



The Cold War and Vietnam

Author(s): George C. Herring

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The Cold War and Vietnam

The cold war and the American war in Vietnam cannot be disentangled. Had it not been for the cold war, the U.S., China, and the Soviet Union would not have intervened in what would likely have remained a localized anticolonial struggle in French Indochina. The cold war shaped the way the Vietnam War was fought and significantly affected its outcome. The war in Vietnam in turn influenced the direction taken by the cold war after 1975.

The conflict in Vietnam stemmed from the interaction of two major phenomena of the post-World War II era, decolonization—the dissolution of colonial empires—and the cold war. The rise of nationalism in the colonial areas and the weakness of the European powers after the Second World War combined to destroy a colonial system that had been an established feature of world politics for centuries. A change of this magnitude did not occur smoothly, and in Vietnam it led to war. When France fell to Germany in 1940, Japan imposed a protectorate upon the French colony in Vietnam, and in March 1945 the Japanese overthrew the French puppet government. In August 1945, Vietnamese nationalists led by the charismatic patriot Ho Chi Minh seized the opportunity presented by Japan's surrender to proclaim the independence of their country. Determined to recover their empire, the French set out to regain control of Vietnam. After more than a year of ultimately futile negotiations, a war began in November 1946 that would not end until Saigon fell in April 1975.

At the very time Vietnamese nationalists were engaged in a bloody anticolonial war with France, the cold war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was evolving into an ideological and power struggle with global dimensions. The conjunction of these historical trends explains the internationalization of the war in Vietnam.

What was unique about decolonization in Vietnam—and from the American standpoint most significant—was that the nationalist movement, the Viet Minh, was led by Communists, and this would have enormous implications, transforming what began as a struggle against French colonialism into an international conflict of dangerous proportions. At least from 1949 on, U.S. officials viewed the struggle in Indochina in terms of the cold war. Ho Chi Minh had been a Communist operative for many years. Although Americans could find no evidence of Soviet support for the Viet Minh, they viewed the revolutionary movement suspiciously. When Mao Tse-tung's Communists seized power in China in August 1949, they offered sanctu-

ary and military assistance to the Viet Minh, heightening U.S. concerns. Recognition of the Viet Minh by China and the Soviet Union in early 1950 settled the matter for American officials, revealing Ho Chi Minh, in Secretary of State Dean Acheson's words, in his "true colors as the mortal enemy of native independence in Indochina" (1). Unable to accept the essentially nationalist origins of the Vietnamese revolution, Americans were certain that Ho and the Viet Minh were part of a monolithic Communist bloc controlled by the Kremlin.

U.S. officials also concluded that the fall of Vietnam to communism would threaten their nation's vital interests. NSC 68, a key 1950 statement of cold war policies, posited that the Soviet Union, "animated by a new fanatical faith," sought "to impose its absolute authority on the rest of the world." It had already gained control of Eastern Europe and China. In the frantic milieu of 1949-1950, Americans concluded that "any substantial further extension of the area under the control of the Kremlin would raise the possibility that no coalition adequate to confront the Kremlin with greater strength could be assembled" (2). In this context of a world divided into two hostile power blocs, a fragile balance of power, a zero-sum game in which any gain for Communism was automatically a loss for the "free world," previously unimportant areas such as Vietnam suddenly took on huge significance. The North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950 seemed to confirm American fears of Communist expansion and to heighten the significance of Vietnam.

There were other reasons related to the cold war why Americans attached great significance to Vietnam. The so-called domino theory held that the fall of Vietnam to Communism would cause the loss of all Indochina and then the rest of Southeast Asia, with economic and geopolitical repercussions spreading west to neutral India and east to key allies such as Japan and the Philippines. Lessons drawn from recent history, the so-called Manchuria/Munich analogy, stressed that the failure of the western democracies to stand firm against Japanese and German aggression in the 1930s had encouraged further aggression until World War II was the result. The "lesson" was that to avoid a larger, possibly even a nuclear war, it was essential to stand firmly against Communist aggression at the outset. The alleged "loss" of China to the Communists set off a political bloodletting in the U.S., called McCarthyism after one of its most unscrupulous practitioners, Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. The result was a militant

anti-Communism that seemed to require political leaders, especially Democrats, to prevent the loss of additional real estate to the Soviet bloc.

Policymakers from Harry S. Truman to Lyndon Baines Johnson acted upon these cold war imperatives in Vietnam, gradually escalating U.S. involvement to full-scale war. In 1950, the U.S. began to assist France against the Viet Minh, eventually absorbing much of the cost of the war. When France faltered in 1954, accepting a settlement at the Geneva Conference that temporarily divided Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel, the U.S. moved to block further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia by creating an independent, non-Communist government in southern Vietnam. When the elections called for by Geneva to unify the country were not held, former Viet Minh in South Vietnam launched an insurgency against the U.S.-backed regime of Ngo Dinh Diem and Communist North Vietnam supported it by infiltrating men and supplies into South Vietnam. The U.S. responded by significantly expanding its assistance to the Diem government. That government fell in 1963, and when the National Liberation Front insurgency, backed by growing support from North Vietnam, seemed likely to topple its fragile successors, Johnson began bombing North Vietnam in early 1965 and dispatched major increments of combat troops to the South. By this time the Sino-Soviet "bloc" was torn by bitter ideological and geopolitical disputes, but the president still felt compelled to uphold cold war commitments.

"[E]verything I knew about history," LBJ later observed, "told me that if I got out of Vietnam and let Ho Chi Minh run through the streets of Saigon, then I'd be doing exactly what Chamberlain did in World War II. I'd be giving a big fat reward to aggression . . . once we showed how weak we were, Moscow and Peking would move in a flash to exploit our weakness . . . And so would begin World War III" (3).

Just as the cold war influenced Johnson to intervene in Vietnam, so it also shaped the way he fought the war. The primary U.S. goals were to deter Communist, especially Chinese, expansion and to maintain the credibility of U.S. cold war commitments by preserving an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam. The U. S. never set out to win the war in the traditional sense. It did not seek the defeat of North Vietnam. On the contrary, vivid memories of Chinese

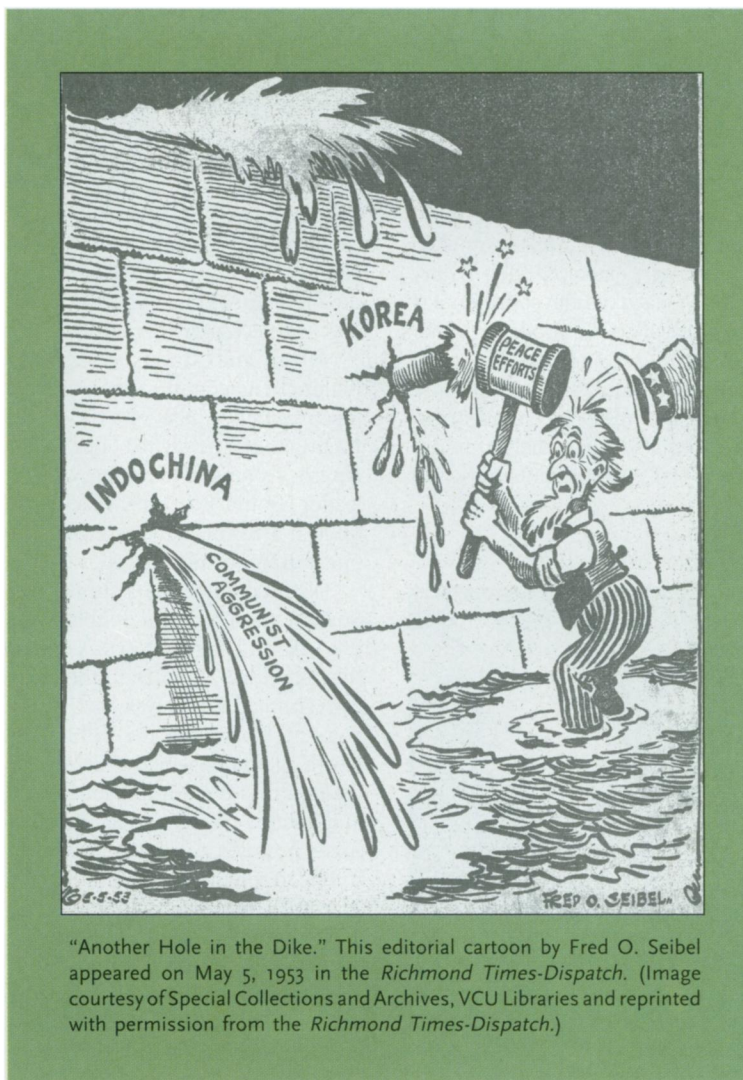
intervention in the Korean War in 1950 and the more recent Cuban missile crisis of 1962 led the administration to wage a limited war.

The U.S. fought in "cold blood." Fearing that full mobilization might trigger alliances among the Communist nations and provoke a larger war, perhaps even the nuclear Armageddon the Vietnam commitment was designed to deter in the first place, the president did not seek a declaration of war from Congress. He refused to mobilize the reserves. No Office of War Information was created, as in World War II, and no dramatic programs were undertaken to rally popular support for the war. In a nuclear world, Secretary of State Dean Rusk later explained, "it is just too dangerous for an entire people to get too angry and we deliberately . . . tried to do in cold blood what perhaps can only be done in hot blood" (4). It proved very difficult to maintain public support in a protracted war fought under these conditions.

The Johnson administration went to great lengths to keep the war limited. It escalated the commitment gradually and quietly to minimize the danger of confrontation with the major Communist powers. Administration officials repeatedly assured the Soviet Union and China that their goals were limited. They scrupulously avoided the sort of rash military moves that might provoke a Soviet or Chinese response. Johnson refused to permit the military to pursue North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front units into their sanctuaries in Laos, Cambodia, and across the demilitarized zone separating the two Vietnams. He tightly restricted the bombing near the Chinese

border and around Haiphong harbor. He lived in mortal terror, by some accounts, that an American pilot—from his hometown of Johnson City, Texas, in his most graphic nightmares—would drop a bomb down the smokestack of a Soviet freighter, thus starting World War III.

Johnson's caution appears warranted—there is ample evidence that a serious threat to destroy North Vietnam would have brought the Soviet Union and China into the war—but it complicated achievement of his war aims. Gradual escalation gave Hanoi time to adapt to the bombing, shield its most precious resources, and develop one of the most deadly air defense systems ever employed in warfare, all of which increased its capacity to resist American military pressures.



"Another Hole in the Dike." This editorial cartoon by Fred O. Seibel appeared on May 5, 1953 in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. (Image courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, VCU Libraries and reprinted with permission from the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*.)

Deeply committed to securing a unified Vietnam, North Vietnamese leaders countered America's limited war with all-out war, producing an asymmetrical conflict that helped neutralize America's vastly superior military power. At the same time, as each escalation failed to produce the desired results, the U.S. moved to the next level, resulting in what one official called an "all-out limited war," a massive, elephantine effort that inflicted vast destruction on North and South Vietnam, earning for the administration widespread and often merited criticism at home and abroad. LBJ's limited war thus produced the worst of both worlds.

The cold war worked to North Vietnam's advantage in other ways. Up to 1964, both of the major Communist powers had been consummate pragmatists, neither hindering nor in any major way assisting North Vietnam's efforts to "liberate" the South, but U.S. escalation forced them to make hard choices. Bitter rivals and now vigorously competing for leadership of world communism, each felt compelled to assist an embattled ally, and Hanoi skillfully exploited their rivalry by extracting maximum assistance from each while scrupulously controlling its own destiny. The Soviets provided the modern fighter planes and surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) to fend off the American bombing, and Soviet technicians manned anti-aircraft batteries and SAM sites. The Chinese provided huge quantities of small arms, vehicles, and food. More than 300,000 Chinese troops helped maintain the vital supply route from China. Total Soviet and Chinese aid



Mao Zedong, leader of the People's Republic of China, shakes hands with Le Duc Tho, special adviser to the North Vietnamese delegation to the Paris peace talks, at Chungnanhai (Peking) as North Vietnamese foreign minister Nguyen Duy Trinh looks on. February 2, 1973. (Image courtesy of the Douglas Pike Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.)

has been estimated at more than \$2 billion. It helped neutralize U.S. air attacks, replace equipment lost in the bombing, and free North Vietnam to send more troops to the South. "The fact that the Soviets and Chinese supply almost all war material to Hanoi . . . [has] enabled the North Vietnamese to carry on despite all our operations," a National Security Council document concluded in 1969 (5). Johnson could do nothing to stop such aid short of the provocative measures he feared would dangerously escalate the war.

After 1968, the cold war and the war in Vietnam remained intimately connected, but in more subtle and complex ways. By 1969, the Soviet Union and China were engaged in fighting along their long common border. Johnson's successor Richard M. Nixon sought to capitalize on the rivalry by reshaping relations with each cold war enemy and gaining an edge over both. Eager to end the Vietnam War, which he considered a distraction from more important foreign policy priorities, Nixon and his top adviser Henry A. Kissinger sought to use the leverage gained from improved relations with the Soviet Union and China to end the Vietnam War in a way that would secure the "peace with honor" they deemed necessary to maintain America's world position.

Nixon and Kissinger succeeded for the short-term in effecting major changes in the cold war. In one of the most dramatic events of his presidency, the one-time red-baiter par excellence traveled to Beijing in early 1972 to begin normalizing relations with a nation once America's most bitter enemy. Shortly after, in Moscow, he and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev reached agreements on expanded trade and nuclear arms limitations. Nixon's diplomacy did not end the cold war, but it dramatically altered the contours of the conflict.

Nixon did not enjoy similar success with Vietnam. China and the Soviet Union played a double game, seeking improved relations with the U.S. and urging North Vietnam to compromise at the same time they provided Hanoi with the military hardware to launch large-scale conventional offensives against South Vietnam in 1972 and again in 1974-75. Following the failure of their 1972 Easter Offensive, the North Vietnamese had to retreat from their longstanding demand for dismantling the South Vietnamese government. Confronting a tired and divided nation and facing an election, Nixon also had to compromise, however, agreeing to permit some 150,000 North Vietnamese troops to remain in the South and to withdraw U.S. military forces by March 31, 1973 in exchange for the return of American prisoners of war. The war in Vietnam would continue without the direct military participation of the U.S.

After the summer of 1973, Nixon was in no position to influence events in Vietnam. Ironically, the abuses of power he authorized to curtail mounting domestic opposition to his Vietnam War policies and facilitate his reelection led to the Watergate scandals that paralyzed his presidency and eventually forced his resignation. His successor Gerald Ford could therefore do little when the North Vietnamese invaded South Vietnam in 1974-1975. Ford and Kissinger again resorted to traditional cold war warnings that to do nothing while an ally of twenty-five years fell to the Communists would cripple America's world position. Ironically, however, the process of detente with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with China weakened the power of cold war appeals among a war-weary and financially strapped people. Congress rejected Ford's calls for additional aid to South Vietnam. On April 30, 1975 North Vietnamese tanks crashed the gates of Saigon's presidential palace, signifying the end of America's longest war.

The Vietnam War had consequences for the cold war far different than Americans had foreseen. The domino theory worked in former French Indochina, with Laos and Cambodia also falling to Commu-



Presidents Nixon and Thieu descend the steps of Saigon's Independence Palace prior to their appearance before the capital city's press corps. Behind them from the left, are Special Advisor to President Nixon Henry Kissinger, South Vietnamese Vice President Ngyuen Cao Ky, and U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker. President Nixon made an unannounced five-hour visit to South Vietnam (no date given). (Image courtesy of the Douglas Pike Photograph Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.)

nist rebels in the spring of 1975. But instead of a unified Communist bloc threatening the rest of Southeast Asia, old nationalist rivalries provoked the various Communist governments to fight each other. The brutal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia established close relations with China, causing Vietnam to invade Cambodia, establish a puppet government, and plunge into a debilitating quagmire of its own. China had spent substantial blood and treasure supporting Vietnam against the U.S., but their shaky alliance rekindled ancient fears and suspicions. In 1979, China sent troops across its southern border to "teach Vietnam a lesson," setting off a short and inconclusive war that did anything but (6). The Vietnam War did not have major consequences for Soviet-American relations. The Soviet Union seemed to come away the winner, exploiting U.S. preoccupation with Vietnam to achieve nuclear parity and assisting its client to defeat its most formidable cold war rival. Over the long haul, however, Vietnam proved a drain on Moscow's limited resources. While the U.S. nursed its so-called "Vietnam syndrome" by turning inward, the Soviet Union dabbled in the Horn of Africa and Central America. Most significantly, it invaded Afghanistan in 1978. Historically as hostile to foreign invaders as Vietnam, Afghanistan became the Soviet Union's Vietnam, exhausting its money and manpower and eventually contributing to its collapse. The Vietnam War may thus have contributed indirectly to Soviet defeat in the cold war, but hardly in the way U.S. policymakers had intended. □

Endnotes

1. *Department of State Bulletin*, February 13, 1950, 244.
2. NSC-68, April 14, 1950, printed in *Naval War College Review* 61 (May-June 1975): 51-108.
3. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 252.
4. Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrief, *Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam*, reprint (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 115.
5. National Security Study Memorandum No. 1, January 21, 1969, in Robert J. McMahon, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, 3 ed. (New York: DC Heath, 2003), 393. The complex involvement of the Soviet Union and China in the war is skillfully analyzed in Ilya V. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc., 1996), and Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
6. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 214.

George Herring is Alumni Professor of History at the University of Kentucky. Much of his research and writing has focused on the Vietnam War, and he is the author of *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 4th ed. (2001).