

## VIETNAM

In Memory of

Ngoc Le

17 August 1947 – 19 October 1967

An Introduction to and an Account of the Vietnam Conflict

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This is a moral issue.

After the Second World War, when the USSR were allies both with Britain and the USA, relationships between the USSR and the West became strained.

This was due to a power struggle and the desire for supremacy of one over the other, and of the vast differences that they had with political and cultural matters.

They confronted each other over the political bid for supremacy by the USSR in the Far East. The USSR, being a communist state, believed that all countries around them, and perhaps even the world, should embrace communism. This being so, the USSR would be the largest individual communist state and could probably hold power universally. Communism is based on Marxism. It is atheistic and wants to dominate all peoples and not allow independence.

America became involved in the Far East in an attempt to stop the growth of communism and this has to be understood in the light of Stalin's ruthless communist régime in the USSR.

In the late 1920s the communists in China wanted to overthrow the Chinese Nationalist Party and there was a civil war between these two factions. However, they came together in 1937 when they fought against the Japanese who invaded Manchuria wanting to expand their realm to sustain their people and because they were taught that their emperor was a god and to be obeyed. After Japan's defeat in the Second World War there was further uneasiness between Chinese nationalists and Chinese communists and this trouble reared its ugly head again.

America wanted Chiang Kai-Shek to rule China as he was a nationalist and therefore, of course, not a communist. To this end, gave Chiang Kai-Shek military aid was to fight the communists. On the one hand it can be said that any country can sell arms to whichever country it pleases but America would not be doing the same to the Chinese communists.

In March 1947, the President of the USA, Harry S. Truman gave a speech to the US Congress in which he promised American support to help any nation trying to maintain their freedom against armed minorities and outside pressure which was a clear reference to communism. This speech became known as the Truman Doctrine.

The Chinese communist forces, who were led by Mao Tse-Tung (Mao Zedong), proved the stronger force and defeated the nationalists in 1949. Chiang Kai-Shek fled to Taiwan but still claimed to be the rightful heir to China.

The communist's victory in China was a severe blow to the USA. The Soviets had aided the Chinese communists and, although Stalin did not really want a communist régime in China as he depended on the USA for trade, a treaty was signed between the USSR and China in 1950.

President Truman saw this communist take over of China as a threat to America's interests and to their foreign policy. They had wanted to use China as a military base to keep a watchful eye over Japan whom they still hated after their attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 which brought the USA into the Second World War.

In Vietnam, communist-backed Vietminh forces had set up a government in North Vietnam with a view to removing the French who had colonised the country in the 1880s.

The American secretary of state for foreign affairs, Dean Acheson, suggested that if America were not hostile to Red China it may prevent China becoming a puppet state of the USSR, but this non-aggressive attitude was not tried until President Nixon attempted it in 1970. Had a more friendly approach been made by the Americans to the Chinese in the late 1940s things might have been different.

Korea had belonged to Japan before the Second World War but Japan had to surrender Korea after their defeat in the war. North Korea came under control of the Soviets and the Americans had control of the South. Both countries had withdrawn their respective troops in 1949 but the communists in the North under Kim Il Sung faced a pro-American government in the South under Syngman Rhee. Perhaps surprisingly, this arrangement was acceptable to both the USSR and the USA.

The Korean war had the Americans joining with the South Koreans to fight the communists in North Korea. The United Nations backed the USA. Had the Soviet representative been present at the UN Security Council he would have opposed the UN helping America and the UN would probably not have been involved. At the time the USSR were boycotting the UN Security Council protesting at the UN refusing to allow China into the UN.

At first the North Koreans swept easily across the 38th parallel that marked the border between North and South Korea. This was in June 1950. The South Korean army crumbled and the South was occupied by the North except for one small area around the port of Pusan where the US General, Douglas MacArthur, halted the Communist advance in July 1950.

The North Koreans prepared a major attack to win the war against the South and the UN. But MacArthur landed at Inchon on the west of South Korea near the 38th parallel. This cut off supplies from the North to the South. Therefore the North Koreans in the South were not getting supplies. The war seemed to be over.

But MacArthur was an individual and arrogant man and refused to obey the orders of the President, Harry Truman. The President had told MacArthur not to close the border between North Korea and China since Americans advancing too close to China could bring China into the war. The Russian leader, Stalin, who supported the North Koreans, wanted China to be involved for this reason. China had a large army and would be backed by the USSR and therefore the Americans would lose the conflict. But MacArthur moved north and reached the Chinese border. Mao Tse-Tung may have thought that China was to be invaded and so he sent 180,000 troops across the border to help the North Koreans. The Americans and the UN troops had to retreat.

MacArthur wanted a victory even if it meant a nuclear war with China. Truman did not and so he sacked MacArthur in April 1951. What Truman did was very wise.

The Chinese were halted at the end of May 1951. The two sides dug in and a stalemate ensued. An armistice was signed in July 1953 and a new border just to the north of the 38th parallel was agreed.

Forty thousand American troops died in Korea. Many more would have died if MacArthur had had his way. He rudely dismissed the Chinese as mere Asiatics. But the Americans did not learn from their mistakes. Fifteen years later they underestimated the communists of North Vietnam.

The Truman Doctrine had prevented the spread of communism in the Far East. It must be remembered that the Communists were the invaders and aggressors. But, at home, in the USA, Americans were in doubt about their country's involvement in the Korean War and the high loss of life. Many Americans looked to the next country in the Far East that was being influenced by communism, Vietnam, which was then occupied and governed by the French colonists. Originally, America had indicated that they would help Vietnam to be freed from French rule. But the Americans then provided money and support for the French against the communist Vietminh in the early 1950s.

The Vietminh were a communist group who wanted the French out of Vietnam. They were led by Ho Chi Minh (1890 - 1969) whom the Americans had helped against the Japanese when the Japanese took over Vietnam in the Second World War. The other Vietminh leader was Vo Nguyen Giap.

In 1945 independent Vietnam had Emperor Bao Dai as nominal ruler. In 1946 the French recognised the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a free state within the Indochinese Federation and French China, but the Vietminh did not accept this and initiated the eight year Indo-China War with an attack on French troops in the north. In 1949 the French said that they did recognise Vietnam as an independent state with Bao Dai as leader. Later that year France also recognised the independence of Laos and Cambodia.

The newly formed People's Republic of China and the USSR recognised the Republic of Vietnam led by the communist, Ho Chi Minh. In May of that year the Americans promised military and economic aid to pro-French régimes in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The Indo-China War continued. The French were the first to use napalm on the Vietnamese in 1950. Napalm is a petroleum based jelly bomb which spreads on impact with the ground and creates an extended carpet of fire. In May 1954 the remnants of the French garrison town at Dien Bien Phu surrendered and Ngo Dinh Diem (1901 - 1963) became premier of South Vietnam two months later.

The Americans were somewhat obsessed with the threat of communism and now regarded Ho Chi Minh as an enemy. To rid Vietnam of communism, the Americans were prepared to support any corrupt or unpopular ruler in Vietnam. The American people, including the troops, were being told that they were campaigning against the evils of communism and for the freedom of other peoples and that future military intervention could not be ruled out. The French having been defeated by the Vietminh at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, meant that the rest of the French withdrew from Vietnam. This was in October 1954. This was a blow to the USA who felt that they had to become directly involved to stop the spread of the evil of communism. The Geneva Accord of 1954 divided Vietnam into two parts along the 17th parallel. Ho Chi Minh controlled the North with his communist régime and the Americans backed Ngo Dinh Diem in the South. The division was said to be temporary until a proper election took place. This did not happen because Diem and the Americans knew that Ho Chi Minh would win and in July 1955 they actually refused to take part in elections. In September 1954 at Manila in the Philippines, the South East Asia Treaty had been signed aimed at checking communist expansion. In 1955 Diem launched a successful campaign against the Binh Xuyen, a secret society that controlled crime such as gambling, opium distribution and prostitution. His campaign was also against religious people such as the Cao Dai which was a combination of Asian and Roman Catholic beliefs and popular amongst the peasant community. The other sect, the Hoa Han was a divisive Buddhist group. This campaign was to create major problems in the future. On 10 May 1955 South Vietnam formally asked the US for instructors for their military forces and within a year the MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) were present in Vietnam. This American backing may explain why Diem was successful in the September 1957 elections. Less

than six months later, in January 1958, communists attacked a plantation north of Saigon in South Vietnam and in April 1959 the Lao Dong (Workers Party of Vietnam) was formed in the South and underground activities increased. The leader of the Lao Dong was Ho Chi Minh who had become their Secretary General in 1956. The US sent in more military advisers in May 1959 as requested by the South Vietnamese government and in July 1959 some of these advisers were wounded by the communists in the South at Bien Hoa.

Ho Chi Minh set up the National Liberation Front (NLF) in 1960 with his supporters in the South with a view to overthrowing Diem and to unite the country under the banner of communism. They attacked the enemy and then hid in villages. They did not wear uniforms and so could not be identified. President Eisenhower and then Kennedy sent more advisers to Diem to help deal with the NLF. The MAAG had increased from 327 to 685. Kennedy was a Catholic and saw possible future American involvement in Vietnam as a bid for freedom under God. Diem was also pro-Roman Catholic. He was unpopular and corrupt. But, then, Kennedy used this freedom under God slogan to win votes for the presidency.

In November 1960 a military coup against Diem failed.

Diem's unpopularity was heightened because most of Vietnam was Buddhist. In 1963 several Buddhist priests set fire to themselves on individual occasions and died. This was a protest against Diem and his suppression of religious dissidents. He was supported by the wealthy landowners and so the peasants felt downtrodden as did the peasants in Russia under the Tsar and under Lenin and Stalin. The NLF and the Vietcong fighters increased in numbers and by 1963 they controlled most of the villages in the south of the country. In these areas under communist rule, land was given to the peasants and Diem was powerless. The USA decided that Diem must be got rid of and supported a plot by South Vietnamese generals to oust him. He was overthrown by a military coup and assassinated in 1963 and this led to the South being administered by the South Vietnamese army. But it did not deter the NLF. Within a few weeks, Kennedy was also assassinated.

America had a new President in Lyndon Johnson. He had been warned of the domino theory. The Americans believed that South Vietnam, having been taken by communists would mean that communism would spread into neighbouring countries such as Laos, Cambodia, Malaya, Thailand and Indonesia tumbling dominoes in a line... a theory that President Eisenhower had announced in 1954. Years later Ronald Reagan supported this idea and this is why he sent American troops to Central America which had been a troublesome area since the Bay of Pigs incident and the communist activity in Cuba.

But Johnson needed to convince the American people that their involvement in the Far East was justified. He had to persuade the US Congress that involvement in Vietnam was essential.

In August 1964 there was the Gulf of Tonkin incident. A US destroyer and North Vietnamese torpedo boats clashed. The Americans claimed that the Vietnamese had launched an attack against them but there was no evidence to support this. In fact, the Americans were there supporting an attack by the South Vietnamese on a North Vietnamese island. Johnson asked the US Congress for the power for him to take action against those who prevented freedom and received this authority which meant that he did not have to consult the US Congress or the American people. But Congress and the Americans did not anticipate what was going to happen. Johnson wanted the North Vietnamese to give up their claim to South Vietnam and this began a series of shocking errors.

The US presidential elections were due in November 1964. Johnson was a democrat and his republican rival, Goldwater, said that Johnson had done little to fight communism. It was this and the Gulf of Tonkin incident that made Johnson appeal to Congress for power to use force against Vietnam. It was clear that the communists in North Vietnam wanted to take over other countries and were already eyeing up Laos. The North Vietnamese had broken the Geneva Accord and the

USA would continue its policy to assist the free nations of the area to defend their freedom. This is what Johnson said adding that it must be clear to all the people of the USA that they were united in their determination to bring about the end of communism and aggression in the area.

Johnson believed that an extensive bombing campaign of communist military targets would force Ho Chi Minh to back down. But it did not. Johnson sent in 23,000 troops initially to protect the air bases from which American aircraft departed to bomb the communists. This operation was known as Operation Rolling Thunder. But the troops soon became involved in the search and destroy missions against the Vietcong.

The Americans tried other plans including the Strategic Hamlet Program which was to move entire village populations away from areas controlled by the Vietcong to reduce the communist influence. This angered the South Vietnamese and had the effect of gaining more support for the communists. By the end of 1965 Johnson had sent in 165,000 troops and during 1969 the number had reached 540,000.

The Americans used napalm to devastating effect. To quote one example, they dropped about 53,600 tons of it in the Khe Sanh area which had a garrison in the first two months of 1968 during a siege that lasted 77 days. They also used a toxic herbicide, paraquat which destroyed the ecology of the country and killed many people.

The North kept the NLF and the North Vietnamese Army (the NVA) supplied with weapons along the Ho Chi Minh Trail which stretched from North Vietnam through neutral Laos and Cambodia to the South of Vietnam. The USSR and China provided military aid to the North Vietnamese with Soviet tanks and anti-aircraft guns. The Ho Chi Minh Trail consisted of over 15,000 kilometres of roads through jungles and mountains with many alternative routes. If one route was bombed there was always another. And there was heavy American bombing.

The US commander in Vietnam was General Westmoreland who said that he could see an American victory soon. This was based on the principle of body count as the US were killing so many Vietcong that they believed that they were winning the war.

In January 1968 the enemy launched their Tet offensive. Tet means New Year. 70,000 Vietcong attacked towns in the South and the Americans were caught by surprise since they thought that towns were safe from fighting since the Vietcong campaign centred on villages and they fought exclusively in the countryside. Vietcong forces were actually filmed fighting in the grounds of the American Embassy in Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam.

In fact, so much filmed footage was available that this war came to be known as the television war. The Vietcong offensive was defeated but Americans, seeing all this on television, were becoming very alarmed. They saw that the communists were a resilient force and not yet beaten. About 9,000 US troops had been killed and another 14,500 were to die in 1968. The war was costing America \$33 billion a year. It meant that Johnson's welfare and reform policies had to be abandoned because there was no money left. Slums were left in their appalling states and promised new hospitals and schools were not built. Because of this, Johnson knew that he would not win the election of 1968 and therefore decided not to stand as a candidate for re-election.

The morale of the US troops became very low. A US major told a reporter that, after one South Vietnamese town had been reduced to rubble, it was necessary to destroy the town to save it.

Drug taking and desertion among US army personnel were very serious. A report to congress in 1971 said that 10 per cent of the troops were heroin addicts. Over 350 unpopular American officers were fragged (killed or wounded) by their own men. The low morale was due to terrible strain fighting an enemy that was hard to find, let alone kill. The Vietcong had a successful hit and run

policy which infuriated the Americans even more. The Americans had all the modern technology but this was very limited against the effective raids of the Vietcong.

If communism attacks one's freedom then it can be rightly said to be morally wrong. But the Americans were corrupt at times as well. In March 1968 American troops gunned down over 300 Vietnamese women, children, babies and old men at My Lai and this event became known as the My Lai Massacre.

Opinion in America was divided. Any journalist who wrote condemning this action was said to be being disloyal to their country.

One of the most amazing things about the Vietcong was that they built about 320 kilometres of tunnels around Saigon and the forests. This enabled them to escape the worst of the American bombings and to launch unexpected attacks on American patrols. The tunnels had first aid stations, storage areas, waterproof and blast proof doors and even false tunnels and traps. This made ambushes effective. They also had false entrances which were booby traps for unsuspecting Americans.

The continuing television coverage produced more protesters against this war. These anti-war campaigners were demanding peace and an end of hostilities and the loss of life. They began a peace movement in effect. Many of the protests began on American campuses. The peace movement spread and there were demonstrations at American embassies in various parts of the world including London. On 17 March 1968 about 20,000 protesters marched on the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square and a riot ensued. It is doubtful whether they were solely campaigning against American involvement in Vietnam since many of the protesters supported communism and were chanting, AHo, Ho, Ho Chi Minh. Many of the leaders of these protests were of the same political persuasion as the North Vietnamese. The protest at the London Embassy was well planned with protesters coming from far afield including neo-Nazis from Germany. It was also the age of a sort of anarchism which would be seen in rebellious teenagers and much pop music. The police were attacked and a police horse called Samson was seriously hurt by a dart thrown into his neck. The Americans produced figures and statistics to indicate that most of the American people supported the war but then it could be agreed that statistics could prove anything.

The republican, Richard Nixon, won the election in 1968 and he wanted to Vietnamise the war which meant reducing American troops and allowing the ARVN to engage in the combat. The ARVN was the Army of the Republic of Vietnam originally set up by Diem to fight the NLF, the communists. Nixon would increase support for the ARVN. Negotiations began in Paris between Nixon's foreign affairs adviser, Henry Kissinger and the North Vietnamese but, at the same time, Nixon increased the bombing of North Vietnam. The Americans dropped more bombs on Vietnam during this war than all the bombs dropped by both sides in the Second World War. Nixon also ordered the bombing of Cambodia to destroy the Ho Chi Minh Trail and therefore the supply line from the North to the South. For five years this went on. The peace movement was a major factor in all the American deliberations about the high cost of this futile war and the appalling number of casualties.

An agreement was finally signed in Paris in January 1973 and Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho from North Vietnam were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their achievement. Le Duc Tho rejected it.

US forces agreed to leave within 60 days and the North Vietnamese agreed not to extend their territory beyond what they had claimed up to the date of the cease-fire.

Few people expected the war to end when the last Americans left in April 1973. But to win votes and the next election, Nixon revealed that he had been in secret negotiations with the North

Vietnamese since January 1972 and so he did win the election of November 1972. The negotiations were called Peace With Honour whereas it was a disastrous defeat for the Americans.

With the Americans gone, the North took the initiative and within two years the NVA had seized the capital of South Vietnam, Saigon and renamed it Ho Chi Minh City after their leader who had died in 1969. The country was united under communist rule.

The Americans lost 58,000 lives in the war. The NVA lost 900,000 and the ARVN lost 250,000. Of civilian deaths these cannot be quantified but it is probably above a million.

Nixon pursued his policy of detente and improving relations with the USSR and China. He hoped that this would stop the USSR and China spreading communism by virtue of his having a friendly relationship with these two countries. In 1971 Nixon openly admitted Communist China as a legal government and Taiwan was expelled from the United Nations and Communist China took their place. Nixon visited China in 1972. He also visited the USSR to sign a nuclear arms limitation agreement. While the relationship between the USA and China has since been generally good, the massacre by the communists of a thousand pro-democracy students in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989 was severely criticised in the West. In 1996 the Chinese held military exercises around Taiwan to remind them of their military power and the Americans also sent a fleet to stress that Taiwan was independent and that they would defend Taiwan if necessary.

The Vietnam War did not end with the cease-fire agreed between Henry Kissinger, US Secretary of State and Le Duc Thu or when the Americans withdrew. By 1974 the fighting started up again and the stronger forces of the North overran the South eventually uniting the country under communist rule.

However, the consequences for both American and Vietnamese citizens are still being clearly felt today. As we know from the recent Gulf War, chemical weapons can have a serious and lasting effect upon soldiers and, indeed, civilians, after the conflict is over. This was certainly the case with the chemical weapons used in Vietnam. Agent Orange was said to be the cause of many Australian servicemen being ill after being exposed to it. The American botanist, Arthur Galston, expressed concerns about the long term effects of such chemicals as early as 1967. Within three years it was proved that such chemicals were linked with cancer and, consequently the chemicals were banned.

A report in 1985 disputed any link between chemical weapons and deformities both in children and grandchildren of Vietnam war veterans but by 1993 the direct link between such weapons and deformities was proved to be irrefutably true and a multi-million dollar compensation fund was set up for victims and their families.

Environmentally, as well, the Vietnam war was a disaster. Millions of acres of Vietnam's forests were destroyed and the land itself, which land was used for growing essential foodstuffs. The ground was polluted with chemicals. In addition, wrecked vehicles and debris were scattered throughout the countryside as were unexploded bombs and land mines which, despite the extensive clearance programme, are still causing injury and death in the country today in 2001.

At one time, Vietnam was one of the world's largest rice producers, producing enough for its people and other countries such as France who had colonised the country in the 1880s and Japan, who occupied Vietnam and much of Indochina from 1941. Vietnam was now forced to import rice from other countries and they did not have the money to pay for all that was required.

Even after the unification of the country in 1975 the social and economic problems still existed. The Communist government wanted to control everything and the people had to accept their decisions without demur. Collective farming and nationalised industries were unpopular with the people of Vietnam. Many workers and professional people left South Vietnam after unification.

This did not help the situation in the South. The Americans put embargos on supplies to Vietnam. Matters got worse.

The Vietnamese became involved in wars with Cambodia in 1978 and China in 1979. This imposed even greater hardships on the people and even more left the country by whatever means they could, mainly by sea. Hence they became known as The Boat People. Some of these boats were not even seaworthy. Many travelled to Hong Kong, Malaysia and Thailand. Some who survived the sea trips were rehabilitated in America. Others were not so fortunate. Some of the boats were attacked by pirates and thousands of people drowned or died of starvation and thirst as well as disease.

All this was due to communism, left wing politics.

The problems of Vietnam increased. Harvests failed and in 1991 the Russians withdrew their aid. However, in 1993 the Americans relaxed their embargoes and allowed the World Bank to begin investing money into Vietnam. In 1995, twenty years after the war had ended, full diplomatic relations were agreed between America and Vietnam.

As history tells us, the effect of war upon people can have serious and permanent consequences. During the actual fighting in Vietnam it was reported that many American soldiers turned to drugs in order to attempt to cope with the atrocities. It is said that the US Government sent barbiturates to the soldiers to calm them down.

When the soldiers returned from the war they expected a heroes welcome. But the American people had been sickened by the images of the war that they had seen on the television and of hearing of many atrocities such as the My Lai massacre. The Americans had also been humiliated by being defeated by a band of peasants, as they described the Vietcong, and further humiliated by the fact that they had been forced to withdraw.

Many would-be employers were reluctant to employ veterans and their not being able to get work caused many to turn to crime. Men experienced nightmares and dramatic mood swings. Marriages broke down. Families were torn apart.

Many feature films have been made about this war including the overrated Forrest Gump. Other films like Full Metal Jacket and Casualties of War are vastly superior and whilst they contain violence and excessive bad language, they do contain something of the reality of the war. Jane Fonda starred in Coming Home which dealt with disabled soldiers experiences on returning to America. This is one way in which the media commented on the conflict.

This is a moral issue on many plains. People have a right to their religious beliefs. People do not have a right to torture you, punish you or war against you because you are not an atheist or have faith. War is immoral and even a just war has immorality in it. Doubtless you will find further moral issues.

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