America, the Vietnam War, and the World

COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Edited by

ANDREAS W. DAUM
University at Buffalo, State University of New York

LLOYD C. GARDNER
Rutgers University

WILFRIED MAUSBACH
John F. Kennedy Institute, Free University of Berlin

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and

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MICHAEL ADAS

I

The available accounts of the exchanges among the leaders of the grand alliance against the Axis powers in World War II make it clear that Franklin D. Roosevelt rarely passed up a chance to debunk European-style colonialism. Although Roosevelt explicitly rejected the idealistic moralizing that had earlier pervaded Woodrow Wilson's dealings with the other great powers, allies and enemies alike,[1] he evinced a good deal more concern than Wilson had for the condition and future of the colonized peoples of Africa and Asia. Wilson was undoubtedly convinced that the principle of self-determination – and the ideals of justice, open diplomacy, and democratization it enshrined – was a vital component of the new world order that he sought to fashion from the wreckage of the Great War. But as African and Asian leaders as diverse as Ho Chi Minh and the members of the Egyptian delegation (*wafd*) to the Versailles peace conference soon learned, Wilson intended self-determination for Poles and Czechs at best, and certainly not Vietnamese and Arabs.[2] In sharp contrast, Roosevelt was convinced that the war had accelerated the demise of an obsolescent European colonial order and that the forces unleashed by decolonization movements were bound to shape the postwar global order in major ways.[3]

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1 Warren F. Kimball, *Forged in War: Roosevelt, Churchill, and the Second World War* (New York, 1997), esp. chap. 7.
2 Robert Lansing, *The Peace Negotiations: A Personal Narrative* (Boston, 1921), chap. 7; David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace* (New York, 1989), chap. 41; Jean Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography* (New York, 1968), 24–5; and P. J. Vatikiotis, *The History of Egypt from Muhammad Ali to Mubarak* (Baltimore, 1985), 260–70.
3 Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II Through Dienbienphu* (New York, 1988), 30–6; Kimball, *Forged in War*, 138–40, 199, 208, 300–5; and Stein Tonneson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War* (London, 1991), esp. 62–6.

Roosevelt quibbled intermittently with Winston Churchill and other European leaders over the colonial question, but he reserved his harshest and most unrelenting criticisms for the French, particularly the legacy of their rule in Indochina. Although some of his statements make it clear that Roosevelt actually knew little about conditions in the Vichy-Japanese–controlled colonies there, he dismissed the French as incompetent and exploitative overlords whose century of rule had impoverished the peoples of the area and done little to prepare them for self-rule. The stunning Nazi defeats of the French military in Europe and the puppet status of the French colonial functionaries left in Japanese-occupied Indochina obviously influenced Roosevelt's assessment in major ways. His views were consistent with a broader skepticism on the part of American diplomats and military leaders, both during and after the war, regarding the capacity of the French in politics and making war. Perhaps consciously seeking to deflect American barbs aimed at the British imperium, Churchill resoundingly seconded Roosevelt's conviction that the French had made a mess of things both at home and in the colonies. But predictably the British war leader stridently contested Roosevelt's broader conclusion that the failures of the French confirmed the inevitability of the European retreat from overseas empire.[4]

The views of Roosevelt and other American policy makers regarding the French as colonizers in Indochina appeared to have been translated – however tenuously – into actual wartime policy by the assistance provided by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and other allied agencies to the Viet Minh and other Vietnamese nationalist groups openly resisting the Japanese overlords and their Vichy puppets.[5] Ho Chi Minh's quite deliberate paraphrases from and references to the American Declaration of Independence in his proclamation of Vietnamese nationhood in September 1945 were simply the most striking manifestations of a more general Vietnamese determination to depict the United States as an ally in their freedom struggle.[6] It is impossible to know whether or not their hopes would have

4 Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam*, 30–9, 138, 149, 300–2; Kimball, *Forged in War*, 298–305; Walter Lefeber, "Roosevelt, Churchill, and Indochina: 1942–1945," *American Historical Review* 80, no. 5 (1975): 1277–80, 1285; and for a British perspective on the standoff over Indochina, see Christopher Thorne, *Allies of a Kind: The United States, Britain, and the War Against Japan, 1941–1945* (New York, 1978).

5 Ronald Spector has provided considerable evidence to demonstrate that American military commanders and OSS operatives continued to push Roosevelt's anticolonial stance long after it had been explicitly abandoned at higher levels. See his "Allied Intelligence and Indochina, 1943–45," *Pacific Historical Review* 51, no. 1 (1982): 23–50.

6 For an American view of Allied–Viet Minh wartime contacts and cooperation, see esp. Archimedes Patti, *Why Vietnam? Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkeley, Calif., 1980), 45–58, 69–71, 82–8, 124–9, 144–7; on Vietnamese references to American historical precedents and expectations of postwar U.S. backing for decolonization, see Mark Bradley, "Imagining Vietnam: The United States in

been more fully realized had Roosevelt lived, particularly because he himself appeared to retreat from them in the last months of his life. But Harry S. Truman and his inner circle of advisers began to distance themselves from the Viet Minh and prepare the way for the reoccupation of Indochina by the French months before the Pacific War was brought to its unsettling end in the fall of 1945.[7]

   In the following years, driven by the imperatives of a rapidly globalizing Cold War, the United States quickly dropped all pretense of championing decolonization, particularly in Southeast Asia. American policy makers not only encouraged, they actively intervened to facilitate France's return to colonial domination in Indochina. By the early 1950s, the United States had become a vital source of military supplies and had assumed a major share of the costs for that failed endeavor.[8] In the next decade, three American presidents presided over an escalating political and military involvement in Indochina that had most of the main attributes of colonial interventions in the preceding centuries of European global domination. Defying the decidedly anticolonial rhetoric of the Roosevelt years, they committed the United States to a massive colonial occupation in a postcolonial era.

II

The Cold War calculations that were used to justify the increasingly costly American commitment were mainly a mix of the same sort of strategic and prestige concerns that had motivated European statesmen in the era of high imperialism. As communist China came to be seen by the late 1950s as a threat to a decolonizing Southeast Asia, independent of and even more menacing than the Soviet Union, the multipolar great-power rivalries that had driven the late-nineteenth-century scramble for overseas colonies provided much of the impetus for the prolonged Cold War contest over hegemony in Indochina. As was the case in American responses to peasant insurgencies in other formerly colonized areas of Latin America, Vietnam and Indochina were more generally viewed as zones of instability on the periphery of an expanding capitalist world system. In the

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Radical Vietnamese Anti-Colonial Discourse," *Journal of American–East Asian Relations* 4, no. 2 (1995): 299–329.

7 The extent of Roosevelt's abandonment of his vision of a postcolonial world order and the responsibility of Truman and his advisers for the shift to support for the French have been the subject of a protracted debate. The differing positions are superbly laid out by Stein Tonnesson, who provides a cogent, alternative interpretation of his own. See *Revolution of 1945*, 13–19, and chap. 7.

8 Patti, *Why Vietnam?*, 415–35; Ellen Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina, 1940–1955: Vietnam and the French Experience* (Stanford, Calif., 1966), 313–14.

late nineteenth century, colonial expansion was frequently linked to the disintegration of client and comprador linkages between the industrial powers and indigenous political and mercantile elites that had been established earlier through informal modes of domination.[9] In the years after the end of World War II, these ties and the extractive systems that had been established in Indochina in the decades of French colonial rule were perceived by American policy makers to be threatened by the revolutionary insurgency led by the Viet Minh. Thus, the escalating American intervention in the Indochina wars was prompted in part by the need to stabilize a peripheral area in turmoil.

If falling dominoes and the need to bolster wavering allies, both Asian and European, figured prominently in the thinking of American policy makers, they also responded to other strategic and economic considerations reminiscent of those that provoked late-nineteenth-century European expansion. As D. C. M. Platt cogently argued some decades ago,[10] Britain's late-nineteenth-century commitment to low tariffs and free trade pushed it to imperialist interventions to deny rival powers control over areas of potential investment, market opportunity, or raw material extraction. Although some post–World War II American policy makers noted that South Vietnam was one of the "rice bowls" of Asia,[11] few seriously contended that the fall of such a small and impoverished region to the communists would in itself significantly reduce economic opportunities for the United States and its capitalist allies. But they feared that the "loss" of South Vietnam to the communist camp might provide the impetus for an economic domino effect that would mean the constriction of investment and market options throughout Southeast Asia. Similar concerns had informed the decisions of nineteenth-century European expansionists who acceded to territorial acquisitions of little apparent strategic worth and dubious resource potential because they feared that these areas would be colonized by rival powers, thereby rendering their future market and resource potential inaccessible. Given the protectionist policies pursued by the continental powers and

9 The most influential conceptualization of these processes has proved to be Ronald Robinson's "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration," in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe, eds., *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (London, 1972), 117–40. For a fine recent survey of the history of the African epicenter of the "scramble," see H. L. Wesseling, *Divide and Rule: The Partition of Africa, 1880–1914* (London, 1996); and for a superb analysis of these patterns in one of the most pivotal zones that was an object of the scramble, see Anthony Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (New York, 1973), chap. 4.

10 D. C. M. Platt, *Finance, Trade and Politics in British Foreign Policy, 1814–1914* (Oxford, 1968). For rather different French approaches to these issues with similar annexationist outcomes, see Jacques Marseilles, *Empire colonial et capitalisme français: Histoire d'un divorce* (Paris, 1984).

11 Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam*, 79.

the United States in the decades of the scramble, these anxieties were not unfounded.[12]

American concerns to secure zones for capitalist expansion were particularly pronounced with regard to Japan, then struggling to recover from the devastation inflicted by the Allies in World War II. Like Germany in the West, Japan was increasingly seen by American strategists as the most critical bulwark against the advance of communism in Asia. A number of American policy makers argued that South Vietnam's potential as a market for Japanese products and investment was a compelling reason for denying it to the communist North,[13] although this was not a rationale that was likely to rally American public opinion in support of the Vietnam venture. This exercise in imperialism by proxy had no counterpart in the great power contests for colonial territories in the nineteenth century.

Another important contrast between the patterns of colonial expansion exhibited by the industrial powers in the late nineteenth century and by the United States after 1945 in Indochina was the level at which effective decisions for advance were made. In the era of the scramble, military adventurers, explorers, and commercial agents spearheaded the extension of colonial territories throughout much of Asia and Africa. The speed of communication between European or North American metropoles and areas where colonial claims were being asserted had greatly improved after telegraphic, rail, and steamship connections were extended into Asia and Africa after the middle decades of the nineteenth century. But once British, French, and German explorers and merchant- or military-adventurers set off from European-controlled coastal enclaves into the interior of Africa and Southeast Asia, or steamed out to remote islands in the Pacific, they could be out of contact with even local officials for months and in some cases years at a time. Through timely alliances with threatened or aspiring indigenous potentates, bogus treaties, and limited expeditionary assaults, these "men-on-the-spot," as they came to be known in the historiography of European overseas expansion, often concluded their expeditions by presenting rulers and parliaments in the metropoles with what in effect were faits accomplis. Faced with the prospect of being vilified in the popular press and pummeled by their political rivals – both domestic and foreign – European statesmen frequently concluded that they had little choice but to ratify locally initiated

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12 Hans-Ulrich Wehler has aptly termed the psychological reflex behind this rash of preemptive colonial annexations as *Torschlusspanik* or "fear of the closing door." See his *Bismarck und der Imperialismus* (Cologne, 1969), 437.

13 Andrew Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1987), chap. 2; and Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam*, 16, 81, 96ff, 108–14, 294–5.

territorial annexations or treaties in which unsuspecting local potentates acceded to European overlordship.[14]

By contrast, escalating American involvement in Vietnam and Indochina more generally was charted by a succession of presidents and their civilian and military advisers at the highest levels in Washington. The vastly increased speed and greatly enhanced geographical reach of command and control communications networks – both civilian and military – in the second half of the twentieth century, in comparison with the last decades of the nineteenth, meant that the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam could be meticulously planned in Washington and directed from Saigon as well as the military headquarters of the tactical zones into which South Vietnam had been divided. Special inquiries, classified reports, and interminable debates in the National Security Council preceded each step into the quagmire. Lyndon Johnson, who presided over the greatest expansion by far of America's war in Indochina, personally plotted the targets for bombing sorties against North Vietnam in the mid-1960s.[15]

III

Beyond motivations for direct intervention, the American occupation of South Vietnam resembled earlier patterns of Western overseas colonization in important ways. It also exhibited what appear to be variations on nineteenth-century approaches to colonization that were in fact characteristic of the rather belated entry of the United States into the competition for overseas possessions. The most striking of these seeming deviations was the American assumption of the role of colonizer that the French had formerly played in Indochina. Although the Western powers often squabbled over the same colonial turf during the decades of the scramble, European statesmen displayed considerable skill at negotiating divisions of the spoils that were far from satisfactory to all of the parties but agreeable enough to prevent open warfare between the rivals in question. As a general rule, territories already colonized by European states – even militarily weak ones, such as

14 Jean Stengers has made a compelling case for the predominance of this dynamic through the end of the nineteenth century. See his "L'impérialisme colonial de la fin du XIXe siècle: Mythe ou réalité?" *Journal of African History* 3 (1961): 469–91. For German and British examples, see respectively, Wehler, *Bismarck und Imperialismus*, chap. 5; and Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians* (London, 1961), esp. chaps. 7, 13.

15 Of the rather extensive literature on the centralization and personalization of decision making in the escalation of America's involvement in Indochina, rather different but revealing perspectives can be found in Loren Baritz, *Backfire* (New York, 1985); Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York, 1982); and Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago, 1995).

Portugal and The Netherlands – were excluded from the real estate that the industrial powers sought to include in their growing empires.

On all counts, the American venture in Indochina appeared to be setting new precedents. Given Roosevelt's summary judgment that French rule in the region had been an utter failure and the disdain evinced by wartime American statesmen for colonialism in general, the American recolonization of Vietnam following the French retreat appeared to be not only a new departure but supremely ironic. But the Cold War situation in which Roosevelt's successors made their incremental decisions for escalating American involvement in Indochina were very different from those of the World War II years, when communist and capitalist states were allied in the great antifascist crusade. Less obviously, the American takeover from the French had ample precedent, both in the history of the relations between the two nations and in broader but equally enduring American assessments of the political and military aptitudes of peoples of "Latin" descent.

Michael Hunt has usefully surveyed the diverse permutations in the long history of American prejudice against Latinos, the Iberian-descended peoples of the Western Hemisphere.[16] He also perceptively grounds disparaging American attitudes toward the Latinos in deep-rooted hostility to the Spanish themselves, which in the form of the "black legend" provided the basis for the original Anglo-American censures of a colonial rival in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the nineteenth century, champions of America's continental manifest destiny deployed ethnic and increasingly racial stereotypes of Latinos as slothful, incompetent, corrupt, and effeminate to rally support for territorial acquisitions from Florida to the Pacific littoral. At the end of the nineteenth century, the sorry record of Spanish misrule proved a persuasive justification for the Spanish-American war and America's first round of overseas annexations in the Caribbean and the Philippines.[17] But similar stereotypes had long been applied to the French as well.

From the bitter hostility English settlers felt toward the Catholic French to the anomalous position in American society of the French Creoles of Louisiana that persisted well into the twentieth century,[18] the French have been represented in elite discourse and popular American culture as languid, emotional, politically inept, and incurably sentimental. Thus, Roosevelt's

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16 Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, Conn., 1987), 58–62.
17 For representative assessments of the Spanish as colonizers by American officials at the time of the annexation, see Jacob G. Shurman, *Philippine Affairs* (New York, 1902), 26–7; and Luke Wright, "The Situation in the Philippines," *The Outlook*, Sept. 12, 1903, 114–15.
18 Daniel H. Usner, "Between Creoles and Yankees: The Discursive Representation of Colonial Louisiana in American History," unpublished working paper, Seminar on Comparative History, Cornell University, Feb. 1999.

harsh assessment of the legacy of French colonial rule drew on deeply rooted sentiments and a long history of summary dismissals. The fact that America had to rescue the French in World War I and liberate them in the global conflict that followed only served to fix these representations more firmly in American discourse. There even was an obvious precedent to buttress the American determination to repair the damage done by a century of French colonial rule in Indochina: The French had, after all, failed miserably in their attempts to construct a canal across the isthmus of Panama. The later American success in this Herculean undertaking left little doubt about their superiority to the French in energy, ingenuity, persistence, and organizational acumen – all qualities that Latins in general were seen as lacking. That the French earlier had succeeded in building the Suez Canal did little to moderate American assessments of their ineptitude; rather, they routinely dismissed Suez as a far less challenging enterprise.[19] It is noteworthy in this regard that though the Americans and British continued to quarrel over postwar policy regarding many of the areas that came to be collectively known as the Third World, the British were in most instances left in charge of their own colonial retreat, and the Americans never sought to politically or militarily reoccupy the territories the British turned over to indigenous nationalist leaders.[20]

IV

Like their nineteenth-century European counterparts and earlier American colonizers, the United States' political and military leaders who escalated American involvement in the civil wars of postcolonial Indochina were confident that the organizational and technological advantages they possessed over what were deemed "primitive" Third World adversaries assured eventual victory. Although again and again both the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese proved more resilient adversaries than expected, American planners refused to even entertain the possibility that a small, poor, underdeveloped society could resist the richest, most technologically advanced, industrial colossus humankind had ever produced. When periodic crises over "the price America was willing to pay" occurred because the insurgents

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19 David McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870–1914* (New York, 1977), 313–14; and Joseph Bucklin Bishop, *The Panama Gateway* (New York, 1913), esp. chap. 25.

20 As studies such as W. Roger Louis's *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941–1945* (New York, 1978) amply illustrate, this does not mean that the Americans did not meddle in British colonial affairs or try in often disconcerting ways to shape the contours of their global withdrawal.

refused to yield, the Rostows and McNamaras insisted that ratcheting up the level of the technowar unleashed against the peoples of Indochina would bring victory.[21]

Historically, American colonizers had placed even greater reliance than the Europeans on their assumed technological and organizational superiority, both to crush resistance to their political and military dominance and to provide the impetus for social and economic "development" in areas brought under their sway.[22] The success of the guerrilla warfare mounted by the communist insurgents against the French provided both further evidence of French ineptitude and an additional motive for U.S. intervention. As was the case earlier in Panama, the Americans were confident that their superior technology, engineering skills, and managerial abilities would allow them to succeed where the French had failed. Responding to Johnson's challenge to his fellow Americans to produce both guns and butter, American planners simultaneously plotted the defeat of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, and drew up schemes for massive public works projects, such as a Tennessee Valley Authority–style refashioning of the Mekong Delta.[23]

In a global context rife with peasant uprisings sustained by guerrilla warfare, the defeat of communist-style insurgency in Vietnam proved to be one of the more pressing rationales for escalating intervention. American policy makers insisted that the tactics of counterinsurgency worked out in Vietnam could be applied to suppress guerrilla resistance throughout the Third World.[24] Here again the contrast between American responses to the French and British is instructive. Although some in the U.S. military realized that French officers had useful lessons to share, most dismissed the French approach as a dismal failure that could provide little in the way of guidance for the American effort. But the British defeat of the 1950s communist insurgency in Malaya was seen as a model for antiguerrilla warfare. Excepting rare academic specialists, few policy makers pointed out that Malaya was a very different place from Vietnam.[25]

Nineteenth-century Western colonizers had, of course, to contend with guerrilla warfare. In fact, from Algeria and across central Africa to

21 Baritz, *Backfire*, 110, 137, 164; James Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (Boston, 1986), 98–103.
22 For late-nineteenth-century comparisons, see Michael Adas, "Improving on the Civilising Mission? Assumptions of United States Exceptionalism in the Colonisation of the Philippines," *Itinerario* 22, no. 4 (1998): 44–66.
23 Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 6, 52–3, 191–7; and Baritz, *Backfire*, 167–8.
24 Gibson, *Perfect War*, 21–2, 78–80; and Michael Klare, *War Without End: American Planning for the Next Vietnams* (New York, 1972).
25 But academics like Michael Osborne argued this in considerable detail in *Strategic Hamlets in Vietnam* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1965).

Afghanistan and Vietnam, guerrilla tactics proved the most effective counter to the repeating rifles and field guns of European and European-trained armies. Resistance leaders such as Abd al-Qadir in Algeria and Mahmadou Lamine and Samori in West Africa, who were quick to recognize the suicidal nature of set-piece battles and direct assaults on European forces, were able to prolong resistance to colonial domination for years, and in some cases decades, through the skillful use of guerrilla tactics.[26] At times stunning victories were won by African and Asian adversaries who led their forces to victory in conventional battles through the use of surprise tactics or simply overwhelming numerical superiority. But peoples who persisted in conventional warfare invariably met with appalling casualties and demoralizing defeats, such as those that marked the suppression of the Maji Maji uprisings in German East Africa, the defeat of the vaunted Zulu *impis* by a small British force at Rorke's Drift, and the annihilation of the Madhist cavalrymen by Kitchener's Maxim guns at Omdurman.[27]

Like those of their European counterparts, the designs of American settler expansionists had been the most effectively and persistently frustrated by indigenous peoples whose modes of warfare incorporated the guerrilla principles of deception, surprise, and hit-and-run assaults. Revealingly, their main foray into overseas colonization in the Philippines had begun with a campaign of repression that was prolonged for years in some areas by the Filipino nationalists' resort to guerrilla warfare.[28]

<div align="center">V</div>

No historical precedents could have prepared the expansionist industrial powers for the more sophisticated brand of guerrilla resistance they increasingly encountered in the mid-twentieth century. Quite consciously responding to the growing organizational and technological gap between dominant industrialized and colonized, nonindustrialized peoples, revolutionary theorists/practitioners, such as Mao Zedong and Vo Nguyen Giap, melded ancient traditions of guerrilla warfare with cadre indoctrination and

26 Charles-André Julien, *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine, 1827–1871* (Paris, 1964); Olatunji Oloruntimehin, "Senegambia-Mahmadou Lamine," and Yves Person, "Guinea-Samori," both in Michael Crowder, ed., *West African Resistance: The Military Response to Colonial Occupation* (New York, 1971), 80–110, 111–43.

27 Respectively, Gilbert Gwassa, "African Methods of Warfare During the Maji Maji War, 1905–1907," in B. A. Ogot, ed., *War and Society in Africa* (London, 1972), 123–48; Donald R. Morris, *The Washing of the Spears: The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Nation* (New York, 1965), 389–420; and P. M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881–1898* (Oxford, 1970), chap. 12.

28 Stuart Creighton Miller, *Benevolent Assimilation: The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899–1903* (New Haven, Conn., 1982), chaps. 9–12.

discipline, communist ideological incentives, and a (necessarily) selective application of modern weaponry. This "modernized" version of what was an ancient approach to warfare and violent resistance against stronger adversaries greatly improved the survival potential of peasant recruits, provided a clearly delineated organizational chain of command and ladder of career advancement, and stressed ways of winning support from the great majority of the rural population in contested and base areas. It meshed political objectives, military targets, and programs aimed at social and economic reform. As formulated by Mao and Giap, revolutionary guerrilla warfare was also conceived as a sequence of interlocking stages – strategic defensive, tactical offensive, counteroffensive – that committed successful insurgent forces to an eventual transition to conventional warfare. As the communist victories over the Guomindang in the late 1940s and the Vietnamese humiliation of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 demonstrated, this highly directed and decision-oriented mode of guerrilla strategy made it possible to win total victory over what were deemed more powerful adversaries and to seize political power in the name of the revolutionary cause.[29]

As had long been the case with sustained resistance to European colonial expansion, the new style of guerrilla warfare mounted by communist nationalists in China and Vietnam made it possible to mobilize substantial insurgent forces for protracted conflict with adversaries who were reliant on industrial technology. When directed against village populations that supported guerrilla forces or struggled to remain neutral, the campaigns of suppression launched by Western colonizers and indigenous regimes backed by them, served to alienate peasants and urban workers and increase support for the insurgents. The technowar the United States waged in sharply escalating increments against the peoples of Indochina proved highly counterproductive in this regard – paradoxically increasingly so as more sophisticated weapons and ever greater amounts of ordinance were employed.

The American reliance on high-tech responses to counter the guerrilla tactics of the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese backers meant that the casualties inflicted on the civilian population vastly exceeded those in any of the wars of resistance to colonization fought in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. The difficulty in telling friendly from hostile peasants had long been one of the key principles of successful guerrilla mobilization. The casualties that resulted were magnified many times by the Americans' impersonal, distanced, and massive application of bombing, strafing, and chemical

29 Mao Zedong, *Selected Military Writings, 1928–1949* (Beijing, 1963); Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army* (New York, 1962); and George K. Tanham, *Communist Revolutionary Warfare: From the Vietminh to the Viet Cong* (New York, 1967).

saturation against elusive guerrilla forces. But perhaps even more devastating were the losses inflicted on villagers deemed friendly to the enemy and, as often, those who simply had the misfortune to be in the way. The tech–nowar was also increasingly directed against the physical environment in large swaths of rural Indochina.[30]

The overkill and appalling level of civilian casualties that almost invari-ably resulted from the routinized high-tech responses of the American and South Vietnamese military undermined the already constricted base of the client regimes in the South and pushed the bulk of the peasantry to support the North Vietnamese–backed guerrilla insurgency, which offered them at the very least a fighting chance for survival. The increasing and eventually overwhelming American determination to pursue the technowar also meant that the ambitious development agenda for South Vietnam, which Johnson and his advisers in particular had advanced at least rhetorically, was neglected and deprived of essential resources from the outset. From grandiose visions of the transformation of the Mekong Delta, the development components of the anticommunist crusade devolved rather rapidly into poorly funded schemes for village schools and community centers, and, even more reveal-ingly, "strategic hamlet"–oriented programs that were more about denying communist guerrillas access to the rural population than raising standards of living.[31]

VI

Beyond a determined and skillful application of a style of guerrilla warfare adapted to the industrial age, communist insurgents in post–World War II Vietnam enjoyed a number of marked advantages over their counterparts in resistance to colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although routinely labeled communist by the Americans to obfuscate its nationalist credentials, the Viet Minh–led Vietnamese insurgency had, over the course of the middle decades of the twentieth century, established itself as the single most viable movement for decolonization and the establishment of an independent nation. Despite numerous false starts and outright disas-ters, most notably the peasant uprisings in Nghe-An and Ha-Tinh in 1930, the communist leadership had survived while rival movements, such as the

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30 Gibson, *Perfect War*, esp. chaps. 5, 8, 15; John Lewallen, *Ecology of Devastation: Indochina* (Baltimore, 1971); and Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley, Calif., 1972).

31 On the increasing neglect of the development side of the American intervention, see Robert L. Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970); and Neill Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York, 1988), book 6.

Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dong or VNQDD), were co-opted or brutally suppressed by the French regime. As the main impetus for ever-expanding resistance to both the French and Japanese colonizers during the early 1940s, the Viet Minh strengthened its nationalist credentials vis-à-vis its rivals by both its modest successes in the anticolonial struggle and the programs it developed for the uplift of the hard-pressed Vietnamese peasantry. By the late 1940s, when resistance to French reoccupation grew into a full-fledged war of independence, the Viet Minh had seized the mantle of national leadership. Their leader, Ho Chi Minh, proclaimed the independent Republic of Vietnam in October 1945; they set to work establishing a government over the territories they controlled in northern and central Vietnam; and they began to receive international support for their struggles to build a new nation in an age when the colonial powers were in full retreat in South and Southeast Asia.[32]

With the possible exception of the Koreans, the Vietnamese were the only people formally colonized in the industrial age who possessed a strong sense of ethnic and cultural identity and who historically aspired to an ideal of political unity. But from the mid-nineteenth century onward, an alienated peasantry and divided elite largely canceled out any advantages they might have derived from what in effect was a preexisting sense of nationalism in their long struggles to check the advance of French colonial rule. Ironically, by discrediting the imperial dynasty and the Chinese-derived system of absolutist rule that had held sway in Vietnam for millennia, the French conquest helped to open the way for a Marxist-inspired movement to emerge as the most compelling proponent of the Vietnamese national cause. The puppet status to which the Nguyen emperors had been reduced in the last half of the nineteenth century rendered futile French efforts to legitimize their rule through association with the dynasty. Thus, the surrogate option that virtually all the industrial colonizers had exercised from West Africa to Cambodia had never been very persuasive in Vietnam. After the upheavals of two world wars and a global depression, French and later (and more tentative) American attempts to gain legitimacy by backing the surviving Nguyen emperor, Bao Dai, stood little chance of success. A heightened sense of national identity and the increasing mobilization of the Vietnamese peasantry and workers in the struggles for decolonization meant that it no longer was possible for foreign colonizers to exploit dynastic squabbles as their entrée for conquest and to buttress their control by toppling recalcitrant princes in favor of more pliable ones.

32 Huýnh Kim Khánh, *Vietnamese Communism, 1925–1945* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982).

VII

Despite all the lessons U.S. policy makers might have learned from ear-
lier forays into overseas colonization, and particularly the experience of the
French in Vietnam, successive decisions to escalate America's participation
in the Indochina wars were made with little knowledge of or even concern
to master the history of the peoples and societies of the region. As a con-
sequence, little notice was taken of the long Vietnamese tradition of fierce
resistance to domination by outsiders. Of special relevance to the managers
of America's technowar was the David and Goliath mindset with which
the Vietnamese had for millennia approached foreign invaders as a result of
their long struggle to retain their independence from the Chinese colossus
to the north. The fact that the Vietnamese had long employed pre-Maoist
guerrilla tactics against the more powerful military forces of Chinese or
Mongol invaders was also of obvious importance to American planners.[33]
But beyond a handful of academic specialists and journalists, many of whom
at this point were French, these vital aspects of Vietnamese history were vir-
tually ignored. And despite Roosevelt's wartime antipathy toward the old
European empires, post-1945 American planners and statesmen were for
the most part oblivious to the sorry history of Indochina in the French
colonial period. A consequence of their oversight was the fact that they
never seriously addressed the extent to which the American recolonization
of Vietnam transferred to the United States the hostility and implacable
spirit of resistance that decades of exploitation and repression by the French
had aroused in the great majority of the Vietnamese people.

The historical perspectives that informed American decision making
were those of the then trendy modernization theorists – most prominently
Walt W. Rostow – who lumped the Third World together in construct-
ing highly abstract and generalized propositions about non-Western, un-
derdeveloped, undemocratic, peasant-based societies.[34] As had been the
case earlier in the Philippines and the Caribbean,[35] development theory
had much more to do with the American experience than the history
and culture of the peoples the United States had colonized. In any case,

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33 Le Thanh Khoi, *Le Viet-Nam: Histoire et civilisation* (Paris, 1955), 92–134, 180–9; and Truong Buu
    Lam, *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention, 1858–1900* (New Haven, Conn., 1967).
34 The most perceptive critique of modernization ideology remains Dean Tipps, "Modernization
    Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective," *Comparative Studies in
    Society and History* 15, no. 2 (1973). For a provocative exploration of the impact of 1960s devel-
    opment presuppositions in Vietnam, see D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S.
    Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton, N.J., 1988), chap. 9.
35 Glenn May, *Social Engineering in the Philippines* (Westport, Conn., 1980); and Hans Schmidt,
    The United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915–1934 (New Brunswick, N.J., 1995).

U.S. policy was premised on the assumption that the sooner the "natives" were Americanized, the better off they would be. Because communism was assumed to be antithetical to the American way, its resonance in Vietnamese society was ignored, and the claims of the Viet Minh or the leaders of North Vietnam to nationalist legitimacy were rejected out of hand. Despite highly publicized rhetoric about the importance of the conflict in Indochina as a school for counterinsurgency, U.S. military responses to Vietnamese (or Laotian) guerrilla resistance were overwhelmingly of the high-tech, maximum-scale sort that had long been hallmarks of the American way of waging war.

VIII

We may never know the full cost in terms of human casualties and environmental degradation of the decades-long Indochinese wars against Western colonialism. But the tens of millions of people maimed and killed, thousands of neighborhoods and villages destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of acres defoliated or cratered in the Indochina conflicts alone call into question John Gaddis's characterization of the post-1945 decades as the era of "the Long Peace."[36] His analysis of the structural factors that obviated direct conflict between the superpowers in the era of the Cold War is perceptive and cogent. But it marginalizes the numerous and often bloody interventions by the industrial powers and the fifty-five to sixty (depending on who is counting and how) major wars that have raged since 1945 in the Orwellian zone collectively known as the Third World. Although Gaddis notes in passing the endemic violence and persistent warfare of the Cold War decades, his equation of peace with the absence of nuclear war is superpower-centric in the extreme. It not only glosses over the very substantial psychic price and the massive economic and environmental costs of the nuclear standoff, it also obfuscates the horrors inflicted by protracted conflicts on a clear majority of the Earth's peoples in the post-1945 period. Some of these wars were in part at least proxy wars of the superpowers. But many others – perhaps a majority – were precipitated and sustained primarily by global processes, such as decolonization and ethnic and cultural rivalries, that were every bit as much hallmarks of the age as the clash of the superpowers.

More than anything else, Gaddis's vision of the "Long Peace" calls to mind the myth of the "Little England" era that British historians John Gallagher

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36 John Lewis Gaddis, "The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System," *International Security* 10 (1986): 99–142.

and Ronald Robinson so thoroughly debunked decades ago.[37] As in the mid-nineteenth century, great-power meddling has touched off or magnified a sizable portion of the wars that have devastated nonindustrial nations. The gunboat diplomacy of the "age of high imperialism" has been superseded by the vastly more lethal, and impersonal, B-52 retaliations of the Cold War era and, more recently, by the cruise missile retribution unleashed by the Bush and Clinton administrations, presumably as portents of the "new world order." Formal colonization has inevitably dwindled in an era of deliberate, internationally sanctioned decolonization. But as the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s and the American occupation of Vietnam in the 1960s emphatically demonstrate, the temporal boundaries of the end of the age of imperialism have been as blurred and porous as those of its onset.

37 John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 4, no. 1 (1953): 1–15.