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MYTHS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

The Pentagon Papers Reconsidered

Robert F. Turner

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SOUTHEAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVES

WILLIAM HENDERSON
Editor

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MYTHS OF THE VIETNAM WAR, *The Pentagon Papers Reconsidered*

by Robert F. Turner

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Preface

In 1971, an extensive collection of classified documents relating to United States policy in Vietnam was turned over to the press by certain private individuals formerly in government service who were opposed to the American involvement in that embattled country. Government efforts to prevent publication of the documents were unsuccessful; and the *Pentagon Papers*, as they are now universally known, have become an important source of information on US policy in Vietnam down to 1968.

Admittedly an incomplete record, the *Pentagon Papers* "were written almost exclusively from the files in the Department of Defense, and did not involve interviews with the key decision makers or consideration of documents in the files of the White House, the State Department, or other government agencies." Nevertheless, the *Papers* have been eagerly seized upon by opponents of the Vietnam involvement as providing voluminous and conclusive proof of the unwisdom—or worse—of official policy over the preceding two decades.

One wonders whether the critics have really bothered to read through the *Pentagon Papers* in reaching this conclusion. The author of the monograph published in this issue of *Southeast Asian Perspectives*, after a careful study of the documents, himself concludes that it is "difficult . . . to read the *Pentagon Papers* without being impressed with how frequently the government has been right about Vietnam, especially during the earlier days of our involvement . . . When one examines the record, . . . the government fares better than most of its critics."

In the monograph that follows, Robert F. Turner considers some of the major myths about the Vietnam War that have been spread so assiduously by the opponents of official policy, and which have so widely influenced public opinion on the issue. He then uses the resources of the *Pentagon Papers* to evaluate the historicity of these

myths. His conclusion is that the documents "thoroughly discredit" most of them. The reader is invited to formulate his own judgments.

The author, Robert F. Turner, is a 28 year-old Research Associate at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford, California. Formerly a Captain in the US Army, he has been in South Vietnam three times, twice with the North Vietnamese/Viet Cong Affairs Division of JUSPAO (Joint US Public Affairs Office of the American Embassy in Saigon). He has published a number of articles in such publications as the *Intercollegiate Review*, *New Guard*, and the *Yearbook on International Communist Affairs*; and is at present working on a book about communism in Vietnam.

William Henderson

September 1972

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Introduction

The author's initial encounter with the myths of the Vietnam War came in early 1965, when he participated in a Vietnam debate at Indiana University. During the years that followed, he took part in scores of similar debates and teach-ins, confronting the same basic myths each time.

For the most part, the proponents of this mythology are sincere in their acceptance of the myths. They have heard them often enough — frequently from the mouths of academicians and national figures whose backgrounds entitle them to a respectful hearing. Certainly the government has done little to dispel the myths; and unfortunately, few supporters of the US involvement in Vietnam are sufficiently versed in the relevant history to counter them effectively.

What are these myths? They are a collection of historical and factual inaccuracies and half-truths which, in the aggregate, provide the foundation for almost all of the most widely used arguments against US policy in Vietnam. In their simplest form, they run something like this: "The United States first became involved in Vietnam to restore French colonialism. Ho Chi Minh, the 'George Washington' of Vietnam, was leading a nationalist movement to win independence from the French. In spite of US efforts to reimpose colonialism, Ho Chi Minh defeated the French militarily at the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Although the United States accepted the Geneva Agreements of 1954, it began to violate them from the day they were signed. After importing Ngo Dinh Diem from the United

States to serve as a puppet President, the US refused to allow free elections to take place in July 1956 because, as even President Eisenhower admitted, Ho Chi Minh would have won the elections by at least eighty percent of the vote. Because the United States and its puppet government in Saigon violated their commitment at Geneva to hold elections, the people of South Vietnam were forced to resort to armed struggle again to regain their independence and to reunite their country, which had a thousand year-old tradition of unity. The United States intervened militarily to prevent Vietnamese independence, justifying its action on the ground that a few leaders of the nationalist movement were also Communists. The US failed to realize that Vietnamese communism is not the expansionist inter-national communism of Lenin or Stalin, but rather a strongly nationalistic movement comparable to communism in Tito's Yugoslavia. It is, therefore, necessary for the United States to recognize its mistakes and to withdraw immediately so that peace can be restored to Indochina."

Although there are many others, these are the basic myths of the Vietnam War. They are more widely accepted today than they were in 1965, and have in fact been granted the status of "given" assumptions in much of the discourse on the topic.

While the author was in Vietnam in 1971, a collection of classified government papers concerning the US involvement was made available to several newspapers by private individuals opposed to the main thrust of American policy in Vietnam. The documents were part of a Department of Defense study, and thus became commonly known as the *Pentagon Papers*. According to one of the individuals who claimed responsibility for their publication, the study is "more reliable than any other work now in public circulation . . . the best we have — a good starting point for a real understanding of the war."¹ The North Vietnamese were equally pleased with the release of the documents and gave them extensive attention in their propaganda efforts.² To insure that the US government would be unsuccessful in its

¹ Daniel Ellsberg, quoted in *Newsweek*, June 28, 1971, p. 16.

² See, for example, the 126-page booklet, *The Pentagon's Secrets and Half-Secrets* (Hanoi: Viet Nam Courier, 1971).

attempts to halt publication of the *Pentagon Papers*, a Congressional critic obtained a copy of the still highly classified documents and inserted them into the official record of a Senate committee. Shortly thereafter, a four-volume edition of the documents was offered for sale to the public by a commercial publisher.³

A close reading of the four-volume study and accompanying documents indicates why the director of the study task force which had prepared them had noted in his letter of transmittal to the Secretary of Defense that "distortions we are sure abound in these studies," and that "we all had our prejudices and axes to grind, and these shine through clearly at times."⁴ Still, since the study is based on primary source material, it is in many ways a very valuable work. The authors could color their interpretations, but for the most part they presented the facts honestly.

Since the study was released by opponents of the government's policy, and over the strong objections of the government, and since it was based largely on classified intragovernmental messages, memoranda, and other documents not intended for open publication, it can hardly be discredited as "government propaganda." The *Pentagon Papers* should, therefore, be useful in examining some of the basic tenets of the historical argument against United States involvement in Vietnam — the myths of the Vietnam War.

³ The Senator Gravel Edition, *The Pentagon Papers, The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); hereafter cited as *Pentagon Papers*.

⁴ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. xv.

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Ho Chi Minh -- George Washington, Tito, or Benedict Arnold?

Ho as George Washington

"Ho is sometimes called the George Washington of Vietnam."⁵ Certainly it is true that Ho Chi Minh and his followers obtained considerable popular support in Vietnam on the basis of nationalistic appeals; but it is equally clear that he was always a dedicated Communist. As the Pentagon study notes, "Ho Chi Minh was an old Stalinist, trained in Russia in the early '20s, Comintern colleague of Borodin in Canton . . . [and a man who presumably] spoke with authority within the upper echelons of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union."⁶ Ho left Vietnam at the age of 21 in 1911, and did not set foot on Vietnamese soil for thirty years,⁷ at which time Vietnam was "a country he knew very little (in fact, far less than France, Russia, or China)."⁸ While absent from Vietnam, Ho had been "one of the founders of the French Communist Party," "the official representative of the French Communist Party" to the Fifth Congress of the Communist International in Moscow, and "the member of the Oriental Department of the Communist International in charge of the Southern Bureau."⁹ Indeed, when the

⁵ Dr. Benjamin Spock and Mitchell Zimmerman, *Dr. Spock on Vietnam* (New York: Dell, 1968), p. 17.

⁶ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 261.

⁷ See, for example, "President Ho Chi Minh—A Brief Biography," *Nhan Dan* (Hanoi), May 17-21, 1970.

⁸ Bernard B. Fall, *Last Reflections on a War* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 87.

⁹ President Ho Chi Minh—A Brief Biography."

Indochinese Communist Party was founded in Hong Kong in 1930, Ho Chi Minh was not present as a Vietnamese delegate but as the official representative of the Communist International.¹⁰ As the Pentagon study notes, "the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) of the Comintern, headed by Russian-trained Ho Chi Minh," was one of several "foreign-based, foreign-oriented parties" active in Vietnam during the 1930s and 1940s.¹¹

In fact, as will be demonstrated shortly, the Ho Chi Minh brand of communism is highly internationalist. Realizing early in the game that the Vietnamese peasant was not attracted to Marxism, Ho operated through ostensibly nationalist fronts and advocated nationalist programs. As Le Duan, First Secretary of the North Vietnamese Lao Dong (Workers, or Communist) Party, later explained: "Only by winning over the peasant masses . . . can the working class conquer the leadership of revolution . . . That is why the Marxist-Leninist parties . . . must have suitable programs, policies, slogans, and styles of work to win over the peasantry."¹² In early 1941, Ho returned to Vietnam and "on behalf of the Communist International" presided over the Eighth Conference of the ICP.¹³ Following Comintern instructions, the party created the Viet Minh Front and put forward an essentially nationalist program. The *Pentagon Papers* note:¹⁴

The announced program of the Viet Minh called for a wide range of social and political reforms designed mainly to appeal to Viet patriotism. Emphasis was placed on an anti-Japanese crusade . . . not on Communist cant. . . The ICP was during the war the hard core of the Viet Minh, but the bulk of the Viet Minh membership were no doubt quite unaware of that fact: they served the Viet Minh out of a patriotic fervor.

¹⁰ Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), vol. 2, p. 145.

¹¹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 292.

¹² Le Duan, *On Some Present International Problems*, second edition (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1964), p. 44; see also Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*, vol. 3, pp. 240-241.

¹³ "President Ho Chi Minh—A Brief Biography."

¹⁴ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 44.

In a similar way, Ho attempted to hide his Communist past from the Allies. In 1945, the ICP was officially dissolved, but in fact simply went underground to disguise Communist control of the Viet Minh.¹⁵ Ho told the US Ambassador to Paris that he was not a Communist, and suggested to a journalist that he could remain neutral, "like Switzerland," in the developing world power struggle between communism and the West. But as the Pentagon study notes, "these and other such statements could have come either from a proper Leninist or a dedicated nationalist. Ho's statements and actions after 1949, and his eventual close alignment with the Sino-Soviet bloc, support the Leninist construction."¹⁶

The Leninist construction is also supported by Ho's treatment of non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists. If any individual could have claimed to be the George Washington of Vietnam between 1900 and 1925, it would have been Phan Boi Chau. Bernard Fall called him "Vietnam's Sun Yat-sen,"¹⁷ and he is today claimed as a hero in both North and South Vietnam. According to historian Joseph Buttinger, the French regarded Chau as the most dangerous of the nationalist revolutionaries. "Between 1907 and the end of World War I, there was probably no single decision made or act of resistance committed that was not either directly instigated by Chau's agents or inspired by his political teachings."¹⁸ Ho recognized Chau as a rival, and as a major obstacle in the Communist attempt to take control of the anti-French movement. He therefore "sold" Chau to the French, who were happy to pay a large sum of money to capture their most effective opponent.¹⁹

¹⁵ See, for example, "Pages of History, 1945-1954" *Vietnamese Studies No. 7* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d.), p. 238: "November 11—The Indochinese Communist Party declared its own dissolution: in fact, it went underground to reappear officially on March 3, 1951, under the name of 'Vietnam Workers Party.'"

¹⁶ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 50.

¹⁷ Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams* (New York: Praeger, 1964), p. 235.

¹⁸ Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam, A Dragon Embattled* (New York: Praeger, 1967), vol. 1, p. 152.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 155-156. Buttinger states that Ho received 150,000 piasters from the French for Chau; Hoang Van Chi, in *From Colonialism to Communism, A Case History of North Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1964), p. 18, says Ho received 100,000 piasters, at a time when a buffalo could be purchased for five piasters. For details of Ho's betrayal of Phan Boi Chau and other nationalists,

Phan Boi Chau was only the first of thousands of non-Communist nationalist leaders eliminated by Ho and his followers. Some of them were sold to the French (a major source of revenue for the Communists), while others were executed by Ho's own men. In March 1946, Ho even signed an agreement with the French allowing the latter to return to Vietnam in order to buy time to eliminate more of his nationalist opponents. Communist Party First Secretary Le Duan later referred to the move as a creative application of the "shrewd recommendation of Lenin" to fight only one enemy at a time: "We would at one time reach a temporary compromise . . . with the French in order to . . . wipe out the reactionaries . . . thus gaining time to consolidate our forces and prepare for a nationwide resistance to French colonialist aggression, which the party knew was inevitable."²⁰

Among the "reactionaries" to be wiped out were the members of the *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang* (VNQDD), the largest of the anti-French nationalist parties. North Vietnamese Defense Minister General Vo Nguyen Giap, who personally directed the VNQDD purge in Hanoi, later wrote: "The liquidating of the reactionaries of the *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang* was crowned with success and we were able to liberate all the areas which had fallen into their hands."²¹ The *Pentagon Papers* describe the purges in this way: "In mid-June [1946], the Viet Minh, supported by French troops, attacked the *Dong Minh Hoi* and the VNQDD as 'enemies of the peace,' effectively suppressed organized opposition, and asserted Viet Minh control throughout North Vietnam." As a result, "the DRV and the Viet Minh were drawn more and more under the control of the 'Marxists' of the former ICP." The study notes that "during the session of the DRV National Assembly in November, nominal opposition members were whittled down to twenty out of more than three hundred seats, and a few 'Marxists' dominated the proceedings."²² Thus, by the end of the First Indochina War, Ho and his followers—by means of effective propaganda relying on

see N. Khach Huyen, *Vision Accomplished? The Enigma of Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Collier Books, 1971), pp. 25-28.

²⁰ Le Duan, *The Vietnamese Revolution, Fundamental Problems, Essential Tasks* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1970), pp. 39-40.

²¹ Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War People's Army* (New York: Praeger, 1962), p. 18.

²² *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 46.

nationalist themes, and through the ruthless elimination of almost all potential competition — had succeeded in taking control of the anti-French movement in much of Vietnam.²³

Ho as Tito

One of the most popular myths is that Ho Chi Minh and his associates have successfully combined communism and nationalism. Former US Ambassador to France, General James M. Gavin, asserts that Ho was "a man who tends toward the combination of nationalism and communism associated with Marshal Tito."²⁴ Dr. George McTurnan Kahin, head of the Southeast Asian program at Cornell University, has asserted that "communism in Asia has adapted itself to nationalism . . . the character of Vietnamese communism is inseparable from Vietnamese nationalism."²⁵ These statements are certainly called into question by Ho's record of betrayal of leading Vietnamese nationalists.

No doubt Ho and his colleagues are patriots. They are, that is, if one accepts their own special definition of the word. Like Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Ho and his associates apparently believe that "when I use a word, . . . it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less." In 1951, Ho explained: "Genuine patriotism is . . . part and parcel of internationalism."²⁶ Later Ho's Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong, amplified: "In our country, to be a patriot means to love socialism . . . the Communist is the most genuine patriot."²⁷

In 1924, Ho Chi Minh made a report to the Fifth Congress of the Communist International in Moscow, in which he referred to "my

²³ This adds a certain irony to the remark by Senator Vance Hartke that "we must not overlook the fact that the predominance of Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh was partially a function of the absence of any genuine, popular non-Communist movement." Vance Hartke, *The American Crisis in Vietnam* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), p. 15.

²⁴ James M. Gavin, *Crisis Now* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), pp. 62-63.

²⁵ Quoted in Marcus G. Raskin and Bernard B. Fall (editors), *The Viet-Nam Reader* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), pp. 289, 294.

²⁶ Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*, vol. 3, p. 262.

²⁷ Pham Van Dong, in *XV Anniversary of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945-1960* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d.), p. 41.

country, Indochina."²⁸ Some 35 years later, he told an audience in North Vietnam that, although he was not married, "I have a very big family — the working class throughout the world."²⁹ In his Last Will, written in May 1969, Ho anticipated "the day when I go and join venerable Karl Marx, Lenin, and other revolutionary elders ..." He did not speak of Nguyen Hue, Le Loi, Phan Boi Chau, or other *Vietnamese* heroes, as one might have expected were he truly a Vietnamese nationalist.

The first Secretary-General of the Lao Dong Party (which replaced the underground ICP in 1951), Truong Chinh (whose name translates "Long March" and reflects his pro-Chinese position), has told the party: "We must oppose every manifestation of bourgeois nationalism, the enemy of proletarian internationalism, which isolates our country."³⁰ In 1960, Le Duan was named First Secretary of the Party. He remarked: "The Communist and Workers parties have the obligation . . . to resolutely struggle against all manifestations of nationalism and chauvinism."³¹

In considering the "Titoist" argument, the *Pentagon Papers* note that "a dynamic and unified Communist Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh could have been vigorously expansionist, thus causing unanticipated difficult problems in some ways comparable to current ones."³² The *Papers* conclude:³³

Ho's well-known leadership and drive, the iron discipline and effectiveness of the Viet Minh, the demonstrated fighting capability of his armies, a dynamic Vietnamese people under Ho's control, could have produced a dangerous period of Vietnamese expansionism. Laos and Cambodia would have been easy pickings for such a Vietnam. Ho, in fact, always considered his leadership to extend to Indochina as a whole, and his party was originally called the Indochinese Communist Party. Thailand, Malaya, Singapore, and even Indonesia, could have been next. It could

²⁸ Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*, vol. 1, p. 81.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 370.

³⁰ Truong Chinh, *Forward Along the Path Charted by K. Marx* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1969), p. 74.

³¹ Le Duan, On Some Present International Problems, pp. 49-50.

³² *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 48.

³³ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 52.

have been the "domino theory" with Ho instead of Mao ... This may seem implausible, but it is only slightly less of a bad dream than what has happened to Vietnam since. The path of prudence rather than the path of risk seemed the wiser choice [for the US to follow].

Support for the suggestion that Ho and his comrades were likely candidates to break up the solidarity of the international Communist movement is difficult to find in their writings. For years, they have referred to the "monolithic solidarity of the Socialist countries headed by the Soviet Union."³⁴ Few international Communist leaders were more outspoken than Ho Chi Minh in support of restoring unity to the international Communist movement.

The idea of a peaceful evolution to socialism has been dealt with on several occasions by Vietnamese Communist leaders. In 1960, Le Duan wrote: "The modern revisionists represented by the Tito clique in Yugoslavia are trumpeting that the nature of imperialism has changed;" and he concluded that "if we want to lay bare the aggressive and bellicose nature of imperialism . . . the Communist and Workers parties must necessarily direct their main blow against revisionism."³⁵ Truong Chinh wrote that "to stand for a peaceful transition in the hope of seizing power is to nurture reformist illusions."³⁶ In a discussion of the ideological aspects of the Sino-Soviet dispute, Le Duan asserted that it "is precisely the Chinese Communist Party, headed by Comrade Mao Tse-tung, which has most brilliantly carried into effect the teachings of the great Lenin." Duan noted: "Some believe that we must secure a detente in which to develop the economy of the Socialist camp;" but "I think that such an approach to the problem is not correct."³⁷

There is irony in the assertion that Ho was "an Asian Tito." On January 14, 1950, Ho requested recognition of his "Democratic Republic of Vietnam" by "the governments of all countries." Communist China responded almost immediately, and soon

³⁴ See, for example, Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*, vol. 3, pp. 296, 405, vol. 4, pp. 68, 286, 368; and Le Duan, *On Some Present International Problems*, p. 48.

³⁵ Le Duan, *On Some Present International Problems*, pp. 51-52.

³⁶ Truong Chinh, *Forward Along the Path Traced by K. Marx*, p. 64.

³⁷ Le Duan, *On Some Present International Problems*, pp. 137, 145, 147.

thereafter all the Communist countries of Europe — including Tito's Yugoslavia — had offered recognition. Ho returned recognition to all except Tito, who had been excommunicated by Stalin³⁸

In 1956, North Vietnam fully endorsed the Soviet invasion of Hungary. The National Assembly passed a declaration supporting the move, and calling the "success of the Hungarian people" a victory for the Vietnamese people, too. Ho Chi Minh remarked: "This declaration testifies to the international solidarity between our country and the Socialist countries headed by the Soviet Union."³⁹ He added: "The Vietnamese people are very glad to see that the brotherly Hungarian people, with the just help of the Soviet Army, have united and struggled to frustrate the dark schemes of the imperialists." North Vietnam also supported the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.⁴⁰

Another aspect of the "Tito" analogy is based on traditional Vietnamese animosity toward China arising out of previous experience with Chinese expansionism. As former US Ambassador to Japan Edwin O. Reischauer — an advocate of the "Tito" theory — has put it, Ho and his associates "were ardent nationalists and probably had deeper fears and suspicions of the Chinese than the Yugoslays had of the Russians."⁴¹ But while it is true that there is a traditional hostility toward China throughout Vietnam, the Communists in Hanoi have gone to great lengths to eliminate it. They have explained that the China which was Vietnam's traditional enemy was the "old" China which existed before the "people" overthrew the feudalists and seized power. Once the Communists were in power in China, Ho Chi Minh went to great efforts to convince his people that China was really a traditional friend. In 1949, Ho wrote: "Brotherly relations have existed between the Vietnamese and Chinese nations during thousands of years of history."⁴² In the

³⁸ Bernard B. Fall, *The Viet-Minh Regime*, revised edition (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1956), p. 56, notes: "Yugoslavia has recognized the Ho Chi Minh regime but was refused recognition by the latter in view of Marshal Tito's break with the Cominform bloc."

³⁹ Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*, vol. 4, p. 220.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 223; Radio Hanoi, August 21, 1968.

⁴¹ Edwin O. Reischauer, *Beyond Vietnam, The United States and Asia* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967). p. 30.

⁴² Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*, vol. 3, p. 184.

following ten years, Ho made numerous remarks like these: "Our party . . . is loyal to Marxism-Leninism and the thought of Mao Tse-tung," and "Vietnam and China are two brotherly countries, having close relations like lips and teeth."⁴³ In a 1971 propaganda booklet published in Hanoi in several foreign languages, the writers explained:⁴⁴

It should be noted that each time the Chinese imperial dynasties were shaken by peasant insurrections, the Vietnamese people's patriotic struggle enjoyed favorable conditions. An objective unconscious solidarity was thus established between the Vietnamese and Chinese peasantry.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 380, and vol. 4, p. 367.

⁴⁴ *Viet Nam-4 Sketch* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1971), p. 24, fn. 1.

3

The First Indochina War

US Support for French Colonialism

Few myths are more widely accepted than the argument that the United States supported the reimposition of French colonialism in Indochina after World War II. Dr. Spock asserts: "When we first got involved in support of the French, it was simply to keep the Vietnamese subjected to France."⁴⁵ Senator Hartke writes: "Unfortunately, the United States strongly supported the postwar French colonial policy."⁴⁶ William J. Lederer, author of one of the best books on the weaknesses of the US Foreign Service in Asia (*The Ugly American*) and one of the worst books on the US involvement in Vietnam (*Our Own Worst Enemy*), claims: "The US self-deception began in earnest in 1945 when we first started helping the French to regain their Indochina colonies."⁴⁷ Professor Howard Zinn — darling of the New Left and an advocate of Communist victory in South Vietnam — writes: ⁴⁸

And what was United States policy? In view of American claims today that its policy is to support self-determination and independence, the answer is both illuminating and troubling: The United States fully supported the French effort to maintain its power in Indochina against the nationalist struggle for independence.

⁴⁵ Spock and Zimmerman, op. cit., p. 19.

⁴⁶ Hartke, op. cit., p. 13.

⁴⁷ William J. Lederer, *Our Own Worst Enemy* (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 31.

⁴⁸ Howard Zinn, *Vietnam, The Logic of Withdrawal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 38.

Even the respected Dr. Martin Luther King fell victim to this myth:⁴⁹

Even though they [the Viet Minh] quoted the American Declaration of Independence in their own document of freedom, we refused to recognize them. Instead, we decided to support France in its reconquest of her former colony. Our government felt then that the Vietnamese people were not "ready" for independence . . . For nine years, we vigorously supported the French in their abortive effort to recolonize Vietnam.

The *Pentagon Papers* clearly refute this assessment of US attitudes toward Vietnam and the First Indochina War. They quote, for example, from a memorandum from President Roosevelt to Secretary of State Hull on January 24, 1944:⁵⁰

I saw Halifax last week and told him quite frankly that it was perfectly true that I had, for over a year, expressed the opinion that Indochina should not go back to France but that it should be administered by an international trusteeship. France has had the country . . . for nearly one hundred years, and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning.

Roosevelt noted that the British would oppose the plan, because "they fear the effect it would have on their own possessions and those of the Dutch."

They have never liked the idea of trusteeship because it is, in some instances, aimed at future independence. This is true in the case of Indochina.

Each case must, of course, stand on its own feet, but the case of Indochina is perfectly clear. France has milked it for one hundred years. The people of Indochina are entitled to something better than that.

During World War II, Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh had received military equipment and financial assistance from the United States in return for intelligence information on Japanese operations in

⁴⁹ Martin Luther King, *Beyond Vietnam*, address to The Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, New York City, April 4, 1967, reprinted by Alton Press, Palo Alto, California, p. 4.

⁵⁰ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 10.

Indochina. Ho had gone to great efforts to hide his Communist background; and since he had eliminated most of the non-Communist opposition, his Viet Minh was the best organized movement available. When the British, who had accepted the surrender of the Japanese forces in South Vietnam in 1945, decided to allow the French to return to their former colony, the US made no official efforts to stop them. The Pentagon study notes: "Although American OSS representatives were present in both Hanoi and Saigon and ostensibly supported the Viet Minh, the United States took no official position regarding either the DRV, or the French and British actions in South Vietnam."⁵¹ Washington did issue a statement declaring that "it is not the policy of this government to assist the French to reestablish their control over Indochina by force."⁵² In Vietnam, however, the OSS went to great lengths to hinder the return of the French, informing the senior French general that "the Potsdam Agreements had made no mention of French sovereignty over Vietnam and that the French, therefore, no longer had any `rights to intervene in affairs which were no longer of any concern' to them." The OSS opposition was so great that French General Sainteny radioed his superiors in Calcutta that he was "face to face with a deliberate Allied maneuver to evict the French from Indochina," and that "at the present time the Allied attitude is more harmful than that of the Viet Minh."⁵³

As the French returned to Vietnam, "the US steadfastly refused to assist the French military effort, e. g., forbidding American flag vessels to carry troops or war material to Vietnam."⁵⁴ In January 1947, "the Department of State instructed the American Ambassador in Paris that the US would approve sale of arms and armaments to France `except in cases which appear to relate to Indochina.'"⁵⁵ In June 1948, the Ambassador was instructed "to `apply such persuasion and/or pressure as is best calculated [to] produce desired result' of France's `unequivocally and promptly approving the

⁵¹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 16.

⁵² *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 17.

⁵³ Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams*, pp. 68-69.

⁵⁴ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 3.

⁵⁵ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 30.

principle of Viet independence."⁵⁶ When the French began negotiations with former Emperor Bao Dai to set up a non-Communist nationalist government, it became apparent that France intended to maintain as much control as possible over any Vietnamese regime. The American Ambassador in Paris was advised to inform the French that "while the [State] Department is desirous of French coming to terms with . . . any truly nationalist group which has a reasonable chance of winning over the preponderance of Vietnamese, we cannot at this time irretrievably commit the US to support a native government which . . . might become virtually a puppet government."⁵⁷

As the Pentagon study notes: "Uncertainty characterized the US attitude toward Ho through 1948, but the US incessantly pressured France to accommodate 'genuine' Vietnamese nationalism and independence."⁵⁸ The Communists came to power in China in 1949; and in May 1950, President Truman took "the first crucial decision regarding US military involvement in Vietnam"⁵⁹ by approving a \$10 million shipment of military equipment to Indochina. According to the *Pentagon Papers*:⁶⁰

... the rationale for the decision to aid the French was to avert Indochina's sliding into the Communist camp, rather than aid for France as a colonial power or a NATO ally. . . . A reading of the NSC [National Security Council] memorandum and the Franco-American diplomatic dialogue of the time indicates that Washington kept its eyes on the ultimate goal of the decolonization of Indochina. Indeed, it was uncomfortable in finding itself — forced by the greater necessity of resisting Viet Minh communism — in the same bed as the French.

The study points out that "the situation in which the decision was made was completely dominated by the takeover of and consolidation of power in China by the Communists;"⁶¹ and adds:⁶²

⁵⁶ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 32.

⁵⁷ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 33.

⁵⁸ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 7.

⁵⁹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 197.

⁶⁰ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 77.

⁶¹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 179.

Following the Communist Chinese (January 18) and the Soviet (January 30) recognition of the Ho Chi Minh regime, the United States announced its recognition of the Bao Dai government. Theretofore, the US had remained neutral, hesitating to choose between supporting France, a friendly colonial power engaged in reestablishing its authority, or supporting the Viet Minh, a Communist-dominated independence movement in opposition to that European ally. This dilemma had been resolved by the victory of the Chinese Communists . . . and by the threat posed to Indochina. The United States policy of support for the French and the Associated States was adjudged one befitting an anticolonial democracy: support of nationalism and independence; opposition to attempted encroachments thereon by international communism.

Even with the fall of China to the Communists, and in spite of various problems relating to the defense of Europe which required US-French cooperation, the United States continued to demand concessions by the French to Vietnamese independence. The American refusal to accept a French puppet government led General De Lattre to charge that the Americans were afflicted with "missionary zeal" and were "fanning the fires of extreme nationalism" and trying to destroy "French traditionalism" in Vietnam.⁶³

Typical of the American demands were those set forth in National Security Council Paper NSC 64/1, which stated : ⁶⁴

. . . as a condition to the provision of those further increases in military assistance to Indochina necessary for the implementation of an agreed overall military plan, the United States government should obtain assurance from the French government that:

(a) A program providing for the eventual self-government of Indochina . . . will be developed, made public, and implemented at once . . .

(b) National armies of the Associated States of Indochina will be organized as a matter of urgency . . .

⁶² *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 186.

⁶³ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 68.

⁶⁴ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 199.

(d) France will change its political and military concepts in Indochina to:

i. Eliminate its policy of "colonialism."

As to whether or not the United States could have done more than it did to pressure France in granting independence, the Pentagon study concludes:⁶⁵

It is sometimes asserted that France could not have continued the war in Indochina without American aid, but that the United States failed to use its considerable leverage on the French to force them to take more positive steps towards granting complete independence to the Associated States. An examination of Franco-American relations between 1950-54 suggests, however, that American leverage was severely limited and that, given the primacy accorded in US policy to the containment of communism in Southeast Asia, French leverage on the United States was the stronger of the two.

Strategic Importance of Indochina

Many critics of the US involvement have argued that traditionally the United States has not considered Vietnam to be of particular strategic significance, and that American involvement in the Vietnam War would not have been considered by Presidents Truman or Eisenhower. Richard Goodwin, former assistant to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, asked whether Vietnam was a place where the US should commit military force to the protection of Asian nations, and concluded: "Not very many years ago, the answer seemed clear. South Vietnam, a tiny patch of poverty-stricken jungle . . . was not important to our security."⁶⁶ Senator Hartke agrees: "There is no evidence that the fate of South Vietnam was seen as integral to the defense of the United States or to that of the 'free world.'"⁶⁷ General Gavin concludes that Vietnam is an

⁶⁵ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 75.

⁶⁶ Richard N. Goodwin, *Triumph or Tragedy, Reflections on Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 15.

⁶⁷ Hartke, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

area "where the interests of the United States were at best marginal."⁶⁸

Did the United States in fact "drift" into involvement in Vietnam, or was it an area considered strategically important by decision-makers during the early 1950s? An indication of the strategic value placed on Indochina by American leaders over the years can be obtained by even the most cursory glance at the dozens of documents appended to the first volume of the *Pentagon Papers*. Document 2 is a letter from Deputy Under Secretary of State Dean Rusk, dated March 7, 1950, informing Defense Department officials of the State Department's view of the Indochina situation. Secretary Rusk notes that the "Department of State maintains that Indochina . . . is the most strategically important area of Southeast Asia."⁶⁹ Document 3 gives the position of the Department of Defense on April 10 of the same year: "The mainland states of Southeast Asia also are at present of critical strategic importance to the United States."⁷⁰ A National Security Council Staff Study, dated February 13, 1952, began by asserting: "Communist domination of Southeast Asia . . . would be critical to United States security interests."⁷¹ In June, an NSC Policy Statement asserted that "with respect to Indochina, the United States should . . . continue to assure the French that the US regards the French efforts in Indochina as one of great strategic importance . . . and as essential to the security of the free world, not only in the Far East but in the Middle East and Europe as well."⁷² Document 18, dated October 30, 1953, recorded the NSC opinion that "certain other countries, such as Indochina . . . are of such strategic importance to the United States that an attack on them probably would compel the United States to react with military force either locally . . . or generally against the military power of the aggressors."⁷³ In light of these official statements from hitherto classified government documents, it is difficult to accept the thesis

⁶⁸ Gavin, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁶⁹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 363.

⁷⁰ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 364.

⁷¹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 375.

⁷² *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 387.

⁷³ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 418.

that the United States did not consider this area of the world to be of great strategic significance.

It is similarly difficult to accept the related argument that the United States had no commitment to assist Vietnam under the Manila (SEATO) Treaty of 1954. Richard Goodwin put it this way in 1966: "One can search the many statements of Presidents and diplomats in vain for any mention of the SEATO Treaty . . . The treaty argument is, in truth, something a clever advocate conceived a few months ago."⁷⁴ Goodwin's assertion is refuted, however, by the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution of August 7, 1964, which specifically referred to America's "obligations under the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty" in granting President Johnson authority to take "all necessary steps" to assist any member or protocol state of the Manila Treaty (e. g., South Vietnam) in defense of its freedom. There are more sophisticated versions of this argument which suggest that the United States did not assume any obligation to assist South Vietnam under the 1954 Manila Treaty. The Pentagon study refutes this argument, noting that at the conference at which the treaty was signed, Secretary of State Dulles put forth a unilateral declaration of US readiness to act: "Dulles defined the obligations under Article IV as `a clear and definite agreement on the part of the signatories, including the United States, to come to the aid of any member of the Pact who under the terms of the treaty is subjected to aggression. However, Dulles failed to instill the same dedication to instant intervention in the other SEATO members."⁷⁵

Dien Bien Phu and French War Weariness

Another popular myth is that the French were decisively defeated militarily at the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Dr. Spock, for example, writes: "In May 1954, the Vietnamese nationalists [read Viet Minh] utterly defeated the fifteen thousand-man French force at Dien Bien Phu in one of the major battles of modern history."⁷⁶ Felix Greene is more direct: "It has become fashionable today . . . to say that the

⁷⁴ Goodwin, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁷⁵ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 212.

⁷⁶ Spock and Zimmerman, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

defeat of the French was the result of national weariness at home — that the war 'was lost in Paris.' There is little evidence to support this."⁷⁷

It is important to examine this myth, as the facts are illustrative of Vietnamese Communist strategy in South Vietnam today. During the Dien Bien Phu battle — like the Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive of 1968 — the political and psychological repercussions were considerably more important than any military benefits the Communists might have obtained.

As the *Pentagon Papers* note, the French fortress at Dien Bien Phu "was to take on a political and psychological importance far out of proportion to its actual strategic value because of the up-coming Geneva Conference."⁷⁸ A Joint Chiefs of Staff memorandum states that French General Ely "recognized the great political and psychological importance of the outcome both in Indochina and in France, but considered that Dien Bien Phu, even if lost, would be a *military* victory for the French because of the cost to the Viet Minh and the relatively greater loss to the Viet Minh combat forces. Politically and psychologically, the loss of Dien Bien Phu would be a very serious setback to the French Union cause, and might cause unpredictable repercussions both in France and Indochina."⁷⁹ One week prior to the fall of the fortress, a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE 63-54) noted that while "the fall of Dien Bien Phu would not in itself substantially alter the relative military capabilities of French Union and Viet Minh forces, . . . the political consequences . . . would be considerably more adverse than the strictly military consequences."⁸⁰

The casualty figures for French and Viet Minh soldiers at Dien Bien Phu support General Ely's statement that even if the fortress fell, *militarily* the engagement would be a French victory. Bernard Fall notes that although the French forces were outnumbered by ten to one in a situation where "a three-to-one superiority . . . was a

⁷⁷ Felix Greene, *Vietnam! Vietnam!* (Palo Alto: Fulton, 1966), p. 128.

⁷⁸ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 97

⁷⁹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 457

⁸⁰ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 483.

sufficient margin for victory in an assault,"⁸¹ the Viet Minh suffered well over three times as many fatalities, and nearly twice as many total casualties as the French Union forces.⁸² Both Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap (the Viet Minh general who had directed the campaign), while not of course diminishing its military significance to their troops, noted the "great" and "decisive" influence the battle had on the Geneva Conference.⁸³ If the Dien Bien Phu defeat can be attributed to any single factor, it was the heavy artillery which the Chinese Communists had provided the Viet Minh, but which neither French nor American intelligence anticipated being used in the battle. A 1953 National Intelligence Estimate on "Probable Developments in Indochina Through Mid-1954" concluded: "The Viet Minh do not have, and probably cannot develop within the period of this estimate, the capability to make such effective use of heavy equipment — artillery, armor, and aircraft — from the Chinese Communists as to permit successful attacks against strong concentrations of regular French forces."⁸⁴ In fact, the Viet Minh hand-carried the heavy artillery to Dien Bien Phu, and used it as direct fire ordnance to decimate the French position — which had not pre-pared for this type of attack.

Ho Chi Minh had concurrently been placing great emphasis on the need to further the "peace" movement in Paris, calling it "one of the most important factors" in settling the Vietnam question, and assuring his followers that with the "support of the French people ... our armed resistance will certainly be victorious."⁸⁵ The fall of the

⁸¹ Bernard B. Fall, *Hell is a Very Small Place* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 329.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 484, 487.

⁸³ Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*, vol. 4, p. 119; Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War People's Army*, p. 153; George K. Tanham, in his excellent study, *Communist Revolutionary Warfare, From the Viet Minh to the Viet Cong*, revised edition (New York: Praeger, 1967), p. 97, concludes: "Though the loss of Dien Bien Phu was a bitter and unexpected defeat for France . it was not in the military sense a decisive one. Its main impact was in the political arena, where it was sufficient to persuade the French to negotiate and end the war." The *Pentagon Papers* (vol. 1, p. 115) note that the "French government found it could no longer ignore antiwar sentiment at home without jeopardizing its survival."

⁸⁴ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 398.

⁸⁵ Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*, vol. 3, p. 410, and vol. 4, p. 341. In 1947, Truong Chinh wrote: "Concerning our foreign policy, what must our people do? We

garrison at Dien Bien Phu resulted in the collapse of the French government of Joseph Laniel, and his replacement by Pierre Mendes-France on June 19. As the next chapter will show, the new French regime was far more concerned with extricating itself from the unpopular war than with the future of Indochina.

Following the success of their psychological warfare campaign against the French, it is not surprising that the Vietnamese Communists have relied on the same strategy against the United States. Indeed, it was apparent even in 1965 that "Communist hopes for victory [in Vietnam] . . . now turn more on an American withdrawal through exhaustion or in response to the pressure of public opinion rather than on conventional military success."⁸⁶

must isolate the enemy, win more friends. We must act in such a way that the French people. . . will actively support us. . . The French people and soldiers should oppose the war . . . by every means: oppose the sending of troops to Indochina, oppose military expenditure. . . [and] demand from the French government peaceful negotiations with the Ho Chi Minh government." Truong Chinh, *The Resistance Will Win*, third edition (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1966), pp. 46-47.

⁸⁶ *New York Times*, October 20, 1965. In 1968, Truong Chinh noted that "an important experience drawn from our revolution lies in that our people must come into close alliance with the . . . people of the imperialist powers which had invaded our country (France, Japan, the United States)." *Forward Along the Path Charted by K. Marx*, p. 85.

4

The Geneva Agreements

The Geneva Conference

The Indochina phase of the Geneva Conference took place between May 8 and July 21, 1954, with representatives of France, the Viet Minh, the USSR, Communist China, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the three Associated States of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam present. To understand the conference properly, it is necessary to appreciate the basic attitudes of the French, the three Communist delegations, the State of Vietnam, and the United States.

The French Position. The primary objective of the French government — especially after Mendes-France took over in mid-June — was to extricate itself from military involvement in Indochina. Although the French assured the delegation of the State of Vietnam "with both oral and written promises" that Paris "would neither seek nor accept a division of Vietnam at Geneva,"⁸⁷ as the conference progressed they conceded on this and many other points considered vital by non-Communist Vietnamese Nationalists. In order to avoid having to consider the attitudes of the Vietnamese delegation, the French delegation "received Pham Van Dong's approval, in a conversation July 6, to have the military commands rather than governments sign the final armistice so as to avoid having to win Vietnamese consent."⁸⁸ Upon coming to power, Mendes-France had promised to secure a cease-fire in Indochina within one month (by July 20) or resign his office. His government's

⁸⁷ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 135.

⁸⁸ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 147.

negotiating position reflected his urgency as the deadline approached, prompting the American Secretary of State to remark that the "French may end by accepting any Viet Minh proposition which offers hope of extricating [the French] Expeditionary Corps."⁸⁹ According to the Pentagon study, "during the latter half of the conference, French and Viet Minh delegation heads met secretly in so-called 'underground' negotiations," and it was during these discussions that the "actual give-and-take" took place — in the absence of the non-Communist Vietnamese representatives.⁹⁰

The Communist Position. Although there were three separate Communist delegations at the Geneva Conference, "the Viet Minh were really on the end of a string being manipulated from Moscow and Peking."⁹¹ Viet Minh delegation head Pham Van Dong at first suggested that military and political questions should be considered together, but he soon agreed with the Soviet and Chinese delegations that "a cease-fire should have priority in the conference's order of business."⁹² On May 25, Dong suggested that Vietnam be divided into two zones, and this proposal was supported by the other Communist delegations.⁹³ The authors of the Pentagon study conclude that "Vietnamese unity, whether achieved by free elections or the disintegration of South Vietnam, was *not a priority objective* of Moscow or Peking" at the conference.⁹⁴ On May 10, Pham Van Dong submitted a proposal for a cease-fire and political settlement which provided for "supervision of [unification] elections by local commissions."⁹⁵ Four days later, "Molotov [head of the Soviet delegation] expressly rejected the American plan, supported by the Indochinese delegation and Great Britain, to have the United Nations supervise a cease-fire."⁹⁶ The Communist delegations favored "an odd-numbered (three or five) neutral commission

⁸⁹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 531.

⁹⁰ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 111.

⁹¹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 173.

⁹² *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 133. The study notes that "on June 23, Chou En-lai several times emphasized to Mendes-France that the main thing was a cease-fire." Vol. 1, p. 147.

⁹³ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 134.

⁹⁴ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 166; see also p. 538.

⁹⁵ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 119.

⁹⁶ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 140.

chaired by India, with pro-Communist and pro-Western governments equally sharing the remaining two or four places," and providing for a unanimous vote on "important questions."⁹⁷ This, of course, would give the Communist elements of the commission an effective veto power.

The State of Vietnam's Position. The State of (South) Vietnam protested bitterly against having been left "in complete ignorance" of the French proposals, and submitted a proposal of its own which involved "a cease-fire without a demarcation line, without partition, even provisionally." The specifics of the Nationalist proposal included "a cease-fire on present positions" and "control by the United Nations . . . of the cease-fire . . . of the administration of the entire country [and] of the general elections, when the United Nations believes that order and security will have been everywhere truly restored."⁹⁸ The Nationalists rejected the inadequately supervised elections proposed by the Communists, according to the *Pentagon Papers*, because they were "convinced that Hanoi would not permit 'free general elections by secret ballot,' and that the ICC [International Control Commission] would be impotent in supervising the elections in any case."⁹⁹ The Pentagon study observes that the State of Vietnam's "rationale for keeping the country united was, as matters developed, eminently clear-sighted":¹⁰⁰

In speeches during June and July, their leaders had warned that partition would be merely a temporary interlude before the renewal of fighting. When the Viet Minh first proposed a temporary division of territory, the Defense Minister, Phan Huy Quat, said in Saigon on June 2 that partition would "risk reviving the drama of the struggle between the North and the South." Diem, in his investiture speech of early July, warned against a cease-fire that would mean partition, for that arrangement "can only be the preparation for another more deadly war."

⁹⁷ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 140, 147.

⁹⁸ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 569-570. Compare this proposal with Lederer's assertion (*Our Own Worst Enemy*, p. 85) that "Ho Chi Minh requested international supervision of the election to guarantee fairness. Ngo Dinh Diem, again with US backing, refused. Blocking the promised election virtually brought on the war between the North and the South—because the North felt betrayed."

⁹⁹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 247.

¹⁰⁰ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 163.

The American Position. The United States announced that it was "at the conference as 'a friendly nation' whose role was subordinate to that of the primary non-Communist parties, the Associated States and France."¹⁰¹ Not wishing to be connected with an agreement which made major concessions to the Communists, the US intended to confine its representation at the conference to a low-ranking "observer." In July, France asked the US to send a senior diplomat to the conference in return for assurance that "the United States will not (repeat not) be asked or expected by France to respect terms which in its opinion differ materially from the attached [seven points], and it may publicly disassociate itself from such differing terms." One of these seven points stated that the agreement must provide "effective machinery for international supervision of the agreement."¹⁰² The Pentagon study notes a National Security Council prediction that "Communist tactics at Geneva . . . would likely resemble those at Panmunjom; a cease-fire might be announced that the Communists would not comply with for lack of effective super-vision."¹⁰³ The study states that the comments of Walter Bedell Smith — head of the US delegation at the conference — at the second and third plenary sessions, and other US statements, "reveal[ed] the rigidity of the American position on a Geneva settlement."¹⁰⁴

The United States would not associate itself with any arrangement that failed to provide adequately for an internationally supervised cease-fire and national elections, that resulted in the partitioning of any of the Associated States . . . It would not interfere with French efforts to reach an agreement, but neither would it guarantee or otherwise be placed in the position of seeming to support it if contrary to policy.

With regard to future elections: ¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 151.

¹⁰² *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 555-556.

¹⁰³ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 116

¹⁰⁴ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 121.

¹⁰⁵ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 121

[Smith proposed] that national elections in Vietnam be supervised specifically by an international commission "under United Nations auspices." As his speeches made clear, the United States believed the UN should have two separate functions — overseeing not only the cease-fire but the elections as well. Both these points in Smith's remarks were to remain cardinal elements of American policy throughout the negotiations despite French (and Communist) efforts to induce their alteration.

The Documents

Two documents relating to Vietnam emerged from the 1954 Geneva Conference — an *Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam* signed on July 20 by the French and Viet Minh military commands, and an unsigned *Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference* considered the following day. It is important to distinguish between the two documents — something that few of the critics of American Vietnam policy have done. The cease-fire agreement, signed between the French and the Viet Minh (at the suggestion of the French so that, as already pointed out, the concurrence of the State of Vietnam would not be needed), made only a brief reference to "the general elections which will bring about the unification of Vietnam,"¹⁰⁶ and fixed no date for the elections. As the Communists had agreed, political questions were postponed until the priority problem of a cease-fire had been resolved. The political questions were dealt with in the unsigned *Final Declaration*, which provided for "free general elections by secret ballot" to be held in July 1956 under the supervision of the international commission originally proposed by the Communists.¹⁰⁷

Unwilling to accept "international supervision by a body which cannot be effective because it includes a Communist state which has a veto power,"¹⁰⁸ Under Secretary of State Smith announced at the

¹⁰⁶ *Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam*, Article 14 (e).

¹⁰⁷ *Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference*, Article 7.

¹⁰⁸ Statement by Secretary Dulles on July 10, *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 551. The supervisory body created in the cease-fire agreement required a unanimous decision "when dealing with questions concerning violations, or threats of violations, which might lead to a resumption of hostilities" (Article 42), thus granting Poland the veto power the Communists sought.

conference after *the Final Declaration* had been read: "As I stated on July 18 [i. e., prior to the signing of the cease-fire agreement], my government is not prepared to join in a declaration by the conference such as is submitted." He made a unilateral declaration stating that the United States "takes note" of the various agreements, promised that "it will refrain from the threat or the use of force to disturb them," and warned that "it would view any renewal of the aggression in violation of the aforesaid agreements with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security." On the question of elections, Smith said: "In the case of nations now divided against their will, we shall continue to seek to achieve unity through free elections supervised by the United Nations to insure that they are conducted fairly." He noted the statement (see below) made by the representative of the State of Vietnam, and added: "The United States reiterates its traditional position that peoples are en-titled to determine their own future and that it will not join in any arrangement which would hinder this."¹⁰⁹

The delegation of the State of Vietnam, which had from the start opposed partition and demanded United Nations supervision of elections, announced that their government "reserves its full freedom of action in order to safeguard the sacred right of the Vietnamese people to its territorial unity, national independence and freedom."¹¹⁰ Thus, as the Pentagon study notes, the government of Vietnam "was technically free of the Geneva Agreements."¹¹¹ France, the only non-Communist state to sign anything at the Geneva Conference, was the executor for the non-Communist side of the agreements; but France had agreed to full independence for the State of Vietnam nearly six weeks before the cease-fire agreement was signed. The Nationalists asked the French to withdraw their military forces from South Vietnam; and in April 1956, the French military command in Vietnam was dissolved.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 570-571.

¹¹⁰ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 285.

¹¹¹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 285.

¹¹² *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 285. The *Pentagon Papers* (p. 210) note that the Laniel government "had recognized `Vietnam as a fully independent and sovereign state in possession of all qualifications and powers known in international law' on June 4, 1954."

The Viet Minh leaders recognized that France, rather than the Nationalist government in South Vietnam, was bound by the terms of the agreements. In 1955, both Pham Van Dong and Ho Chi Minh placed this responsibility on the French.¹¹³ In fact, there is considerable evidence that the elections were never seriously contemplated by either side. Several Western scholars have reached this conclusion,¹¹⁴ including the highly respected British specialist on North Vietnam, P. J. Honey, who reports that Pham Van Dong commented after Geneva that: "You know as well as I do that there won't be any elections."¹¹⁵ An American scholar reports being told by a high-ranking Viet Cong defector in South Vietnam that "higher level cadres (province and above) were certain that general elections would never take place, although this was not discussed at lower levels to maintain morale and so as not to conflict with the party's public stance that the Geneva Accords were a great victory for the party."¹¹⁶

The 1956 Election Myths

Few aspects of the Vietnam question have been the subject of more myths than the non-elections of 1956. At a 1965 teach-in, Cornell University Professor George McTurnan Kahin asserted:¹¹⁷

But with American encouragement, Diem refused to permit the elections in 1956 . . . Regardless of what sophistry has been em-

¹¹³ "On January 1, 1955, . . . Pham Van Dong, DRV Premier, declared that as far as Hanoi was concerned: . . . it was with you, the French, that we signed the Geneva Agreements, and it is up to you to see that they are respected." *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 286. Ho Chi Minh remarked on September 2 that "we demand the Southern authorities to correctly implement this agreement. France, a party to it, must honor her signature and fulfill her duty." *Selected Works*, vol. 4, p. 111.

¹¹⁴ See, for example, Victor Bator, *Vietnam, A Diplomatic Tragedy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), pp. 129-133; and Frank N. Trager, *Why Viet Nam?* (New York: Praeger, 1966), p. 118.

¹¹⁵ P. J. Honey, *Communism in North Vietnam* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1963), p. 6.

¹¹⁶ Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 34.

¹¹⁷ Reprinted in Raskin and Fall, *op. cit.*, p. 291. Spock makes a similar argument with the clever use of ellipsis: "[The American unilateral declaration at Geneva] . . . seemed to endorse the 1956 reunifying election: 'In the case of nations now divided against their will, we shall continue to seek to achieve unity through free elections' Final ellipsis Spock's. Spock and Zimmerman, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

ployed to demonstrate otherwise, by encouraging Diem to defy this central provision of the Geneva Agreements, the United States reneged on the position it had taken there in its own unilateral declaration. Civil war in Vietnam became inevitable.

As has been demonstrated above, (1) the 1956 elections were not a "central provision" of the Geneva Agreements; and (2) the US refusal to support the elections was not in any way in conflict with its statement at Geneva. Further, as the *Pentagon Papers* recognize, (3) the United States did not "encourage" Diem to refuse the election proposal:¹¹⁸

The US did not — as is often alleged — connive with Diem to ignore the elections. US State Department records indicate that Diem's refusal to be bound by the Geneva Accords and his opposition to pre-election consultations were at his own initiative. . . [The US] shifted its position in the face of Diem's opposition, and of the evidence then accumulated about the oppressive nature of the regime in North Vietnam. "In essence," a State Department historical study found, "our position would be that the whole subject of consultations and elections in Vietnam should be left up to the Vietnamese themselves and not dictated by external arrangements which one of the parties never accepted and still rejects."

Another scholar fond of myths about the 1956 election is David Schoenbrun, who asserts:¹¹⁹

Washington and its supporters still claim today that free elections could not have been held in North Vietnam. They may well be right. The fact is, however, that they never once raised such a contention in the course of the Geneva Conference. The fact is that they never held a single meeting or put forward a single proposal to impose the conditions of free elections or to put the Communists to the test and expose them.

Schoenbrun also argues that "since the elections were not held, then the entire agreement was null and void."¹²⁰ A possible explana-

¹¹⁸ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 245.

¹¹⁹ David Schoenbrun, *Vietnam, How We Got In, How to Get Out* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 46.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.46.

tion for the widespread popularity of such myths in the face of considerable evidence to the contrary¹²¹ was that Schoenbrun taught a course on the history of Vietnam at the Columbia University Graduate School of International Affairs (according to his publisher, the first such course offered at any American university), and that Kahin is associated with the Southeast Asian Studies Program at Cornell.

Another very popular myth — related to both the 1956 elections and the "Ho Chi Minh as George Washington" myth, is the "Eisenhower quote." As Senator Wayne Morse phrased it in 1965: "Undoubtedly, the Viet Minh under Ho Chi Minh would have won such a free election. President Eisenhower declares in his *Mandate for Change* that all the experts he talked to in that period believed Ho would get at least eighty percent of the vote."¹²² Other critics quote directly from President Eisenhower's memoirs. Felix Greene, for example, writes: "The reason the US refused to allow elections was abundantly clear. No one who knew the conditions in Vietnam was in any doubt that, if elections were held, Ho Chi Minh would be elected by an overwhelming majority of the people." He then (mis-) quotes Eisenhower:¹²³

I have never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indochinese affairs who did not agree that had elections been held . . . possibly eighty percent of the population would have voted for the Communist Ho Chi Minh. (President Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, p. 372.)

It is instructive to compare what President Eisenhower really said with what Greene and the others quote:¹²⁴

¹²¹ It is important to note that almost none of the information in the Pentagon study is "new" in the sense that the basic facts were not previously available. Quite the contrary, this writer and many others were refuting all of the basic myths at the same time that Kahin, Schoenbrun, and others were propagating them.

¹²² Wayne Morse, "American Policy in Viet-Nam," in Raskin and Fall, *op. cit.*, p. 283

¹²³ Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 132. Among dozens of other sources for this myth are Spock and Zimmerman, *op. cit.*, p. 24; Hartke, *op. cit.*, p. 33; and Norman Cousins, *Saturday Review*, May 16, 1970.

¹²⁴ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years, Mandate for Change* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), p. 372. In response to an inquiry addressed to Presi-

I have never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indochinese affairs who did not agree that had elections been held *as of the time of the fighting*, possibly eighty percent of the population would have voted for the Communist Ho Chi Minh *as their leader rather than Chief of State Bao Dai*. Indeed, *the lack of leadership and drive on the part of Bao Dai was a factor in the feeling prevalent among Vietnamese that they had nothing to fight for*. (Emphasis added to denote omissions).

Thus, (1) President Eisenhower was talking about an election which might have taken place in 1954, not 1956 (and the situation in both North and South Vietnam during this two-year period changed significantly to Ho Chi Minh's disadvantage, as will be shown shortly); and (2) he was talking about a contest between Ho and the French puppet Bao Dai. There is little question that Ngo Dinh Diem would have defeated Bao Dai by eighty percent of the vote, too. The "feeling prevalent among Vietnamese that they had nothing to fight for" was largely the result of having a choice between a French puppet and a Communist dictator, when the majority of Vietnamese really wanted a true nationalist.

That Diem was such a man is apparent from the *Pentagon Papers*, which note his early reputation for integrity and his refusal to be anyone's puppet: 'Bao Dai had sought him for his Premier in 1945, Ho Chi Minh for the DRV government in 1946, the French for their 'solution' in 1947 and 1949 — all unsuccessfully."¹²⁵ Refuting other myths, the study observes that the US was not "committed to Diem in any irrevocable sense. We . . . accepted him because we knew of no one better."¹²⁶ "True to his reputation for 'all-or-nothing' integrity,"¹²⁷ Diem also refused to be an American puppet.¹²⁸ Further, according to the authors of the Pentagon study, "Ngo Dinh Diem really did accomplish miracles, just as his American boosters said he did."¹²⁹

dent Eisenhower, the author was informed that "no further great conclusion should be drawn from that statement" that Ho would have defeated Bao Dai in 1954 by eighty percent of the vote

¹²⁵ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 296.

¹²⁶ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 228.

¹²⁷ Fall, *The Two-Viet-Nams*, p. 239.

¹²⁸ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 183, 227, 230, 234, 238.

¹²⁹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 252.

The study acknowledges the frequency with which the Eisenhower quotation is used, but concludes:¹³⁰

It is almost certain that by 1956 the proportion which might have voted for Ho — in a free election against Diem — would have been much smaller than eighty percent. Diem's success in the South had been far greater than anyone could have foreseen, while the North Vietnamese regime had been suffering from food scarcity, and low public morale stemming from inept imitation of Chinese communism.

Even though "Diem might well have won" the election had it been free,¹³¹ in view of the fact that Ho Chi Minh had control of a majority of the population and a veto over effective supervision through his Polish allies, Diem would have been foolish to agree to the election. Ho Chi Minh and other key party leaders usually claim at least 99 percent of the votes in North Vietnamese elections.¹³²

Violations of the Agreements

Although neither South Vietnam nor the United States was technically bound by the Geneva Agreements, it is worthwhile to determine which side violated their provisions first. Schoenbrun asserts that the Communists "carried out the provisions of the treaty by withdrawing their forces. It was Diem who first violated the treaty by an economic and arms agreement with Washington and by refusing elections."¹³³

Aside from the fact that the proposed elections were not an essential provision of the "treaty" (the only document which could possibly qualify as a "treaty" was the French-Viet Minh *Agreement on*

¹³⁰ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 246.

¹³¹ Chester A. Bain, *Vietnam, The Roots of Conflict* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 123. See also Tanham, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

¹³² In the first legislative election in North Vietnam since the Geneva Agreements, Ho Chi Minh received 99.91 percent of the vote, and his chief subordinates were reelected by majorities ranging from 98.75 to 99.6 percent. (See Bernard B. Fall, "North Viet-Nam's Constitution and Government," *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 33, no. 3 (September 1960), p. 282. And in the April 11, 1971, National Assembly elections in North Vietnam, Le Duan received 99.46 percent, Pham Van Dong 99.30 percent, and Truong Chinh 99.29 percent of the votes in their respective wards (Radio Hanoi, April 13, 1971).

¹³³ Schoenbrun, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam, which set no date or conditions for future elections),¹³⁴ the facts indicate that the Communists began to violate essential provisions of the signed agreement almost from the day it was signed. Within days, it was apparent why they had insisted on a Communist veto on the International Control Commission — they had no intention of carrying out their obligations under the terms of the agreement.

Although Article 1 of the cease-fire agreement provided for the withdrawal of "the forces of the People's Army of Vietnam to the north of the line" (approximately the seventeenth parallel), the Viet Minh left many of their soldiers in the South. As the Pentagon study notes: "During the time allowed for collecting forces for the move north, the Viet Minh evidently undertook to bank the fires of revolution by culling out of their units trained and reliable cadres for 'demobilization,' 'recruiting' youth — forcibly in many instances — to take their place, and caching weapons."¹³⁵ "The Communists continued their political dominance of many villages [in South Vietnam, secretly]."¹³⁶

An even more important violation was the refusal of the Communists to allow the free movement of refugees from North to South. Article 14 of the agreement provided that "any civilians residing in a district controlled by one party who wish to go and live in the zone assigned to the other party shall be permitted and helped to do so by the authorities in that district." According to the *New*

¹³⁴ In recent years, North Vietnam—perhaps taking a lesson from war critics in the United States—has attempted to obscure the differences between the signed cease-fire agreement and the *Final Declaration* at Geneva: "The Geneva Agreements signed on July 20, 1954, comprise military and political clauses. To help bring about Vietnam's peaceful reunification, general elections were to be held in July 1956 throughout the country." *Viet Nam—A Sketch*, pp. 116-117.

¹³⁵ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 295. Ellen Hammer writes: "If it was impossible to estimate how many guerrillas and soldiers had stayed behind in the guise of civilians and how many trained Viet Minh officials were working with them as administrators and agitators in the regions which they had nominally evacuated, it was certain that they were numerous." *The Struggle for Indochina 1940-1955* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), p. 338.

¹³⁶ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 307. This would appear to be in violation of Articles 8 and 14 of the cease-fire agreement, which placed civilian administration of the two zones in the hands of the parties whose forces were to regroup there.

York Times, the American decision to "respect" the accords was made only after "diplomatic intelligence established the terms contained a clause permitting a free exchange of populations between northern and southern Vietnam." According to the *Times*, "diplomatic officials attached the greatest importance to this clause."¹³⁷ This report is consistent with a State Department telegram reprinted in the Pentagon study noting "the importance that we attach" to "the right of population transfer."¹³⁸ In discussing the subsequent exodus by nearly a million refugees out of North Vietnam, the Pentagon study notes:¹³⁹

Though no doubt many migrants fled North Vietnam for vague or spurious reasons, it was plain that Ho's Viet Minh were widely and genuinely feared, and many refugees took flight in understandable terror. There were indications that the DRV forcefully obstructed the migration of other thousands who might also have left the North.

Ellen Hammer, in one of the classic works on the period, writes: "It was clear not only that the exodus constituted a serious popular indictment of the northern regime, but that it would have been multiplied several-fold had the refugees been permitted to leave freely."¹⁴⁰ The Pentagon study comments that the International Control Commission's "inability to cope with violations of the Armistice in the handling of would-be migrants ... impugned its competence to overwatch the general free elections, for which it was also to be responsible."¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ *New York Times*, July 21, 1954

¹³⁸ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 542.

¹³⁹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 248.

¹⁴⁰ Hammer, *op. cit.*, p. 345. Dr. Thomas A. Dooley, who was involved in the evacuation of refugees from North Vietnam, wrote that "the Communists began to violate the agreement on this point from the day it was signed . they employed trickery, threats, violence, and even murder to stop the southward rush of their subjects." He estimates that at least another half a million people would have left North Vietnam had the Communists not violated the terms of the cease-fire agreement. See Thomas A. Dooley, *Deliver us From Evil* (New York: Signet Books, 1961), pp. 121-122.

¹⁴¹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 249. The Canadian delegation on the International Control Commission tried to protest, charging that "the Communist government of North Vietnam was evading its obligations under the terms of the truce in Indochina. [The Canadian delegation] said that the free movement of

Another Communist violation of the agreements was noted by the British government—as Cochairman of the Geneva Conference—on April 10, 1956. In a note to the Soviet Union (the other Co-chairman), the British pointed out that since Geneva, the South Vietnamese Army had been reduced by twenty thousand men, while the North Vietnamese Army had increased from seven divisions in July 1954 to twenty divisions in 1956. The note also recognized that South Vietnam was not legally bound by the armistice agreements since it had not signed them and had protested against them at the Geneva Conference.¹⁴² The Pentagon study remarks on another violation: "After the 1954 armistice, French, US, and British intelligence indicated that the flow of arms into North Vietnam from China continued on a scale far in excess of 'replacement' needs."¹⁴³ this was in violation of Article 17 of the cease-fire agreement.

With regard to US compliance with the Geneva Agreements, the study notes:¹⁴⁴

The only major example of US ignoring the ICC was the instance of the US Training and Equipment Recovery Mission (TERM), 350 men ostensibly deployed to Vietnam in 1956 to aid the Vietnamese in recovering equipment left by the French, but also directed to act as an extension of the existing MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group] by training Vietnamese in logistics. TERM was introduced without ICC sanction, although subsequently the ICC accepted its presence.

The confusion over whether and to what extent North or South Vietnam violated the Geneva Agreements has been caused in part by the reports of the ICC, which have frequently been cited by critics of US policy. The ICC reports suggest that the majority of complaints received by their teams concerned South Vietnamese

refugees into South Vietnam was not being permitted." The Canadians complained that "the commission had no authority for enforcing its decisions." *New York Times*, May 4, 1955.

¹⁴² *New York Times*, April 11, 1956.

¹⁴³ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 249.

¹⁴⁴ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 249. Note that this "violation" took place in 1956, well after the first major Viet Minh violations.

noncompliance with the accords. This was explained by a RAND scholar, who noted:¹⁴⁵

The Government of South Vietnam actually filed a great many charges, but because it took the position that it was not legally bound by the Geneva Agreement that it had not signed, in 1954 it sent its complaints to the French Liaison Mission to the ICC without referring to the Geneva Agreement *per se*, and without specifically asking for an ICC investigation. The charges were simply forwarded to the French Mission with the expectation that it would seek ICC action. It rarely did."

Thus the ICC reports were not accurate reflections of the actual situation.

¹⁴⁵ Anita Lauve Nutt, *On the Question of Communist Reprisals in Vietnam* (Santa Monica: RAND, August 1970), p. 8. In comparing relative compliance with the accords by the US and South Vietnam, on the one hand, and the North Vietnamese, on the other, the *Pentagon Papers* (vol. 1, p. 250) conclude: ". . . on balance, though neither the United States nor South Vietnam was fully cooperative . . . both considered themselves constrained by the accords. There is no evidence that either deliberately undertook to breach the peace. In contrast, the DRV proceeded to mobilize its total societal resources scarcely without pause from the day the peace was signed . . . [to bring about re-unification by force]."

5

The "Civil War" Myths

A frequent argument against US involvement in the Second Indochina War is that the conflict is really a "civil war." This argument usually takes one of two forms. The first version asserts that the North Vietnamese and other Communists are not significantly involved in the struggle; while the second admits their involvement, but contends that since Vietnam has historically been one country, the North Vietnamese have a right to use force to reunite their nation. This second argument is usually presented in conjunction with myths about the Geneva Agreements and the proposed elections of 1956.

"Tradition of Unity"

"Vietnam is a single entity from Lang Son to Camau. The Vietnamese people, throughout their thousands of years of history . . . have struggled unremittingly and heroically to build their country and to defend the independence of their fatherland." So reads the preamble to North Vietnam's 1959 constitution. It is instructive to determine during just how many of those "thousands of years of history" Vietnam was "a single entity from Lang Son to Camau."¹⁴⁶

Vietnam does indeed have a "tradition of unity." But the boundaries of "Vietnam" in this context embrace (approximately) only the territory known today as North Vietnam. The Pentagon study includes a map showing the "Historical Development of Vietnam"¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Lang Son is at the northern tip of North Vietnam, while Camau is the southernmost point in South Vietnam.

¹⁴⁷ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 292. A similar map can be found in the North Vietnamese study, "Vietnam: A Historical Outline," in *Vietnamese Studies No. 12* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1966), between pp. 20 and

and depicting "Viet Expansion." The map shows that prior to 1303 A.D., the southern boundary of "Vietnam" was quite close to the seventeenth parallel — the line dividing North and South Vietnam today. Between the fifteenth and the latter part of the eighteenth century, the southern boundary of Vietnam gradually moved southward — the Saigon area being annexed between 1698 and 1797. At the same time, the Viets were moving into present-day Cambodia and Laos.

Furthermore, as even North Vietnamese accounts admit,¹⁴⁸ during this period of expansion true unity was rare. In 1558, the Nguyen family established an autonomous administration for the southern part of Vietnam (Hue and the provinces farther south), while the Trinh family ruled in the North (now North Vietnam). For most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Vietnam was divided at the Gianh River in Quang Binh Province (now the southernmost province of North Vietnam), and the two families fought each other fiercely. During truces in the fighting, the Nguyen family pushed southward, conquering most of what is today South Vietnam. The two zones were united in 1786 by Nguyen Hue, and less than a century later Vietnam was under French control. The French divided Vietnam into two protectorates (Tonkin in the North, Annam in the center) and a colony (Cochinchina, in the South), which along with Cambodia and Laos were administered as French Indochina. Thus there is, in fact, no tradition of unity between North and South Vietnam. North Vietnamese leaders are fond of referring to Vietnam's "four thousand year-old national history;"¹⁴⁹ but it should be remembered that North and South Vietnam — as they exist today — were united for less than a hundred years of that history.

One or Two Vietnams?

According to war critic Felix Greene: "By its rejection of elections, the United States effectively sabotaged the intentions of the Geneva Agreements, and from that moment the myth of 'two

21; and in Hoang Van Chi's outstanding work, *From Colonialism to Communism*, p. xiv.

¹⁴⁸ See, for example, *Viet Nam—A Sketch*, pp. 27-28.

¹⁴⁹ Le Duan. *The Vietnamese Revolution, Fundamental Problems, Essential Tasks*, p. 149

Vietnams' was to be carefully cultivated by apologists for American policy."¹⁵⁰ History does not support Greene's thesis.

As the Pentagon study notes, from the outset of the Geneva Conference, there were "two sovereign Vietnamese states,"¹⁵¹ a fact which was acknowledged by the head of the Chinese Communist delegation, Chou En-lai.¹⁵² The Geneva Agreements, if anything, assured the continuation of two Vietnams. The study comments: "If the intent of the Geneva Accords was subverted, the subverters were the conferees themselves, who aspired to an ideal political settlement incompatible with the physical and psychological dismemberment of Vietnam on July 21, 1954."¹⁵³ Rather than attempting to undermine the agreements, "the Southeast Asian policy of the US in the aftermath of the Geneva Conference was conservative, focussed on organizing collective defense against further inroads of communism, not on altering [the] *status quo*." The study notes that that "*status quo* was the two Vietnams set up at Geneva ... the Geneva conferees in fact fostered two governments under inimical political philosophies, foreign policies, and socio-economic systems."¹⁵⁴

Both the Chinese Communists and the Soviet Union recognized that there were, in fact, two sovereign Vietnams. The study points out that the "Chinese, to be sure, accepted the notion that the Geneva Accords had, temporarily at least, created two Vietnamese governments rather than simply divided the country administratively."¹⁵⁵ The Soviet Union declared in 1957 that "in Vietnam, two separate states existed, which differed from one another in political and economic structure."¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁰ Greene, op. cit., p. 133.

¹⁵¹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. I, p. 285.

¹⁵² *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 537. This is a classified message from US representatives in Paris to the Secretary of State, noting that "Chou said that he recognized that there were now two governments in the territory of Vietnam, the Viet Minh government and the Vietnamese government."

¹⁵³ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 166.

¹⁵⁴ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 244.

¹⁵⁵ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 172.

¹⁵⁶ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 288.

Prior to the date proposed for elections in the *Final Declaration*, the Cochairmen of the Geneva Conference "recognised the existence of two sovereign governments in Vietnam."¹⁵⁷ *Oppenheim's Inter-national Law* concluded in 1955 that both "Vietnam" and "Viet Minh" were fully sovereign international persons.¹⁵⁸

Although North Vietnam still usually speaks in terms of "one Vietnam," when it has served the Communists' interests they have referred to "North Vietnam" or the "DRVN" as "an independent and sovereign country."¹⁵⁹ The Communists in South Vietnam have also, on occasion — usually when discussing their future goals — referred to "South Vietnam" as "a sovereign and independent state."¹⁶⁰

The "Indigenous" NLF

Critics of US policy in Vietnam frequently cite the "inescapable conclusion" of two Cornell University professors that the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam):¹⁶¹

. . . is not "Hanoi's creation;" it has manifested independence and it is Southern. Insurrectionary activity against the Saigon government began in the South under Southern leadership not as a consequence of any dictate from Hanoi, but contrary to Hanoi's injunctions. Abundant data have been available to Washington to invalidate any argument that revival of the war in the South was precipitated by "aggression from the North."

The Pentagon study takes note of this conclusion, but adds that

¹⁵⁷ B. S. N. Murti, *Vietnam Divided, The Unfinished Struggle* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1964), pp. 176-177. Dr. Murti, who served with the Indian delegation to the ICC, notes that "irrespective of interpretations, with the simple application of the *de facto* doctrine, one can say that there are two sovereign states at present in Vietnam. Both the states are completely independent with full-fledged governments of their own owing no allegiance to the other."

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹⁵⁹ See, for example, Truong Chinh, *Forward Along the Path Traced by K. Marx*, p. 110; or *Viet Nam—A Sketch*, p. 111.

¹⁶⁰ Le Tan Danh, "The South Vietnam National Front for Liberation (1961-1965)," in *Vietnamese Studies No. 11* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d.), p. 165.

¹⁶¹ George McTuman Kahm and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (New York: Dial, 1967), p. 120. Spock and Zimmerman, *op. cit.*, p. 31, quotes from this conclusion, as do many other critics.

"all information now available (Spring 1968) points to a decision taken by the DRV [North Vietnamese] leaders not later than Spring 1959 actively to seek the overthrow of Diem." Perhaps in an attempt to explain how the Cornell professors were misled, the study comments:¹⁶²

But few Administration critics have had access to the classified information upon which the foregoing judgments are based. Such intelligence as the US has been able to make available to the public bearing on the period 1954-60 has been sketchy and not very convincing: a few captured documents, and a few prisoner interrogations.

One able American scholar, Jeffrey Race, takes note of the conclusions of Professors Kahin and Lewis — and others who share their view on the indigenous nature of the NLF — but concludes:¹⁶³

The view that a coordinated policy of armed activity was initiated in the South by a militant group outside the party, or by a militant Southern faction breaking with the national leadership, is not supported by historical evidence — except that planted by the party—and is vigorously denied by defectors. [Senior Viet Cong defectors, who did not know each other,] found very amusing several quotations from Western publications espousing this view [and] . . . commented humorously that the party had apparently been more successful than was expected in concealing its role.

The argument that the NLF was something other than a creation of the Lao Dong Party in Hanoi usually includes charges that Ngo Dinh Diem was such a repressive dictator that the people were forced to revolt merely to survive. The *Pentagon Papers* conclude, however, that Diem's regime "compared favorably with other Asian governments of the same period in its respect for the person and property of citizens," and notes that when he took office, he was "the most singularly disadvantaged head of state of his era." The various opposition groups "would have opposed any Saigon government, whatever its composition," and thus it would have been "impossible" for Diem to establish a government without

¹⁶² *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 260.

¹⁶³ Race, *op. cit.*, p. 107. The present author encountered a similar response in interviews with dozens of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese defectors between 1968 and 1971.

having to deal with them "resolutely."¹⁶⁴ After a few years of "miraculous" accomplishment,¹⁶⁵ terrorist activities by Viet Minh elements which had remained in the South after Geneva forced the Diem government to become more authoritarian.¹⁶⁶ The Communists wanted Diem to be as "repressive" as possible, and worked with this goal in mind. As one senior Viet Cong defector later explained: "We had to make the people suffer, suffer until they could no longer endure it. Only then would they carry out the party's armed policy. That is why the party waited until it did."¹⁶⁷

While the government certainly had access to considerably more evidence than did Kahin and Lewis during this period, there nevertheless existed a wealth of material which was apparently ignored by the critics. Not only had the "National United Front" been a central element in Vietnamese Communist strategy for over twenty years, but the announced program of the NLF was for the most part identical to the 1955 program of the Fatherland Front of North Vietnam. Indeed, the "official" text of the document "borrowed extensively from Le Duan's September speech [at the Third National Congress of the Lao Dong Party in Hanoi] and left little doubt about the [National Liberation] Front's true sponsors or objectives."¹⁶⁸ The speech in question, which was published in English in 1960, stated:¹⁶⁹

To ensure the complete success for the revolutionary struggle in South Vietnam, our people there, under the leadership of the

¹⁶⁴ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 253

¹⁶⁵ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 252.

¹⁶⁶ Bernard B. Fall, in *Viet-Nam Witness 1953-1966* (New York: Praeger, 1966), pp. 131-132, examines terrorist incidents in 1957 and concludes that there was "close coordination between the Communist guerrillas in South Vietnam and the North Vietnamese intelligence apparatus"

¹⁶⁷ Quoted in Race, *op. cit.*, p. 112. The *Pentagon Papers* (vol. 1, p. 330) reprint a captured Viet Cong history, which asserts that after Geneva, "the contradictions had not yet developed to a high degree and the hatred had not yet developed to a point where the use of armed struggle could become an essential and popular struggle tactic."

¹⁶⁸ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, 314.

¹⁶⁹ *Third National Congress of the Viet Nam Workers Party* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d.), vol. 1, pp. 62-63. This document is cited in the Kahin and Lewis study, establishing their knowledge of its existence when they reached their oft-quoted "inescapable conclusion."

Marxist-Leninist party of the working class, must strive to establish a united bloc of workers, peasants, and soldiers, and to bring into being a broad National United Front directed against the US and Diem.

Thus, the First Secretary of the Lao Dong Party called for "our people" in South Vietnam to establish a "National United Front" three months before the NLF was created — but six years later, American scholars reached the "inescapable conclusion that the Liberation Front [was] not 'Hanoi's creation.' "

To provide the "leadership of the Marxist-Leninist party" for the front Le Duan had proposed, a "People's Revolutionary Party" was created in South Vietnam. From the beginning, there was "no separate vertical chain of command for the front, in order that each echelon would be a horizontal dependency on its corresponding party committee." The party insured that "the front never commanded military units except in name."¹⁷⁰ The "new" party was, in reality, merely an arm of the Lao Dong Party of Hanoi. As one respected scholar has noted:¹⁷¹

The same realities which dictated the formation of a superficially independent front in the South also dictated the announcement of the superficially independent People's Revolutionary Party . . . the peasantry ... all knew there had been no real change in the Party.

Like their predecessors, the ICP and Viet Minh, the People's Revolutionary Party and National Liberation Front in South Vietnam realize that communism does not appeal to the Vietnamese people, and thus hide their true objectives behind nationalist slogans. As the Pentagon study notes:¹⁷²

Drawing on the years of Viet Minh experience in subversive government and profiting from Viet Minh errors, the Viet Cong appealed to the peasants not as Marxist revolutionaries proposing a drastic social upheaval, but quite to the contrary, as a conservative, nationalist force wholly compatible with the village-centered traditionalism of most farmers.

¹⁷⁰ Race, *op. cit.*, p. 122. 171

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁷² *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 332.

6

Terrorism and "Popular support"

Critics of the Viet Cong frequently observe that various forms of terrorism have played a major part in securing what "popular support" the Communists have obtained. This observation has been challenged by many opponents of the American involvement in Vietnam, who argue that "successful guerrilla warfare cannot . . . be conducted without the support of the people, and such support cannot be obtained by threats."¹⁷³ Dr. Spock writes that the "Viet Cong are supported not because they create fear, but because they end it."¹⁷⁴ What are the facts?

The Legacy

As was noted in Chapter Two, the Indochinese Communist Party was able to gain control of the anti-French movement in Vietnam primarily by means of two tactics. They disguised their Marxist nature and advocated nationalist programs to appeal to as many people as possible; and they either killed or betrayed to the French any potential competitors who would not subordinate themselves to the instructions of the Communists.

The terror did not stop when the Communists took control of North Vietnam following the Geneva Conference. The mission then became the consolidation of power, and a primary goal was the elimination of "reactionaries" and "traitors." Although General Giap

¹⁷³ Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

¹⁷⁴ Spock and Zimmerman, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

and Tran Van Giau had purged hundreds of nationalist leaders — potential competitors — in 1946, this was not enough. As Truong Chinh wrote later that same year: ¹⁷⁵

It is to be regretted that energetic, timely, and necessary measures to counteract all possible dangers in the future were not taken immediately upon the seizing of power . . . We regret only that the repression of the reactionaries during the August Revolution was not carried out fully within the framework of its possibilities . . . For a newborn revolutionary power to be lenient with counter-revolutionaries is tantamount to committing suicide.

The Communists did not repeat the same mistake when they came to power in 1954. Although close to a million potential victims fled to South Vietnam under the terms of the Geneva Agreements, sufficient "reactionaries" and "counterrevolutionaries" remained to warrant a purge. The principal vehicle for the elimination of those who might present "dangers in the future" was "land reform," which took place between 1954 and 1956. Under the supervision of Communist Chinese-trained cadres, "people's courts" were held through-out the country — ostensibly aimed at "landlords," but in fact attacking anyone deemed by the party to be a potential enemy in the future. Although no official figures were made public, the best estimates are that about fifty thousand people were executed, and several hundred thousands more died as a result of the "policy of isolation."¹⁷⁶ Although the party had carefully planned the campaign (following the equally ruthless example set by Mao), in the face of widespread peasant revulsion to the purge Ho claimed that the land reform cadres had committed "excesses" and forced Truong Chinh to resign as Secretary-General of the party and make a self-criticism. In fact, Chinh did not fall into disgrace within the party. He remained a key figure in the Politburo, and a few years

¹⁷⁵ Truong Chinh, *The August Revolution*, republished in *Primer for Revolt, The Communist Takeover in Viet-Nam* (New York: Praeger, 1963), p. 41.

¹⁷⁶ The most extensive study of the land reform was made by Hoang Van Chi, a former Viet Minh official who lived in North Vietnam during most of the period. He concluded that during the program, "half a million Vietnamese (four percent of the population of North Vietnam) were sacrificed." Chi, *op. cit.*, p. 72. The present author has interviewed a number of individuals who were involved in the campaign—including some "people's court" judges—and believes Chi's estimates to be accurate.

later was again one of the three or four most powerful men in Hanoi. It is difficult to study this "rectification of errors" campaign in any depth without concluding that its purpose was simply to placate the angry peasants — who in several areas had armed themselves and rebelled for a brief period — after the party had achieved its primary objectives. The "possible dangers in the future" which Truong Chinh had expressed concern about were now dead.¹⁷⁷

Viet Cong Terrorism

Terrorism was a key tactic of the Viet Cong from, the first, when they "used terror to recruit former Viet Minh for the new movement, threatening them with 'treason' and elimination."¹⁷⁸ The Pentagon study describes the following account of Viet Cong strategy as "quite accurate":¹⁷⁹

To begin with, they start acts of violence through their underground organizations. They kill village chiefs, headmen, and others working for the government, and, by so doing, terrorize the population, not necessarily by acts of violence against the people but by demonstrating that there is no security for them in accepting leadership from those acknowledging the leadership of the government. Even with much smaller numbers of troops than the constituted authority, it is not difficult now for the Communists to seize the initiative.

Douglas Pike, author of the most comprehensive study of the Viet Cong to date, explains the rationale of the VC assassination policy:¹⁸⁰

The common characteristics of this activity against individuals is that it was directed at the village leader, usually the natural leader — that individual who, because of age, sagacity, or strength of character, is the one to whom people turn for advice or leadership. Many were religious figures, schoolteachers, or simply peo-

¹⁷⁷ This period will be dealt with in greater detail in a forthcoming book by the author.

¹⁷⁸ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 329.

¹⁷⁹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. 327.

¹⁸⁰ Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong, The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966), p. 248.

ple of integrity and honor. Since they were superior individuals, these persons *were* more likely to stand up to the insurgents when they came to the village and thus most likely to be the first victims. Potential opposition leadership was the NLF's most feared enemy. Steadily, quietly, and with a systematic ruthlessness the NLF in six years wiped out virtually an entire class of Vietnamese villagers . . . By any definition, this NLF action against village leaders amounts to genocide.

Jeffrey Race tells of discussing the *tru gian* ("extermination of traitors") policy with a senior Viet Cong defector, who explained that a "traitor" was "anyone who worked for the [Saigon] government." He states that "in a village, all the hamlet chiefs are considered to be traitors. Among them, however, there is perhaps one who is particularly honest . . . the honest hamlet chief who had done much for the people . . . is classified by the party as a 'traitor of major importance.' He is eliminated."¹⁸¹ As for the assassination of schoolteachers, the defector said: "Why were there assassinations of teachers, many of whom did not even work for the government? Because they were people . . . who were pure nationalists, who might be able to assume anticommunist leadership in the area. Such people are very dangerous and hence are classed as traitors."¹⁸²

It is interesting to note that even strong critics of the American involvement in Vietnam — people who accept without question many of the other myths — note the importance of terrorism in Viet Cong strategy. Thus, Colonel William R. Corson, who resigned from the Marine Corps to write a book attacking America's Vietnam policy and who accepts the myth that the NLF was an indigenous organization, says that in thousands of "contested" hamlets, "Viet Cong behavior is like that of the Capone mob in South Chicago in the 1920s." Corson notes that "if the people in the contested hamlets attempt to oppose or inform against the Viet Cong, retribution is swift. Murder, terrorism, kidnapping, extortion, and coercion are the techniques used by the Viet Cong to enforce compliance with their demands."¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Race, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ William R. Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: Norton, 1968), p 149.

Prospects for the Future

Perhaps the most dangerous of all the "myths" — in that it could lead to miscalculations with widespread and horrible consequences — is the idea that once the war in Vietnam stops, the killing will also stop. Howard Zinn, mythmaker *par excellence*, states: "The only way we can stop the mass killing of civilians — of women and children — is to stop the war itself."¹⁸⁴ One can only accept this view if he entirely ignores the past and present actions, and the overt and covert (as found in captured classified Viet Cong documents) statements, of the Vietnamese Communist leadership.

Before the "land reform" purge got under way in North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh stated that in "enemy-occupied areas, land reform will be carried out after their liberation."¹⁸⁵ Truong Chinh, who as noted above made a "self-criticism" following the "excesses" of the DRV purge, wrote in 1968: "Our party holds that our dictatorship of people's democracy does not mean an end to, but the continuation of, class struggle . . . after the seizure of power by the working class." He also stated: "Dictatorship of people's democracy most unquestionably use violence against the counterrevolutionaries and exploiters."¹⁸⁶ General Giap, North Vietnam's Minister of Defense, sounded an ominous note when he remarked that "the pro-US forces in South Vietnam are extremely reactionary; they are traitors to their country, and their people . . . thirst for class revenge."¹⁸⁷ Le Duan, First Secretary of the Lao Dong Party and currently the top man in North Vietnam, wrote shortly after Ho Chi Minh's death that "after the seizure of power, . . . the class struggle against the bourgeoisie and other reactionary forces continues with unabated fierceness in various forms, 'bloody and bloodless, violent and peaceful.'" He notes that to "relax vigilance *vis-à-vis* the exploiting

¹⁸⁴ Zinn, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

¹⁸⁵ Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*, vol. 3, p. 424.

¹⁸⁶ Truong Chinh, *Forward Along the Path Charted by K. Marx*, p. 74.

¹⁸⁷ Vo Nguyen Giap, "The Liberation War in South Vietnam, Its Essential Characteristics," in *Vietnamese Studies No. 8* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1966), p. 12.

classes and other counterrevolutionary forces" would be "a dangerous rightist blunder and a crime against the revolution."¹⁸⁸

Documents captured in various parts of South Vietnam have indicated that throughout the country the Viet Cong are preparing "blood-debt" lists of "traitors" and "reactionaries." According to high-ranking North Vietnamese Army defectors, there are between three and five million names on these lists already.¹⁸⁹ An idea of what the Viet Cong have planned for these people can be found in their performance in the city of Hue during the 1968 Tet Offensive, when they held the city for about a month. Between three and five thousand Hue citizens were "arrested" by the Viet Cong from prepared "blood-debt" lists, taken outside the city, and "punished" by the "Liberation Forces." By the end of 1969, over 2,800 bodies of these individuals had been uncovered in mass graves near the city and nearly two thousand more were still officially missing. The Communists' own plan of attack for the city of Hue, a copy of which was captured in late 1968 by American soldiers, refuted the attempt of Viet Cong apologists to attribute the bodies to "American bombs, bullets, and napalm."¹⁹⁰ The attack plan presents as a primary mission the arrest of "tyrants," and notes "a roster of these individuals is available." After the "tyrants" and "reactionaries" have been arrested, the Communists are instructed to "take them out of the city" to "punish them properly."¹⁹¹

Typical of several captured documents dealing with the future plans of the Viet Cong is a 1968 directive from the Security Agency

¹⁸⁸ Le Duan, *The Vietnamese Revolution, Fundamental Problems, Essential Tasks*, pp. 90-92. The internal quotation is attributed to Lenin.

¹⁸⁹ Estimates by Colonels Tran Van Dac, Le Xuan Chuyen, and Huynh Cu given to the author.

¹⁹⁰ The Australian Communist, Wilfred Burchett, made this assertion in a "Liberation News Service" article which appeared in several American college newspapers, including the *Kui Ka Lono* (April 6, 1970) of Leeward Community College, in Hawaii.

¹⁹¹ Captured document, "Plan of Attack, Hue City Unit," declassified in June 1970, a copy of which is now in the author's possession. Interviews by the author with Hue citizens who witnessed the attack, and with North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong soldiers who participated in it, corroborate the document's authenticity.

of COSVN — the Central Office for South Vietnam, through which Hanoi directs the war in the South. The directive notes:¹⁹²

In the future, even when our fatherland is completely liberated . . . [the] people's struggle will continue to take place, fierce and complicated, especially the struggle against . . . reactionaries, henchmen of the US imperialists, reactionary elements in religious communities and [in] ethnic minority groups. The Armed Security Forces will still have to . . . suppress the counterrevolutionaries.

It is difficult to predict the probable human costs of a Communist victory in South Vietnam, as there are a great number of variables. After numerous discussions with senior Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army defectors, exposure to hundreds of captured Viet Cong documents dealing with security matters, on-the-scene investigations of dozens of Viet Cong terrorist incidents, and a study of the history of communism in Vietnam, however, the estimate of the British scholar P. J. Honey that "the minimum number of those to be butchered will exceed one million"¹⁹³ does not appear excessive to this observer.

¹⁹² Captured document, declassified in October 1969, a copy of which is now in the author's possession.

¹⁹³ P. J. Honey, "Vietnam: If the Communists Won," *Southeast Asian Perspectives*, no. 2 (June 1971), p. 26. Another respected British authority, Sir Robert Thompson, concluded in mid-1972 that "well over one million" Vietnamese would perish in a blood-bath following a Communist military victory in Vietnam. See *New York Times*, June 15, 1972.

7

Conclusion

A free society is more vulnerable to psychological warfare than a closed society. As was the case in the First Indochina War, the Vietnamese Communists are today placing far more reliance on a victor' through the American "peace" movement than on military victory in Indochina. Much of the considerable success they have had on this front is due to the popularity of the myths of the Vietnam War.

From the Congress in Washington to the campus at Berkeley, sincere but misinformed scholars and public figures have been telling the American people that the United States is on the wrong side in this war. The government has for the most part been inept at explaining its actions, and the nation's communications media — which in a free society have a critical responsibility to seek the truth and keep the people informed — have, with exceptions, done more to propagate the myths than to dispel them.¹⁹⁴

It has been noted that the United States government has a "credibility gap" with regard to the Vietnam question. Certainly there is justification for the charge. It is difficult, however, to read the *Pentagon Papers* without being impressed with how frequently the government has been right about Vietnam, especially during the earlier days of our involvement. There has been many instances of

¹⁹⁴ This may be partially due to the nature of the "system," in which primary recognition is reserved for the sensational and highly critical report. But the principal cause—if this author's experiences with journalists in Vietnam are any indication—lies in the fact that most of the media representatives have themselves accepted the myths as fact.

excessive and often unwarranted optimism — as has been true in most wars — and there have also been a few instances of government officials dishonestly misleading the people.

When one examines the record, however, the government fares better than most of its critics. Indeed, much of the "credibility gap" has resulted from scholars and assorted national leaders misinforming the people,¹⁹⁵ who upon hearing the truth from, the government assume that it is trying to deceive them. In retrospect, for example, the Government analysis of the 1968 Viet Cong Tet Offensive was clearly more accurate than those of most of the press and other critics like Daniel Ellsberg, who concluded that "the war is over," that "it is the death of pacification," and that "two months from now . . . things are going to get much worse."¹⁹⁶ From a military stand-point, the Tet Offensive was a major defeat for the Communists. Thanks to excessively pessimistic journalistic accounts and the totally erroneous predictions of critics like Ellsberg, Tet was transformed into a major Viet Cong victory in the minds of the American people. This was the victory that counted. America's war critics presented the Communists with a victory that American soldiers had died to deny them on the battlefield.

The *Pentagon Papers* are not the definitive history of United States involvement in Vietnam. As the letter of transmittal which accompanied the study noted, "we all had our prejudices and axes to grind, and these shine through clearly at times."¹⁹⁷ In many ways the *Papers* are incomplete, as they were written almost exclusively from the files in the Department of Defense, and did not involve inter-views

¹⁹⁵ Jeffrey Race, for example, notes: "Critics . . . are fond of citing the testimony of then Major General Samuel L. Myers. . . on April 17, 1959, to the effect that the Viet Minh guerrillas . . . were gradually nibbled away until they ceased to be a major menace to the government: to demonstrate the self-delusion of American military leaders about Vietnam. Nevertheless, General Myers only echoed what the party leadership itself was saying about the party during this period." Race notes that few of the captured documents used by General Myers have been made available to the public, and says: "In the critics' view, the revolutionary movement was not in decline but on the upswing during these years. . . the critics' views on the upswing in the revolutionary movement are not correct." Race, *op. cit.*, p. 104, fn. 51.

¹⁹⁶ Evans and Novak, "A Memorandum from Daniel Ellsberg," *Pacific Stars & Stripes* (Tokyo), July 22, 1971.

¹⁹⁷ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1, p. xv.

with the key decisionmakers or consideration of documents in the files of the White House, the State Department, or other government agencies. The documents do, however, present a wealth of valuable research material heretofore unavailable to the American people. They also thoroughly discredit most of the myths of the Vietnam War.

In the light of these revelations, there is irony in the introduction to the Beacon Press edition of the *Pentagon Papers* written by war critic Senator Mike Gravel. Senator Gravel might more accurately have been speaking for himself, and also for Schoenbrun, Kahin, Spock, Zinn, Greene, Hartke — and thousands of equally sincere but misinformed critics of the US involvement in Vietnam — when he concluded: "The terrible truth is that the *Papers* do not support our public statements. The *Papers* do not support our good intentions."¹⁹⁸

(Editor's Note: The conclusion of Dr. Gerald L. Steibel's monograph on Communist Expansion in Indochina, Part Two, The Second Indochina War, originally scheduled for the September 1972 issue of Southeast Asian Perspectives, will be published in the December 1972 issue.)

¹⁹⁸ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. 1. p. x.

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