietnamese to reciprocate with self-limitations, as the theorists predicted, however, this approach served only to heighten Hanoi's appetite and courage. Johnson's lack of action, as well as his presidential campaign rhetoric, convinced Hanoi that the Americans would not put up a fight for Vietnam in the near future. This change came at a time when the weakened condition of the Saigon government indicated that South Vietnamese resistance to a North Vietnamese invasion would be weak. Consequently, in November 1964, Hanoi began sending large North Vietnamese Army units to South Vietnam, with the intention of winning the war swiftly. The Americans were slow to identify the shift in North Vietnam's strategy and thus lost any remaining chance of deterring Hanoi or otherwise enabling South Vietnam to survive without U.S. combat troops.

Some well-known historians have argued that President Johnson wanted to inject U.S. ground troops into the war whether they were needed or not. Johnson made his decision to intervene, they contend, at the end of 1964 or in early 1965. In actuality, Johnson reached his decision no earlier than the latter part of June 1965, by which time intervention had become the only means of saving South Vietnam. The first U.S. ground troops sent to Vietnam arrived in March 1965, but Johnson deployed them only to protect U.S. air bases, not to engage the main elements of the Communist forces. At the time of the initial ground force deployments, Johnson and his lieutenants did not foresee a major war between American and Communist forces, because they did not know that Hanoi had begun sending entire North Vietnamese Army regiments into South Vietnam. They did not learn of this development until the beginning of April. By the middle of June, abetted by a continuing infusion of North Vietnamese soldiers, the Communist forces had won many large victories and the South Vietnamese Army was losing its ability to challenge large Communist initiatives. The North Vietnamese had entered the third and final stage of Maoist revolutionary warfare, in which the revolutionaries use massed conventional forces to destroy the government's conventional forces. Hanoi's ultimate success, as its leaders repeatedly stated, depended above all on the ability of its conventional forces to destroy the South Vietnamese Army, particularly its mobile strategic reserve

units, not South Vietnam's small counter-guerrilla forces. The fighting of 1965 demonstrated that, contrary to the contentions of a multitude of pundits and theoreticians, the Americans and the South Vietnamese had been correct to develop a large conventional South Vietnamese army during the 1950s and early 1960s rather than concentrate exclusively on small-unit warfare.

Lyndon Johnson had always wanted to avoid putting U.S. troops into the ground war if there was any way that South Vietnam could continue the war without them. Like most of his advisers, he doubted that U.S. ground force intervention would result in an easy victory, believing instead that it would result in a long, painful, and politically troublesome struggle against an enemy who might never give up. But in June 1965, Johnson and his military advisers concluded, correctly, that only the use of U.S. ground forces in major combat could stop the Communist conventional forces from finishing off the South Vietnamese Army and government. Even as Johnson became convinced of the need for intervention, he held out hopes of withdrawing U.S. troops from Vietnam relatively soon, regardless of how the fighting was going, in the belief that a brief intervention might achieve as much as a sustained intervention in terms of preserving U.S. credibility and prestige in the world.

Johnson decided that South Vietnam was worth rescuing in 1965 primarily because he dreaded the international consequences of that country's demise. His greatest fear was the so-called domino effect, whereby the fall of Vietnam would cause other countries in Asia to fall to Communism. Historians have frequently argued that Johnson fought for Vietnam primarily to protect himself against accusations from the American Right that he was soft on Communism, which would have harmed his reputation and denied him the political support he needed to carry out his domestic agenda. In actuality, the domestic political ramifications of losing Vietnam had relatively little influence on Johnson's decision on whether to protect South Vietnam. Johnson recognized that the American people were largely apathetic about Vietnam and would be no more likely to turn against him politically and personally if he left than if he stayed and fought. Domestic political considerations did, on the other hand, exert great influence on how Johnson protected South Vietnam, as they discouraged him from bridling Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, from taking a tough stance on Vietnam before the 1964 election, and from calling up the U.S. reserves and otherwise putting the United States on a war footing. That there has been great cynicism and confusion about Johnson's motives was partly the responsibility of the President himself, for during this period he repeatedly misrepresented his intentions to the American people and he did not provide decisive leadership that would have clarified his views and inspired the people's confidence.

The domino theory was valid. The fear of falling dominoes in Asia was based not on simple-mindedness or paranoia, but rather on a sound understanding of the toppler countries and the domino countries. As Lyndon Johnson pondered whether to send U.S. troops into battle, the evidence overwhelmingly supported

the conclusion that South Vietnam's defeat would lead to either a Communist takeover or the switching of allegiance to China in most of the region's countries. Information available since that time has reinforced this conclusion. Vietnam itself was not intrinsically vital to U.S. interests, but it was vital nevertheless because its fate strongly influenced events in other Asian countries that were intrinsically vital, most notably Indonesia and Japan. In 1965, China and North Vietnam were aggressively and resolutely trying to topple the dominoes, and the dominoes were very vulnerable to toppling. Throughout Asia, among those who paid attention to international affairs, the domino theory enjoyed a wide following. If the United States pulled out of Vietnam, Asia's leaders generally believed, the Americans would lose their credibility in Asia and most of Asia would have to bow before China or face destruction, with enormous global repercussions. Every country in Southeast Asia and the surrounding area, aside from the few that were already on China's side, advocated U.S. intervention in Vietnam, and most of them offered to assist the South Vietnamese war effort. The oft-maligned analogy to the Munich agreement of 1938 actually offered a sound prediction of how the dominoes would likely fall: Communist gains in one area would encourage the Communists to seek further conquests in other places, and after each Communist victory the aggressors would enjoy greater assets and the defenders fewer.

Further evidence of the domino theory's validity can be found by examining the impact of America's Vietnam policy on other developments in the world between 1965 and the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, developments that would remove the danger of a tumbling of Asian dominoes. Among these were the widening of the Sino-Soviet split, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the civil war in Cambodia. America's willingness to hold firm in Vietnam did much to foster anti-Communism among the generals of Indonesia, which was the domino of greatest strategic importance in Southeast Asia. Had the Americans abandoned Vietnam in 1965, these generals most likely would not have seized power from the pro-Communist Sukarno and annihilated the Indonesian Communist Party later that year, as they ultimately did. Communism's ultimate failure to knock over the dominoes in Asia was not an inevitable outcome, independent of events in Vietnam, but was instead the result of obstacles that the United States threw in Communism's path by intervening in Vietnam.

It has been said that the Johnson administration, in its first years, could have negotiated a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam that would have preserved a non-Communist South Vietnam for years to come. Evidence from the Communist side, however, reveals North Vietnam's complete unwillingness to negotiate such a deal. The Communists would not have agreed to a settlement in 1964 or 1965 that could have prevented them from gaining control of South Vietnam quickly. With their list of military victories growing longer and longer, with a clear and promising plan for conquering South Vietnam on the battlefield, the



North Vietnamese had no reason to accept a diplomatic settlement that might rob them of the spoils.

The Americans did miss some strategic opportunities of a different sort, opportunities that would have allowed them to fight from a much more favorable strategic position. In the chaotic period following Diem's overthrow, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other U.S. military leaders repeatedly advocated an invasion of North Vietnam. Johnson and his civilian advisers rejected this advice, however, on the grounds that an American invasion of the North could lead to a war between the United States and China. Historians have generally concurred in the assessment that Chinese intervention was likely. But the evidence shows that until at least March 1965, the deployment of U.S. ground forces into North Vietnam would not have prompted the Chinese to intercede. Having suffered huge losses in the Korean War, the Chinese had no more appetite for a war between themselves and the Americans than did their American counterparts. Johnson's failure to attack North Vietnam also worked to the enemy's advantage by facilitating a massive Chinese troop deployment into North Vietnam, which in turn freed up many North Vietnamese Army divisions for deployment to South Vietnam and made a subsequent U.S. invasion of North Vietnam much riskier.

Another opportunity not taken – one that never carried a serious risk of war with China – was the cutting of the Ho Chi Minh Trail with American forces. Johnson rejected many recommendations from the Joint Chiefs to put U.S. ground forces into Laos to carry out this task, and on this point, too, historians have backed the President over his generals. The Johnson administration and some historians have argued that the Ho Chi Minh Trail was not essential to the Communist war effort, but new evidence on the trail and on specific battles makes clear the inaccuracy of this contention. The Viet Cong insurgency was always heavily dependent on North Vietnamese infiltration of men and equipment into South Vietnam through Laos, and it could not have brought the Saigon government close to collapse in 1965, or defeated it in 1975, without heavy infiltration of both. Other orthodox historians have argued that an American ground troop presence in Laos would not have stopped most of the infiltration, but much new evidence contradicts this contention as well. The United States, moreover, missed some valuable opportunities to sever Hanoi's maritime supply lines, although it did cut some of the most important sea routes in early 1965.

In sum, South Vietnam was a vital interest of the United States during the period from 1954 to 1965. The aggressive expansionism of North Vietnam and China threatened South Vietnam's existence, and by 1965 only strong American action could keep South Vietnam out of Communist hands. America's policy of defending South Vietnam was therefore sound. U.S. intervention in Vietnam was not an act of strategic buffoonery, nor was it a sinister, warmongering plot that should forever stand as a terrible blemish on America's soul. Neither was



it an act of hubris in which the United States pursued objectives far beyond its means. Where the United States erred seriously was in formulating its strategies for protecting South Vietnam. The most terrible mistake was the inciting of the November 1963 coup, for Ngo Dinh Diem's overthrow forfeited the tremendous gains of the preceding nine years and plunged the country into an extended period of instability and weakness. The Johnson administration was handed the thorny tasks of handling the post-coup mess and defending South Vietnam against an increasingly ambitious enemy – and in neither case did the administration achieve good results. President Johnson had available several aggressive policy options that could have enabled South Vietnam to continue the war either without the help of any American ground forces at all or with the employment of U.S. ground forces in advantageous positions outside South Vietnam. But Johnson ruled out these options and therefore, during the summer of 1965, he would have to fight a defensive war within South Vietnam's borders in order to avoid the dreadful international consequences of abandoning the country.

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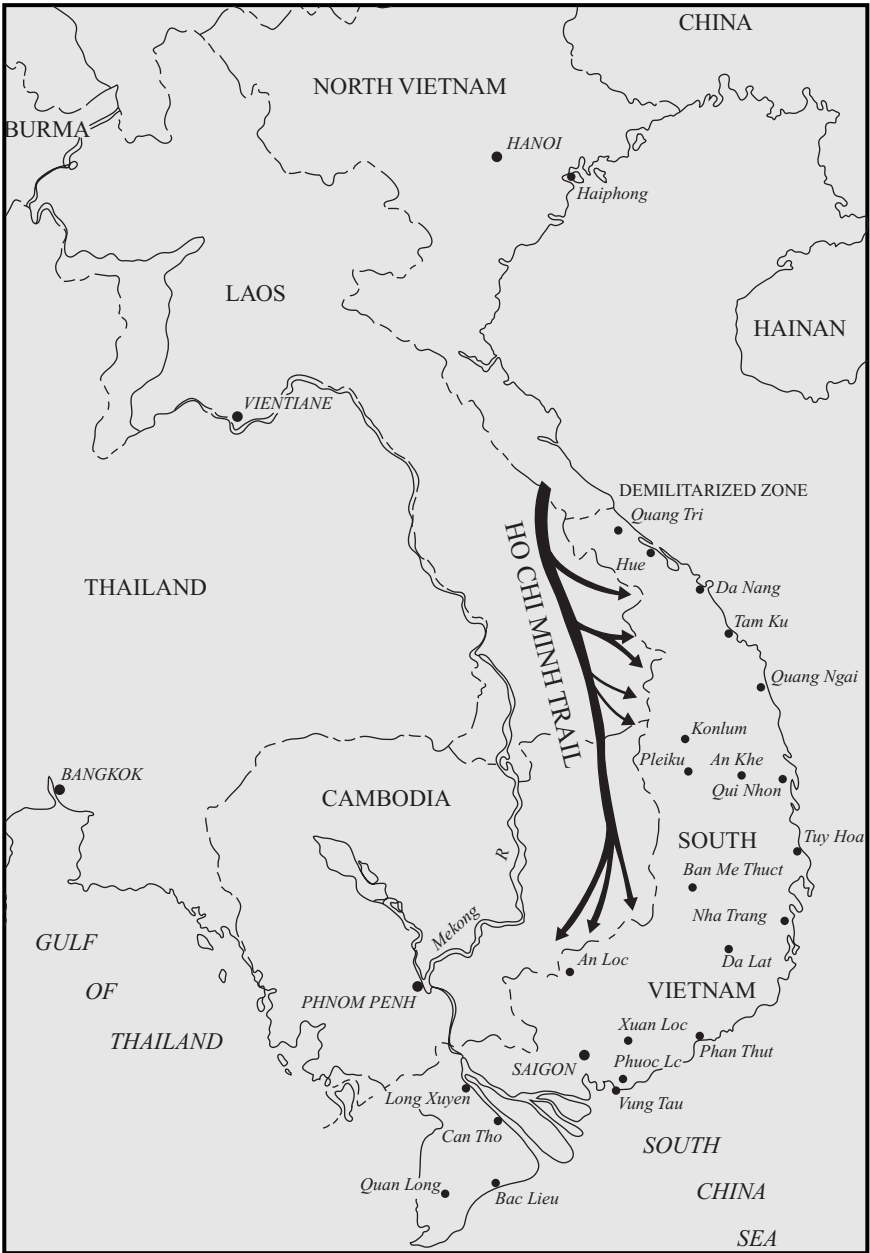
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## TRIUMPH FORSAKEN



**Southeast Asia**

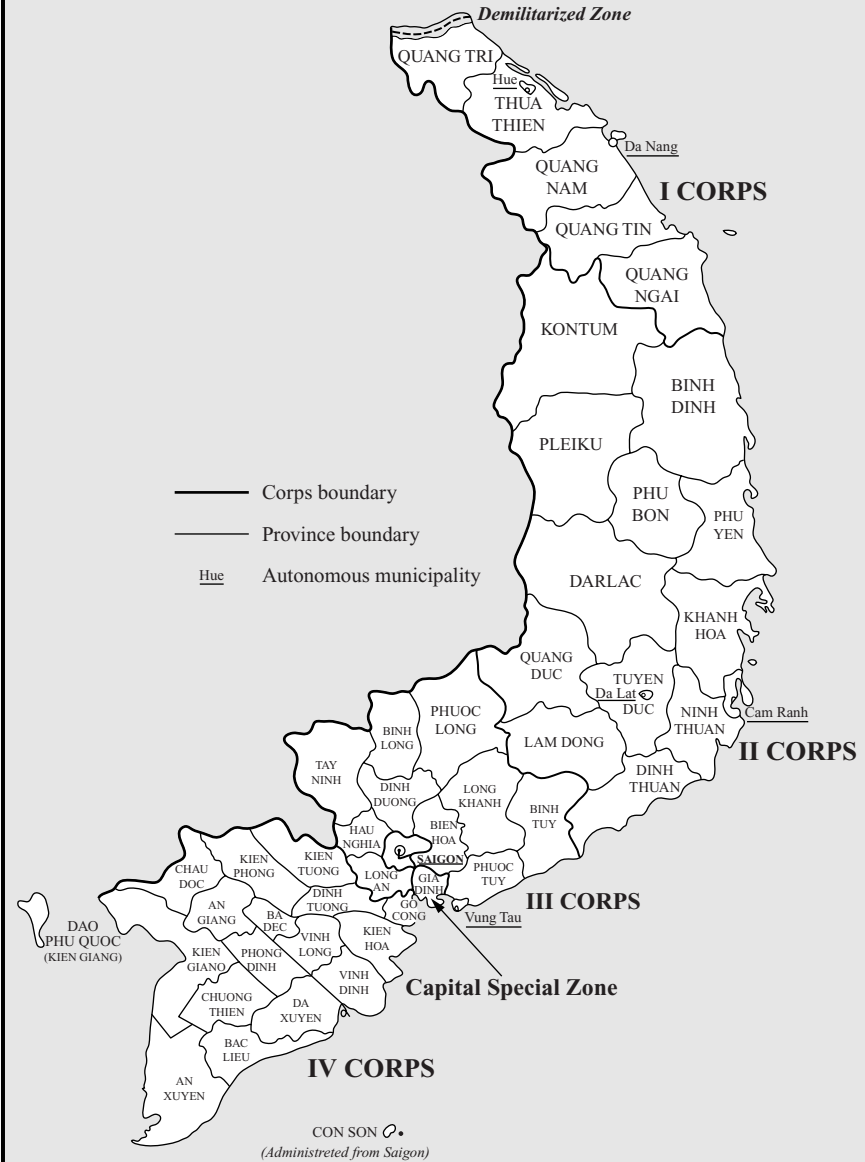


# COMMUNIST (VIET CONG)





## REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM



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## CHAPTER 1

# Heritage

**FROM ALL DIRECTIONS, FROM HANOI AND FROM THE SURROUNDING** countryside, several hundred thousand Vietnamese converged on a large square called the Place Puginier, next to the French Governor's palace. At that square, they had been told, they could hear the man who had suddenly claimed to be the leader of all Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh arrived at the Place Puginier in a black American automobile. He was supposed to speak to the throng at 2:00 P.M., but he arrived several minutes late because the streets of Hanoi were jammed with pedestrians heading toward the square. Having no dress clothes of his own, Ho was wearing a faded khaki suit and a high-collared jacket that he had borrowed from an acquaintance, and atop his head was a pith helmet. Men in suits waved small red flags with gold stars and a band played marches as he headed towards a high wooden platform in the center of the square. Just a few weeks earlier, the Viet Minh had taken over the city from a Japanese occupation force, which had largely stopped functioning after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but Viet Minh leaders still feared that the Japanese might interfere with this momentous event. For that reason, armed Viet Minh guards hovered around the platform and the rest of the square. At Ho's invitation, several American officers from the Office of Strategic Services were standing near the platform, and two American P-38 Lightning fighters happened to fly over the assemblage during the event, both of which created a false impression that the United States government was endorsing Ho Chi Minh.

Ho tailored the beginning of his speech to the American officers standing right in front of him. Quoting from the American Declaration of Independence, Ho pronounced, "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." He then read from a proclamation that had inspired a more radical set of men, the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen: "All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights." Ho proceeded to accuse the French colonialists of violating these American and French principles in all sorts of cruel

ways. Asserting that his new government represented “the entire Vietnamese people,” he made no mention of his political ideology, and the only political objective he discussed was the formation of an independent Vietnam. “The entire Vietnamese people,” he said in conclusion, “are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property, in order to safeguard their freedom and independence.”<sup>1</sup>

According to many accounts, the Place Puginier speech on September 2, 1945 proved that nationalism, not Marxist-Leninist internationalism, was the locomotive that pulled Ho Chi Minh’s revolution. Ho Chi Minh, it is argued, was simply the latest in a long line of Vietnamese nationalists who had resisted foreign aggressors. Had it not been for American determination to support the French colonialists and later to prop up a weak non-Communist South Vietnam, the United States and a unified Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh could have been allies, with Ho’s Vietnam turning against Communist China because of nationalist animosity just as Yugoslavia had turned against the Soviet Union. If only the Americans had understood the history of Vietnam, the whole tragedy could have been averted.<sup>2</sup>

The fatal flaw in this line of reasoning is that the history of Vietnam and the history of Ho Chi Minh actually support the very opposite conclusions.<sup>3</sup> Ho Chi Minh was not, in reality, the most recent of many nationalist heroes who had combated foreign aggression. Driving out foreign invaders was not the main chord of Vietnam’s national song; infighting was the primary chord, and aggression against the southern neighbors of Champa and Cambodia rivaled the struggle against foreign invasion for second place. For most of the thousand years that are known in the West as the first millennium A.D., Vietnam belonged to what later became China. On a dozen occasions during that period, the residents of Vietnam attempted to expel the ruling officials and soldiers by force of arms, not out of xenophobia – many of the rebels had been born in China or descended from Chinese ancestors – but out of a desire for power or freedom from the central authority. In every case except the last one, the only rebel successes were but brief flourishes that quickly perished along with the perpetrators. The final revolt began in 939, under the leadership of Ngo Quyen, and it ended with Vietnam receiving vassal status from its massive northern neighbor, which entailed the payment of tributes to China in return for Vietnam’s autonomy. Vietnam would remain a vassal of China for nearly one thousand years.

From this point onward, in all of the centuries to come, the very extensive fighting within Vietnam consisted almost entirely of one Vietnamese faction fighting another Vietnamese faction. Vanity and cruelty often prevailed in these contests, giving lie to the view of some in the West that it was French colonialism that corrupted Vietnamese politics. The infighting began just five years after Vietnam obtained vassal status from China. Upon Ngo Quyen’s death in 944, his brother-in-law Duong Tam Kha and his son Xuong Van went to war over

the throne, leading to a succession of usurpations. In 963, while observing his military forces from a boat, King Xuong Van was felled by a crossbowman hidden on the bank. His death plunged Vietnam into a two-year period era of anarchy known as the Period of the Twelve Warlords. Unity returned to the land in 965 when the warlord Dinh Bo Linh put down the other lords. But bloody rebellions would plague his dynasty and all that followed it, becoming more frequent when the king was incompetent or inattentive to subversion. Knowing that deception and treachery were constantly fermenting in the hearts of their countrymen, the kings usually delegated power to their family members, and for this reason revolts normally failed unless they involved members of the royal family audacious enough to despoil the sanctity of kinship. On occasion, however, the entire dynasty was supplanted by feudal lords, in which case there was certain to be considerable brutality, possibly involving wholesale slaughter of the outgoing dynasty.

To support the view that Ho Chi Minh could have become an Asian Tito, numerous commentators have asserted that China and Vietnam had been at war for much of Vietnam's existence and enemies for nearly all of it prior to the mid-twentieth century, ensuring subsequent conflict.<sup>4</sup> The actual history of Vietnam, however, does not bear out this claim. From the end of the tenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, the Chinese and the Vietnamese fought a mere three wars, all of which the Vietnamese initiated. The first of these wars, in 1075, began when the Vietnamese raided China to prevent the Chinese from dominating the buffer zone between Vietnam and China. The Song Chinese sent an army into Vietnam to punish the Vietnamese, and the army withdrew once the Vietnamese apologized for what they had done. In the two subsequent wars, in 1406 and 1789, the Chinese came to Vietnam because one Vietnamese faction invited them in to help fight another Vietnamese faction. The very few uninvited attacks on Vietnam during this thousand-year period were made not by China but by Champa, by the Mongol empire of Kublai Khan, and by France.<sup>5</sup>

In general, amicability characterized relations between China and Vietnam during these thousand years. Having been a Chinese province and a popular destination for Chinese emigrants during the preceding thousand years, Vietnam had thoroughly absorbed the customs, ideas, and religions of China. From the time of its independence through the middle of the twentieth century, Vietnam remained a follower of China in the realms of culture and politics. Although the Vietnamese at times resented Chinese influence and feared excessive Chinese meddling in Vietnam's affairs, as is typical when one nation dominates another, these emotions were not strong enough to either prevent collaboration or create serious hostility. From the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, the Vietnamese and Chinese helped each other repeatedly in times of need, much as the Americans during the same period worked together with the British, who had been their colonial masters

much more recently. Cooperation was especially close among Vietnamese and Chinese of Communist persuasion.

Ho Chi Minh was one in a long line of Vietnamese leaders who used assistance from abroad to fight their Vietnamese enemies. For most of his career, his successes depended heavily upon large-scale material aid and advice from the Soviet Union and China. His struggles against French colonialism constituted a civil war as well as a war against a foreign power, for more Vietnamese than Frenchmen would take up arms against the Viet Minh, and when Ho's nationalist rival Ngo Dinh Diem came to power in southern Vietnam, the ensuing conflict was purely a contest between two Vietnamese groups that relied heavily on foreign assistance. If one side in that conflict could be said to be less dependent on foreigners than the other, it was not the Communists, as Ho was much more deferential to his foreign advisers than was Ngo Dinh Diem. Ho was to follow the advice of the Chinese with a submissiveness that Diem would never display in his dealings with the Americans. Only Ho Chi Minh would fill towns and villages with propaganda lauding his foreign allies.

Foreign aid to warring Vietnamese factions figured prominently in Vietnamese history from the fourteenth century onward. In 1369, the Vietnamese king perished without leaving an heir, leading to a succession crisis during which royals slaughtered one another in great numbers. Among the victims was Nhat Le, the first man to seize the throne. After Nhat Le's murder, his mother went to the country of Champa to ask for help against the Vietnamese who had taken the kingdom from her son, and, in 1371, the Chams complied. Led by the famed Che Bong Nga, the Chams entered the Red River Valley, tore the Vietnamese army to shreds, and burned the palaces of Hanoi. In 1389, the Chams returned to Vietnam to assist Vietnamese rebels, but just as they were about to defeat the forces of the Vietnamese king, a Cham traitor revealed the location of Che Bong Nga's ship, thereby enabling the Vietnamese to kill the Cham hero and take his head. The Chams, deflated by the death of their mighty leader, returned to their homeland.

In the year 1400, the cunning regent Ho Quy Ly orchestrated the strangling of the young king and massacred huge numbers of his supporters and their male relatives, from babies to old men, in order to take over the throne. Surviving members of the dynastic family appealed to the Chinese for help, and finally, in 1406, Chinese Emperor Yung Lo agreed to do so. He dispatched an army known as the "Force the Barbarians to Submit Army," which, abetted by the ousted dynasty, defeated Ho Quy Ly's forces and drove him from power. Possessed by an enormous appetite for enlarging his domain, Yung Lo did not restore the Vietnamese royal family to power but instead chose to place Vietnam under the rule of his own Ming dynasty. The Ming government in Vietnam, Chinese though it was, enjoyed widespread favor among the people of northern Vietnam. Further south, however, a wealthy Vietnamese landowner named Le Loi formed a powerful group of rebels. A fierce war followed between the Ming

and Le Loi's forces, lasting nearly a decade. It ended when Yung Lo's successor decided that Vietnam was not worth the trouble and agreed to let Le Loi have all of Vietnam, returning it to vassal status.

With the start of the early sixteenth century came some of the worst infighting in Vietnamese history, leading to the establishment of two rival regimes, one in the north and one in the south. North Vietnam and South Vietnam were to engage intermittently in inconclusive wars for the next two hundred years. The Nguyen family, which took control of southern Vietnam in the latter part of the sixteenth century, erected two huge walls north of the plains of Quang Tri, running from the sea all the way to the Annamite foothills. Located near the seventeenth parallel, the walls sat very close to the line that would divide North Vietnam from South Vietnam following the Geneva Conference of 1954. After an interval of peace, the North – now led by the Trinh family – attacked the South, beginning a series of wars spanning half a century. Once again Vietnamese leaders sought foreign assistance in order to fight their Vietnamese rivals, with the Nguyen family receiving military equipment and advice from the Portuguese, and the Trinh family obtaining assistance from the Dutch, who were competing with the Portuguese in the scramble for colonies and trading privileges in the Far East. Although the North had a far larger population and army than the South, and although the South expended much of its martial energy in the conquest of lands belonging to Cambodia and Champa, the Trinh were never able to vanquish the Southerners.

In the late eighteenth century, three brothers from the village of Tay Son overthrew both the northern and southern monarchies in an orgy of violence that included ritual cannibalism and every other form of barbarity. The Tay Son brothers cut Vietnam into three sections, North, Center, and South, and ran them as separate states. The deposed royal families called on the Chinese for help in removing the Tay Son brothers, prompting the Chinese emperor to send his troops into Vietnam, the first time Chinese troops had been deployed to Vietnam since 1406. With the assistance of the Chinese, the old dynasties and their supporters drove the Tay Son from the cities and slaughtered many of their collaborators. But the youngest and greatest of the Tay Son brothers, Emperor Quang Trung, built a large army and, in 1789, threw the Chinese back into China while smashing the former dynasties.

Soon thereafter, the former southern king's nephew, Nguyen Anh, stormed into southern Vietnam and seized the commercial center of Saigon and much else in southern Vietnam from the Tay Son. Pigneau de Behaine, a French missionary, persuaded French merchants, missionaries, and naval officers to send Nguyen Anh two ships, a collection of military hardware, and European military advisers so that he could take northern Vietnam as well. From bases in southern Vietnam, Nguyen Anh's forces marched northward into a war that was to last thirteen years. Many of Nguyen Anh's European military advisers grew tired of him during the war and quit. He was overly cautious, they complained,

and had no sense of urgency. But in 1802, Nguyen Anh captured Hue and then Hanoi, putting an end to the rule of the Tay Son. He promptly executed the members of the Tay Son family and the families that had supplied the Tay Son with generals. The deposed Tay Son emperor, Nguyen Quang Toan, was forced to watch while Nguyen Anh's men urinated on his parents' disinterred bones, and then he had his limbs tied to four elephants that were driven in four directions until his body was torn into pieces.

Making Hue his capital, Nguyen Anh proclaimed himself the Emperor Gia Long and unified modern Vietnam, to include the Mekong Delta, for the first time. Although both Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Dinh Diem would later claim to be the rightful ruler of all of Vietnam, which they said was a single nation, Vietnam as a unified country had only a very brief and troubled history. Prior to 1954, North Vietnam and South Vietnam would be united for just fifty-eight years, from 1802 to 1859 – a very short period for an area with 2,700 years of history. This unification period would be filled with great tyranny, intrigue, and bloodletting among the Vietnamese, not the sort of unification to merit nostalgia. Nor was it the sort that would help the people develop a strong identification with Vietnam as a nation. For a much longer period, two hundred years in length, the North and South had been divided near the demarcation line established in 1954, and Northerners and Southerners had fought numerous wars against each other during those two centuries. Under the Tay Son and again under the French, Vietnam was divided into North, Center, and South, three regions that developed distinct cultures and identities along with feelings of superiority over the other two thirds. Much of unified Vietnam, moreover, had not been Vietnamese at all for most of Vietnam's history. Until the Vietnamese crushed the Chams in the fifteenth century, ninety percent of what became South Vietnam had belonged to either Champa or Cambodia. Vietnamese settlers did not penetrate the lands at the southern and western extremes of modern South Vietnam until the 1700s, and not until 1757 did the South Vietnamese kingdom reach the southernmost point of the Mekong Delta. While the regions of Vietnam shared the same language and were adjacent geographically, they were not predestined to become unified, any more than were the United States and Canada, or Germany and Austria. Because of its complicated history, Vietnam could legitimately be considered to be one, two, or three countries.

To complicate matters further, much of Vietnam was inhabited by people who were not considered to be Vietnamese by either themselves or by the ethnic Vietnamese who dominated the affairs of prosperous lowland Vietnam. After the annexation of the Mekong Delta, the ethnic Vietnamese were fond of saying that Vietnam was two rice baskets at the ends of a carrying pole, with the Mekong Delta in the south complementing the Red River Delta in the north. This assertion betrayed the contempt of the ethnic Vietnamese for the country's ethnic minorities, for the analogy was apt only if Vietnam were considered



to be merely the two deltas and the coastal lowland areas in between them, where virtually all of the ethnic Vietnamese lived. The lowland strip along the central coast was indeed narrow like a pole, but to its west the central highlands extended for hundreds of miles, making them comparable in breadth to the Mekong Delta. Comprising two-thirds of the land mass of southern Vietnam, the highlands were home to tribes from a wide range of ethnic groups. Most of them lived in humble villages on the vast Kontum and Darlac plateaus or in the steep mountains of the Annamite chain, a huge spur of the Himalayan massif running from China's southern frontier down the Southeast Asian peninsula.

By the time Gia Long had established dominion over all of the Vietnamese territories, Vietnam was on a collision course with France. Out of deference to his French benefactors, Gia Long allowed French and Spanish missionaries to convert many Vietnamese to Catholicism – by the 1820s, they had built the Catholic population of Vietnam to 300,000. But Gia Long's successors turned against the missionaries because of their ties to ravenous European governments and their support for opposition groups in a period of great civil strife. During the twenty-year reign of Gia Long's immediate successor, Minh Mang, no less than two hundred different uprisings against the emperor took place, with the opposition particularly strong in southern Vietnam, which remained very resistant to northern authority. At the end of a failed rebellion in 1833, the emperor's forces captured a French missionary with the rebels and, in public, they burned him with red hot pincers, hung him on a cross, and slowly sliced off his chest muscles, buttocks, and other body parts until he died. Emperor Thieu Tri, who came to power in 1840, killed several more missionaries, hundreds of Vietnamese Catholic priests, and thousands of their followers.

The persecution of missionaries and their converts, together with a desire to amass colonies at a time when European countries were racing to expand their empires, caused Emperor Napoleon III to send French forces to Vietnam at the end of 1857, beginning a twenty-five year conflict in which the next Vietnamese emperor, Tu Duc, attempted to fend off French attacks as well as several hundred internal revolts of various kinds. On August 25, 1883, Vietnam surrendered its independence to France. As the Tay Son had done, the French carved Vietnam into three parts – Tonkin in the north, Annam in the center, and Cochinchina in the south. The Chinese, at the urging of the Vietnamese, tried to contest France's colonization of Vietnam by sending their own soldiers to fight the French, but after two years of costly warfare the Chinese relented and agreed to peace on French terms. China officially relinquished its status as protector of Tonkin, bringing to an end the payment of tribute from Vietnam to China. In the next few years, some Vietnamese elites organized further resistance to their new rulers, but most of the prominent and talented Vietnamese decided to cooperate with the French, and a large number of them eagerly absorbed not only the science and technology that gave the French the tools of power but also

the ideas that animated them. To maintain their hold on Vietnam, the French colonialists would always rely more heavily on Vietnamese manpower than on their own.

Two strong anti-colonial groups that emerged during the 1920s attempted to throw the French out by force of arms in 1930. The Vietnam Nationalist Party, modeled after China's Kuomintang, incited a mutiny among Vietnamese soldiers in the colonial army, but the French quickly destroyed the mutineers and much of the party. The tattered remnants of the Vietnam Nationalist Party had to hobble into China. The second group was the Vietnamese Communist Party, led by the man who was to become known as Ho Chi Minh.<sup>6</sup> Born in 1890 in the province of Nghe An, Ho was the son of a well-to-do mandarin. During his teenage years, Ho attended the Lycée Quoc Hoc in Hue, the best high school available to Vietnamese boys, a school that would also educate the future Communist Party leaders Vo Nguyen Giap and Pham Van Dong, as well as the two anti-Communists who would ultimately cause Ho Chi Minh the greatest grief, Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu. Ho Chi Minh left Vietnam in 1912 to work aboard a French ocean liner, beginning a long period of life abroad. Following World War I, he settled in Paris and joined the French Socialist Party. Many years later, Ho would explain that he did not understand the party's ideology or platform at the time and he joined simply because they "had shown their sympathy toward me, toward the struggle of the oppressed peoples."<sup>7</sup> French leftists deemed Ho's oratorical skills and appearance unimpressive, but they liked his emotional intensity, which they said could be seen in his dark, flashing eyes.

The French Socialist party would be the stepping stone that took Ho to the Communism of Marx and Lenin. Coming from a country wrapped in authoritarian and communitarian traditions, Ho was not repelled by the lack of democracy and individualism in Soviet Communism, as many of the French Socialists were repelled. Ho later said that he went from being a Socialist to a Communist upon reading Lenin's "Theses on the National and Colonial Questions." He recounted,

In those Theses, there were political terms that were difficult to understand. But by reading them again and again, finally I was able to grasp the essential part. What emotion, enthusiasm, enlightenment and confidence they communicated to me! I wept for joy. Sitting by myself in my room, I would shout as if I were addressing large crowds: 'Dear martyr compatriots! This is what we need, this is our path to our liberation!' Since then, I had entire confidence in Lenin.<sup>8</sup>

What was in those inspirational Theses? Lenin's Theses laid out a strategy for revolution in colonial and non-European countries, a subject neglected in previous Communist treatises. The struggle against colonialism, Lenin maintained in the Theses, was a key component of Communism's quest to end the enslavement of the world's people by a small number of Western capitalists.

According to Lenin's treatise, the proletariat would first collaborate with the native bourgeoisie to destroy the colonial powers, then the dictatorship of the proletariat would eradicate the bourgeoisie along with "bourgeois prejudices" such as national and racial animosities, and would also destroy the "medieval influences of the clergy, the christian missions, and similar elements" and the "petty bourgeois pacifist confusion of the ideas and the policy of internationalism." Lenin called for "the closest union between all national and colonial liberation movements and Soviet Russia," and demanded "the subordination of the interests of the proletarian struggle in one nation to the interests of that struggle on an international scale."<sup>9</sup>

Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist in the sense that he had a special affection for Vietnam's people and favored Vietnamese unification and independence, but, from his reading of Lenin's Theses onward, he firmly adhered to the Leninist principle that Communist nations should subordinate their interests to those of the international Communist movement. The peoples of the world had to set aside national prejudices, he believed, and they needed to work together as partners to spread the global revolution, themes that he was discussing in his writings as early as 1922.<sup>10</sup> In Ho's opinion, Yugoslavia or an Asian Yugoslavia or any other entity that destroyed Communist unity for the sake of national interests or hatreds was despicable. Like the Soviets, Ho derided those who put nationalism ahead of Communism as "bourgeois nationalists" or "chauvinistic nationalists." When the feud between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union began in the late 1940s, Ho and his fellow Vietnamese Communists would bitterly denounce Tito for putting national concerns before those of international Communism.<sup>11</sup> They would also praise the Soviets for obliterating the Hungarian Communist regime of Imre Nagy when it tried to leave the Warsaw Pact for nationalistic reasons.<sup>12</sup> In the 1960s, after the conflicts between the Soviets and the Chinese had shattered the unity of the international Communist bloc, Ho Chi Minh would try to gather up the pieces and put it back together.

Throughout his life, Ho Chi Minh greatly admired the leaders of China and the Soviet Union, in whose countries he had lived for many years. He would work for the Comintern – the Soviet organization charged with promoting Marxist-Leninist revolution around the world – and for the Chinese Communist Army. As the leader of the Viet Minh during their war against the French, he would follow Chinese advice as if he had been given orders, and he would invite Chinese soldiers into Vietnam on several occasions.

The only piece of direct evidence employed in arguing that Ho Chi Minh disliked the Chinese and other foreigners was a comment he reportedly made in 1946 while defending his decision to let the French Army into northern Vietnam: "It is better to sniff French shit for a little while than to eat Chinese shit all our lives."<sup>13</sup> This bit of evidence is badly flawed. When Ho allegedly made this comment, China was largely under the control of the Chinese Nationalists, who were fervent anti-Communists and who were actively promoting Vietnamese

Communism's most powerful rival, the Vietnam Nationalist Party. Ho Chi Minh detested the Chinese Nationalists and wanted to be free of their influence, but this hatred did not translate into hatred of the Chinese in general, anymore than Harry Truman's animosity toward the Nazis translated into hatred of the Germans in general. The evidence available overwhelmingly indicates that Ho Chi Minh generally liked the Chinese as a people. Even if Ho had been referring to all Chinese, it easily could have been an attempt to trick his Western adversaries into thinking that there were not strong ties between the Vietnamese and Chinese Communists.

Further evidence of Ho's commitment to Communism came from his single-minded and unswerving dedication to one objective: the imposition of Communist government on Vietnam and the rest of the world. Ho's long career as a practitioner of Marxism-Leninism started in 1920, when he became a founding member of the French Communist Party. Three years later, the Soviets summoned him to Moscow to learn Leninist organizational methods and work for the Comintern. When Lenin died, in January of 1924, Ho waited in line to see the corpse for so long that his fingers and nose became frost-bitten. In a tribute to Lenin, Ho wrote that the Asian peoples "see in Lenin the personification of universal brotherhood. They feel veneration for him which is akin to filial piety."<sup>14</sup> At the end of 1924, the Soviets transported Ho to Canton via the Trans-Siberian Express. Carrying orders to organize Vietnamese émigrés and other Asians into revolutionary groups, Ho was to work under the guidance and financial auspices of the Comintern. In Canton, he started a Communist organization called *Viet Nam Thanh Nien Cach Mang Hoi*, meaning Revolutionary Youth League. In conformity with Lenin's theories, Ho sought temporary alliances with non-Communist Vietnamese. As he wrote in the Revolutionary Youth League's journal, "we must destroy the counterrevolutionary elements," but only "after having kicked the French out of our borders."<sup>15</sup> Ho enrolled some of his most gifted followers in a Chinese military academy, including several who would later become his top generals.

In early 1930, the Comintern sent Ho to Hong Kong, where he welded two factions of Vietnamese Communists into a single new organization called the Vietnamese Communist Party, subordinate to the Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern in Shanghai. On the day that he founded the Vietnamese Communist Party, Ho made the party's ideological alignment quite clear, asserting that the party belonged to a "revolutionary camp" led by the Soviet Union and supported by "the oppressed colonies and the exploited working class throughout the world." The stated goal of the Vietnamese Communist Party was to "overthrow French imperialism, feudalism, and the reactionary Vietnamese capitalist class," all of which belonged to the "counterrevolutionary camp of international capitalism and imperialism whose general staff is the League of Nations."<sup>16</sup>

The Comintern next sent Ho Chi Minh to Siam, Malaya, and Singapore to preside over the creation of Communist Parties in each of those countries. In Siam, Ho explained to his comrades that “Communists not only should take to heart revolution in their own country, they also should make contributions to the international proletarian revolution.”<sup>17</sup> The nascent Communist Parties in Siam, Malaya, and Singapore reported to a new department of the Comintern’s Far Eastern Bureau, which was located in a small stone building on Hong Kong island and headed by Ho Chi Minh. Later in the year, Moscow also put Ho in charge of revolutionary activity in Laos and Cambodia, leading to the transformation of the Vietnamese Communist Party into the Indochinese Communist Party.

The year 1930 was one of grand ambitions for Ho Chi Minh and his Soviet patrons. Once he had solidified the party, Ho initiated an insurrection that wrested control of a few northern Vietnamese provinces from the French for several months. During this period, the Vietnamese Communists put their ideas into practice for the first time. They executed large numbers of landlords and Vietnamese colonial officials, then gave their land to tenant farmers, and they burned all tax and land documents. But the revolution was short-lived. The French sent in the Foreign Legion, which killed 2,000 Communists and captured 51,000 more, snuffing out all resistance and crippling the Communist Party.<sup>18</sup> In Hong Kong, the British police incarcerated Ho Chi Minh.

French and Vietnamese moderates, appalled by the violence during the 1930 insurrections of the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Vietnam Nationalist Party, looked to the new Vietnamese Emperor to repair relations between French and Vietnamese. The Emperor Bao Dai came to power at the age of eighteen, full of energy and ideas. Believing the mandarins to be outmoded, Bao Dai closed down the high mandarin council and took on its duties himself. For the position of Minister of the Interior, he chose a thirty-one-year-old mandarin named Ngo Dinh Diem.

The son of the famous mandarin Ngo Dinh Kha, Diem could trace his roots all the way back through Ngo Quyen, the first king of Vietnam.<sup>19</sup> As a youngster, Diem had been a very serious and successful student, awakening before dawn to read by oil lantern. He never missed a day of school; during severe monsoons, when his father told him not to go, he would sneak away from home to go to class. Diem, indeed, often violated his father’s will, inviting frequent beatings and whippings. Diem, nevertheless, fully absorbed his father’s religious and political beliefs at a young age. Fervently embracing the Catholic faith, Diem took a vow of chastity as a teenager, and he subsequently went to a monastery to become a priest, although he left a short time later. According to one of his brothers, who was to become an archbishop, Diem was too independent to submit to the strict discipline of the church. Diem also absorbed from his father a fierce nationalism and a contempt for the French colonialists. Early in Diem’s childhood, his father had quit the imperial court because of his outrage

over France's ousting of Emperor Thanh Thai. Moving to the countryside, Ngo Dinh Kha went to work as a farmer, a very unusual job for a prestigious mandarin, and he made his sons join him as he trudged through rice paddies with a water buffalo and plough. These experiences gave Ngo Dinh Diem an appreciation of rural life that most of Vietnam's elites lacked, a fact that would have great influence on the future of Vietnam.

At the Lycée Quoc Hoc, Diem performed so well that the French offered him a scholarship to study in France. He declined the offer, however, and instead studied at the School for Law and Administration in Hanoi. After graduating at the top of his class, Diem received assignment to the position of district chief. Dressed in a mandarin's robe and conical straw hat, Diem rode by horse across his district to mediate disputes among peasants and supervise public construction projects. He helped Vietnamese farmers leave French plantations and settle new lands. Because of his fairness and unwillingness to accept bribes – traits that were greatly revered in a land where public officials often took advantage of their positions for personal gain – Diem acquired an outstanding reputation among both the peasants and the colonial administrators. At the age of just twenty-eight, Diem received a promotion to the post of provincial chief. He asked the French to give the villages in his province better schools and greater control over their affairs, but they rejected the requests. By nature stubborn and averse to compromise, Diem considered quitting, but decided to remain in office on the advice of his elders. "You will lead this country one day," they told him.

Diem lived an austere life. He never had a girlfriend or broke his vow of chastity. Father John Keegan, who worked at a New Jersey seminary where a fifty-year-old Diem stayed a few years before his ascendancy to the South Vietnamese Presidency, remembered: "We didn't know quite exactly what he was all about. He didn't seem to us to be very important. He did dishes with us, and people of importance didn't do that; students did that, or brothers did that, and here was Diem doing dishes at the tables with the rest of the students."<sup>20</sup> At the height of his career, when he was the most powerful man in his country, he would own only two suits – a white sharkskin one for the palace and a khaki one for trips to the villages. Rather than sleep in a luxurious palace bed, he would sleep on an army cot, and he ate a simple peasant's breakfast of bouillon, rice, and pickles. Personal austerity, a vital attribute for a Vietnamese leader, enhanced Diem's aura of impartiality and devotion to the people. Ho Chi Minh projected a similar image of austerity, although in Ho's case the image was based partially on false claims that Ho had never married – he in fact had married a Chinese woman in the 1920s and then, a few years later, a Vietnamese political activist. According to unconfirmed accounts, Ho also wed or had relationships with additional women, including a French Socialist and a Russian.<sup>21</sup> The French scholar and diplomat Paul Mus once remarked, "Only one man could ever hope to challenge Ho Chi Minh for leadership – Ngo

Dinh Diem – because he alone has the same reputation for virtue and austerity as Ho.”<sup>22</sup>

Even the Communists, who outwardly denounced Diem as a stooge of the Americans, viewed him as a great nationalist leader. Bui Tin, a Communist who joined Ho’s Party in 1945 and thirty years later had the distinction of accepting South Vietnam’s surrender at Saigon’s Independence Palace, later said, “Although we criticized Ngo Dinh Diem publicly as an American puppet, Ho Chi Minh adopted a more sober appraisal. He realized Diem was a patriot like himself but in a different way. Later many other people came to accept and value Diem as a leader who was imbued with the spirit of nationalism, and who lived an honest and clean life and, like Ho Chi Minh, was unmarried.”<sup>23</sup> Bui Tin himself thought that Diem was “an exceptional political figure, with profound patriotism, courage, and integrity, and a simple, unselfish way of life.” Because Ho Chi Minh had been involved in a series of romantic relationships and had tried to hide them, and because he had embraced a foreign ideology, Bui Tin decided that a comparison between Ho and Diem “reveals that Ho Chi Minh is far behind and cannot match Ngo Dinh Diem.”<sup>24</sup>

A conservative nationalist, Diem wanted to preserve the traditional core of Vietnam’s culture while taking advantage of Western science and technology. He embraced the traditional view that the ruler must rule strongly and well and the people must follow. Only through strong leadership, Diem observed, could anyone bring unity to Vietnam, divided as it was into a multitude of squabbling and ineffectual political factions. From early on, Diem recognized that Communists, as well as nationalists, were capable of wielding such strength, and that the Communists sought to unify Vietnam by dictatorial methods in order to destroy the Vietnamese political, social, and religious traditions that he revered. When the Vietnamese Communist Party rebelled in 1930, Diem arrested every Communist he could find in his province, although without the needless excesses that took place in some other provinces.

Diem accepted Bao Dai’s invitation to become Minister of the Interior in 1933, and the emperor put him in charge of undertaking reforms, but he would serve only a few months as Minister of the Interior. When it became clear that the French would not delegate real power to Vietnamese officials as they had promised, he resigned. The French reacted by stripping Diem of his academic titles and his decorations for government service. “Take them,” Diem shouted. “I don’t need them. They are not important.”<sup>25</sup> He returned to Hue, where he spent his time reading countless books, attending mass, hunting, and building friendships with other nationalists.

Once Bao Dai had perceived France’s determination to deprive him of real authority, he turned to a life of yachting and big-game hunting. Colonial Vietnam coasted along in relative peace until the middle of 1940, when Hitler’s panzers overwhelmed France in a period of six weeks. Japan forced the new Vichy French government to allow thirty-five thousand Japanese troops into



Vietnam. The Japanese soldiers left the French colonial government in place since the Vichy French were allies of the Germans, but they appropriated the country's rice, rubber, and minerals.

Ho Chi Minh was serving in China with the Chinese Communist Eighth Route Army when the fall of distant France reverberated across Asia. Following his release from a British prison in 1933, he had gone to Moscow and worked at the Lenin School and the Stalin School until 1938, when the Comintern sent him to China. It was in China that he assumed the name Ho Chi Minh, meaning "Ho the Enlightened One." In early 1941, with the Chinese Communists desirous of hurting the Japanese wherever possible, Ho returned to Vietnam to build up the indigenous Communist movement. Assembling a group of leading Communists shortly after his arrival, Ho convened the Eighth Plenum of the Indochinese Communist Party at a clammy, rat-infested cave near the boundary between Vietnam and China. Towering over the cave was a mountain that Ho dubbed Karl Marx Peak, while 140 feet below the cave flowed a brook that he named Lenin Stream. Perhaps the members of the Party's central committee slaked their thirst at the stream, for the documents they wrote were entirely Leninist in character. The committee members called for a nationalist war in alliance with Vietnamese capitalists, their intention to harness the horses of nationalism until they had defeated the French and Japanese. Once this war had been won, they planned to put those horses to pasture and ride the steeds of Marxist revolution to final victory. During the plenum, the central committee created a new organization called the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi, meaning the League for the Independence of Vietnam, or Viet Minh for short. The Party declared it an organization for all Vietnamese that would rely on nationalist, not Communist, propaganda. The Vietnamese Communists would use the Viet Minh as their front organization until the French made peace with them thirteen years later, in 1954.

Numerous Westerners were to believe the claim that the Viet Minh was truly a diverse nationalist movement from top to bottom, deriving its strength from all Vietnamese opposition groups, but from the beginning this conception was inaccurate.<sup>26</sup> While some non-Communists did join the Viet Minh, the Communist Party would always retain control of the Viet Minh's leadership, and few prominent non-Communists ever became members of the Viet Minh throughout its thirteen-year existence.<sup>27</sup> Those Viet Minh leaders who claimed to be non-Communist nationalists were in reality Communist Party members operating at the direction of Ho Chi Minh. The top Viet Minh leaders came predominantly from mandarin families, but they obtained most of their rank-and-file personnel from the uneducated peasantry rather than the independent-minded elites. As a landlord or businessman, one would be permitted to serve in only the lowest ranks of the Viet Minh, and would be monitored and controlled closely. Lasting alliances with other opposition groups did not materialize, for the Viet Minh, determined as they were to maintain complete control over the



revolution, either destroyed or alienated those groups willing to put their trust in them. Throughout his career, Ho Chi Minh succeeded not by gaining the friendship of other opposition leaders, but by eliminating them.

Ho Chi Minh went back to China in 1942 to seek support from a variety of Chinese groups and Vietnamese émigré communities. A Chinese Nationalist warlord, wary of Communists, had Ho arrested and chained to the walls of a lice-ridden prison. Chiang Kai-shek, however, released Ho after he promised to work with other Vietnamese to fight the hated Japanese, and he even gave Ho money for this purpose, thereby enabling Ho to build up the Viet Minh's armed forces. After his release, Ho also appealed to the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) for help, changing his name from Nguyen Ai Quoc to Ho Chi Minh in order to hide his Communist past.<sup>28</sup> The OSS began sending arms to the Viet Minh, too, in return for Viet Minh promises to attack the Japanese, hand over intelligence on Japanese forces, and help recover downed American pilots. Although Ho's small army grew steadily, he made little effort to attack the Japanese as he had promised the Chinese Nationalists and the Americans. As the war played out and Viet Minh promises of action mounted, Ho's commanders urged him to unleash the guerrillas against the Japanese, but Ho, mindful that he had only a few chips to play, chose to wait until the odds were clearly in his favor.

In March 1945, fears of an American invasion drove the Japanese occupation force to seize control of Indochina from the French. The Free French leadership in recently liberated Paris appealed to the United States for help in the restoration of French rule. The U.S. government at first did nothing, quickly exciting the wrath of Free French leader Charles de Gaulle, and also that of Winston Churchill, who was working with de Gaulle to preserve both of their empires. On March 13, 1945, de Gaulle informed the Americans, "If the public here comes to realize that you are against us in Indochina, there will be terrific disappointment, and nobody knows to what that will lead. We do not want to become Communist; we do not want to fall into the Russian orbit; but I hope that you do not push us into it."<sup>29</sup>

President Franklin D. Roosevelt opposed colonialism as a general policy, but he had always considered Europe to be more important to American security than Asia, and at this point in time he was already resigning himself to French control over the postwar fate of Indochina. Upon hearing de Gaulle's reaction, therefore, he directed American air units in China to assist French resistance forces in Indochina.<sup>30</sup> His successor, President Harry S. Truman, consented in July to a plan whereby Nationalist Chinese and British forces would move into Vietnam following Japan's surrender to maintain order and facilitate the reestablishment of French rule.

As soon as America's atomic bombs ravaged Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the stunned Japanese dropped the reins of power in Vietnam, leaving them dangling for the first comer. Convinced that the most favorable moment had arrived at

last, Ho Chi Minh quickly moved into action. As he had hoped, he preempted the Allied powers as well as the Vietnamese nationalist leaders who possessed armed forces, many of whom were still in China. Vietnamese Communist guerrillas marched unopposed into Hanoi and other cities with the rifles and submachine guns that they had received from their Chinese and American benefactors. Intimidating the inert Japanese-installed regime into submission, they established a new government that had but one stated objective: the end of foreign rule in Vietnam. The Viet Minh avoided any mention of their Communist ideology or their plans to take away the wealth and privileges of the elites. Without delay, the Viet Minh nullified the most hated French policies, including high taxes and the government monopolies on salt, alcohol, and opium. Their anti-colonial rhetoric and their initial actions helped them win over many of the city people, especially in the north, but they owed their success to two other factors as well. Much of their attraction emanated from the personality of Ho Chi Minh. As far as most Vietnamese were concerned, it made little difference whether Ho's ideology was purely nationalist, as he claimed at this time, or whether it was an unoriginal blend of the ideas of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, as it was in reality. What counted most were the strength of personality and appearance of austerity that conferred charisma upon him.

Hoang Van Chi, a one-time Viet Minh official who quit the Communist movement because of its excesses, wrote these perceptive words:

Ho is endowed with an outstanding personality. He has in fact all the qualities necessary in a leader, and his austerity, perseverance, iron determination and whole-hearted devotion to the cause of the Revolution are an inspiration to all who serve under him and to the nation as a whole. . . . His reputation for honesty and sincerity has contributed greatly to his success, for in Vietnam, as in many underdeveloped countries, the masses put their trust in the personal character and behavior of a leader more than in the political party he represents.<sup>31</sup>

Tran Van Tra, later one of Communist Vietnam's highest generals, sensed Ho's charismatic appeal the instant he met him. Tra remembered his first encounter with Ho: "Just looking at him, I suddenly felt I had endless confidence in him. I respected him and felt intimate with him. His skill could conquer everything. He was the quintessence of talent."<sup>32</sup>

The other key factor in the Viet Minh's rapid rise in prestige during August 1945 was their demonstration of brute strength. From the beginning of their history, the Vietnamese people had always been very inclined to support whichever political faction appeared strongest, in part because theirs was a culture that revered authority, in part because the enemies of a Vietnamese victor so often suffered nasty punishments. At a time when everyone else stood in utter disarray, the Viet Minh could project an image of strength very easily even though they had just five thousand men under arms. Wielding their shiny American weapons, Viet Minh soldiers had the ability to impose their will on most

anyone. Further evidence of Viet Minh strength came from the seeming support they enjoyed from the mighty United States, as conveyed by the presence of OSS officers and U.S. aircraft. Many potential rivals were so awestruck by the Viet Minh's prestige that they decided not to resist them at all. Bao Dai himself agreed to step down so that the Viet Minh could form a government for the whole country, although it is not clear whether the Emperor made this decision on his own or under duress.

Unaware that the Americans had already consented to France's return, Ho Chi Minh labored hard to secure the American support that the people thought he already possessed. Ho had manipulated many past adversaries with false offers of friendship, so the idea of hoodwinking the Americans with pretended amicability came readily to him. The citation of the American Declaration of Independence in his Place Puginier speech was only the most prominent of multiple attempts to flatter the Americans into the position of Timon of Athens. To allay concerns over his political affiliation, Ho told the OSS officers in Hanoi that he was not really a Communist, just a patriot seeking national independence. One of those officers, Archimedes Patti, later said that he and others in the OSS admired the Viet Minh and wanted to side with them, only to be thwarted by Washington officials who thought differently.<sup>33</sup> Some of the OSS men were indeed taken in by the Viet Minh's propaganda immediately, but Patti himself at that time recognized that the propaganda was misleading and that the Viet Minh would not be reliable allies. Patti's 1945 OSS reports from Hanoi were not at all of the sort that would suggest to Washington or anyone else that alliance was a viable option. On August 29, 1945, Patti sent Washington a cable stating that "Red elements" were leading the new Viet Minh regime astray, and that the regime's leaders spoke regularly in favor of liberalism and democracy but in fact were preparing to take illiberal and undemocratic actions.<sup>34</sup>

To demonstrate its strength further and enhance its prestige, the Viet Minh government methodically neutralized its opponents. In some instances, the Viet Minh were subtle. They gave respected nationalists positions in the new government and held elections for other positions, then denied the officeholders any real power. Immediately after their march into Hanoi, the Viet Minh quietly took over the printing presses of non-Communist newspapers and ended the publication of material critical of the Viet Minh. More often, though, they acted without subtlety. In the tradition of both the independent Vietnamese emperors and Josef Stalin, Ho had many of his rivals put to death.<sup>35</sup> Without hesitation, the Viet Minh killed the renowned literary and political figure Pham Quynh, who had served under Bao Dai and the Japanese. They apprehended Ngo Dinh Khoi, a prominent and very talented brother of Ngo Dinh Diem, and buried him alive. In Hanoi, the Viet Minh killed Vietnam Nationalist Party leaders Nguyen The Nghiep and Nguyen Ngoc Son, as well as the founder of the moderate Constitutionalist Party, Bui Quang Chieu. Another victim was Ho Van Nga, a conservative nationalist leader in the south. Viet Minh assassins

took the lives of Nguyen Van Sam, who had founded the Front of National Union, and Dr. Truong Dinh Tri, a former Viet Minh official who was organizing on behalf of Bao Dai in Tonkin. Others were not killed until 1946, including Truong Tu Anh, head of the influential Dai Viet Party.

Vietnamese Communists who adhered to the Communism of Leon Trotsky, the Soviet luminary who a few years earlier had been murdered with an ice-pick on orders from his archrival Joseph Stalin, were shown no more mercy than the others. For Ho and the other Viet Minh leaders, Stalin was the supreme leader of the world revolution, while Trotsky was a dangerous heretic.<sup>36</sup> The Viet Minh killed some Trotskyites right away, often by tying several people together and throwing them into a river to drown slowly. In 1946, the Viet Minh apprehended Nguyen Ta Thu Thau, the most gifted Trotskyite leader and writer, at the train station in Quang Ngai, then took him to a sandy beach, gave him a mock trial, and put a bullet through his head.

A short time after Ho seized power in Hanoi, Viet Minh guerrillas abducted Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem had spent the years 1942 to 1944 organizing anti-French political subversion in cooperation with exiled Vietnamese nationalists and the Japanese, leading to the formation of a secret political party called the "Association for the Restoration of Great Vietnam." In the summer of 1944, however, the French Sûreté began arresting the party's members and Diem was forced to go into hiding.<sup>37</sup> The guerrillas took Diem to Ho in Hanoi.

"Why did you kill my brother?" Diem asked Ho.

"It was a mistake," Ho claimed. "The country was all confused. It could not be helped."<sup>38</sup> Knowing that Diem possessed rare leadership talents, Ho asked him to become his minister of the interior. Diem said he would accept only if he would be kept fully informed of the Viet Minh's activities and would be privy to all decisions. Ho refused to accept these conditions. "I see it is useless to discuss matters with you while you are so irritable," Ho remarked, "but stay around a little while." Diem still did not budge, though, and after a time Ho released him.<sup>39</sup> That Ho did not kill Ngo Dinh Diem as he killed so many other nationalist leaders was a measure of the respect he had for Diem. It was also the biggest mistake he ever made.

In the northern villages, the Vietnamese Communists implemented a more radical and less discriminate program than in the cities. Stripping the mandarins and the village councils of their powers, they installed revolutionary committees in their place and gave landless peasants the land of landlords who had cooperated with the French. Across the northern countryside, Viet Minh security personnel killed large numbers of village officials and landlords. During August and September, in Vietnam as a whole, the Viet Minh would end the lives of several thousand Vietnamese.<sup>40</sup>

The redistribution of land helped put large numbers of poor peasants on the Communist side, and the Viet Minh gave strong preference to poor peasants when recruiting and promoting within their own ranks. Yet catering to the

interests of the peasants was not essential to mobilizing them, whether in 1945 or in centuries past. The essentials were always charismatic leadership and manifest strength, both of which the Viet Minh possessed and used very effectively. Numerous Vietnamese leaders, from Ngo Quyen to Le Loi to Nguyen Anh, had succeeded in mobilizing hundreds of thousands of peasants for war through leadership and strength alone. Consumed by the needs of agricultural work and ingrained with respect for the existing social order, the peasants never led their own rebellions, but they were very willing to follow others.

By eliminating many of Vietnam's finest non-Communist leaders, the Viet Minh hoped to destroy all embryos of resistance before they could grow into mature organisms. That goal, however, was not reached. In the north, stout opposition to the Viet Minh arose under the leadership of the Vietnam Nationalist Party and other exiled nationalists who were on good terms with the Chinese Nationalists. Chinese troops arrived in mid-September to accept the Japanese surrender, and they quickly helped install the Vietnam Nationalist Party in several provinces. In 1946, however, when the Chinese Nationalists withdrew their troops, the Viet Minh started a war with the Vietnam Nationalist Party. Surrounding the provincial and district capitals, the Communist armed forces overwhelmed the nationalist defenders and put the leading elements of the Vietnam Nationalist Party to the sword. Vo Nguyen Giap later wrote that in 1946, "The liquidating of the reactionaries of the Vietnam Nationalist Party was crowned with success and we were able to liberate all the areas which had fallen into their hands."<sup>41</sup> In Vietnamese Communist parlance, the label "reactionary" was applied to anyone who was not a Communist. Many more "reactionaries" would suffer death during the remainder of 1946, bringing the toll of civilians killed by the Communists during the period of Communist rule into the tens of thousands.<sup>42</sup>

While the Viet Minh eventually succeeded in wiping out the organized opposition in the north, they failed in this task in the south. They lacked sufficient strength there in the early moments of the revolution, and were unable to develop it subsequently. Southern political activity was centered in the city of Saigon, which under the French had grown into a modern Asian metropolis, with all the commercial activity, commotion, and vice one might expect. In the autumn of 1945, the native political elite of Saigon jostled for power as frantically as the city's street peddlers sought customers for their fish, rubber, and cinnamon. A bewildering array of political parties, religious sects, and gangsters entered the fray alongside the Viet Minh, resulting in a free-for-all in which countless factions organized demonstrations and processions full of talk and noise but empty of meaning. The people of Saigon had never agreed on anything. They never would.

During September 1945, French soldiers reoccupied Saigon and established control across all of southern Vietnam, which required no great exertion because neither the Viet Minh nor any other Vietnamese group offered armed

resistance of any significance. Initially, the French did not try to oust the Communists from the north, owing to the presence of Viet Minh and Chinese troops. Instead, French diplomats attempted to pry concessions from Ho Chi Minh while French clandestine operators developed plans for subverting him. Hoping to avert a war he knew he could not win and to gain time to annihilate the Vietnam Nationalist Party, Ho agreed in March 1946 to let 15,000 French troops plus 10,000 Vietnamese troops under French command into the north for a maximum of six years. The French, for their part, agreed to let the Viet Minh remain in power in the north, and to allow the south to decide by a vote whether it would be united with the north. During the ensuing months, however, further negotiations between the French and the Viet Minh were unproductive and relations deteriorated. Preparing for the worst, Ho doubled the strength of his army, from 30,000 to 60,000.

The showdown between the French and the Viet Minh came at the end of 1946, after a series of small violent incidents. On the night of December 19, Ho's forces in Hanoi knocked out the city's electric power plant and launched an all-out attack against the French. The French Socialist Party, the foreign party to which Ho had first belonged, held power in Paris at this time. As in the past, the French Socialists were generally sympathetic to calls for Vietnamese independence, especially those that came from Vietnamese leftists, but the Viet Minh's recent acts of violence against French civilians and soldiers had convinced the Socialists that the Viet Minh were deceitful and malevolent. The Socialist government, therefore, decided it had to restore order by force before resuming negotiations with the Viet Minh.<sup>43</sup> With their great firepower, the French military easily blasted the Communists out of Hanoi and the provincial capitals, compelling Ho Chi Minh and his associates to flee their offices in the colonial mansions of Hanoi and head into the countryside. The Communists took refuge in jungles and mountain caves from which they would wage war for the next eight years. As their principal redoubt, the Viet Minh chose the Viet Bac, a slice of rugged territory sandwiched between the Red River Delta and the Chinese border. Covered with steep mountains and uncut by roads, the Viet Bac was largely impervious to attack from French aircraft and motorized vehicles. The French were to invade the Viet Bac on a number of occasions, and they did disrupt Viet Minh activities for a time, but they never drove the Viet Minh out altogether.<sup>44</sup>

Ho Chi Minh's army endured numerous setbacks during the first years of the conflict. Lacking sufficient military experience and training, their leaders often reacted to French attacks by holding their ground inflexibly or fleeing in disarray, both of which usually resulted in heavy casualties. They squandered thousands of men in futile assaults. In time, the Viet Minh developed skill in conducting hit-and-run raids, ambushing the long French convoys that traversed Vietnam's narrow roads, and retreating under fire. To inflict losses on well-armed and well-disciplined French forces, his troops still had to take

fearsome losses of their own, but Ho accepted these casualties philosophically, believing that his side could stomach the pain of this war longer than the enemy could.

Most of the fighting took place in northern Vietnam, close to the Viet Minh base areas in the Viet Bac. In the south, the Viet Minh were too weak to contest French control in a serious fashion. There, the French used offers of autonomy and riches to enlist the support of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects, as well as a Saigon gangster organization called the Binh Xuyen. The Cao Dai sect had been formed in the 1920s, and by the late 1940s it held the allegiance of a million people. At the grand Cao Dai temple in Tay Ninh, one could witness the sect's eclectic character in the collection of effigies honoring favorite saints, whose number included Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Victor Hugo, and Charlie Chaplin. The Hoa Hao sect was founded in 1939 by a twenty-year-old villager named Huynh Phu So. Said to possess the ability to heal the infirm and other rare spiritual powers, Huynh Phu So began to prophesize events in Vietnam, and each of his prophesies came true. Among the natives of southern Vietnam, word spread that the "living Buddha" had entered their midst, causing hundreds of thousands to flock to the sect. The Viet Minh greatly feared Huynh Phu So because of his ability to mobilize the masses. In 1947, they captured him and bludgeoned him to death, then chopped up his body and scattered the pieces across the country to prevent his remains from inspiring his followers. The grisly murder, however, made the Hoa Hao into the most implacable and fanatical of anti-Communists.

As it became clear that the war would be long and costly, the French attempted to cultivate a strong Vietnamese government that would mobilize the masses against the Communists. They asked Ngo Dinh Diem to join, but he turned them down because their proposals were watered down with special privileges and powers for France. The French found a more receptive man in Bao Dai. In 1949, Bao Dai agreed to form an autonomous and anti-Communist regime within the French Union, and this new government attracted the services of some respected Vietnamese nationalists, who viewed it as a necessary antidote to Communism.

The crucial turning point in the Franco-Viet Minh war came in 1949, when Mao Zedong's Communists won control of the Chinese mainland. To the French and the Americans and the Vietnamese, the enormous implications for Vietnam and the rest of Asia were obvious. Communism now had a massive base in Asia, and Stalin and Mao wanted to use it as a springboard for subverting the other countries of Asia. While French and American politicians agonized, Viet Minh leaders celebrated the "glorious success" of the Chinese Communists and derided the "failure of American imperialism."<sup>45</sup> Ho Chi Minh, in an accurate characterization of both historical relations and his own relations with the Chinese Communists, announced in a published letter, "Brotherly relations have existed between the Vietnamese and Chinese nations during thousands



of years of history. Henceforth these relations will be even closer for the development of the freedom and happiness of our two nations, as well as for the safeguard of world democracy and lasting peace.”<sup>46</sup> In early 1949, Viet Minh and Chinese Communist units joined together to attack French positions near the Chinese border, with the Chinese forces briefly holding the Vietnamese town of Mong Cai before returning to bases on Chinese territory.<sup>47</sup>

Ho hiked to China in January 1950, a journey lasting seventeen days. Just after he arrived in Nanning, the Chinese announced diplomatic recognition of Ho’s Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The Soviet Union did the same a few days later. Ho then took a trip to Moscow, where he met with Stalin and Mao to request weapons and military advisers.

“Toward Vietnam we feel equal concern as we do for China,” Stalin told Ho. “From now on, you can count on our assistance. Especially now after the war of resistance, our surplus materials are plenty, and we will ship them to you through China. But because of limits of natural conditions, it will be mainly China that helps you. What China lacks, we will provide.”

“Whatever China has and Vietnam needs, we will provide,” Mao intoned. The Chinese Communist Party “offers all the military assistance Vietnam needs in its struggle against France.”<sup>48</sup> True to his word, Mao gave Ho everything he requested. During the first nine months of 1950, the Chinese shipped the Viet Minh 14,000 rifles, 1,700 machine guns and recoilless rifles, 60 artillery pieces, 300 bazookas, and a variety of other military equipment. The Viet Minh particularly liked the bazookas and recoilless rifles, which they believed to be “as powerful as elephants.” Two hundred eighty-one Chinese experts came to advise the Vietnamese Communists from the battalion level on up. At Ho’s request, the list of Chinese experts included Chen Geng, who was one of Mao’s best generals despite the fact that he was so fat that he had to be lifted onto his horse. The Vietnamese heeded Chen Geng’s advice with such readiness that he became the principal architect of the war effort.<sup>49</sup> As if suddenly grown from a cub into a bear, the Viet Minh’s armed forces for the first time posed a serious threat to the French military.

For the remainder of the war and for some years afterwards, Ho and his adherents would follow the Chinese in all things, as an awestruck boy follows his older brother. Ho acknowledged in 1951, “the Chinese Revolution exerted a great influence on the Vietnamese revolution, which had to learn and indeed has learned many experiences from it.”<sup>50</sup> A more explicit description came later from Bui Tin. In the period following Mao’s victory over Chiang Kai-shek, Bui Tin recounted, “We were dazzled by the new light of the Chinese Revolution, which was acclaimed as our role-model. We accepted everything impetuously and haphazardly without any thought, let alone criticism. . . . In truth it has to be said that the thinking of Ho Chi Minh and the rest of the leadership in those days was to regard Mao Tse-tung’s thought as the only way to follow.”<sup>51</sup>