

Tim O'Brien

The Things
They Carried

The Vietnam War

INTRODUCTION

On Sept. 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh stood before nearly half a million of his fellow Vietnamese and proclaimed the establishment of a new nation—the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Ho's announcement seemed to mark the end of nearly 80 years of French colonial rule of Vietnam. Behind him on the platform sat several U.S. military and intelligence officers who had worked closely with Ho and his revolutionary forces during World War II in collaborating against the Japanese, who had seized control of Vietnam from France in 1940. They nodded approvingly as Ho began his speech with words taken from America's Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident. That all men are created equal." The crowds of Vietnamese looked to the sky to see U.S. planes flying overhead. And, as a special treat, a Vietnamese band played a song it had worked up just for this occasion: the "Star-Spangled Banner." It seemed an auspicious beginning: America, the land of liberty and freedom, bestowing its blessings on one of the newest independent nations.

Thirty years later, nearly 60,000 Americans and nearly two million Vietnamese were dead after fighting each other in one of the most controversial, frustrating and divisive wars in the history of the United States. Unlike World War II, which has been dubbed "the good war" by many writers, the Vietnam War has remained an open sore in the American memory. For some in the United States, the war was evidence of the cost of American arrogance, ignorance and Cold War paranoia. For others, it was an example of the failure of America's willpower, determination and patriotism, with liberals, antiwar protestors and the media coming in for special denunciation. For many of America's veterans, Vietnam left them with crippling physical and psychological injuries. For most of the men and women who served in Vietnam, the conflict was characterized by a confusing blend of incompetence, heroism, brutality, camaraderie, guilt, pride, helplessness and, in the end, an overall sense of pointlessness.

BACKGROUND TO THE VIETNAM WAR

Vietnam is a nation with a history five times as long as that of the United States. It first achieved independence in 938 A.D. when Vietnamese nationalists were finally successful in defeating the Chinese who had occupied their lands for years. Vietnamese independence lasted until the mid-1800s. Then, in 1868, French forces attacked the nation, intent on turning Vietnam into one of France's colonial possessions. By 1883, the French were successful in their military campaign, and Vietnam (and neighboring Cambodia) became a colony. As they had with the Chinese, the Vietnamese chafed under French domination and exploitation, and rebellions against the French were numerous.

In 1930, one of the Vietnamese nationalists who had fled the nation to escape French persecution met in Hong Kong with several fellow revolutionaries to plot a new line of attack. His name was Ho Chi Minh, and together with his colleagues he formed the Indochinese Communist Party. His disgust with Western imperialism, together with his experiences in revolutionary Russia and China, worked to convince Ho that communism, which proclaimed to stand against colonialism and racism, was the best method for achieving the independence and progress of his homeland. During the next few years (when he was not hiding or in prison), Ho worked to build the basis for a revolution against French control in Vietnam.

World War II, however, interceded. In 1940, following the fall of France to Germany, Japanese forces occupied Vietnam. The Japanese left the French in control of the day-to-day governing of Vietnam, but quickly established a dominant military and economic presence. Ho and his supporters began a campaign of agitation against the French puppet rulers and

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a guerilla war against the occupying Japanese forces. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, U.S. military and intelligence officers moved quickly to establish relations with Ho's small rebel force, providing his men with arms, communications equipment and medical supplies. In return, Ho and his followers conducted acts of sabotage against the Japanese and on occasion rescued American pilots shot down over Vietnam. When the Japanese were defeated in August 1945, Ho's forces moved quickly to seize power in northern Vietnam. On Sept. 2, 1945, Ho officially declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

France, however, was reluctant to give up its stake in its former colony. With the assistance of British forces (which had occupied southern Vietnam to accept the surrender of Japanese troops), the French quickly reasserted colonial control in the southern half of Vietnam and ignored Ho's claims of Vietnamese independence. Negotiations between Ho and France quickly collapsed. By December 1946, war had broken out between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and France. The conflict dragged on for over seven painful and brutal years of warfare. In 1954, the French suffered a humiliating military defeat at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and decided to withdraw from Vietnam. The French and their allies suffered over 170,000 casualties; Ho's forces lost nearly half a million men and women.

EARLY AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM

Despite the fact that the U.S. military worked with Ho during World War II and that several American officers attended the Vietnamese independence celebration in September 1945, the U.S. government never gave any serious thought to recognizing either Vietnamese freedom or Ho Chi Minh's government. The post-World War II period witnessed the development of an increasingly menacing battle between the United States and the Soviet Union, soon dubbed the "Cold War." Anything that hinted of communism was instantly suspect for the American government. And Ho Chi Minh was a communist. In addition, pressures from America's wartime ally, France, also worked to push the United States into taking a negative view of Vietnamese independence. The French claimed that they needed Vietnam—and their other colonies lost during the war—in order for their economy to recover from the devastation of World War II and Nazi occupation. For these, and a variety of other reasons, the United States turned its back on Ho (who wrote President Harry S. Truman on several occasions pleading for American recognition of Vietnamese independence) and actively supported the French in their war effort with massive amounts of military and economic assistance. By 1954, the United States was paying 80 percent of the costs of the war.

With the French defeat in 1954, a peace agreement was hammered out that established a cease-fire in Vietnam, temporarily divided the country at the 17th parallel and set elections in two years' time that would reunify the nation. The United States refused to sign the agreement, for it believed that Vietnamese elections would result in an overwhelming victory for the popular Ho Chi Minh. Determined that all of Vietnam would not fall to communist rule, the United States quickly moved to establish a nation; the Republic of Vietnam (popularly known as South Vietnam). American officials found a man to lead the new nation, Ngo Dinh Diem, and saw to his return to Vietnam. Millions of dollars in U.S. military and economic aid flowed into South Vietnam, in addition to hundreds of U.S. military advisers. Diem, for his part, held a rigged election and soon became president of South Vietnam. He quickly indicated that the elections to reunify Vietnam would never take place. His rule was often brutal, however, and his popularity never extended much farther than his presidential palace. For his part, Ho Chi Minh claimed that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (more popularly known as North Vietnam) was the only true government of the nation.

In 1960, reeling from Diem's persecution, Ho's followers in South Vietnam and other Vietnamese nationalists formed the National Liberation Front (NLF) to overthrow Diem's government. In a very short time, Diem's government had lost control over vast areas of the countryside, and NLF forces were battering the South Vietnamese military. The United States, under new President John F. Kennedy, responded with even heavier amounts of military aid, and soon thousands of U.S. military advisers were in Vietnam. Nothing helped, and by the summer of 1963 the U.S. government had made the fateful

decisions that America would have to take a more active role in the war in South Vietnam and that Diem would have to go. Urged on by American officials, elements of the South Vietnamese military moved against Diem in November 1963; he and his brother were captured and murdered. Three weeks later, President Kennedy was himself assassinated, and Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in as the new president. There were over 16,000 U.S. advisers in Vietnam.

AMERICA AT WAR IN VIETNAM

Following Kennedy's death in November 1963, American involvement in South Vietnam escalated rapidly. Despite the Johnson administration's public claims that American boys would not be sent to fight and die in Vietnam, privately President Johnson and his advisers had reached the conclusion that only direct U.S. military involvement could prevent a communist victory in South Vietnam. In August 1964, using as a pretext a supposed attack by North Vietnamese gunboats on two American destroyers off the coast of North Vietnam, President Johnson asked Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The resolution gave the American president nearly carte blanche to conduct military operations in Vietnam, if he believed U.S. interests were in danger. Congress responded with a nearly unanimous vote in favor of the resolution. Johnson immediately ordered retaliatory bombings against North Vietnam, which most American officials believed to be the real instigator of the civil war in South Vietnam.

In early 1965, the United States decided to bomb North Vietnam in what was known as Operation Rolling Thunder. For the next three years, U.S. warplanes dropped an unprecedented amount of bombs on North Vietnam. Shortly after Rolling Thunder began, President Johnson sent the first U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam. In March 1965, approximately 3,200 Marines landed in South Vietnam. By the end of the year, over 180,000 U.S. troops were stationed there. Nearly 7,000 had been killed or wounded.

The American strategy in Vietnam was direct, to say the least. Rolling Thunder would reduce North Vietnam to rubble, ending its ability or willingness to support the NLF in South Vietnam. For the rebels in South Vietnam, U.S. ground forces adopted the strategy of "attrition": quite simply, killing more of their soldiers than they killed of our soldiers. In a short time, it was thought, the NLF would reach the "crossover point"—the point at which U.S. forces would kill more enemy soldiers than the enemy was able to replace. Both the U.S. bombing and ground war strategies wreaked unbelievable destruction and death on Vietnam, but there was no discernible progress in terms of breaking the will of the enemy or bringing the war to a close. By the end of 1967, the United States had lost over 20,000 men in Vietnam, and protests against the war were beginning. Nearly half a million U.S. troops were in Vietnam.

Although the Johnson administration tried to convince the American people that the war in Vietnam was being won and that the enemy was nearly defeated, the Tet Offensive destroyed those myths. In January 1968, NLF and North Vietnamese armed forces launched their largest military offensive of the war, attacking all over South Vietnam, particularly the major cities. The American embassy in Saigon (South Vietnam's capital) came under attack, and enemy forces overran the ancient Vietnamese city of Hue. Despite the fact that the enemy was eventually driven back with massive casualties, the American people's trust in President Johnson and belief that the war was winnable were crushed. Massive antiwar demonstrations now began to take place in the United States, highlighted by the violent protests in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention. President Johnson, with his popularity at an all-time low, announced in March 1968 that he was ending the bombing of North Vietnam, ending the escalation of U.S. troop strength in South Vietnam and seeking peace talks to end the war. His presidency in tatters, he then declared that he would not seek re-election in 1968.

In 1968, Republican Richard Nixon was elected president. He indicated that he had a plan to end the war in Vietnam with America's "honor" intact. To his advisers, he confided that he was relying on the "madman theory": the belief that the North Vietnamese, once they learned that the "insanely" anticommunist Nixon had his hand poised over the button to launch nuclear missiles, would cave in to American demands at the ongoing peace

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negotiations. To give credence to this theory, Nixon ordered the secret (and illegal) bombings of enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia in 1969, and then ordered U.S. troops into Cambodia in 1970. The North Vietnamese responded with a steadfast insistence on America's withdrawal from South Vietnam. In May 1970, tragedy struck when Ohio National Guardsmen opened fire on student protesters at Kent State University, killing four and wounding 11.

Nixon responded to the public clamor for an end to war by beginning the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from South Vietnam. By 1972, with the presidential election just around the corner, Nixon ordered National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger to quickly seal a peace agreement with the North Vietnamese. In October, Kissinger announced that peace was at hand and that a treaty had been signed with North Vietnam. America's South Vietnamese ally, however, balked at the agreement, maintaining that it was a death warrant for the government of South Vietnam. When North Vietnam steadfastly refused to renegotiate the treaty, Nixon ordered massive new air strikes. In a few weeks, North Vietnam and the United States announced that a new treaty had been negotiated. Though it differed little from the original agreement, the United States coerced South Vietnam into accepting the treaty and promised that America would never desert its ally.

In January 1973, the treaty ending America's involvement in Vietnam was formally signed. American troops began their withdrawal, and North Vietnam returned nearly 600 U.S. prisoners of war. Almost 60,000 U.S. troops had died in Vietnam, and tens of thousands more had been wounded. The war, including veterans' benefits and other associated costs, came with a price tag of nearly \$300 billion. Vietnamese casualties (both North and South) totaled nearly two million dead.

From 1973 to 1975, warfare between South Vietnam and NLF and North Vietnamese forces continued. In early 1975, the communist forces launched a massive military offensive. In a matter of weeks, South Vietnam collapsed. In April 1975, Saigon fell and South Vietnam surrendered. Vietnam was reunited under the new name of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, which it remains to this day.