

Introduction: Why Vietnam Matters

This book relates the story of the Vietnam War from the “other side.” Specifically, it explains what Vietnamese communist leaders in Hanoi had to – and did – do to defeat the mighty United States, and its South Vietnamese and foreign allies, and reunify the country under their own authority. The Vietnam War, the narrative that follows demonstrates, was much more than the sum of its battles; an assortment of circumstances shaped its course and decided its outcome. The ground war in South Vietnam and the air war in the North were certainly important in those respects, but they alone fail to explain why Hanoi prevailed and Washington lost in the end. After all, Vietnamese communist forces came up short in most battles, including two major offensives, against American and allied troops in the South, and suffered disproportionately higher casualties throughout the conflict. Above the 17th parallel, North Vietnamese air defense units resisted valiantly, but American air forces still managed to bomb and destroy most targets at will. To make sense of the Vietnam War, to recognize and appreciate the reasons it turned out the way it did, we must look beyond the war itself. Above all, we must understand the personalities, motivations, thought process, and strategies of Vietnamese communist decision-makers. That is, we must see the conflict – and the world – through their eyes. And it is that story this book relates. This is the story of how the Vietnamese David defeated the American Goliath.

VIETNAM AS GLOBAL WAR

Today, Vietnam is much more than a country. It is an evocation, a cause, a slogan. It is a defining chapter in the history of the United States, the label

of a global era, an inspiration for the small, the weak, and the oppressed, a model of national liberation. It is, too, a syndrome that cannot be cured, a curse that cannot be exorcised. So much more than a geographical and political entity, it is a veritable incantation for some, a specter for others. Vietnam is a virtual brand name.

Why is this all the case? Why do we keep evoking Vietnam? How did a small, impoverished country the size of a postage stamp on a large map of the world become the object of the second longest war in US history? And how did that war come to mean so much to Americans? After all, if Korea is the “forgotten war,” how did Vietnam, similar in so many ways, become the “war that never ends?” What accounts for the enduring preoccupation with it in US political, military, and academic circles? Why can we not discuss American foreign policy since then, including the recent campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, without conjuring it, without framing the discussion within a “post-Vietnam” context? Why, after more than four decades, does Vietnam still matter?

American military intervention in the small Southeast Asian country began in earnest in spring 1965. The ensuing Vietnam War, as we call it – the American War to today’s Vietnamese – lasted precisely eight years, until spring 1973; though its final outcome was not decided until two years later, in April 1975. It pitted puny North Vietnam, and its ostensibly ragtag Viet Cong supporters in the South, against the United States, the government of South Vietnam (which possessed the fifth largest army in the world at one point), and other allies, in a David-versus-Goliathesque contest. As each side widely publicized the merits of its cause, and the wicked intentions of its enemies, to garner supporters near and far, their war turned into a global media sensation – the most potent symbol of the political realities of the times. The Vietnam War was the world’s first “television war,” regularly brought into people’s living rooms during nightly news broadcasts. Audiences in the United States, and around the world, closely followed its progression, as one would the storyline of a riveting melodrama or a daytime soap opera. People identified with it, were emboldened by it, and mobilized for it. The war produced more than its fair share of shocking and stupefying moments, immortalized in iconic footage and still images. Its brutalities, reported by ubiquitous correspondents and photographers on-site, eventually prompted governments and ordinary citizens everywhere to demand its end. The war elicited protests and counter-protests of tens, and sometimes hundreds, of thousands of people on six continents.

The Vietnam War was the most consequential conflagration of the Cold War, a symbolic crucible for testing the staying power of the “Free [i.e., capitalist] World” against that of the “Progressive [i.e., communist] World.” It has been the most far-reaching armed conflict since World War II, impacting the world in several profound and meaningful ways. It escalated Cold War tensions, which had been abating since the Cuban missile crisis of late 1962, and, just like that crisis, raised the specter of a superpower “hot” war. It marked the ascent of the People’s Republic of China as a major player in world politics, a role it has not relinquished since. Elsewhere in Asia, the war impelled closer, and for the most part enduring, US political, military, and economic ties with Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan, South Korea, and Pakistan. It also bore directly on the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, and the adoption by the international community of the “One-China” policy that has chipped away at Taiwan’s sovereign status ever since.

The war hastened decolonization by rousing independence movements across the Afro-Asian world. It also energized the Non-Aligned Movement of would-be neutral governments against superpower entanglements and bloc politics, and fostered unity and collaboration among newly-independent Third World states at the United Nations and elsewhere. Che Guevara – the Argentine-born revolutionary who helped Fidel Castro seize power in Cuba before traveling to sub-Saharan Africa and returning to Latin America to foment popular upheavals – spoke of creating “two, three, many Vietnams” the world over. In demonstrating the possibilities of national liberation, predicated on a militant Marxist–Leninist template, Vietnamese revolutionaries galvanized insurgent groups, from Mozambique and Angola to Nicaragua and El Salvador. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) drew both lessons and strength from the experiences of the Vietnamese; in fact, it came to see itself as closely intertwined with them in a common struggle against Western imperialism. The Lebanese Civil War, instigated by the PLO, broke out the year America’s enemies won the Vietnam War.

The American war in Vietnam was a harbinger for other kinds of transnational causes. In the West, it fueled a counter-cultural movement that electrified and radicalized young people, moving many to become political and social activists in an assortment of causes. A few of them went on to form far-left militant organizations, such as the Red Army Faction (the Baader-Meinhof Group) in West Germany, and the Red Brigade in Italy, responsible for spectacular acts of domestic terrorism. Left-wing

political activism prompted massive general strikes and brought down a government in France, as it engendered lasting socio-political changes there and elsewhere. In Canada, it encouraged radical elements in the Quebec Liberation Front to press for that province's secession by violent struggle. Meanwhile, in East Europe, the Vietnam War boosted solidarity and cooperation among members of the communist bloc, even as it aggravated the Sino-Soviet dispute over leadership of that bloc. The dispute eventually precipitated Sino-American rapprochement and Soviet-American détente, which effectively ended the Cold War between Beijing and Washington and, for a period, calmed that between Moscow and Washington. Ironically, the war that exacerbated superpower tensions at its onset impelled their diffusion at its end.

The Vietnam War had equally dramatic consequences in the United States. No Cold War episode captured the domestic imagination to the extent, and for as long, as that conflict did. It left few thinking adults indifferent. In fact, it galvanized them, occasioning an acute national identity crisis that tore at the fabric of American society by exposing and exacerbating old cleavages and creating new ones. Not since the Civil War had Americans been more divided. The Vietnam War incited mass demonstrations in the nation's capital, violent riots across the country, deadly protests on university campuses – and even acts of domestic terrorism. Vietnam remains the only major American war whose outcome was conditioned more by the domestic and international response to it than realities on the field of battle.

The conflict bore directly on the decisions to lower the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen, to end conscription, “the draft,” and move to an all-volunteer military service. It exhorted Congress to reassert its role as balancer of executive power, to curtail the “imperial presidency” through the War Powers Act limiting unilateral presidential authority to deploy US troops overseas. The reluctance to raise taxes to pay for the war produced inflation that obliged the United States to abandon the gold standard and “float” the value of its dollar. And, in the wake of it all, an influx of refugees from Vietnam and the neighboring states of Laos and Cambodia, the three formerly constituent parts of French Indochina, redefined the demographic and cultural landscape of localities from St. Paul to San Jose.

In an entirely different vein, the Vietnam era witnessed a new high tide of innovation in popular American art forms, especially music, as social and political commentary. The war and related developments at home inspired a generation of singers and songwriters to produce a body of politically charged, electrifying compositions. Taylor Swift's solipsistic

repertory of recent years would have been a hard sell to 1960s college-aged concert-goers, who expected socially significant lyrics from their favorite recording artists. They wanted to be emotionally roused, politically provoked, and intellectually enlightened by them. The success and enduring notoriety of the 1969 Woodstock Music and Art Fair are testaments to the artistic riches, political predilections, and general spiritedness of that generation. Marketed as “An Aquarian [i.e., New Age] Exposition: 3 Days of Peace & Music,” with posters featuring a dove perched on a guitar, the festival drew an audience of 400,000, who enjoyed performances by thirty-two of the most uninhibited and innovative artists at the time. This celebration of “peace, love, and rock & roll” signaled a youthful repudiation of the values that underlay American policy in Southeast Asia.

As Woodstock exemplified, the conduct and consequences of the Vietnam War also eroded popular faith in traditional sources of political and cultural authority in the United States, including the presidency. The Watergate affair that led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon was both symptom and consequence of the domestic political malaise caused by the war. Owing to that and other scandals, many Americans openly questioned the virtues of their own socio-political order. “Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty” became a popular mantra among young demonstrators and activists. Their and others’ criticism of American policy and actions in Southeast Asia, and of those responsible for them, boosted the appeal and legitimacy of progressive action groups challenging the status quo, including the civil rights, feminist, Chicano/Hispanic, and anti-poverty movements. By the time the war ended, many Americans had lost faith in their political leaders and the system that kept them in power. That loss still resonates in national politics today.

Finally, defeat in Vietnam shattered the notion of American exceptionalism. It collapsed the nation’s self-confidence for a generation and caused the United States to tread more cautiously in the international arena. As Che Guevara had hoped for “many Vietnams,” disgraced former President Nixon called for “no more Vietnams.” Obsessed with minimizing casualties, his successors became loath to involve US ground forces in combat overseas. The hasty withdrawal from Somalia following the “Black Hawk Down” incident in 1993, and the more recent debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan, attest at least in part to this continued hesitancy. “Vietnam syndrome” still echoes in high American political and military circles. No war since 1945 has had such a cathartic, transformative effect on American society. It provoked a reckoning,

a reappraisal of core values and public policies that led to irrevocable political, social, and economic change. Many of the ideals, including a redefined individualism, now evinced among young Americans are direct legacies of the Vietnam era. That war changed the United States in important ways – as much as it changed Vietnam, albeit in quite different ways.

The Vietnam War defined a global period: the 1960s, the “cultural decade,” and 1970s, the “pivot decade,” would have been very different, in the United States and around the world, without the war and its effects. “The most powerful states dominate international politics,” historian Jeremy Suri writes, “but the small places in between define the fate of the world.”¹ The American military intervention in Vietnam, and the Vietnamese response to it, certainly left their mark on our world.

VIETNAM AS HISTORY

Washington's decision to become militarily involved in Vietnam was part of a larger effort to contain the spread of communism in Asia and around the world. It was consistent with the Truman Doctrine of 1947, an article of faith for every American president during the Cold War. To prevent South Vietnam from succumbing to aggression from the communist North, US policymakers spent a staggering \$200 billion – more than one trillion in today's money, or five percent of the current annual gross domestic product. At the height of the commitment, in 1968–9, more than half a million American military personnel were stationed in Vietnam. A combined total of 2.7 million American men and women – nearly five percent of the relevant age group of that generation – served at one time or another in the war, a quarter of them college-age draftees. During its eight-year involvement in the conflict, the United States dropped in excess of seven million tons of bombs and other ordnance on Vietnam and the rest of Indochina. That represented nearly three times the total expended in all of World War II. In South Vietnam, US planes also sprayed some twenty million gallons of carcinogenic “Agent Orange” and other herbicides, in an effort to deprive enemy forces of food crops and jungle cover. More than 58,000 Americans lost their lives in the war, and another 305,000 were seriously wounded. Vietnamese casualties were in the millions.

In the end, it was all for nothing for the Americans. Though it won most battles, and inflicted far more casualties on its enemies than its own forces suffered, the United States met none of its core goals in Vietnam.

Washington indisputably lost its war against Hanoi. It had to stand by idly as its enemies not only took over the South and reunified the two halves of Vietnam under their own authority, but also seized power in Cambodia and Laos. By protracting the war for so long, Washington may have prevented other “dominoes” in the region from falling to communism, though that remains uncertain. What is undeniable is that the world’s most powerful country by conventional reckoning was unable to defeat its foes in Vietnam and the rest of Indochina. It was even, by some accounts, humiliated by them, suffering a loss of credibility so great as to mark the beginning of the end of the *pax Americana*. How was that all possible?

Thousands of works on the Vietnam War have been published in the United States, dating back to the onset of the war itself. A search for titles on the subject on Amazon.com yields over 83,000 results! In recounting the story of the origins, evolution, and outcome of the war, American historians have focused almost exclusively on their own country’s experience, retelling the way policymakers managed the conflict, the armed forces waged it, the domestic antiwar movement opposed it, and the national media reported it. Only a handful of them have addressed the Vietnamese side of the story, and fewer still have related that of America’s enemies.² Most surprising, no one has attempted to explain in any systematic or comprehensive fashion what the “other side” had to do – and did do – to manage its own war effort and win the war. In fact, even the precise nature of its purposes and objectives, and who defined and pursued them, remains unclear, if not completely unknown. To comprehend how astonishing this is, imagine historians of World War II writing about the origins, course, and issues at stake in that conflict without delving into – indeed, making any serious effort to relate – the goals, strategies, and motivations of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime in Germany. Could we make any sense of that conflagration generally, and what was truly on the line in it specifically, without exploring these issues?

The story of how Hanoi beat the United States in the Vietnam War matters because it helps us appreciate the limits of American power, the complexities of the Cold War international system, the important role assumed by small states therein, and the dramatic implications of the Sino–Soviet split. It teaches us how a seemingly trivial international actor used public opinion to offset its irrelevance and inherent weakness to prevail over arguably the world’s most powerful country at the time in a major war. The Vietnam War demonstrated that brute force alone does not always decide the outcome of an armed conflict;

sound political and diplomatic strategies are also essential. The recent American experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the ongoing fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), are testaments to these realities. Surely, US policymakers would have been better prepared to take on their enemies in the so-called Global War on Terror had they paid closer heed to the conduct of their rivals, to their strategies and tactics, in the Vietnam War. In this sense, Hanoi's story also matters because it underscores the pitfalls of combatting an enemy without really understanding its capabilities, resourcefulness, organization, and leadership. To be sure, had American leaders known at the time what we now know about that other side in the Vietnam War, that conflict would have followed a different course. It might even never have happened in the first place.

* * *

The narrative that follows is organized chronologically. While its scope is comprehensive, it is far from exhaustive. No single-volume history could ever capture the war in all of its complexities, as suggested above. The purpose here is to underscore the formative experiences and worldview of the men who devised communist strategies and tactics during the war against the United States and its allies, on the one hand, and to explain those strategies and tactics, on the other. In sum, this book aims to help readers come to a better grasp of the outcome of the Vietnam War by shifting the analytical focus, traditionally on Washington, onto Hanoi.

Coming to terms with Vietnam's American War requires awareness of its causes: of how Hanoi and Washington ended up colliding so violently in 1965, with such brutal and far-reaching consequences. Chapter 1 explores the background to the conflict, deeply rooted in Vietnam's own past. The historical experience of the Vietnamese with outside invasion produced over time a national myth of indomitability even as it fractured regional identities. China's millennium-long occupation and frequent intrusions thereafter, the southward expansion of the Vietnamese from the Hanoi-centered heartland and the ferocious conflicts it engendered, repeated triumphs over Mongol armies invading from China – all of these experiences informed Vietnamese reactions to the American involvement in their country that began in the 1940s. So too did instances of internal North–South conflict, and differences of outlook that the United States would exploit.

French colonial rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was equally significant in influencing the distinct self-images of Northern and Southern Vietnamese. The suffering and humiliation, personal as well as

national, endured under French domination inspired many nationalist and patriotic Vietnamese to see in Marxism–Leninism an ideology that explained their plight, and could serve as a platform for liberating their nation and reclaiming their dignity as a people. Staunchly anti-colonialist, as well as anti-capitalist, the ideology first informed their understanding of the French presence in their country during the 1920s. It subsequently performed the same function, though with distinctive fluctuations, during the Japanese occupation of Indochina in World War II and the return of French control after the Japanese defeat and withdrawal. It was obvious to Vietnamese nationalists and patriots, from the moment the war ended, that the fate of the world, at least in the short run, and thus the fate of Vietnam, rested on the course of the looming struggle for world domination between the capitalist and the communist superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union (and, after 1949, the People's Republic of China).

The resulting tensions between these two camps emerged in Vietnam shortly after the Indochina War between France and its Vietnamese opponents began in 1946, covered in Chapter 2. As a result of French manipulation during the course of that war, a consequent misreading in Washington of Vietnamese political realities, and the intensifying state of the Cold War, in 1950 the United States decided to intrude heavily into the communist-led struggle for independence. By the time of the climactic Battle of Dien Bien Phu, in spring 1954, the United States was footing nearly eighty percent of the French war bill, and Washington policymakers had become obsessed with the evolving situation across the Indochinese Peninsula. The Geneva accords of July 1954 concluded the Indochina War by creating two Vietnams separated at the 17th parallel, but did nothing to assuage American concerns about the creeping presence of communism in the region.

Chapter 3 opens with a discussion of the decision by Ho Chi Minh's communist regime in the North to abide by the terms of the Geneva formula, and concentrate thereafter on social recoupment, economic recovery, and development in areas under its jurisdiction. Ho insisted on respecting the basic terms of the Geneva accords and foregoing armed struggle even as it became obvious that the rival regime headquartered in Saigon – headed by Ngo Dinh Diem and underwritten by American political, military, and economic support – was sneering at the peace and reconciliation process and had no intention of participating in elections to reunify Vietnam under a single government. Ho's passivity shocked and dismayed some of his own followers, especially in the South. It was

not until 1959 that Hanoi sanctioned insurgent activity below the 17th parallel, but even then under restricting guidelines and with minimal support from the North. Ho feared provoking US intervention, which he thought his side would not be able to overcome given the limited resources then at its disposal. While sensible, his tentativeness alienated growing segments of his communist and nationalist supporters, including a Southerner recently recalled to Hanoi for consultations on the most important matters of strategic policy. The Southerner was Le Duan, a rising star in communist ranks, despite – but also because of – his strong objections to the line of struggle espoused by Ho and his regime in the South after 1954.

By 1963, the tension between Ho and other “doves,” on the one hand, and Le Duan and other “hawks” who favored all-out war to “liberate” the South, on the other, had split the Communist Party into two competing, rival wings. Following Diem’s overthrow in a coup abetted by the United States in early November 1963, Le Duan and his chief lieutenants staged a coup of their own in Hanoi. They took over decision-making and purged from Party ranks or otherwise demoted and marginalized influential doves, including Ho. In the aftermath of this quiet palace coup, the new regime under Le Duan dramatically escalated hostilities in the South, setting North Vietnam on an irreversible collision course with the United States.

The war with the United States is covered in Chapters 4 and 5. As the Vietnam War became, for American policymakers, an episode in their efforts to contain communism and block Soviet and Chinese expansion in Southeast Asia, for Le Duan and other Vietnamese who coordinated the resistance against them, it was a struggle to achieve, at all cost, national independence and reunification under a Marxist–Leninist, communist regime. Despite public claims to the contrary, Hanoi at that time had no desire to negotiate an end to the war; the leadership there, firmly under Le Duan, was committed to “complete victory” and to the reunification of the country under its own aegis. Nothing short of the surrender of its enemies was going to satisfy it. To meet that end, Le Duan’s regime relied heavily on political and material support from the Soviet Union and China, which was not always easy to obtain in light of the growing ideological dispute between the two. Mounting frustration with the course of the war eventually prompted Le Duan to order a major military campaign to break the stalemate and expedite victory: the Tet Offensive of early 1968. Although it dealt the United States a major psychological blow, the offensive fell far short of meeting Le Duan’s own expectations,