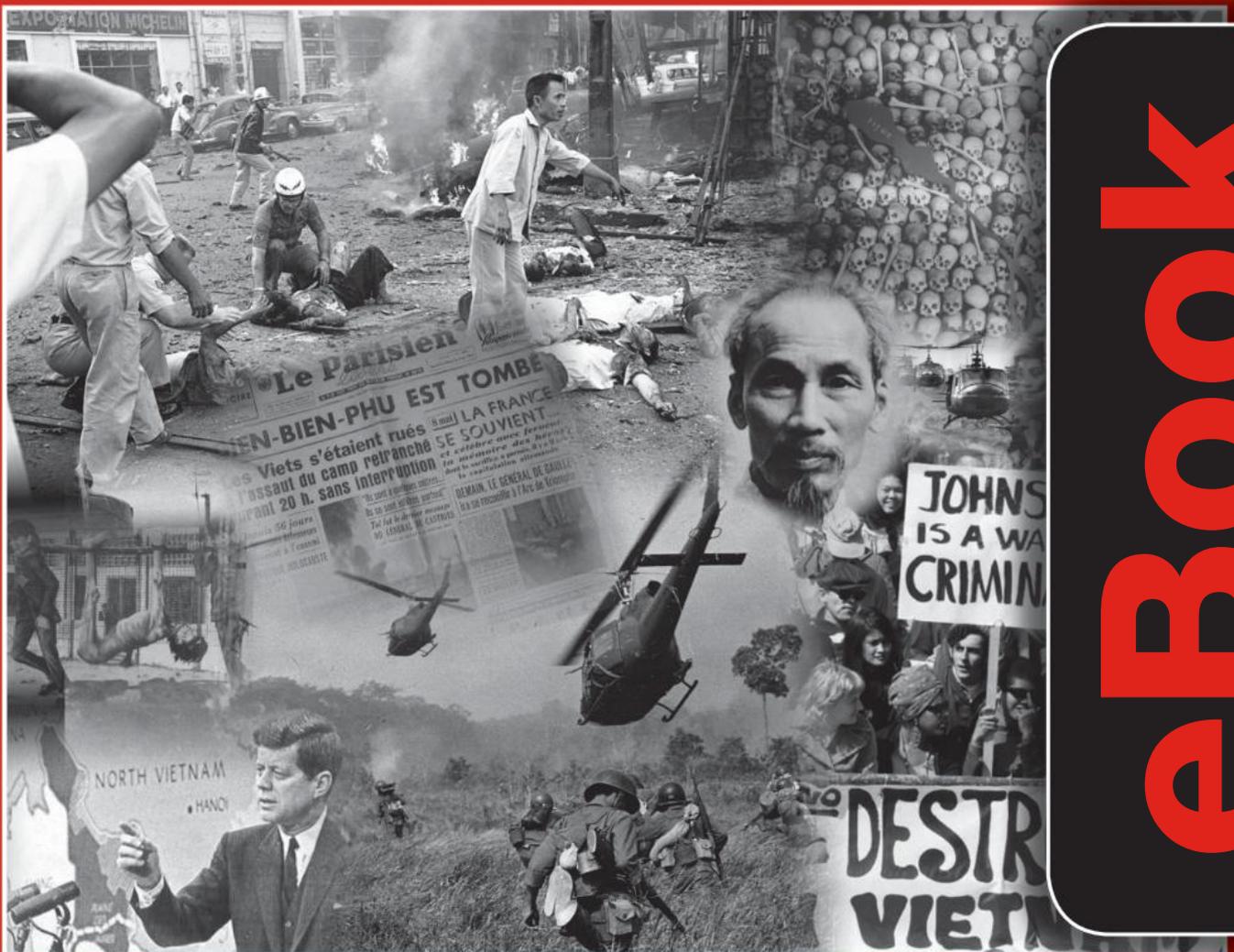


# Conflict in Indochina

1954-1979

by Ken Webb

Here it is: the factual detail, the historiography, revision exercises and advice on how to write responses on Conflict in Indochina 1954-1979.



eBook

*"Everything you wanted to know about Conflict in Indochina 1954-1979,  
but were afraid to ask."*

# Conflict in Indochina

## 1954-1979

by Ken Webb M.A. (Oxon), C.Ed

*“Everything you wanted to know about  
Indochina 1954-79, but were afraid to ask.”*

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1st Edition

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## About the author

Ken Webb was educated in the United Kingdom and graduated from the University of Oxford. He taught in several state schools before moving to Pymble Ladies' College where he taught Modern, Ancient and Extension History. In March 2008, he moved to Ravenswood School for Girls where he also taught the International Baccalaureate course in History. He is a member of the Independent Schools Examination Committee for Modern History. He frequently lectures and runs workshops for Year 12 and teacher groups in Sydney and Regional NSW. In addition to his own work, Ken Webb has contributed to colleagues' work and to newspapers and periodicals. He has also been a consultant on various history video documentaries. In 2012, Ken Webb was a NSW winner of the "National Excellence in Teaching" award.

Over the years, Ken Webb has written a wide range of study guides and textbooks for NSW and Australia wide, including *"Power and Authority in the Modern World"* (Nelson Cengage Learning), *"Discovering Australian History"* (CUP), *"The Augustan Age 44 BC – AD 14"* (Get Smart Education), *"World War 1: From Sarajevo to Versailles"* (Nelson Cengage Learning), *"Extension History: The Historians"* (HTA of NSW), *"Russia and the Soviet Union 1917-1941"* (Nelson Cengage Learning), *"Spartan Society to the Battle of Leuctra 371 BC"* (Get Smart Education)

**"Conflict in Indochina 1954-1979"** is one of fifteen titles in the "Everything you wanted to know about... but were afraid to ask" series written specifically for the new NSW Modern and Ancient History syllabuses commencing 2018-19. Other titles in this series include:

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## Author's note

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The purpose of this book – as with all titles in the “Everything you wanted to know about... but were afraid to ask” series – is to make life easy for students and teachers working their way through the ‘Peace and Conflict’ topic: Conflict in Indochina 1954-79. It is not intended to be the final word on Conflict in Indochina 1954-1979; nothing beats wide-reading and going back to the primary sources!

However, neither teachers nor students always have the time for such luxuries. Teachers have several other classes to worry about, not to mention a growing multitude of administrative and bureaucratic tasks to fulfill! Students have other subjects to study, and may also be burdened with a series of major works. Thus, “Everything you want to know...” steps in to make life easy.

The principal aims of this book are to:

- provide the essential factual detail needed to understand the topic;
- provide references to written and visual sources;
- provide an introduction to the essence of historiographical debate;
- provide ideas for approaching the types of questions that might appear when examined on *Conflict in Indochina 1954-1979*.

## Rationale for the structure of this book

---

“*Conflict in Indochina 1954-79*” is one of six topics in the ‘Peace and Conflict’ section of the Modern History syllabus, introduced in 2018 and examined for the first time in 2019. The syllabus divides the topic as follows:

- Survey: Decolonisation in Indochina
- Focus of study:
  - Conflict in Indochina 1954-64
  - The Second Indochina War
  - The spread of the conflict to Cambodia and Laos

These broad headings have been used to structure the book and have been broken down into sections closely based on the structure of the syllabus to make the topic more accessible to students. The three countries – Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos - have been treated separately throughout, except when it was logical to link them. Additional sections have been included on approaching the types of questions that could be set on this topic in the HSC examination.

## Think as historian

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A key problem historians have in explaining the Conflict in Indochina – or indeed any major historical event – is that we know what happened. Hindsight allows us to look back and isolate those developments which we can now see, from our current perspective, as the key issues. We can isolate the mistakes, criticise the leaders of the time and ask in incredulous tones:

- How could the Americans have allowed themselves to get dragged in like that?
- Surely the outside world must have known what the Khmer Rouge was doing in Cambodia?

However, when one is living in the middle of events there is no hindsight.

As the United States stepped up its involvement in Vietnam in 1965 and 1966, it seemed inconceivable that the greatest military and economic power in the history of the world could possibly be defeated by a rag tag guerilla army or a third rate nation like North Vietnam. Yet...

---

## Section 1 – Survey ■ Decolonisation in Indochina

# Chapter 1: Conflict in Vietnam 1946-1954

---

### Background (1): Indochina before the French

The region known as Indochina is located in South East Asia and comprises the modern-day countries of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. This region had long been of interest to foreign powers. In 258 BC, the Han Chinese took over Vietnam, naming the area Nam Viet. Over the next thousand years, Vietnamese culture was steadily affected by Chinese values such as **Confucianism**. The Vietnamese rebelled often against their Chinese overlords. Even today, the rebellion led by the Trung sisters in AD 40 is celebrated in Vietnam. Chinese control eventually came to an end in 938 with the beginning of the Ngo Dynasty. Vietnam continued to face attacks from the Chinese in the north and from the Angkor Empire (Cambodia) to the west.

By the late 16th century, Vietnam was dominated by two ruling families

- the Trinh family in the north
- and the Nguyen family in the south.

It was not until 1802 that Vietnam became a united nation following Nguyen Anh's victory over the Trinh family. He took the title Emperor Gia Long.

Society in Vietnam was feudal in nature. At the apex of the social pyramid was the emperor who ruled with '**the mandate of heaven**'. Beneath him came the aristocracy and the bureaucrats, whose position and privilege were based on their mastery of the old Confucian classics. Their **reactionary** attitudes did much to hinder development inside Vietnam. The mass of the population were peasants whose lives were a constant struggle against famine, the monsoon and exploitation by their 'betters'. The economy was based around agriculture which was largely traditional and subsistent in nature.

Gia Long was deeply suspicious of westerners in general and Christian missionaries in particular. Their teachings went against Vietnam's traditional ways and those missionaries who ventured into Vietnam were expelled or imprisoned. This policy of mild persecution became one of violence and cruelty under Gia Long's successors, Minh Mang and Thieu Tri. Thousands of missionaries and their Vietnamese converts were executed bringing calls for European intervention in the country, especially from France.

French intervention in Indochina was the result of several factors.

- the desire to protect Catholic missionaries, many of whom were French;
- the desire to match Britain in the contest for imperial possessions;
- the economic benefits that such colonial acquisitions were believed to bring;
- the hope of France's ruler, Napoleon III to achieve glory and expansion.

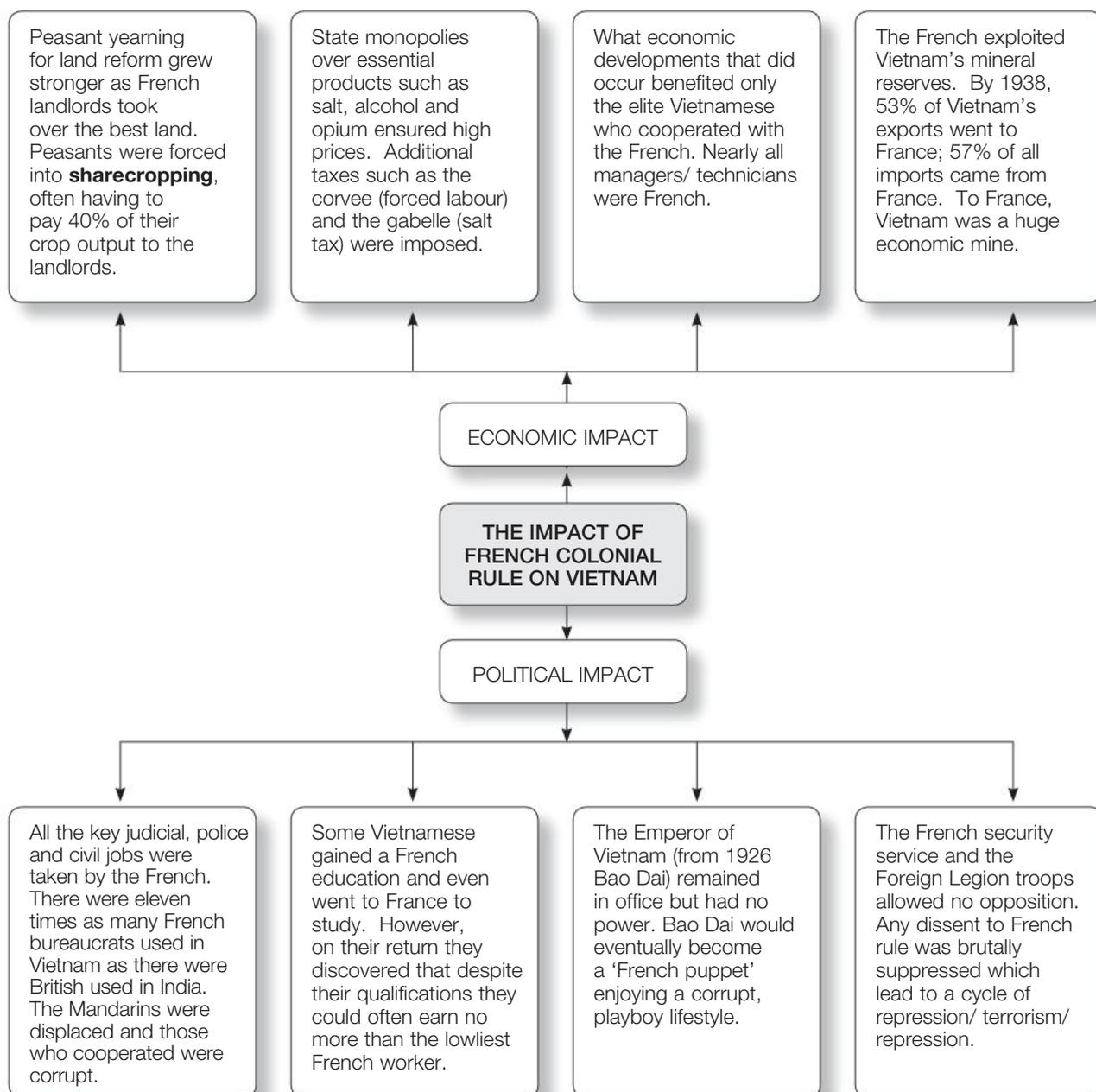
### Background (2): Indochina under the French

It took France about 35 years to complete its takeover of Indochina. In 1858, the French captured Tourane (Da Nang). The region around Saigon was taken over by 1862 and a

protectorate was declared over Cambodia in 1863. The southern region of Cochin-China was annexed in 1867 and Annam (central region) and Tonkin (northern region) became protectorates in 1883. Laos became a French protectorate in 1893.

The French liked to boast about their ‘mission civilisatrice’, and even today Vietnam can boast many examples of beautiful French architecture. However, the fundamental aim of the French in Indochina was economic exploitation. US President Franklin Roosevelt referred to this in 1944 when he stated: “France has milked it (Indochina) for 100 years. The people of Indochina are entitled to something better than that.” French rule brought not only economic exploitation of the Vietnamese people but also the gradual destruction of the traditional political and social structures. The impact of French rule in Vietnam is summarised in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 The Impact of French rule in Vietnam



### Background (3): The Growth of Independence movements

The harshness and exploitative nature of French rule inspired the development of nationalist opposition. At first, this opposition came from figures within the royal family and high-ranking **mandarins** whose aim was restore Vietnam's traditional structures. Many Vietnamese fought with French forces during World War I. When they returned to Vietnam, they brought with them new democratic and communist ideas. This new thinking inspired the creation of nationalist groups opposed to French rule. However, before 1940, their success was extremely limited due to the brutal efficiency of the French secret police.

- In 1923 the Constitutionalist Party was created; it sought liberal reform and peaceful protest. It failed.
- The Vietnamese Progressive Party, formed in 1926 sought to cooperate with France. It was denied legality and forced underground.
- Religious groups like the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao also sought independence.
- The strongest non-communist nationalist group was the Vietnamese Nationalist Party. An abortive coup in 1930 effectively destroyed it.
- In 1930, Ho Chi Minh formed the Indochinese Communist Party. Promising land reform as well as independence, it gained peasant support but French suppression made it ineffective before 1940.

### Background (4): 1940-1946

1940 – Japan's expansionist ambitions during World War II included Indochina. French authorities were forced to accommodate Japan's request to use facilities in North Vietnam.

1941 – Japan occupied all of Vietnam though the French were allowed to 'administer' the country. Japan's ability to defeat European powers inspired the Vietnamese but Japanese rule proved far more brutal than that of the French. Within four years, Vietnam was in the grip of a terrible famine.

1941 – Ho formed the Vietminh, a coalition of independence-minded groups, to fight the Japanese. The Communists were the major element of the Vietminh.

1941-45 – Aided by the US and China, the Vietminh fought a sustained guerrilla campaign against Japanese forces. The Vietminh's long-term aim was independence, and the nationalist nature of the organisation was emphasised. However, by 1945, the Communists were the most important part of the Vietminh.

1945 – At the Potsdam Conference in July, it was decided that France would eventually resume its control over Vietnam, following a brief occupation by British forces in the south, and Chinese forces in the north. Japan's surrender in August was followed by the August Revolution as the Vietminh captured Hanoi. On 2 September, Ho declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Within two weeks British and Chinese occupation troops arrived.

1946 – French forces returned in large numbers under commanders d'Argenlieu and Leclerc. Negotiations continued throughout the year between the French and Ho at a series of

conferences for example at Fontainebleau but they got nowhere. As the talks broke down, fighting between Vietminh and French forces broke out. A major French attack on Haiphong in November, which killed 6000 people, signalled the beginning of the war between France and the Vietminh.

### Exercise 1.1

Place the following events in the correct chronological order:

| Event                                  | Correct order  |
|--|----------------|
| The August Revolution                  | 1st event was  |
| Return of the French in numbers        | 2nd event was  |
| Ho's Declaration of Independence       | 3rd event was  |
| French attack on Haiphong              | 4th event was  |
| Surrender of Japan                     | 5th event was  |
| British/ Chinese occupation of Vietnam | 6th event was  |
| The Potsdam Conference                 | 7th event was  |
| Japan's move into northern Vietnam     | 8th event was  |
| Creation of the Vietminh               | 9th event was  |
| Negotiations between Ho and the French | 10th event was |

### The French-Vietnamese War 1946-54

By 1946 the Vietminh had a People's Liberation Army of 80 000. Ho felt the longer the war, the more chance he had of victory, believing the French would be ground down in a war of attrition. Ho referred to the war as a contest between a tiger and an elephant.

If the tiger stands still, the elephant will crush it. The tiger must run when the elephant comes. But when the large beast is resting, jump on its back and rip off the flesh. Eventually the elephant will bleed to death. This is essentially what happened to the French.

- Ho realised that full-frontal, conventional attacks on the French had to be avoided in favour of continual guerrilla attacks: harass the enemy, use booby traps, sabotage, ambushes, hit and run tactics.
- Ho introduced his "Twelves Recommendations" on ensuring army discipline. He ordered his troops "not to do what is likely to damage the land... of the people... not to bring hens into mountain people's houses.."

- By 1950 Chinese aid was flowing in and the Vietminh were able to attempt conventional battles.
- The French performed poorly: conventional attacks did not work, morale was low, and the army was ill-prepared for jungle guerrilla warfare.
- Peasant suffering in French-controlled areas compared poorly with the land reform being enacted in Vietminh areas.
- In 1953, General Navarre arrived to take control. He decided on the strategy of defending Laos by basing French forces at Dien Bien Phu near the Laos border.

### Increasing United States involvement <sup>1</sup>

The US had originally supported the Vietminh against French colonialism. Franklin Roosevelt's disparaging comment about French rule was referred to earlier. However, as the Cold War intensified in the late 1940s, the US saw the war in Indochina in Cold War terms. The French were seen as containing the spread of communism. "Containment" had become the basis of US foreign policy since the Truman Doctrine of 1947 (see Chapter 7). By 1954, the US were paying up to 80% of France's war costs.

### What do the historians have to say about 'Conflict in Vietnam 1946-54'?

#### *Max Hastings: Vietnam – An epic tragedy 1945-1975*

Hastings shows that by 1952 the Vietminh controlled 25% of the population in the south, 75% in central Vietnam and over 50% in the north. Faced with successful Vietminh tactics, the French put enormous effort into building fortifications. The 'De Lattre line' was created to protect the Red River delta. This involved the construction of concrete pillboxes from which a few men could hopefully control a particular location. The French built 2200 such structures that consumed fifty-one million cubic yards of concrete. This French policy:

*"...suited the Vietminh strategy of grignotage – gnawing away at French strength: they progressively eliminated such isolated positions, always in darkness..."* <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The details of the reasons for American involvement in Vietnam and the nature of that involvement will be covered fully in Chapters 7 and 8.

<sup>2</sup> Hastings, Max, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945-75*, William Collins, London, 2018, p 36

### An additional point worth considering regarding the US position at this time:

- For the Americans the issue of Indochina was seen within the context of the “loss of China”.
- The administration of President Truman (Democrat Party) was bitterly criticised by Republican Party figures inside the United States for failing to stop China falling to communism in 1949.
- They accused Truman of being weak in the face of communist activity in China.
- The question was being asked: “Whose fault was the loss of China?”



*President Truman*



*Mao Zedong*

At the time, nobody had the temerity to question the arrogance of the Republican position: “Who was the US to ‘lose’ a country? Should not China be allowed to decide its destiny?” Anti-communist feeling was reaching hysterical proportions inside the United States.

The United States had succeeded in ‘not’ losing South Korea (Korean War 1950-53). It would later be determined ‘not’ to lose South Vietnam. Future Democrat Party presidents (Kennedy and Johnson) would later be keen not to be seen as weak in the face of communism, hence their strong support for South Vietnam.

---

## Chapter 2:

# Nature of the Vietnamese victory against the French in 1954

---

### The Battle of Dien Bien Phu

The war between the French and the Vietminh lasted from 1946 to 1954. Commentators believed at the time that a modern, technological nation like France would have little difficulty defeating Ho's ragtag forces. However, by the early 1950s, the French were experiencing major problems in their campaign against the Vietminh.

- French conventional warfare tactics were ill suited to the mountainous jungle terrain of Vietnam. French forces seemed unable to cope with the Vietminh's hit and run, small scale **guerrilla warfare** tactics.
- The Vietminh gained widespread support from the Vietnamese people. Ho had enforced strict rules of 'good behaviour towards the peasants' on his troops which contrasted well with the contemptuous attitude of the French troops.
- Land reform in Vietminh controlled areas was popular.
- The Vietminh were fighting for their country; Ho claimed his people would fight for fifty years if need be and morale remained high. French morale steadily declined the longer the war dragged on.

As the French war effort steadily deteriorated, a new commander, General Navarre, was appointed to take control in 1953. He decided on a major strategic gamble. He established a giant French base at Dien Bien Phu near the Laotian border in a valley measuring 18kms by 5 kms. Both Navarre and the Vietminh military commander, Giap, understood the significance of this action.

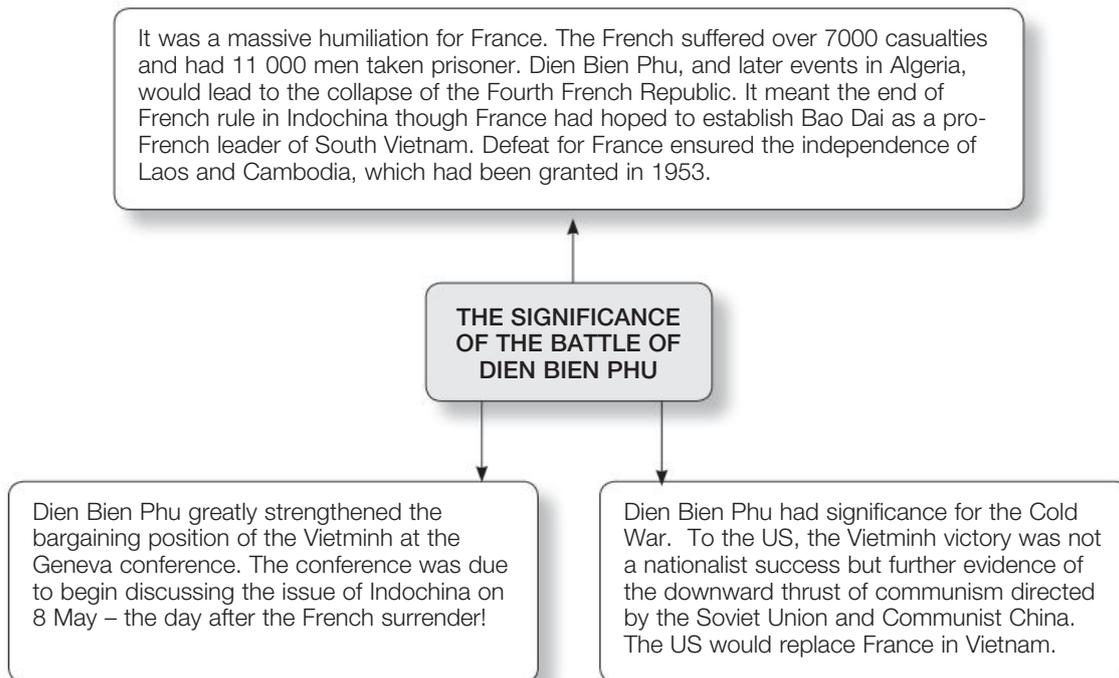
- Navarre believed that his position was impregnable and was almost inviting Giap to attack him in what would be a conventional set-piece battle.
- Giap, on the other hand, realised that though the risks were great, a victory at Dien Bien Phu could mean the end of the French.
- Thus, victory for either side here could be decisive in the outcome of the war.

12 000 French troops and supplies were parachuted into Dien Bien Phu. The valley was ringed by mountains and the French believed that their artillery could hit any spot surrounding them. Giap's forces exhibited almost superhuman efforts as they dragged heavy guns up to the mountains surrounding the valley. Dien Bien Phu was set for a siege which would last 57 days from 12 March to 7 May.

- By 16 March the Vietminh had destroyed the airstrip. The French were now cut off and reliant on parachute drops.
- Early Vietminh attacks resembled the suicidal frontal assault tactics of World War I. Giap then changed course. From early April, Vietminh troops gradually tightened their noose around the French by digging kilometres of trenches, gradually encroaching on French positions.
- The French base eventually shrunk to an area less than 2 kms by 2 kms and torrential rains turned it into a quagmire. From 1 May, wave after wave of Vietminh finally wore the French down. French forces surrendered on 7 May.

The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu was to be of decisive importance

**Figure 2.1 The decisive importance of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu**



## What do the historians have to say about “Nature of the Vietnamese victory against the French in 1954?”

### *Max Hastings: Vietnam – An Epic Tragedy 1945-75*

Hastings makes an interesting point in his analysis of the French defeat in 1954. Most historians would accept the view that there is nothing inevitable in history: just because something happened, this does not mean that it was bound to happen. However, when it comes to the Vietnamese victory in 1954, Hastings is willing to contradict this usual line of argument. He argues that there was nothing surprising about the eventual outcome. He highlights three factors.

After Dien Bien Phu, the French still had powerful forces. The army of Vietminh commander, General Giap, was exhausted and in no state to launch a general offensive. However, the will of the French government and people to continue the struggle against the Vietminh had evaporated.

French colonial rule had become unsustainable in the face of the resistance from the Vietnamese people.

The Americans had hoped that non-communist elements – a so-called ‘third force’ – might appear, but such elements were too weak.

Thus, Hastings concludes:

*“...there is an absolute lack of suspense about a narrative of France’s Indochina experience between 1945-1954..”*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hastings, M, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975*, William Collins, London, 2018, p 70

---

## Chapter 3:

# Significance of the Geneva Conference for Indochina in 1954

---

### The Geneva Peace Agreement: 1954

At the time of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, the four major world powers of the time – the USA, the Soviet Union, Britain and France – were meeting at Geneva. They began discussing the issue of Korea<sup>1</sup> on 26 April. Indochina was due for discussion on 8 May – the day after the French capitulation at Dien Bien Phu. The conference was attended by nine delegations – the US, the Soviet Union, Britain, France, China, Cambodia, Laos, the Vietminh and the (French-backed/ puppet) Bao Dai government based in South Vietnam. British Foreign Minister, Anthony Eden, commented later that the different parties would not make direct contact with each and there was a constant danger of one or more delegation walking out.

- The Vietminh representative, Pham van Dong, refused to recognise the Bao Dai government in the South and ignored the envoys from Laos and Cambodia.
- US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, refused to shake hands with the Chinese representative, Premier Zhou En Lai and accused Britain's Foreign Secretary, Antony Eden of not being tough enough.
- New French Premier, Pierre Mendes France, announced he would resign if a formal ceasefire had not been achieved by 20 July.

Though the Vietminh had been victorious at Dien Bien Phu, and Ho Chi Minh expected to achieve his dream of an independent, unified Vietnam, pressure was placed on the Vietminh to accept a divided Vietnam. Ho's chief backers were the Soviet Union and China. The Soviets were more concerned about the security situation in Europe and would have been happy to see the French presence continue in South Vietnam as it might weaken their presence in western Europe. China feared being dragged into another Korea style confrontation against the United States in Indochina. As a result, Ho Chi Minh and Pham van Dong were pressured by their backers to accept an agreement which was not going to produce a unified Vietnam.

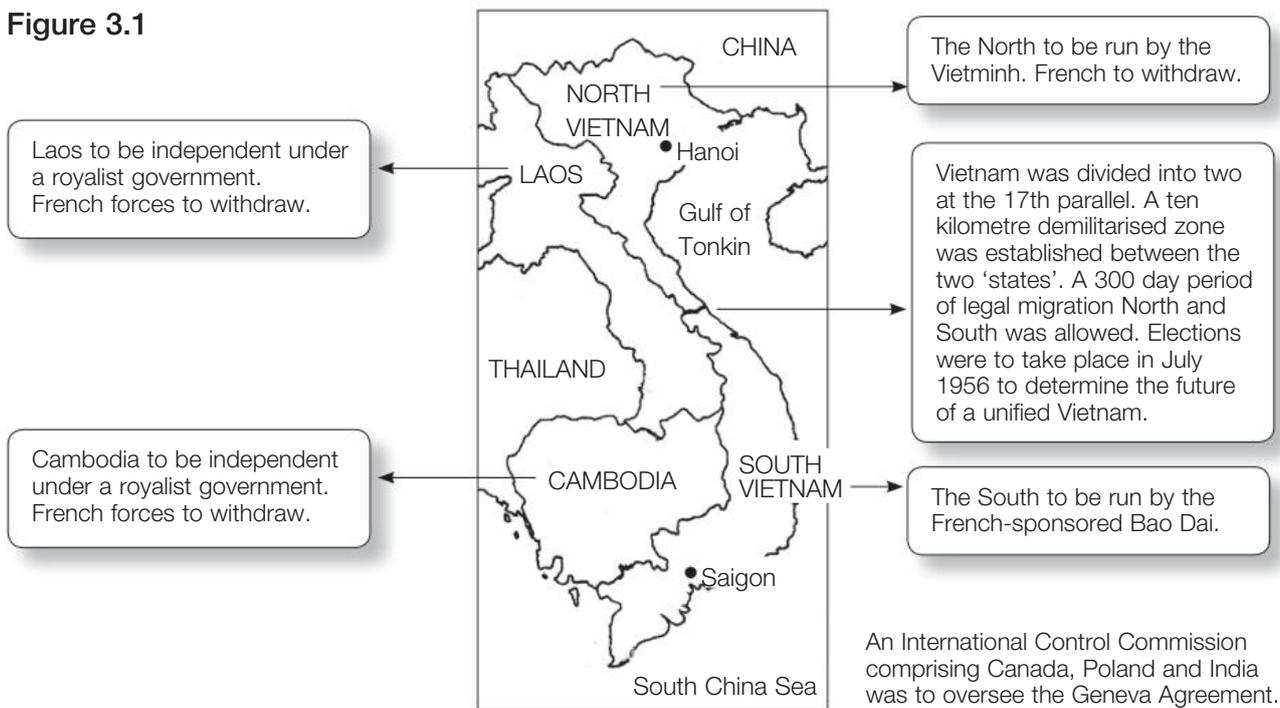
The result of the tensions at the conference and the behind the scenes pressures and secret meetings, which were a feature of the conference, was the Geneva Agreement of 1954. It was a compromise which satisfied nobody.

The key elements of the Geneva Agreement are shown in Figure 3.1.

---

<sup>1</sup> Following North Korea's invasion of South Korea in June 1950, UN forces led by the US intervened and succeeded in pushing the North back. Chinese troops entered the war in support of the North. The war dragged on till 1953. Korea remained divided at the 38th parallel (as it still is today).

Figure 3.1



Exercise 3.1

Using the terms in the box below, complete the following passage.

Most people expected a French \_\_\_\_\_ when war broke out in 1946. However, the \_\_\_\_\_ tactics used by the French proved to be no match for the \_\_\_\_\_ tactics used by the Vietminh. In 1953, the French commander, \_\_\_\_\_, established a base near the Laotian border at \_\_\_\_\_. The Vietminh commander, \_\_\_\_\_, accepted the challenge thrown out by the French. A siege lasting fifty-seven days now took place, resulting in a French surrender on \_\_\_\_\_. On \_\_\_\_\_ the Geneva Conference began discussing the Indochina situation. The conference was an acrimonious affair which resulted in a \_\_\_\_\_ agreement which satisfied nobody. Vietnam was to be divided at the \_\_\_\_\_ parallel, with \_\_\_\_\_ ruling the North and \_\_\_\_\_ ruling the South. In July 1956 \_\_\_\_\_ were to be held to decide the permanent fate of the country.

|               |           |            |              |    |
|---------------|-----------|------------|--------------|----|
| Dien Bien Phu | Giap      | compromise | conventional | Ho |
| victory       | 7 May     | elections  | Navarre      |    |
| 8 May         | guerrilla | Bao Dai    | 17th         |    |

## What do the historians have to say about the “Consequences of the Vietnamese victory against the French”?

### 1. Jean Lacouture: Ho Chi Minh

Lacouture argues that the concessions made by the Vietminh at Geneva came about because of the willingness of Ho Chi Minh to accept them. He suggests that even the promptings of China and the Soviet Union would not have been enough to achieve them. “The wisdom of such a sacrifice”, of cutting one’s losses again and surrendering much in the process, as had happened during the 1946 negotiations, could only have been promoted by the one man whose word would carry sufficient weight to carry the day.

*“...What can he have thought when news of the signing of the agreement at least reached Hanoi... The experience of forty years’ relentless fighting had convinced him that a man has never altogether won or altogether lost...”*<sup>2</sup>

### 2. Stanley Karnow: Vietnam

Karnow comments on the Americans’ keen desire not to be committed to anything signed at Geneva. US Secretary of State Dulles ordered the US delegation chief, Bedell Smith, to remain aloof and make no concessions to the Communists. Dulles knew, suggests Karnow, that whatever was going to come out of Geneva was going to be unsatisfactory.

*“...the Geneva Conference produced no durable solution to the Indochina conflict, only a military truce that awaited a political settlement, which never really happened. So the conference was merely an interlude between two wars – or rather, a lull in the same war.”*<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Edwin E Moise: The Vietnam Wars

Moise makes the point that for the Vietminh the Geneva Accords were a gamble. They were giving up a great deal of territory south of the 17th parallel which they controlled in return for a small area controlled by the French north of there. The expectation was that they would easily win elections in 1956. Moise further highlights the point that neither the US nor the State of Vietnam (South) promised to abide by the Accords. The US did not sign the Accords.

*“...However, the State of Vietnam was virtually powerless, and the influence of the United States was quite limited. The American leaders themselves were by no means confident that they would be able to prevent the reunification of Vietnam from occurring on schedule in 1956.”*<sup>4</sup>

2 Lacouture, J, Ho Chi Minh, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1967, p169

3 Karnow, S, Vietnam, Century Hutchinson, London, 1983, p 199

4 <http://www.clemson.edu/caah/history/FacultyPages/E&adMoise/viet4.html>

#### *4. Max Hastings: Vietnam – An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975*

Hastings tries to explain the surprising outcome of the Geneva Conference. One would have assumed that as the Vietminh had won, and the French (and thus the French-backed Saigon government) had lost the conflict, the Geneva Agreement would reflect this. However, Hastings says the Soviet Union was not that interested in the fate of Vietnam. China did not want a strong Vietnam to its south, and seemed to want to bring Laos and Cambodia into its sphere of influence. The Americans, on the other hand, believed that the interest of the two communist powers in Indochina was much greater than it actually was. This leads Hastings to conclude:

*“...Yet what was so extraordinary about the Accords was that the new Saigon government got so much, the triumphant Vietminh so little...”*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hastings, M, Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975, William Collins, London, 2018, p 79

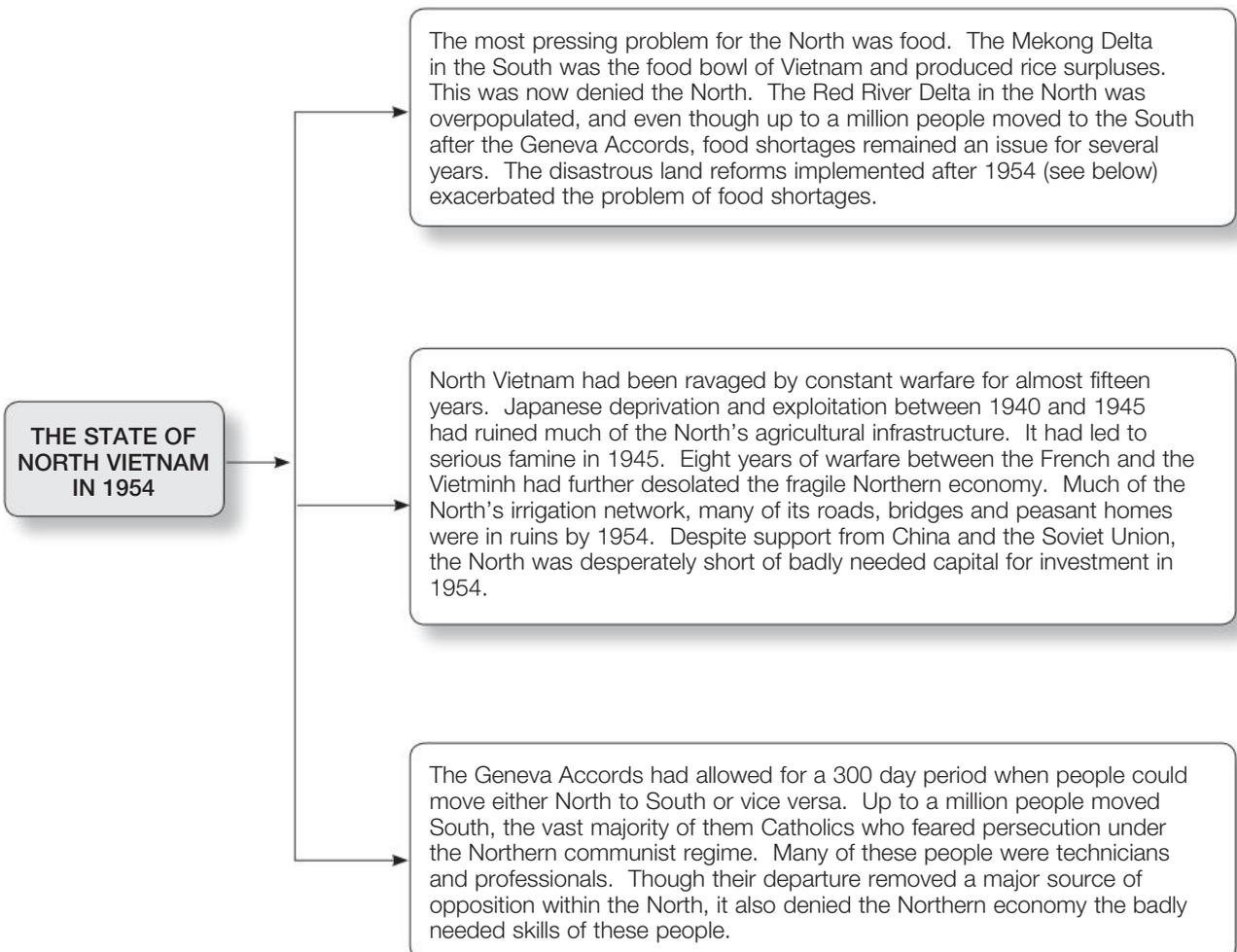
## Chapter 4: Political, social and economic developments within North Vietnam 1954-1960

The dream of an independent and unified Vietnam had been denied Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh a second time in 1954. His Declaration of Independence in September 1945 had been overlooked by the international community; the result was a further eight years of war. Victory at Dien Bien Phu secured only half the country following pressure from the Soviet Union and China, and Ho's own caution. The struggle for independence was not over. However, from the time of the Geneva Conference to the early 1960s, the leadership of North Vietnam had to focus on its major internal problems.

### The state of North Vietnam in 1954

Following the ravages of the Japanese occupation and the French war, North Vietnam was in a disastrous state in 1954. This is summarised in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 The state of North Vietnam in 1954

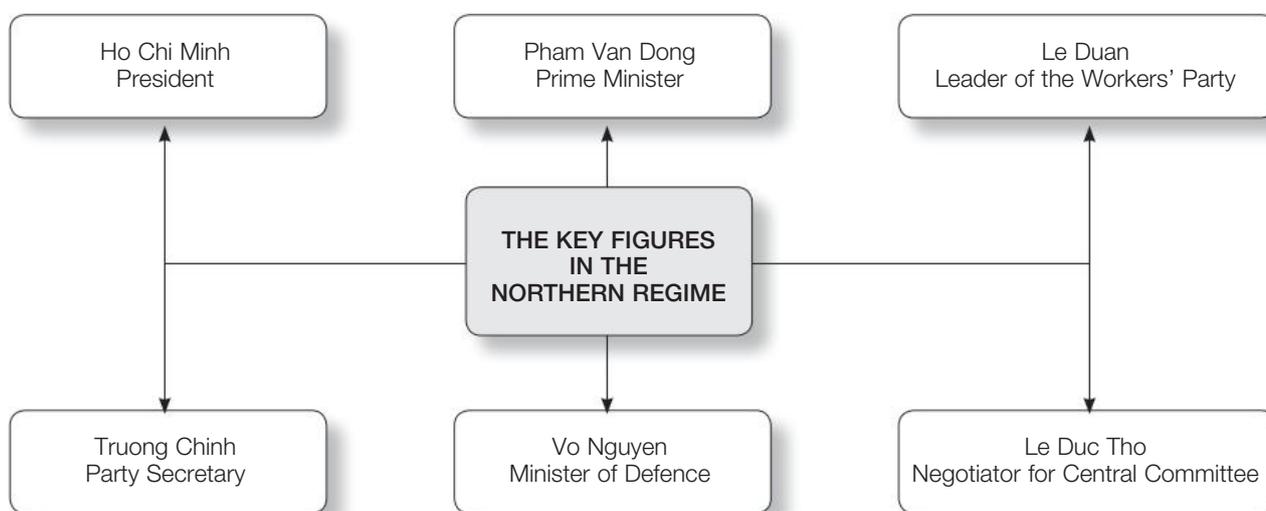


## The Agricultural Tribunals

North Vietnam quickly developed into a one-party dictatorship. Technically, the new Northern government (the DRV – Democratic Republic of Vietnam) included not only communists but also those non-communists who had fought with the Vietminh against the French. Indeed, for a while some non-communists did hold positions within the government. However, it soon became apparent that power rested in the hands of the Vietnam Workers' Party (the **Lao Dong**). Policy was decided by the Workers' Party Politburo and the key aim now was the promotion of the socialist revolution.

Despite its early problems, the leadership of the DRV proved to be extremely stable. Now aged 64, Ho Chi Minh was elevated to the realm of elder statesman though he held the position of President. The key players in the Northern regime were:

Figure 4.2 The North Vietnamese leadership



In addition to the party's primary political role, it also dominated a host of mass 'associations' which organised the population, eg a peasants' association, a youth association. All groups within society found themselves under strict party control, including journalists, writers and cultural groups.

The Geneva Accords allowed for the movement of people between North and South. Almost 140 000 Vietminh political and military activists moved north and had to be accommodated. Many remained in the South to 'wait and see' what future developments might determine.

Soon after Geneva, major divisions appeared within the Northern government on the path to follow to 'create a socialist society in the North'.

- Some, like Giap, argued for a moderate program of reform. Giap's view was that with the disastrous state of the Northern economy, radical policies could only make the situation worse.
- Giap was opposed by radical elements in the party 'on the left', led by Party Secretary Truong Chinh. Truong Chinh wanted to follow the Chinese model of rapid land reform.

Truong Chinh won the argument and the DRV was subjected to the disastrous activities of the Agricultural Reform Tribunals. The purpose of the Tribunals was supposedly to supervise the redistribution of land. However, it quickly descended into a witch hunt purging of landlords, wealthy peasants, French collaborationists and anyone not sufficiently enthusiastic towards the new regime. These people became collectively described as 'feudalists'.

- The Tribunals became a byword for terror, denunciation and death.
  - People were accused, given quick trials – the verdict never being in doubt – and then equally quickly sentenced to a spell in a re-education camp or worse.
  - Many people faced sentencing without even the farce of a trial.
  - Over 100 000 people died during this campaign of purging.
- Panic and fear now took over.
  - Many denounced friends to proclaim their own loyalty.
  - Many Vietminh fighters who had valiantly fought the French now found themselves subject to baseless accusations.
  - Thousands of innocent people were swept up into the process as individuals took the opportunity to settle personal scores.

Food production further declined making a bad situation ever more disastrous. The leadership soon faced violent opposition from the very people who had been engaging in valiant battle against the French only a few years earlier. In June 1956 there were peasant risings. In November 1956, French-style methods had to be used to put down peasant revolts in Ho's home province of Nghe An; over 6000 people were either killed or deported. An 'Intellectuals' Revolt' in Hanoi at the same time received equally ferocious treatment. The DRV seemed on the verge of collapse and there were even some in the US who believed that perhaps their Southern leader, Diem, might have won a national election in 1956!

With disaster looming, Ho stepped in and asserted his authority. He admitted that errors had been made and in 1958 the Tribunals were abandoned for a much more moderate program of Cooperativisation Plans. The Cooperative operated on the idea that villagers shared out the labour and the responsibilities. Truong Chinh lost his post of General Secretary. Many people who had been purged were released. The violence did not cease immediately as those now released took their chance to take revenge on those who had falsely accused them.

Having flirted with absolute disaster the DRV authorities managed to turn the situation around. By 1960, over 85% of the North's peasant population was participating in the Cooperativisation program. Food production had increased to the point that the North could feed itself, needing only the occasional imports. Living standards had risen and politically the North's internal position had stabilised.

### Exercise 4.1

Match the phrase on the left with one of the answers in the box below. Place your answer in the space provided.

| Phrase to be considered                       | Answer which matches the phrase |
|---|---------------------------------|
| Supporter of radical land reform              |                                 |
| Suspected traitors to the party               |                                 |
| The Vietnam Workers' Party                    |                                 |
| Opponent of radical land reform               |                                 |
| He stepped in to moderate the reform program  |                                 |
| Plan for villagers to share farming work      |                                 |
| Vehicle for purging suspected traitors        |                                 |
| Province where major peasant revolts occurred |                                 |

|                       |             |              |         |
|-----------------------|-------------|--------------|---------|
| Lao Dong              | cooperative | Truong Chinh | Giap    |
| Agricultural Tribunal | feudalists  | Ho Chi Minh  | Nghe An |

### Industry

North Vietnam made significant strides in the area of industry. There was a systematic process of **nationalisation** of all previously French-owned companies, the major coal and textile concerns and other large businesses. Banks and public utilities were also nationalised. Some smaller businesses were allowed to continue under private control but the government imposed a series of regulations affecting things such as prices, wages and output.

- Following the Soviet model, a Three-Year Economic Plan was put in place in 1958.
- Significant economic aid was received from the Soviet Union and China.

Despite the trials and tribulations of the Agricultural Tribunal period, by 1960 North Vietnam had made significant economic progress. National income had grown, the country's transportation capacity had doubled, the country was usually able to feed itself and North Vietnam had the highest economic growth rate of any Asian country.

### Foreign Policy

In the context of the Cold War of the 1950s, it is not surprising that relations between the **DRV** and the United States were frosty. The US closed its Hanoi embassy in December 1955. To Washington, the DRV was not an independent nation but merely a pawn in the game of worldwide communist insurgency being directed from Moscow.

Throughout the 1950s, North Vietnam relied heavily upon both the Soviet Union and China.

- Chinese rice imports had been crucial during the disastrous Agricultural Tribunal period of 1954-7.
- Soviet technological aid had been vital to resurrect the DRV's industrial sector.

However, North Vietnam was not a mere acolyte willing to do the bidding of its two giant communist allies. Ho Chi Minh was grateful for Soviet/ Chinese assistance. However, he no more intended to allow the Russians and Chinese to dictate to him than he had been willing to allow the French and Japanese, or would allow the Americans.

By the late 1950s, there was an added complication to DRV foreign policy. The Soviet Union and China were drawing apart, due partly to ideological differences, and partly to age-old great power rivalry. On occasions this “*Sino-Soviet split*” even broke out into armed conflict along their common border. North Vietnam sought to avoid taking sides in this conflict, realising that the friendship of both would be needed if, or when, it found itself taking on the South with its great power ally, the United States.

### Exercise 4.2

Circle the correct response – THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE - to each statement in the left hand column.

|   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 1. North Vietnam’s economy was still in major trouble by 1960.  | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 2. Relations between the DRV and the US remained strong throughout the 1950s.                         | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 3. The DRV nationalised most economic enterprises after 1954.   | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 4. The DRV had little need of Soviet/ Chinese aid in the period immediately after 1954.               | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 5. Ho Chi Minh was happy to follow directives from the Soviet Union and China.                        | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 6. Relations between the Soviet Union and China had worsened by 1960.                                 | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 7. Ho Chi Minh was eager to avoid taking sides in the Sino-Soviet conflict.                           | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 8. The United States believed that the Soviet Union directed all communist activity around the world. | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |

### What do the historians have to say about “Political, social and economic developments within North Vietnam: 1954-60”?

#### 1. James Harpur: *War Without End*

Harpur describes the difficulties the North faced in the 1950s with the Agricultural Tribunals and the efforts made by the DRV to maintain neutrality in the conflict between its two giant communist allies. The results of the DRV’s efforts in the 1950s were significant:

*“...it allowed the Communist Party to strengthen and reinforce its control over northern Vietnam and, secondly, the economic consolidation put North Vietnam in a strong position to confront the problem of a divided country.”*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Harpur, J, *War Without End*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991, p43

## 2. Gabriel Kolko: Vietnam: Anatomy of a War 1940-75

In his summing up of the DRV's introduction of the Cooperativisation program, Kolko comments how the peasants appreciated the security and stability which the new system offered them. The DRV leadership realised the disastrous impact of their radical efforts at land reform which had demoralised many in the party. He concludes:

*"...The Party sought, above all, to avoid errors which might renew the corrosive class divisions that had marked its earlier, hasty reform efforts."* <sup>2</sup>

## 3. Stanley Karnow: Vietnam

Karnow suggests that the DRV was lucky to get away with its brutal repression of its peasants in 1956. It coincided with the Hungarian revolt and the Suez Crisis which grabbed the world's attention at the time. <sup>3</sup> Though Giap acknowledged major errors on the part of the Party, attempts were made to shift the blame:

*"...The regime, seeking a scapegoat, placed the blame on...Truong Chinh, and dismissed him from the post of secretary-general of the Lao Dong...Years later, the Vietnamese Communists would contend that they had been pushed into the program by Chinese advisors..."* <sup>3</sup>

### An additional point worth considering

The anti-North Vietnamese stance of successive United States administrations was a tragic and unnecessary mistake. US policy is understandable in the light of the Cold War developments, but mistaken nonetheless. Warm US-Vietnamese relations existed before the First Indochina War (1946-54) and could have prospered.

- President Roosevelt had long berated the French for its treatment of Indochina.
- Vietminh guerrillas had provided enormous assistance to American pilots who had been shot down or who had crashed in Vietnam during their missions against the Japanese during World War II.
- After 1945, Ho had wanted to work with the United States not against it. He had communicated as much to President Truman.
- It was no accident that Ho had included in his September 1945 'Declaration of Independence' phrases taken directly from Thomas Jefferson's 1776 'Declaration of Independence'.



President Roosevelt



Ho Chi Minh



President Truman

<sup>2</sup> Kolko, G, Vietnam: Anatomy of a War 1940-75, Allen and Unwin, London, 1986, p 68

<sup>3</sup> Soviet troops invaded Hungary to crush an anti-Soviet revolt; 30 000 Hungarians were killed. British, French and Israeli forces attacked Egypt following President Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal.

<sup>4</sup> Karnow, S, Vietnam, Century Hutchinson, London, 1983, p226

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## Chapter 5:

# Political, social and economic developments within South Vietnam: 1954-60

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The French position after Dien Bien Phu was confused. It had suffered a humiliating defeat and the Geneva Agreement stipulated that French forces had to leave Laos, Cambodia and those areas of Vietnam north of the 17th parallel. France had actually granted the State of Vietnam (South) its independence in June 1954. However, the Bao Dai regime which was now in power, was looking towards the United States not France. This tendency increased after Bao Dai appointed Ngo Dinh Diem as his Prime Minister. The French were not keen on Diem but US President Eisenhower's administration had faith that, under Diem, South Vietnam would become strong enough to stand up to future communist expansionism. As American influence increased in South Vietnam, France continued to withdraw its remaining forces. By the end of 1955, the French presence in Indochina had come to an end after almost a century of involvement.

### Ngo Dinh Diem – Biography from 1901 to 1954

|      |  |
|------|--|
| 1901 | Ngo Dinh Diem was born in Hue, into a Mandarin family; he was the third of six sons in a family comprising nine children. Diem's family was devoutly Roman Catholic.   |
| 1907 | Diem's father, Kha, resigned from his post in the imperial household in protest at the French removal of the Emperor, Thanh Thai. Kha became a farmer. Diem worked on the family farm and attended a Catholic school.  |
| 1916 | Diem entered a monastery. Though a dedicated Catholic, Diem decided against a religious career and took up study at the School of Public Administration and Law.   |
| 1921 | Having topped his class, Diem entered the civil service. He rose steadily through the ranks of the French colonial bureaucracy.  |
| 1926 | At the age of 25, Diem became a provincial governor.   |
| 1933 | Diem became Bao Dai's Interior Minister. However, by now Diem had developed very strong nationalist beliefs and he often encountered opposition from the French as he called for greater rights for the Vietnamese. France's refusal to bring in a Vietnamese legislature led to his resignation. For the next two decades Diem held no formal post and was frequently a target of French security surveillance. |
| 1945 | When offered the post of Premier in a Japanese puppet Bao Dai government in August, he declined. In September he was arrested by the Vietminh.   |
| 1946 | Diem turned down an offer from Ho Chi Minh to join the Vietminh. He moved to Saigon and jointly established the Vietnam National Alliance which demanded from France greater autonomy for Vietnam. He campaigned for a 'third force' in Vietnamese politics which was neither communist nor French.  |
| 1950 | The Vietminh sentenced Diem to death in absentia. He left Vietnam and went to Japan and the United States where he lobbied American officials to support his 'third force' idea for Vietnam. With cold war tensions heightened, Diem was beginning to be seen by some as a possible non-communist figure in a future Vietnamese government.  |

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| 1951-1954 | Diem spent this time in the United States, staying at a catholic seminary in New Jersey. However, he was also making contacts with political and academic figures.  |
| 1954      | Diem was in France at the time of the Geneva Conference. Bao Dai invited Diem to become Premier of the State of Vietnam (South). He arrived back in Saigon on 26 June and was formally appointed Premier on 7 July. |

## Diem consolidates his power

When Diem arrived back in South Vietnam his position was not strong. He was not well known, he had no military backing and was nominally at least, subject to the will of Emperor Bao Dai. In fact, Diem was opposed by almost every group in the country – Bao Dai’s supporters, Buddhists, pro-French groups, religious sects and of course Ho’s supporters. Furthermore, he had inherited a country that was in chaos and facing total economic, social and political collapse.

- Because of the Geneva Agreement, up to one million refugees had flooded into South Vietnam from the North. The vast majority were Catholics. These people had to be fed, housed and found employment.
- However, the South was already in an economic mess. As in the North, the war had led to the destruction of many of the country’s roads, bridges, factories, plantations and irrigation systems.
- There were widespread food shortages and high unemployment. Destitution in the countryside had led thousands of landless peasants to move to Saigon.
- Diem also faced major political problems. He faced opposition from powerful religious sects such as the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao.
- Organised criminal gangs had flourished in Saigon. These gangs threatened not only law and order but also carried political clout. The Binh Xuyen syndicate controlled the police force.

However, within eighteen months Diem had not only managed to survive against all the odds, he had consolidated his power and made himself almost unassailable. In part this was due to the solid backing Diem received from the United States government. As mentioned above, Diem arrived with almost nothing. However:

*“...What he did have was the complete support of Colonel Lansdale and all the money, manpower, weapons, training, propaganda, and the political savvy in the **CIA’s covert-action war chest...**”*<sup>1</sup>

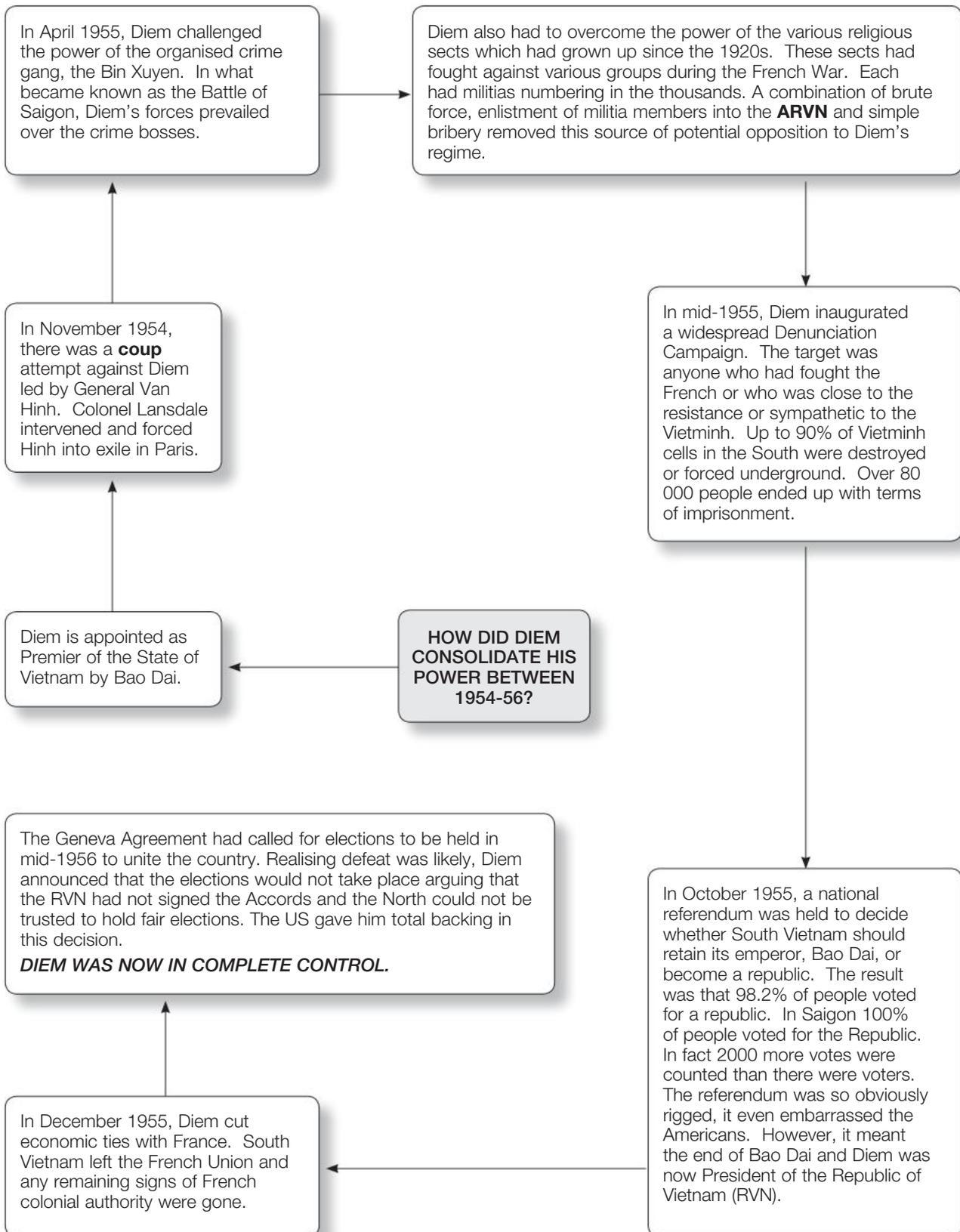
The United States proved willing to fully back Diem. In early 1955, an aid package worth \$322 million was granted. By the early 1960s, the economy of South Vietnam was totally reliant on the United States.<sup>2</sup>

However, Diem’s ability to so quickly consolidate his power was also the result of his determination and his steely nerve. Figure 3.1 highlights the steps taken by Diem to achieve this.

<sup>1</sup> McGehee, R, *Deadly Deceits: My 25 Years in the CIA*, Sheridan Square, New York, 1982

<sup>2</sup> The reasons for, and means by which, US involvement became so extensive will be covered in Chapters 7, 8 and 9.

**Figure 5.1 Diem consolidates his power: 1954-56**



**Exercise 5.1**

Place the following events in the correct chronological order:

| Event   | Correct order  |
|---|----------------|
| Economic ties with France are cut                     | 1st event was  |
| Diem is appointed Prime Minister by Bao Dai           | 2nd event was  |
| Diem launches the Denunciation Campaign               | 3rd event was  |
| Cancellation of the nationwide elections              | 4th event was  |
| Referendum result turns South Vietnam into a Republic | 5th event was  |
| Diem defeats the Bin Xuyen                            | 6th event was  |
| Failed coup led by General Hinh                       | 7th event was  |
| Diem defeats the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao              | 8th event was  |
| Diem returns to Saigon                                | 9th event was  |
| US grants South Vietnam an aid package of \$322m      | 10th event was |

**The RVN – authoritarian, even totalitarian?**

Throughout the late 1950s, Ngo Dinh Diem was hailed by the Americans as a great national leader, a model anti-communist. What Diem could not be hailed as was a great democrat. Diem was zealously anti-communist; this was enough for the Americans. However, the Republic of Vietnam was not a democracy. In fact, the regime of Diem contained many elements of not only authoritarianism but even totalitarianism. Not only was his regime anti-democratic in substance, it was also corrupt and acted in an increasingly arbitrary manner.

Diem trusted only his close family. He had no close friends, had never married and so chose to surround himself only with members of his immediate family. The Diem regime provides a classic case of **nepotism** in government.

- His brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, was Diem's closest advisor, the person he trusted above all others.
  - Nhu was in charge of the police, and all the military and intelligence services throughout South Vietnam.
- Another brother, Ngo Dinh Can, had extensive control over many aspects of the nation's economy.

- A third brother, Ngo Dinh Thuc, was Archbishop of Hue.
  - Thuc's interest ranged well beyond the spiritual. He established a catholic network which provided a small power base for Diem.
  - He also involved himself in a variety of business ventures including real estate and host of other investments.
- Another brother, Nguyen Dinh Luyen, was a diplomat and for a while was the South Vietnamese ambassador in London.
- Diem never married, indeed remained celibate throughout his life. In the absence of a presidential wife, the role of South Vietnam's 'First Lady' was taken by Tran Le Xuan, the wife of Ngo Dinh Nhu.
  - Madame Nhu ran the Women's Solidarity Movement which attempted to impose a strict morality on Vietnamese women with its attempt to limit divorce, access to contraception, prostitution, dancing and beauty contests.
  - She was a controversial figure, especially with her comment about the later Buddhist opposition to Diem.<sup>3</sup>

Having consolidated his position by 1956, Diem continued to tighten his hold on power. Only one political party was allowed in the country, the Can Lao or 'Personalist Labour Revolutionary Party'. This was under the control of Nhu. Nhu furthered tightened his control by using the Can Lao as a **Gestapo**-style secret police force. Anybody who was suspected of opposition to the regime could be arrested, imprisoned, tortured and executed. In 1958 it was estimated that there were over 40 000 political prisoners in South Vietnam; by 1961 the figure was thought to be over 150 000. It was enough to be suspected of harbouring pro-communist sentiments.

- A law enacted in August 1956 called Ordinance 47 made it a capital offence to be a communist or associated with communists.
- It has been estimated that up to 12 000 people were executed between 1955 and 1957 under this law.
- Law 10/ 59 passed in 1959 gave military tribunals the right to try people suspected of communist links.

There was routine strict censorship and any newspaper that did not toe the party line would be closed down. In 1962 the civil service came under military control. Even economic affairs came under increasing government control.

Early on, the Diem regime tried to reverse some of the land reform measures that had been implemented by the Vietminh during the years of the French war. Landlords were allowed to return and claim their lands. They could demand payments of past rents that they had lost. The lives of the peasants once again became much tougher. Diem was well aware that there was still lingering support for Ho in rural communities and that many Vietminh cadres had stayed behind in the South after the Geneva Agreement. To counter this, whole communities of villagers were forcibly relocated to 'government protected' sites known as 'Agrovilles'. The impetus for this policy came from the belief that the ordinary peasants could be removed from communist influence. The result of the Agroville policy proved disastrous for a variety of reasons:

- The areas to which the peasants were sent often contained very poor land. This reduced farm output and led to growing poverty in rural areas.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 6

- As life in the Agrovilles became tougher, many peasants drifted to the cities in the hope of finding something better. Life in the cities was often just as tough.
- The Agrovilles were often situated far from the villagers' homes and hence the graves of their ancestors. The connection between Vietnamese peasants and their ancestral homes was a strong one. Removal from these traditional sites caused great upset and bitterness.
- The overall impact of the Agrovillage policy was to make likely increased recruitment into the ranks of the Vietcong. <sup>4</sup>

## The 'economic miracle' of South Vietnam

For some time, the United States was effusive in its praise for Diem's running of South Vietnam. In 1957, President Eisenhower called Diem '*the miracle man of Asia*'. LIFE Magazine said at the time that "*Diem is respected today for the miracles he has wrought*". When Mayor Wagner of New York welcomed Diem to his city in 1957, he described Diem as a "*man to whom freedom is the very breath of life*". In 1961, Vice-President Lyndon Johnson visited Saigon and called Diem "*the Winston Churchill of South East Asia*". <sup>5</sup>

The praise heaped on Diem by the likes of Eisenhower was really a comment about the state of the South Vietnamese economy. It was booming. As massive amounts of US aid continued to pour into the country, new factories were established producing textiles, cement and sugar; transport schemes were developed. Saigon became a bustling, westernised city; Ford motor vehicles and Coca Cola were everywhere. The Saigon Middle Classes were doing very well.

However, South Vietnam's prosperity was only superficial.

- It was totally reliant on American **largesse**. If for any reason American generosity ever dried up, the economy would collapse overnight.
- As ever more US money entered the country, the opportunities for corruption abounded. Diem proved either unwilling or unable to prevent this.
- There was a growing disparity between life in the city and life in the countryside.
  - Saigon was an exciting, energetic place and its middle classes were enjoying all the luxuries that western capitalist society could offer.
  - However, the countryside was steeped in poverty.
- This was the result of several factors:
  - little of the US aid reached beyond the city;
  - Diem's policies of reversing earlier Vietminh land reforms had hurt the peasantry;
  - some of the best land around Saigon had been turned into catholic enclaves for the refugees who had fled south after the Geneva Agreement.

The combination of economic inequality, the Agrovillage Program and the regime's stern repression did much to fuel the growing opposition to the regime. <sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 6

<sup>5</sup> When Johnson was asked by a journalist if he really meant what he said, Johnson replied: "*Shit, Diem's the only boy we got out there*".

<sup>6</sup> This will be covered in more detail in Chapter 6.

**Exercise 5.2**

Using the information from the text, answer the following questions.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. What is meant by the term nepotism?   |  |
| 2. Why was Ngo Dinh Nhu of such importance to Diem?  |  |
| 3. Who was Tran Le Xuan?   |  |
| 4. Provide examples of the repressive nature of the Diem regime.   |  |
| 5. What was an 'Agroville'?  |  |
| 6. Why did the peasants oppose the Agroville program so strongly?  |  |
| 7. How was Diem's performance as RVN leader viewed in the United States?   |  |
| 8. Why was the South Vietnamese booming in the late 1950s/ early 1960s?  |  |
| 9. Indicate two fundamental problems with South Vietnam's economy.   |  |
| 10. What did Vice President Johnson's comment to the journalist suggest about the true US attitude towards Diem? |  |

### What do the historians have to say about the "Political, social and economic developments within South Vietnam: 1954-60"?

#### 1. Michael Maclear: *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War*

Maclear describes the regime's land redistribution policies. It was a system riddled with patronage and nepotism, with the best land going to the highest bidder. Maclear suggests that under Diem, the peasants had to pay more for their land than they had under the French. As opposition to the reforms grew, so too did Nhu's repression. Arbitrary arrests, Gestapo-like raids and torture became common and these were not directed just against possible communist sympathisers. Maclear quotes Diem's last military Chief of Staff, General Tran Van Don:

*"...The repression, however, spread to people who simply opposed their regime, such as heads or spokesmen of other political parties, and against individuals who were resisting extortion by some of the government officials."*<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Maclear, M, *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War*, Thames Methuen, London, 1981, p73

## 2. Sean Brawley, Chris Dixon and Jeffrey Green: Conflict in Indochina

Brawley and co make the point that there was not a great deal of difference in the way the North and the South were run after the Geneva Agreement. Life in both North and South included denunciation, repression, tough living conditions and a reliance on foreign aid.

However, the North had settled down by 1960 and its security problems had been greatly reduced. The Southern regime had absorbed a million people who could have made life harder for the northern government had they stayed, while it had to deal with thousands of opponents who had stayed in the South after 1954.

*“...By 1960 the South’s internal security problems continued to grow despite (or because of) Diem’s repression.”*<sup>8</sup>

## 3. H G Slingsby: Rape of Vietnam

In his polemical and emotionally charged book, Slingsby does not hold back in his condemnation of the policies of the Diem regime. He describes the Agroville program as a policy carried out with no finesse. Peasants were ejected from their villages which were then burnt down. They then had to engage in forced labour to build the new Agroville, build the moat, set up the barbed-wire for the ‘new concentration camp’. As resistance increased, so did government repression with troops engaging in torture and massacre.

*“...To “legalise” the situation, the infamous law 10/59 was passed. This provided for two punishments only, death by guillotine or life imprisonment, for anyone suspected of harbouring an intent (his bolding) to commit a crime against the “security of the State”.*<sup>9</sup>

## 4. Max Hastings: Vietnam – An Epic Tragedy 1945-75

Hastings makes the point that Diem was very much his own man. He would not be told what to do by the Americans, and he consistently rejected advice that was offered. Such advice included stopping the favouritism of Catholics, ending his preference for appointments based on nepotism rather than merit, checking corruption and tolerating critics.

*“...the advice he rejected was that which might have secured his survival and even success...”*<sup>10</sup>

8 Brawley, S, Dixon, C, Green, J, Conflict in Indochina, CUP, Melbourne, 2005, p 69

9 Slingsby, HG, Rape of Vietnam, Modern Books Press, New Zealand, 1966, p 56

10 Hastings, M, Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975, William Collins, London, 2018, p 98

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## Chapter 6:

# Military and political developments within Vietnam to 1964

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### Before the National Liberation Front: 1954-59

Ho and the Vietminh were deeply disappointed with the outcome of the Geneva Agreement of 1954. Having fought and defeated the French, Ho expected that his country would become independent and united. However, as was explained in Chapter 3, pressure was placed on Ho by the Soviet Union and China to settle for 'half a nation'. The Geneva Agreement called for national elections to be held in mid-1956 which would decide the future of Vietnam. Most commentators at the time expected the Vietminh to easily win these elections. However, President Diem decided that the elections would not take place. He argued that the **RVN** had not signed the Geneva Agreement and so was not obliged to have the elections. He further argued that the North could not be trusted to hold fair elections, this coming from the man who had so outrageously rigged the southern referendum on the monarchy the previous year.

Following the Geneva Agreement, many Vietminh fighters moved north of the 17th parallel. However, tens of thousands remained in the South. They were ordered to bury their weapons and become absorbed into southern life. Now was not the time to achieve unification through armed struggle. The Northern communist government had several reasons for urging patience and caution on their southern comrades:

- Both the Soviet Union and China were urging restraint on North Vietnam. Hanoi was still heavily reliant on Soviet and Chinese aid.
- The North did not want to provoke an American attack by interfering in the affairs of the South.
- The Northern economy was in a mess, and following the chaos of the Agricultural Tribunal period (see Chapter 4), the North was in no condition to take on another sustained struggle.
- There was also the issue of the 1956 elections. The North expected to win these elections and so patience had another justification.

However, Northern policy was about to change. Several factors combined to bring about this change in direction of the North's approach to the South.

- Diem's repression had been so effective, that there was a real danger that the communist presence in the South might be totally annihilated.
- Southern communists were pleading with their Northern comrades for help.
- The leading Southern communist was Le Duan. In 1957 he moved to the North, became Politburo member and so was able to promote the Southern cause.
- By the late 1950s, southern communists began to take things into their own hands, launching frequent small-scale attacks against landlords and RVN officials.

Though the Northern regime was pleased to see the growing anti-Diem actions in the South, they had not yet become fully involved. However, as the scale of the actions increased,

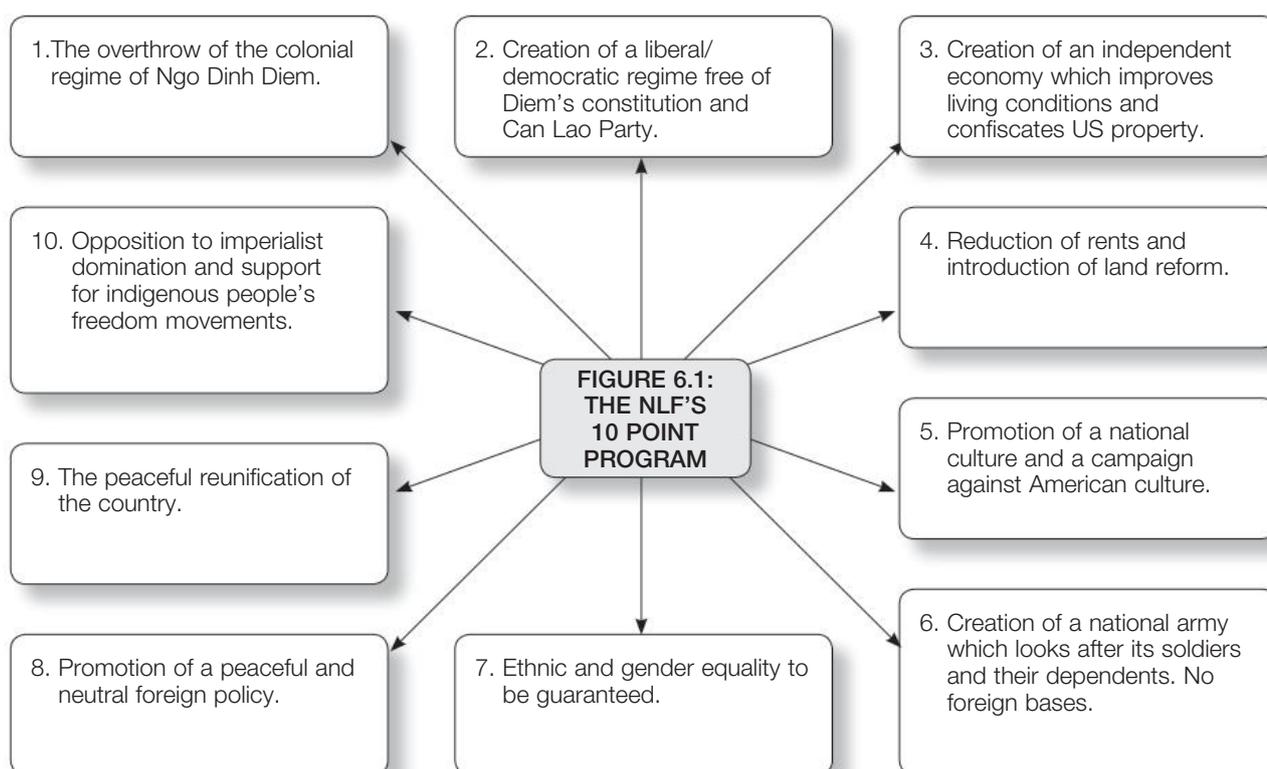
**cadres** were gradually moved South to assist. In May 1959 the Central Committee in Hanoi established a branch of the party called Group 559. The purpose of Group 559 was to facilitate the movement of supplies and men to the South. Rather than trying to cross the demilitarised zone, supply routes were developed which went through Laos and Cambodia. In the years to come, these supply routes would become known collectively as ‘the Ho Chi Minh Trail’.

- However, the Ho Chi Minh Trail never comprised a single pathway but was rather a collection of complex routes which criss-crossed.
- In places the trail was barely wide enough for a horse and cart to make its way, while in other areas it might be as wide as a highway.
- During the American war, it was constantly bombed by US aircraft and in turn constantly repaired. As time went on, the Ho Chi Minh Trail would be constantly upgraded to include rest areas, hospitals and even anti-aircraft defences.

### The creation of the National Liberation Front (NLF)

In the same way that Ho Chi Minh had sought to combine the various anti-Japanese groups into the broad coalition of the Vietminh in 1941, so the North attempted to do a similar thing in 1960 to oppose Diem. On 20 December 1960, The National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF) was established. It was a broad coalition comprising a range of ethnic, political and religious groups with one aim – the removal of Diem. Like the Vietminh, the NLF was not a communist organisation but like the Vietminh, the NLF would gradually come to be dominated by the communists.

Diem did not understand the wide appeal of the NLF. To the Southern government, the NLF was communist, pure and simple. Its members were referred to as ‘Viet Nam Cong San’ (Vietnamese Communist), a term which was abbreviated to ‘Vietcong’, meant by Diem to be a term of abuse. Though a misnomer, it was a term which would resonate across the world during the next decade. The NLF issued a Ten Point program.



## The impact of the NLF

The initiative for the armed struggle against the Diem regime had come from southern communists. There were several thousand still left of the many thousands who had remained behind following the Geneva Agreement. The NLF had little difficulty recruiting members to its ranks. The Vietcong was not a part of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) but it was supported by them. However, as time wore on, Northern control over the NLF was steadily increased.

- In 1959, the Northern governing Politburo created **COSVN** – the Central Office for South Vietnam to coordinate activities in the South. It was run by Le Duan, Le Duc Tho and four other Politburo members. It was based close to the border with Cambodia.
- The NLF was steadily strengthened by supplies coming into the South from the North along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The NLF sought to infiltrate every corner of Southern society. Often using three man/ woman cells, it had a presence in villages, on farms, in factories and in various associations. Each cell was attached to a three-person cell squad, while three squads became a platoon. Many of the NLF recruits were teenagers, resentful of Diem's landlords and tax collectors. They were not necessarily communists.

- When it was formed, the NLF had a regular force of about 5500 along with an irregular force of about 30 000 guerrillas. This force was reorganised into the People's Revolutionary Army which comprised both paramilitary units of villages involved in classic guerrilla tactics <sup>1</sup> and regular soldiers.
- As Vietcong strength increased, their control of South Vietnam widened. By the end of 1961, the Americans estimated that the VC controlled about 80% of the countryside.
- The principal targets of the VC were people who worked for the Diem regime, helped the regime to function or actively supported it.
  - Warnings might be given to cease such collaboration with the regime.
  - However, if these warnings were not heeded, VC retribution would be swift and violent.
  - In 1961 alone, over 4000 government officials, school teachers and other collaborators were systematically assassinated by the VC.
- The aim was to make it impossible for the Diem regime to function.

However, the NLF did not operate merely as a military/ terror force. Most Southern peasants welcomed them as liberators. The Vietcong put a great deal of effort into educating the Southern population about the goals of the NLF, about its vision of a free, independent and unified Vietnam. There was great emphasis put on the issue of land reform. Vietcong soldiers could be merciless with their opponents but they were under strict instructions to respect the people they supposed to be fighting for. So effective had the VC become, by 1963-64, the Southern regime was on the verge of collapse.

### Exercise 6.1

The following passage contains a series of sentences which have been written out of order. Study the passage carefully, and then rewrite the passage in the space provided so that it makes sense.

<sup>1</sup> The issue of guerilla warfare will be covered in depth in Chapter 10.

In December 1960, the National Liberation Front was set up whose aim was to overthrow Diem and create the conditions for possible reunification. By late 1961, it was estimated that it controlled up to 80% of the Southern countryside. As a result, it urged caution and patience on its cadres in the South. After the Geneva Agreement, the North was not prepared for an armed struggle in the South. The NLF quickly grew in strength. However, Diem’s repressive policies were proving so successful, it seemed possible he might destroy the communist presence in the South. Its growth was both the result of an appealing propaganda message and a willingness to be utterly brutal towards its enemies. Anti-Diem attacks began to occur in 1958-59.

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**What do the historians have to say about “The National Liberation Front (NLF)”?**

*1. Gabriel Kolko: Main Currents in Modern American History*

Kolko comments on the success of the NLF in mastering the conditions within Vietnam. He explains how the NLF’s resourcefulness and its devotion to its cause, combined with the trauma that the US imposed on the structure of South Vietnamese society, gave the NLF the ‘ingredients for complete victory’.

*“...in combat, American officers morosely concluded by mid-1967 that the NLF controlled the timing and terms of combat in almost four-fifths of the engagements. Technological fetishism was to fail, and the United States military machine could perform barbarous acts but not victorious ones...”<sup>2</sup>*

*2. Robert K Brigham: Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF’s Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War*

Brigham makes the point that both northern and southern communists saw value in promoting a coalition government in South Vietnam. He suggests that the decision to work for this came at the Lao Dong’s national congress in September 1960. The hope

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<sup>2</sup> Kolko, G, Main Currents in Modern American History, Harper and Rowe, New York, 1976, pp 371-

was that as Diem's regime became more and more unpopular, converts would desert the Diem regime for the NLF. Brigham quotes a Saigon resident from the time:

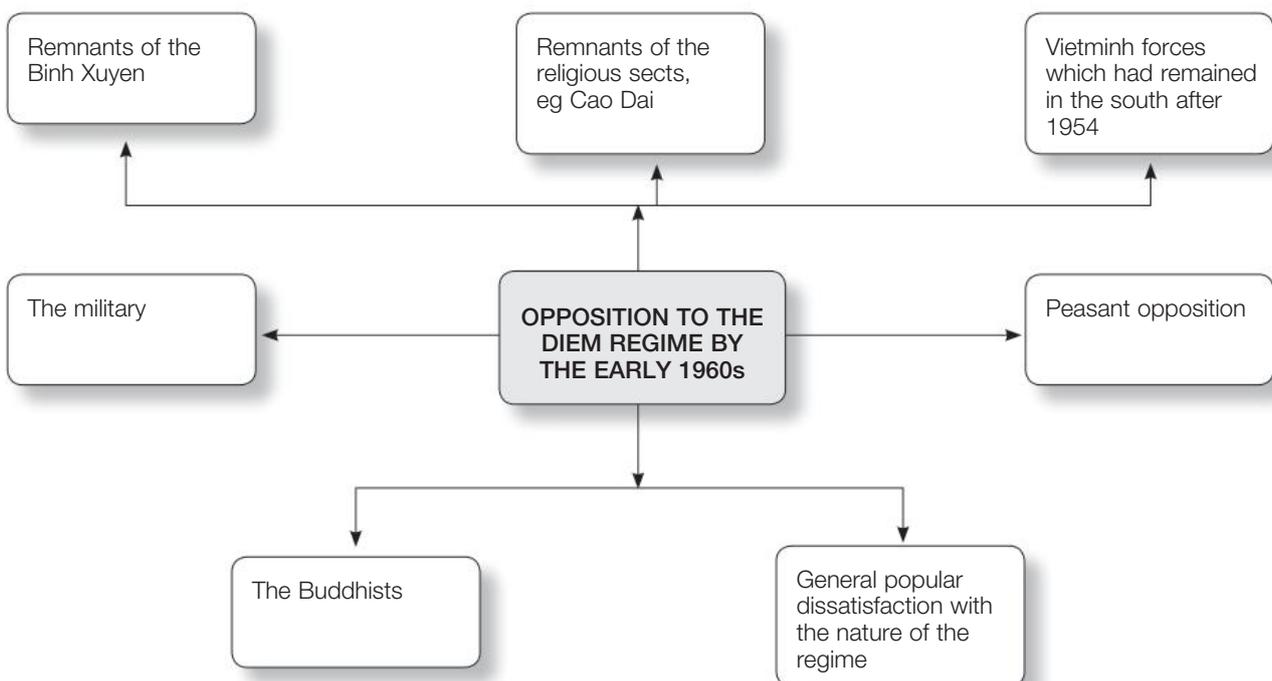
*"... We opposed American intervention and foreign interference and although none of my friends supported the Communists, we understood that they were the only ones who recognised the need for an all-Vietnamese answer to our pressing problems..."*<sup>3</sup>

## Growing opposition to Diem

During the early years of his rule, Diem had a real opportunity to establish himself as a true national Vietnamese leader. Urged by his American advisors, Diem toured the country to meet his people; he was not well known outside of Saigon. Stories of the brutality that was accompanying the Agricultural Tribunals in the North did not provide Ho's regime with good propaganda. The solid backing of the United States ensured that the economy would remain buoyant, at least in the cities.

However, by the early 1960s, Diem had managed to turn almost every section of society against his rule. Figure 6.1 summarises the range of opposition to the regime.

Figure 6.2 Summary of the opposition to the Diem regime



Diem's consolidation of power in 1955-56 had secured his position but it had not completely destroyed those early anti-Diem elements.

- The remnants of the Binh Xuyen and the religious sects, such as the Cao Dai, had gone 'underground'.
  - Many of their members would reappear as members of the NLF.

<sup>3</sup> Brigham, R K, *The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1998, p 21

The remnants of the Vietminh who had stayed behind in the South following the Geneva Agreement would obviously remain hostile to the regime.

- Diem's repression had greatly reduced the strength of this group.
- However, the 10 000 or so who had survived by the late 1950s would provide the nucleus of the NLF.
- Diem's reliance on the US made it possible for the NLF to present Diem as nothing more than a puppet of his American masters.

Peasant opposition rose steadily due to:

- the reversal of pre-1954 Vietminh land reform measures in favour of landowners;
- the government's Agrovillage program which proved extremely unpopular with ordinary peasants; <sup>4</sup>
- the 'Strategic Hamlet' program, strongly supported by the US further alienated the peasant population; <sup>5</sup>
- the growing evidence that government economic policy was clearly favouring the cities at the expense of the countryside.
- thousands of South Vietnamese civilians were being killed as the regime took a harder line against the NLF, often using American air power.

Diem's hold on power ultimately rested upon the support of the police and the military. Mao Zedong's dictum – "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun" – was extremely appropriate to Diem. However, even the military was growing restive:

- the growing strength of NLF activity was alarming leading military figures;
- the regime's web of nepotism stretched into military ranks - promotion in the ARVN was decided not on merit but on the degree of one's loyalty to Diem.
- there was a coup attempt by the military against Diem in November 1960, led by Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi and Vuong Van Dong; it failed following the intervention of US Ambassador Durbrow and CIA Saigon chief, William Colby;
- two years later rebel air force pilots, Nguyen Van Cu and Phan Phu Quoc, attacked the Presidential Palace with napalm and rockets.

The brutality, nepotism and general corruption of the regime <sup>6</sup> alienated workers, peasants and students.

- The South's cronyism, greed and materialism contrasted unfavourably with the apparent selflessness and sense of purpose that seemed to prevail in the North.

By 1963, the most serious sign of anti-government unrest was coming from the country's large and highly respected Buddhist community.

- The Diem regime showed clear favouritism to South Vietnam's Catholic population and the almost one million Catholics who had fled the North following the Geneva Agreement.
  - Catholics were given the best land.

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 5

<sup>5</sup> This will be dealt with in Chapter 8

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 5

- Catholics were often allowed to escape obligations and tax payments.
- As Buddhists began to protest, government repression against them was steadily increased.

Events boiled over in May 1963. A minor dispute arose in Hue, in central Vietnam, over the flying of flags. Claiming that the Diem regime was being insulted because Buddhist flags were being flown higher than the national flag, local Diem officials ordered all Buddhist banners pulled down, and all processions and celebration cancelled. A leading Buddhist monk, Tri Quang, mobilised his supporters to descend on Radio Hue to present their case. Army units were sent to the protest. Nine Buddhists were killed and another fourteen wounded.

On 10 June, Tri Quang led thousands of Buddhist monks in protest to Diem's presidential palace. Markets closed down in sympathy. There was no violence on this occasion but several monks were arrested.

The following day, a 66-year-old Buddhist monk, Quang Duc decided to make the ultimate protest against the Diem regime. He sat down on the asphalt at a busy Saigon intersection. A fellow monk poured gasoline over him while another set him alight. Stanley Karnow describes the scene:

*"...He pressed his palms together in prayer as a sheet of flame the colour of his orange robe enveloped him...By the time an ambulance arrived, the old man had fallen over, still burning as the fire consumed his flesh."*<sup>7</sup>

Apparently only his heart was left intact!

The Buddhists had organised themselves well. Quang Duc's **self-immolation** was filmed and the images were sent around the world. It caused an international sensation. Comments made by Madame Nhu only worsened things for the regime. She made several statements ranging from "let them burn and we shall clap our hands" or "we are not concerned about Buddhist barbecues". Her comments were seen as almost being as shocking as the suicides themselves. In the weeks that followed:

- several more Buddhist monks repeated Quang Duc's action;
- pagodas were fenced off with barbed wire;
- government suppression of Buddhist protests continued; 1400 monks were arrested in August and it took the army eight hours to take the Dieude Temple in Hue from the monks and nuns who were defending it.

Events in South Vietnam were being viewed most seriously in the United States. The Vietcong were getting ever stronger, government officials were being assassinated in their hundreds and normally peaceful Buddhist monks were making the most shocking of protests against a corrupt and failing regime. President Kennedy was being advised that the situation in Saigon could not be allowed to continue like this!

## The assassination of Diem

As the situation in South Vietnam gradually spiralled out of control, certain members of the military considered organising a plot against President Diem. Such a move contained many

<sup>7</sup> Karnow, S, Vietnam, Century Hutchinson, London, 1983, p 281

dangers as Nhu's security services were widespread and any hint of disloyalty was likely to be quickly and firmly dealt with. Perhaps of even greater importance was the attitude of the United States. South Vietnam's economic and military survival was totally reliant upon US aid. No decision to remove Diem could be made without at least consulting the United States. In the end, the US position was clear: it would take no part in any forceful removal of Diem, but neither would it stand in the way of any such action.

Following the Buddhist troubles of August 1963, two senior military figures, Duong Van Minh and Nguyen Khanh approached the new American ambassador to Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge. They wanted to know America's views on a possible coup attempt. Due to the major role the United States was now playing in South Vietnamese life<sup>8</sup>, the US ambassador was arguably the second most important figure in the country. The Kennedy administration told Cabot Lodge:

- Diem must try to remove Nhu and his supporters from power and allow reliable military figures a major say in the government;
- If there was a breakdown in the South Vietnamese government, the US would support the military during the period of the breakdown.

It is inconceivable that the coup against Diem would have happened without US approval. Thus, though the US did not plan the coup, and did not participate in its carrying out, their fingerprints were all over it!

Action was finally taken in early November.

- On 1 November army and air force officers staged the coup against Diem. Diem and his brother Nhu were in the presidential palace at the time and escaped to a church in the Cholon area of Saigon.
- Diem spoke to Cabot Lodge by phone and was offered passage out of the country.
- On 2 November Diem and his brother surrendered to air force officers. They were murdered and Nhu's body was mutilated.

A Revolutionary Military Council was set up to run the country led by General Duong Van Minh, "Big Minh".

There was shock in the US when news of Diem's death became known. Slowly the significance of what had happened sunk in and not all administration officials were convinced of the wisdom of having removed Diem. However, any lingering controversy or debate over the issue was pushed aside with the assassination of President Kennedy on 22 November, only three weeks after Diem.

## Exercise 6.2

Rearrange the list of events on the left into the correct chronological order. Write your answers in the appropriate spaces on the right.

<sup>8</sup> The detail of this involvement will be dealt with in Chapter 8.

| Event   | Correct order  |
|---|----------------|
| The self-immolation of Quang Duc                          | 1st event was  |
| Minh and Khanh approach ambassador Cabot Lodge            | 2nd event was  |
| The Buddhist flag controversy in Hue                      | 3rd event was  |
| Minh appointed head of the Revolutionary Military Council | 4th event was  |
| The murder of Diem and Nhu                                | 5th event was  |
| Cabot Lodge offers Diem passage out of the country        | 6th event was  |
| A coup is staged against Diem                             | 7th event was  |
| The rebel air force attack on the Presidential Palace     | 8th event was  |
| Tri Quang's protest against Diem                          | 9th event was  |
| Attempted military coup against Diem in November 1960     | 10th event was |

## South Vietnam after Diem

Following the deaths of Diem and Nhu, South Vietnam descended further into chaos and instability. The immediate impact was one of unbridled joy and exuberance on the streets of Saigon, and a desire for vengeance after years of brutal rule. The Presidential Palace was sacked and mobs formed throughout the city. A statue that was believed to be of Madame Nhu was pulled down and the head rolled through the streets.

However, the joy was short lived. Diem's regime certainly had its flaws but at least it had provided the country with some stability. Over the next eighteen months, the South Vietnamese regime experienced a period of total instability, and coup was followed by coup as self-seeking generals sought to line their pockets.

- Duong Van Minh remained in power for three months. He was not seen as a strong leader and apparently had a preference for orchids and tennis rather than tough politics. He suggested talking with the NLF, a view not shared by the US Administration.
- Minh removed on 30 January 1964 and was replaced by General Nguyen Khanh. Khanh supported US air strikes against the North and even had ideas of invading North Vietnam. He was replaced as leader in November 1964.
- Following Khanh was Tran Van Huong. Huong lasted until January 1965.
- Huong was replaced by Nguyen Xuan Oanh who lasted a month in power.
- After Oanh came Phan Huy Quat who held power until June 1965.

In June 1965, power fell to Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky. Ky held power until September 1967 and was followed by Nguyen Van Thieu who clung to power until late April 1975. Both these rulers controlled corrupt, self-serving regimes which were ‘up to their necks’ in various forms of corruption ranging from control of drugs and brothels, to selling US supplies to the Vietcong to creating ‘ghost armies’ to building up overseas bank accounts.

By 1965, President Johnson’s decision to Americanise the war meant that it did not really matter who was the nominal head of state in South Vietnam. The big decisions would be made in Washington.

### What do the historians have to say about the “Political and social issues in Vietnam in the early 1960s”?

#### 1. *Current Affairs Bulletin (CAB), November 1961: Threat to Vietnam*

Published by the University of Sydney, this issue of the CAB is interesting because it examines the situation in South Vietnam without the benefit of hindsight. Its main thesis was that the communists could only be overcome by ‘understanding their aims and methods’, and it quotes Sun Tzu’s ‘The Art of War’ to that effect. In this it was correct; the Americans would later make the mistake of both misunderstanding their enemy and fighting the wrong sort of war in Vietnam. However, what is also interesting is that its analysis says absolutely nothing about the state of the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem. The Agrovillage Program is lauded and the belief that the threat of American power could intimidate the NLF is unquestioned. Comparisons with the Malayan Emergency of the 1950s are made to add an optimistic element to this contemporary analysis. Perhaps this is an example of history teaching no lessons.

*“...Further re-grouping of the rural population into ‘agrovilles’, similar to the ‘new villages’ in Malaya, has also been recommended...In brief, much the same policies are now to be followed at village level in South Vietnam, as turned the tide in Malaya between 1952 and 1954.”<sup>9</sup>*

<sup>9</sup> Current Affairs Bulletin, Vol 29 No 1, November 13 1961, Threat to Vietnam, University of Sydney, p 15

## 2. Howard Jones: *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War*

Jones compares President Kennedy with King Henry II of England. King Henry had wanted his annoying Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas a Beckett removed and was alleged to have uttered the words, “Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?” When Beckett was murdered by Henry’s loyal knights, who were guilty? The knights who believed they were doing what their king wanted or the king himself? Kennedy never openly stated that he wanted Diem dead, though his secret meeting with Lansdale in the fall of 1963 suggests that such an occurrence might have been discussed, suggests Jones. Kennedy’s closest advisors were well aware that he at least wanted Diem out of power. Jones also compares Kennedy to the driver of a getaway car in a bank hold up. Isn’t the driver an accomplice if someone is killed in the hold up?

*“...The Kennedy administration was a party to the coup and hence to the assassinations of Diem and Nhu. The White House knew that it could spark a coup by assuring the generals of no interference with their actions and of support in the period afterward...”*<sup>10</sup>

## 3. Ellen J Hammer: *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963*

Hammer’s main contribution to the debate over Diem’s assassination is the way in which she is able to highlight the sheer arrogance of American policy making over Vietnam in 1963. She says administration officials displayed “*chilling indifference*” to Diem’s death. Cabot Lodge had only praise for “*the remarkably able performance*” of the plotters and when Assistant Secretary of State, Roger Hilsman, was asked how he felt having blood on his hands, he replied, “*Oh come on, revolutions are rough. People get hurt.*” Hammer says that the generals who would later lead South Vietnam were acceptable to the Americans because they would be docile followers of US policy.

*“...Such attitudes arose from a remarkable arrogance that not only took for granted America’s right to intervene in Vietnamese affairs, but also never questioned Washington’s ability to control events after Diem’s overthrow...”*<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Jones, H, *Death of a Generation: How the assassinations of Diem and JFK prolonged the Vietnam War*, OUP, New York, 2003, p455

<sup>11</sup> Isaacs, A R, *Bloody and Stupid*, (Review of *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* by Ellen J Hammer), in *The Guardian*, August 2, 1987



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# Chapter 7:

## United States policy towards Vietnam to 1964

### (1): Why?

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Hindsight is a wonderful thing. It is so easy to see the mistakes of the past and to ask in incredulous tones “how could that president have been so stupid to do that?” Or one might ask “why on earth did the Americans allow themselves to get stuck in, what the journalist/historian David Halberstom called, the ‘quagmire of Vietnam’” In years to come, students of history may ask similar questions about American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan during the early decades of the 21st century. However, though hindsight has its advantages, it is a dangerous tool and can so easily prevent us from understanding the past. The task of the historian should be not so much to judge, as to explain. To really understand why the United States became so committed to a war in Vietnam, that ‘with hindsight’ was so disastrous for the United States both domestically and internationally, and was a catastrophe for Vietnam (and Cambodia and Laos); one needs to consider the various elements of the context of the time:

- World War II had just ended. Had its outcome and its origins provided any lessons for world leaders?
- What was the state of the world in the immediate post-war period?
- How did western political leaders and their peoples respond to the tide of communism that seemed to be taking over the world? Were leaders thinking, ‘We allowed Hitler to get away with so much, we must not make the same mistake with the Communists’?
- The ‘fall’ of China in 1949 traumatised the Truman administration and had critics demanding ‘who was responsible?’ (as if China’s fate was anybody’s fault)
- Cold War politics during the 1950s and early 1960s were dominated by fear, suspicion and paranoia.
  - American children of the 1950s grew up with lessons on what to do when the Russians drop atomic bombs;
  - Communist spies seemed to be present everywhere, right to the top;
  - and inside the United States communist witch hunts sought out real or imagined communist traitors, again right to the top.<sup>1</sup>
- A cold war consensus prevailed in the United States that there was a real communist threat to the American way of life and that it had to be resisted at all costs. It was a state of mind resisted by few either in power or ‘in the street’.

There was also a brashness and a ‘can-do’ attitude prevalent in post-war America that inspired both self-belief and arrogance.

It was against this background that the United States’ commitment to Vietnam was born. This chapter will attempt to focus on the ‘why’ of American involvement to 1964; Chapter 8 will focus more on the ‘how’.

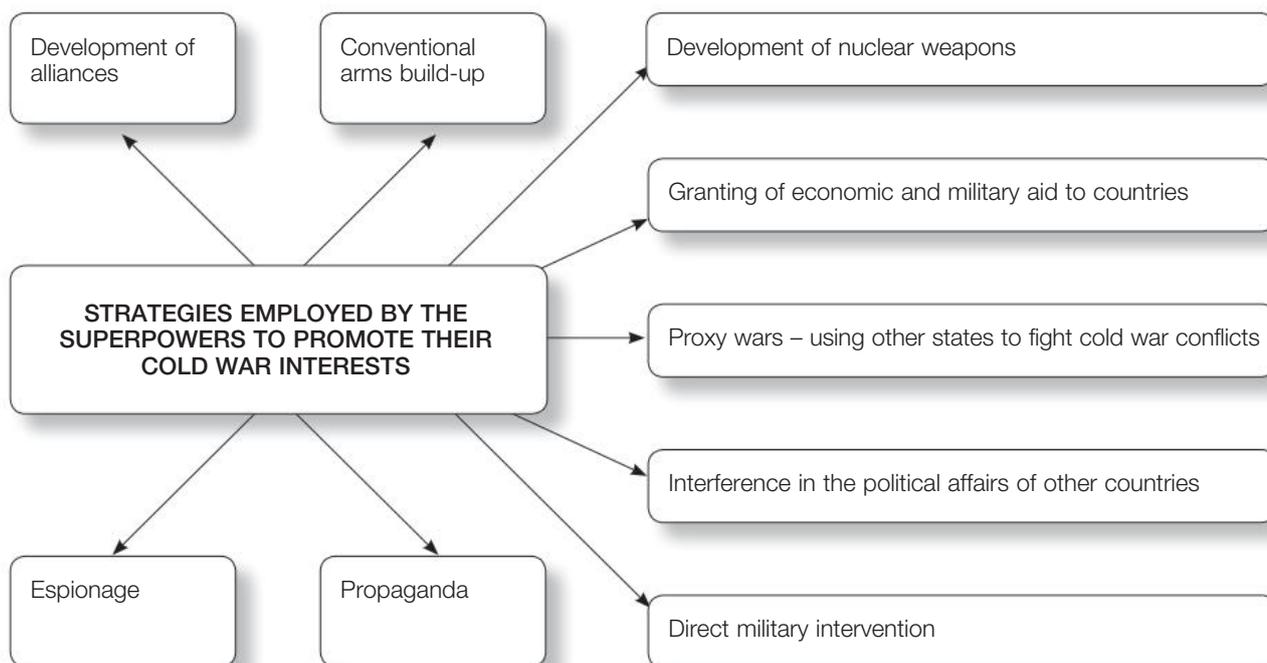
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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the efforts of Senator Joseph McCarthy who used the House UnAmerican Activities Committee to supposedly find communists in the government, the military and society at large.

## Background (1): Enter the Cold War

The defeat of the Nazis and the Japanese in 1945, and the creation of the United Nations, had inspired hope in many people. The misery of the depression, the suffering of war and the horrors of the death camps were over. Here was an opportunity to move into a future of peace and international cooperation. Unfortunately, such hopes were dashed even before they had a chance to bloom. Within a very short period of time, the world found itself in the midst of the Cold War. Cold War issues were to dominate American foreign policy thinking for the next two generations.

Figure 7.1 Cold War strategies



### What was the Cold War?

- On one level it was an ideological struggle between east and west.
  - The Soviet Union sought to impose its communist view of how societies should be governed onto the world. Put simply, the communists sought a society which placed the interests of society above the individual, called for state controls and one-party rule to achieve this, and claimed that such policies would lead to the creation of an egalitarian utopia.
  - The United States and its western allies sought democracy and capitalism which allowed people to choose their leaders and promoted the interests of the individual over the state in the belief that this would ensure freedom.
- On another level it was a power struggle between the major superpowers of the post-war period, the United States and the Soviet Union.
  - This view of the Cold War suggests that ideology was at most a tool to be used in the promotion of the interests of each superpower.
  - The aim for both was to maximise its control of territory, resources, allies and armaments.

- The Cold War was far more dangerous than any previous great power struggle.
  - Both sides spent billions on the development of powerful atomic, and later nuclear, weapons which had the potential to destroy the planet.
  - As a result, the Cold War never involved direct military confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union; instead issues were taken to the brink of war at which stage each side, fortunately, managed to step back.

As the Cold War developed, both sides employed a variety of methods in attempts to gain advantage over the other. These are summarised in Figure 7.1.

## Background (2): The development of the Cold War

In this context, American involvement in the Vietnam War was thus an outgrowth of its global cold war concerns. From the late 1940s to the early 1960s, the prime objective of American foreign policy became the prevention of the spread of communism. The following table summarises some of the major cold war incidents that preceded America's commitment to Vietnam.

| Date       | Location       | Actions   |
|------------|----------------|---|
| 1945-48    | Eastern Europe | By 1948, the Soviet Union had succeeded in imposing Communist governments on all of Eastern Europe, including the eastern half of Germany.  |
| March 1947 | Worldwide      | In March 1947, US President Truman announced 'The Truman Doctrine'. The Truman Doctrine established the policy of ' <b>containment</b> '. The US promised to support any state threatened from without or within by communist attack. This committed the US to fighting communism all over the world. <sup>2</sup>      |
| 1948-49    | Berlin         | The world went to the brink of war over Berlin. Soviet leader Stalin sought to remove the western presence in West Berlin by means of blockade. A massive western airlift kept West Berlin going and forced Stalin to back down.  |
| 1949       | China          | In October 1949, Communist forces led by Mao Zedong took power in China. The 'fall' of the most populous country to communism shocked the US. It was feared that communism could now spread across Asia, including Japan.   |
| 1950-53    | Korea          | Following communist North Korea's invasion of non-communist South Korea, UN forces led by the US fought a three-year war to defend the South. China intervened on the side of the North and UN Commander, MacArthur, had even advocated the use of atomic weapons against China before his sacking by President Truman. |
| 1954       | Indochina      | Following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Conference, North Vietnam was now ruled by a communist government under Ho Chi Minh.  |

<sup>2</sup> Importantly, it did not commit the US to removing Communist governments where they already existed.

|         |             |  |
|---------|-------------|--|
| 1948-60 | Malaya      | British and Commonwealth forces fought successfully against Communist guerrillas seeking to take control of Malaya.  |
| 1950s   | Worldwide   | Both the US and the Soviet Union steadily built up both their conventional and nuclear armaments. Each side also established rival alliances, eg the US had <b>NATO</b> (1949), the Soviet Union had the Warsaw Pact (1955).   |
| 1957    | Outer Space | The successful Soviet launch of <b>Sputnik</b> in 1957 shocked and scared the US as it appeared that the Soviet Union now had an outer space capability that the US was lacking.   |
| 1959-62 | Cuba        | Fidel Castro took power in Cuba in 1959. In April 1961 a CIA-backed invasion of Cuba ended in fiasco at the ' <b>Bay of Pigs</b> '. Castro grew closer to the Soviet Union whose attempt to provide a defence for the island against a possible US attack, led to the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. This was the closest the world ever came to nuclear war. |
| 1961    | Berlin      | The world again moved to the 'brink' over Berlin following the construction by the Communists of the Berlin Wall which would divide the city for the next 28 years.  |

During the 1950s and the 1960s, both the Soviet Union and the United States sought to establish themselves in developing countries at the expense of their cold war rival.

- The Soviet Union supported Cuba; the US supported various Latin American military dictatorships.
- The Soviet Union supported the Arab states in the Middle East; the US supported Israel.
- The Soviet Union (and China) supported communist/ nationalist groups seeking independence from colonial regimes such as the Vietminh; the US supported the French and later South Vietnam.

Such was the apparent reach of the Soviet Union, the United States developed a belief in 'monolithic communism', ie the idea that all communist activity, wherever it occurred throughout the world, was directed by Moscow.

### Exercise 7.1

Circle the correct response – THIS IS TRUE/ THIS FALSE – to each statement in the left hand column.

|  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| 1. The Cold War was both an ideological conflict and a struggle for power conflict.  | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 2. The success of communism in China in 1949 was viewed with enormous alarm in the United States.                            | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 3. The policy of containment involved the United States trying to remove communism from states which were already communist. | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |

|   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 4. Cold War rivalry was restricted to Europe and Latin America.   | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 5. Monolithic communism was the idea that all communist activity around the world in the 1950s was being directed from Communist China. | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 6. American interest in Indochina predated the defeat of the French in 1954   | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 7. Containment was the fundamental principle behind US foreign policy after 1945.   | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 8. Events in outer space had no impact on great power thinking regards the Cold War   | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |

## Vietnam and the Cold War

The United States' involvement in the affairs of Vietnam was determined by several Presidents. They included:

Harry Truman (April 1945-January 1953)

Dwight D Eisenhower (January 1953-January 1961)

John F Kennedy (January 1961-November 1963)

Lyndon Johnson (November 1963-January 1969)

Richard Nixon (January 1969-August 1974)

Gerald Ford (August 1974-January 1977)

The fundamental reasons why the United States committed itself to supporting South Vietnam were:

1. Containment
2. The Domino Theory
3. Idealism
4. Self-interest
5. Prestige

### 1. Containment

During the war between the French and the Vietminh (1946-54), the United States gave significant support to the French. The Truman administration, and then the Eisenhower administration, both viewed Ho and the Vietminh not as nationalists seeking to free Vietnam from colonial rule, but as part of a worldwide communist campaign of aggression. Ho was seen as nothing more than a communist puppet doing the bidding of his Soviet (and Chinese) masters. The tensions present at the Geneva Conference were largely the result of Cold War pressures.<sup>3</sup>

- Thus, the decision to back South Vietnam and later escalate US military intervention was all part and parcel of the US policy of containment which had been in place since 1947.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 3

## 2. The Domino Theory

However, President Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, saw the Indochina conflict as having an even greater significance. Following the Vietminh victory over the French, the US believed that the Bao Dai (and later Diem) regime in the South had to be supported and protected from expansionary communism. Eisenhower believed that if South Vietnam fell to the communists, this would lead in quick succession to the fall of other South East Asian states including Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaya and Indonesia.

- Eisenhower was enunciating what became known as the **Domino Theory**.

Eisenhower expressed it this way in April 1954:

*You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly.*

## 3. Idealism

It is very easy to be cynical of politicians and the things they say. Since the 1960s, it has almost been taken for granted that political leaders are duplicitous, self-serving and can never be believed when they speak in public ‘on the record’. This is of course grossly unfair to those many sincere, dedicated people who work honestly and conscientiously for the good of their communities. It can perhaps be difficult to believe that US intentions in Vietnam were anything but ‘cynical and self-serving’, especially if the events concerning Diem’s assassination are considered.

However, this would be to deny a strong and genuine idealistic element in US policy towards Vietnam. Senator John Kennedy spoke of this in June 1956. In a wide-ranging speech he viewed Vietnam in the following ways:

*“...Vietnam represents the cornerstone of the Free World in South East Asia...”*

*“...Vietnam represents a proving ground of democracy...”*

Later in his speech he referred to the US as the ‘godparents’ if not the ‘parents’ of South Vietnam and that the US thus had an almost parental responsibility to sustain the country.

*“...This is our offspring, we cannot abandon it, we cannot ignore its needs...”*

## 4. Self-interest

As will be detailed in Chapter 8, the United States poured vast amounts of economic and military aid into South Vietnam. Losing South Vietnam would mean the loss of a massive economic investment in the country made over several years. Masses of military equipment had been poured into the country. Bases had been developed. If South Vietnam fell to the communists, these facilities could easily fall into Soviet hands.<sup>4</sup> South Vietnam was strategically placed to act as a bulwark against international communism. Kennedy implied as much in his ‘idealistic’ speech of June 1956 when he gave as another reason for supporting South Vietnam a selfish motive.

<sup>4</sup> Cam Ranh Bay was in fact used by the Soviet Union following the communist victory in 1975.

- America's stake in Vietnam he argued:  
“...can be measured in the last analysis, in terms of American lives and American dollars.”

### 5. Prestige

As early as August 1954, the US National Security Council (NSC) stated in NSC Directive 5429/2 that:

*The US must protect its position and restore its prestige in the Far East by a new initiative in South East Asia.*

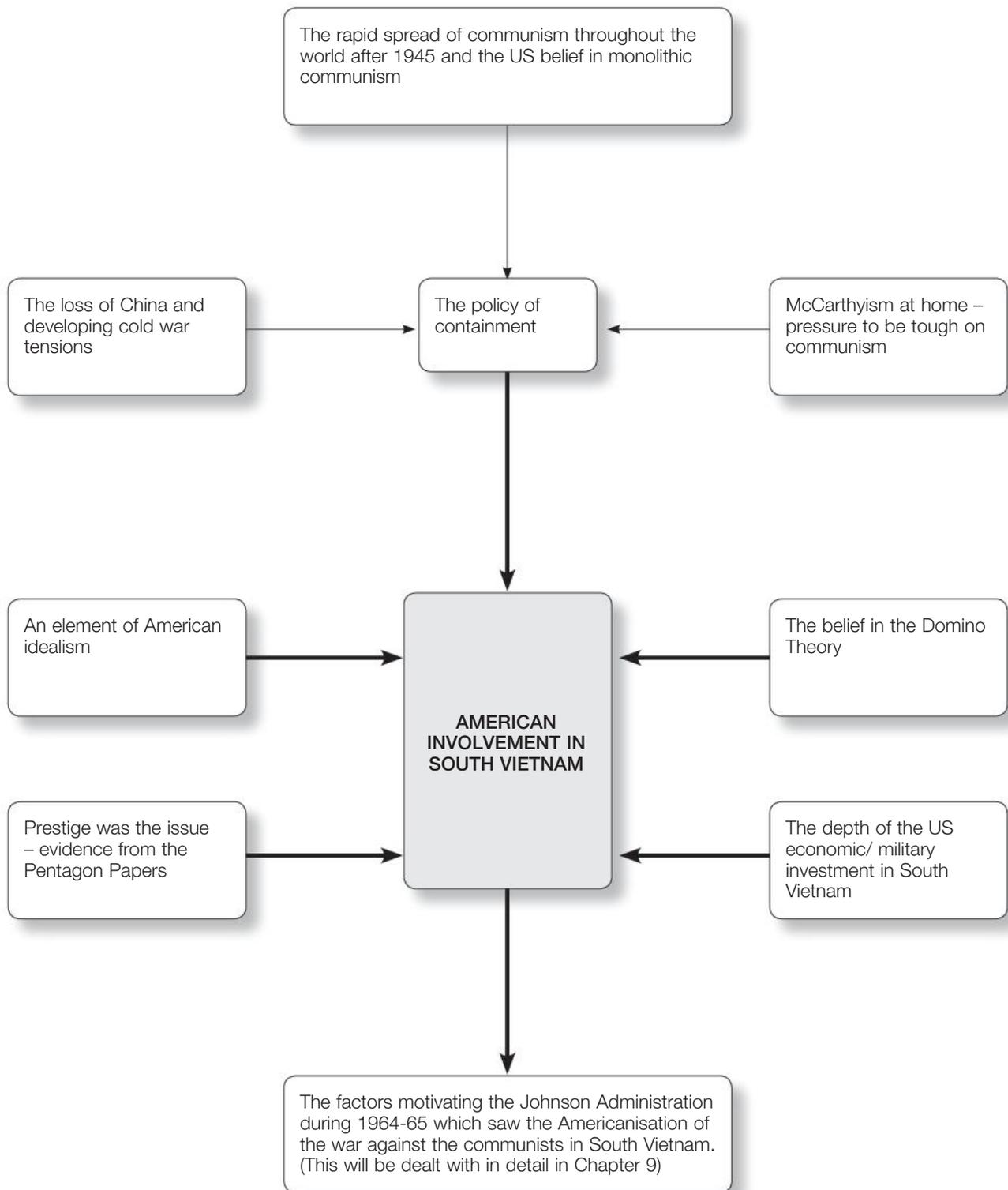
There is nothing wrong with a nation wishing to maintain its international prestige. However, what had become apparent by 1964, was that the maintenance of American prestige had become the key factor motivating US policy in Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> In June 1971, the New York Times newspaper printed extracts of what were to become known as “The Pentagon Papers”.

- ‘The Pentagon Papers’ was a top-secret study which had been commissioned by former Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara.
- The New York Times report printed a series of secret Pentagon documents which had been amended to the original report.<sup>6</sup>
- What the documents showed was that the Johnson administration deliberately escalated the conflict in Vietnam, often against the advice of its own intelligence authorities.
- Assistant Secretary of Defence, John McNaughton, wrote at the time that the motives for the United States to wage war in Vietnam were:
  - 10% – to allow the people of South Vietnam to live a better life;
  - 20% – to keep South Vietnam out of Chinese hands;
  - 70% – to avoid a humiliating US defeat!

<sup>5</sup> In addition to this was President Johnson's concern at his own personal prestige. Johnson's preoccupation not to be ‘the first US President to lose a war’ will be dealt with in Chapter 9.

<sup>6</sup> Then US President Nixon obtained an injunction to prevent any further publication of the documents. Students might find the 2017 movie, “The Post”, starring Tom Hanks and Meryl Streep of interest as it deals with the issues surrounding ‘The Pentagon Papers’.

Figure 7.2 America's motivation to become involved in Vietnam



## Exercise 7.2

Match each definition on the left with one of the answers from the box below.

|    |  |  |
|----|--|--|
| 1  | The idea that if South Vietnam falls to communism, other South East Asian nations will fall in quick succession.         |  |
| 2  | Documents regarding the US government's attitudes towards the Vietnam War leaked to the New York Times newspaper in 1971 |  |
| 3  | The notion that the United States' only concerns in South Vietnam were for America's own well-being.                     |  |
| 4  | The policy of trying to prevent the spread of communism throughout the world.  |  |
| 5  | US President who enunciated the principle of the Domino Theory   |  |
| 6  | US President who earlier in his career outlined an idealistic position on US policy in South Vietnam                     |  |
| 7  | US President who constructed the policy of containment in 1947   |  |
| 8  | Secretary of Defence under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson  |  |
| 9  | US President who tried to stop the leaking of secret defence documents about Vietnam in 1971                             |  |
| 10 | The issue which seemed uppermost in the mind of US policy makers if the Pentagon Papers are to be believed               |  |

|               |            |                 |             |
|---------------|------------|-----------------|-------------|
| McNamara      | Kennedy    | Pentagon Papers | containment |
| prestige      | Eisenhower | Domino Theory   | Truman      |
| self-interest | Nixon      |                 |             |

## What do the historians have to say about “United States policy towards Vietnam to 1964 (1): Why”?

### 1. *The Pentagon Papers*

One of the ideas that comes through the Pentagon Papers is the preoccupation that US administration officials had with ‘power’. The US acted in South Vietnam because it could; the later covert activities and bombing campaigns against the North were carried out with a feeling of ‘who can stop us?’ This self-confident approach was so strong that CIA caution, or advice that differed to administration officials, was ignored. Walt Rostow (a key advisor to both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson) perhaps expressed the thought more clearly than anyone else in a memorandum to Defence Secretary McNamara in November 1964.

*“...There may be a tendency to underestimate the real margin of influence on the outcome which flows from the simple fact that at this stage of history we are the greatest power in the world – if we behave like it.”*<sup>7</sup>

### 2. *Moya Ann Ball: Vietnam-On-The-Potomac*

Moya Ann Ball writes in detail about the decision-making processes of both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. However, she shows how Kennedy and Johnson both saw the Vietnam issue in black and white terms of containment. In September 1963, she argues there was no intention of the US pulling out of Vietnam. In a news conference of September 12, Kennedy put it simply, “we want the war to be won, the communists to be contained..”<sup>8</sup> When Kennedy became President, he had hopes of carrying out a domestic reform program he called ‘The New Frontier’. However, cold war concerns were still the dominating issue of his presidency. Moya Ann Ball puts it this way:

*“Discussion of the Vietnam problem...was fitted into allusions to Greece and Turkey.”*<sup>9</sup> *Although Kennedy and his advisors were pressing forward with their New Frontier, their roots were still in Cold War rhetoric and in many respects, it was a case of ‘Plus ça change, plus c’ est la même chose (roughly, the more things change, the more things remain the same).”*<sup>10</sup>

### 3. *Michael Maclear: Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War*

Maclear also highlights the key role that an unquestioning belief in the importance of containment had on President Johnson. Johnson would later be responsible for having over 500 000 US troops in Vietnam. However, before he became President, he was keen on avoiding a massive American involvement against the Communists. However, this does not mean that he viewed US foreign policy any differently than most other US policy makers.

<sup>7</sup> Extract from the Pentagon Papers, The Sunday Times, London, 20 June, 1971

<sup>8</sup> Ball, M A, *Vietnam-On-The-Potomac*, Praeger, New York, 1992, p 73

<sup>9</sup> This was the 1946-47 crisis which led to the Truman Doctrine which embodied the principle of containment.

<sup>10</sup> Ball, p 47

*“...Like Kennedy, Johnson had repeatedly drawn a scenario of aggressive monolithic communism on the march, with South Vietnam as a measure of the Free World’s determination...”*<sup>11</sup>

#### **4. Max Hastings: Vietnam – An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975**

Would the US policy towards the Vietnam War have been different if President Kennedy had lived? Hastings’ view is that it would not. Kennedy was to deliver a speech at the Dallas Trade Mart on 22 November, 1963. Had an assassin’s bullet not taken him, Kennedy would have told his audience that the US does not “weary of the task” of assisting South East Asia. Hastings argues that Kennedy’s Vietnam policy (and that of all post-war US presidents) was rooted in US domestic politics and not the desires of the Vietnamese people. The climate of the Cold War dictated policy, and in this climate:

*“...the political costs of staying in South Vietnam appeared to the Kennedy White House lower than those of being seen to quit, fail, lose...”*<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Maclear, M, Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War, Thames Methuen, London, 1981, p 111

<sup>12</sup> Hastings, M, Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975, William Collins, 2018, p 155



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## Chapter 8:

# United States policy towards Vietnam to 1964

## (2): How?

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American involvement in Vietnam predated its support of the French during the 1946-54 war against the Vietminh. During World War II, Indochina was occupied by Japanese forces.<sup>1</sup> At this time, the US air force was supplying Chinese forces fighting the Japanese. There were US personnel training Vietminh fighters who were launching guerrilla operations against the Japanese, and OSS<sup>2</sup> operations were being carried out. Ho Chi Minh's forces were responsible for rescuing US pilots shot down by the Japanese.

President Franklin Roosevelt had a poor opinion of French rule in Indochina and had made clear his hopes for colonial peoples around the world to gain their freedom after the war. When Ho declared independence in September 1945, he was clearly hoping he would gain the support of the United States. The Vietnamese Declaration of Independence deliberately lifted language straight from the American Declaration of Independence of 1776.

*We hold truths that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*<sup>3</sup>

### US involvement during the French War

However, within a short time the world had changed. Roosevelt died in April 1945; his successor, Harry Truman, did not share Roosevelt's anti-colonial idealism. Truman's presidency was faced with the challenge of the Cold War and communist expansionism. In this context, the United States was keen to get France on side in its European containment of communism. If this meant supporting the French desire to return to Indochina, so be it.

By 1950, cold war tensions had reached alarming levels. China had fallen to communism in 1949, the same year the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb. War was raging in Korea and the French were floundering in their war against the Vietminh. By 1950, the hopes Ho had had of developing a positive relationship with the US were long gone. In American eyes, Ho was a mere communist puppet being directed by his Soviet and Chinese masters.

In this context, the Americans decided to assist the French.

- Though no American troops were sent to help the French, US money flowed easily.
- By the end of the war, the US was paying up to 80% of French war expenses.
  - In defence of this expenditure, President Eisenhower argued that it was the most economical way for the US to prevent the further spread of communism.
- During the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, Vice President Nixon had even canvassed the use of atomic weapons to help the French.

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 1

<sup>2</sup> OSS – Office of Strategic Services. It carried out undercover operations against the Japanese. The OSS was the forerunner of the CIA

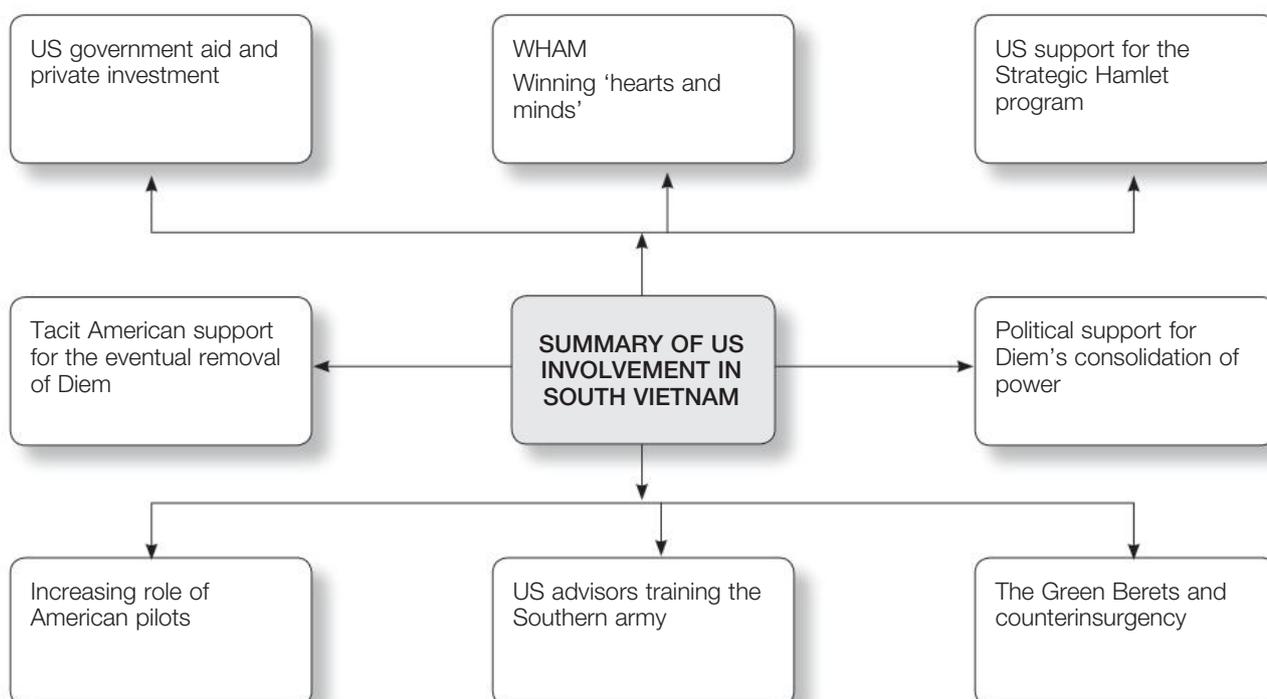
<sup>3</sup> Taken from the Declaration of Independence 2 September 1945

As the French presence in Indochina declined, so the American presence grew. At the Geneva Conference, the Americans refused to compromise with Vietminh and Chinese delegates. Secretary of State Dulles even refused to shake hands with Chinese Premier Zhou En Lai. Neither the Americans nor the Bao Dai (Southern Vietnamese) regime signed the Geneva Accords.

### The growth of American involvement in Vietnam during the Diem years: 1954-63

The United States involvement in South Vietnam affected almost every sphere of life. Its main features are summarised in Figure 8.1.

Figure 8.1 American involvement in Diem's South Vietnam



- By the end of 1954 there were 600 US advisors in South Vietnam.

Their function was to train the new Southern army; advisor numbers would increase steadily during the following decade.

- In early 1955, the US granted an aid package of \$322m to South Vietnam.
  - This would be the first of many such grants.
  - By the early 1960s, the South Vietnamese economy was completely reliant upon American aid and investment.
- The US gave its full support to Ngo Dinh Diem. From the early days, Diem had the support of key US advisors like Colonel Lansdale.
  - The US backed him when he rigged the national referendum in October 1955 which ousted Emperor Bao Dai and inaugurated the Republic of Vietnam with Diem as its president.

- The US totally supported Diem in 1956 when he cancelled plans for holding nationwide elections. Diem argued that the North could not be relied upon to hold a fair vote. Both Diem and the US knew that a nationwide poll would almost certainly result in victory for Ho Chi Minh.
- As Diem and Nhu strengthened their hold on power, often in brutal fashion, there was no US questioning of their methods.
- The number of US advisors in South Vietnam grew steadily. Some of these were civilian forces, eg a Michigan police unit was training RVN police forces.

However, most were involved in the training of the ARVN. With Vietcong attacks steadily increasing, the advisors' main role became to train the Southern troops in **counterinsurgency**. This task fell to units known as 'The Green Berets'. The hope was that the southern army could be brought to a point where it could deal with the Vietcong threat without the need for American ground troops.

- By 1960 there were 900 US advisors in South Vietnam.
  - By the end of 1961, there were 3200 advisors.
  - Technically, there were no US combat troops in South Vietnam. However, by late 1962, US 'advisors' frequently assisted ARVN troops by flying helicopters and air craft in missions against the Vietcong.
  - By the end of 1962, there were over 11 000 US personnel in South Vietnam.
  - By the end of 1963 the number had risen to 16 700.
- American involvement in South Vietnam went beyond the purely military and economic.
  - A program known as **WHAM** – winning hearts and minds – was also implemented.
  - The purpose of WHAM was to develop a social infrastructure for the South. This involved the provision of health services, education and subsidised rice.

Diem's 'Agrovilles' program had largely been a failure.<sup>4</sup> In its place came the US introduction of the Strategic Hamlet program of the early 1960s. This was a much more ambitious plan, though the aims were similar. The basic aims of the Strategic Hamlet program were:

- to deny the enemy the support of the civilian population;
- to convince villagers that the cause of the Vietcong is wrong by providing them with better welfare services and keeping them close to government administrators;
- to convince the villagers that the Vietcong is losing.

Though the Strategic Hamlets had the backing of US funds, they suffered the same problems as the Agrovilles – they were far from ancestral grounds, they were built with unpaid peasant labour, their fortified structure turned them into virtual prison camps and the ARVN imposed strict rules. Worse still, many Vietcong joined villagers in the Strategic Hamlets.<sup>5</sup> The program was a failure and had collapsed by 1964. Its main result had been to turn many South Vietnamese peasants over to the side of the Vietcong.

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 5

<sup>5</sup> One of the programs chief organizers was Colonel Pham Mgoch Thao; he was a communist agent!

**Exercise 7.1**

Answer the following questions in the spaces provided.

|    |  |  |
|----|--|--|
| 1  | Why was the US active in Indochina before 1945?  |  |
| 2  | What was Ho's attitude towards the United States at the end of World War II?                 |  |
| 3  | Why was the US so keen to support the French against the Vietminh?                           |  |
| 4  | What was the US attitude towards Diem's attempts at empowerment in South Vietnam?            |  |
| 5  | How reliant was South Vietnam on the United States?  |  |
| 6  | Who were the 'Green Berets'?   |  |
| 7  | What was the US policy of attempting to build up welfare facilities in South Vietnam called? |  |
| 8  | What was the American successor program to the Agroville Program?                            |  |
| 9  | How extensive had the United States advisors' role become by 1963?                           |  |
| 10 | Did Kennedy intend pulling out of Vietnam?   |  |

By late the 1963, the situation in South Vietnam had become critical.<sup>6</sup> The Vietcong now controlled large sections of the countryside, the regime faced opposition from all sides, particularly the Buddhists and plans for a coup against Diem were afoot. What was also apparent was that Diem was not the pliant puppet leader some might assume. Diem was happy to receive US aid and support, but he was not willing to be ordered around. United States involvement in the coup against Diem was discussed in Chapter 6.

However, at this time the long-term, massive American commitment to South Vietnam was not yet set in concrete. In fact, Kennedy had signalled a plan to withdraw a thousand US personnel by the end of 1963. However, historians still debate whether or not President Kennedy was planning to withdraw US troops/ advisors before his own assassination in November 1963.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 6

## What do the historians have to say about “Kennedy’s proposal to pull out of Vietnam”?

### 1. David D Dileo: *Vietnam and the Rethinking of Containment*

Dileo writes of a meeting between Kennedy and one of the President’s key advisors, George Ball. He refers to Ball recalling an incident early in Kennedy’s presidency that suggests the President had no doubts about the wisdom of being in Vietnam and staying the course. Ball had a private discussion with Kennedy on 7 November 1961. He argued that the US should not get involved further in South Vietnam. He said the topography was all wrong for US troops, and he said that in five years there could be 300 000 US troops in the rice paddies and “we might...never be able to find them”. Proposals being considered for a deeper US involvement were absurd and the President “had better be damned careful”. Apparently, Kennedy rejected Ball’s thinking, called him “crazier than hell” and said withdrawal “just isn’t going to happen”.

*“...It was patently clear that Kennedy neither agreed with his analysis nor encouraged him to expound upon his thesis.”<sup>7</sup>*

### 2. Howard Jones: *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War*

However, Jones points out that the existence of a withdrawal plan had long been debated in Kennedy White House circles. Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk said no withdrawal plan ever came to his attention though records show that the issue was discussed in his presence. Former Defence Secretary McNamara has admitted in recent years that a withdrawal process was being considered. Kennedy economics advisor, Kenneth Galbraith:

*“...asserted that Kennedy had considered the war unwinnable by the spring of 1963 and sought to return the US involvement to an advisory level...If President Kennedy so clearly supported the phased withdrawal plan, why did it fail? His assassination...was a key factor...”<sup>8</sup>*

### 3. Lawrence Freedman: *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos and Vietnam*

Freedman argues that it is not possible to know whether Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam or whether he would have followed a similar path of escalation as did Johnson. Apart from the differences in personality of the two men, would matters have developed in the same way under Kennedy? The circumstances Johnson faced were different simply because of Kennedy’s death. In addition, just because Kennedy had assumed a position in late 1963, does that mean he would have stuck to it? Freedman suggests it would require a leap of faith to suggest Kennedy would stick to the same policy come what may.

*“...This was, after all, a man who prized flexibility and keeping open his options...In 1964 Robert (Kennedy) was asked what his brother would have done if the South Vietnamese had been on the brink of defeat: ‘We’d face that when we came to it’.”<sup>9</sup>*

<sup>7</sup> Dileo, D L, *Vietnam and the Rethinking of Containment*,

<sup>8</sup> Jones, H, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK prolonged the Vietnam War*

<sup>9</sup> Freedman, L, *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos and Vietnam*, OUP, New York, 2000, p 399

#### 4. Max Hastings: Vietnam – An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975

Would the US policy towards the Vietnam War have been different if President Kennedy had lived? Hastings' view is that it would not. Kennedy was to deliver a speech at the Dallas Trade Mart on 22 November, 1963. Had an assassin's bullet not taken him, Kennedy would have told his audience that the US does not "weary of the task" of assisting South East Asia. Hastings argues that Kennedy's Vietnam policy (and that of all post-war US presidents) was rooted in US domestic politics and not the desires of the Vietnamese people. The climate of the Cold War dictated policy, and in this climate:

*"...the political costs of staying in South Vietnam appeared to the Kennedy White House lower than those of being seen to quit, fail, lose..."*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hastings, M, Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975, William Collins, 2018, p 155

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## Chapter 9

# United States policy towards Vietnam: 1964-65

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### President Johnson's choice

Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) was sworn in as President of the United States in Dallas on 22 November 1963, within two hours of the death of John Kennedy. As the nation mourned the death of Kennedy, Johnson was faced with the realities of power and some of the first meetings he held as President concerned the issue of Vietnam. How would Johnson deal with the issue of Vietnam?

- Johnson shared the general view of most US political leaders at the time that communism around the world was being directed by Moscow. Therefore, South Vietnam was all about containment.
- He had said as much to the House Foreign Affairs Committee on 5 June 1961 in what was a typically 'folksy' Johnson style: <sup>1</sup>

*"...I am standing for South Vietnam and Thailand, for I have seen as a boy that when you start running from a bully, he keeps you running, and if he doesn't respect the line you draw out in the pasture, he isn't going to respect the line you draw at your front yard. He is going to wind up chasing you right out of your own house."*

As 1964 wore on, the situation in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate. Johnson was being advised that there was a very real possibility that South Vietnam could fall to the communists. Apart from the issue of containment and the possible application of the Domino Theory, Johnson had more pressing concerns: his 1964 re-election. Johnson wanted to be elected President in his own right. The South Vietnam situation presented Johnson with a dilemma:

- If South Vietnam fell to the Communists, if he "lost" South Vietnam, if he, a 'Democrat' President allowed South Vietnam to fall to communism as another Democrat President (Truman) had allowed China to fall, his re-election chances would be nil.
  - His Republican opponents would play on the apparent weakness of Democrats in the face of communist aggression.
  - Americans would be advised that national security could not be entrusted to the Democrat Party.
- However, he was as equally unlikely to win an election as a war President sending thousands of young men to fight in a place most Americans had never heard of.

Johnson was not going to let South Vietnam fall; equally he was not going to be dragged into Vietnam before the election. His aim was to keep Vietnam 'on hold', play up the virtues of his domestic '**Great Society**' program and worry about South East Asia once the election was over.

Johnson was fortunate in 1964 that his Republican opponents nominated as their presidential candidate one of the scariest people they could find – Barry Goldwater. The Democrats successfully depicted Goldwater as a virtual madman to whom America's nuclear arsenal could not be entrusted. Johnson was able to play the role of the man of peace. In November 1964, Johnson won a landslide victory.

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<sup>1</sup> A style used often by another Texan President, George W Bush (2001-09)

## What do the historians have to say about Johnson's attitude to Vietnam?

### 1. Michael Maclear: *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War*

Maclear reveals that Johnson's main motivation in 1964 was his party's electoral prospects. He quotes Johnson's biographer, Doris Kearns, who interviewed Johnson extensively. Johnson later openly told Kearns that though his prime concern was his 'Great Society' program, he knew that if he lost Vietnam, he would lose the presidency.

*"...Johnson's immediate motivation in Vietnam was political self-defence as much as defence of the Free World...The theoretical fear of losing the leadership if he lost Vietnam was at least as equal a determinant as the actual military situation..."*<sup>2</sup>

### 2. Howard Jones: *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War*

Jones relates a conversation Johnson had with one of his advisors, Bill Moyers, soon after taking office. Johnson had just told a group of advisors that he was not going to be the president who 'saw Southeast Asia go the way China went'. Moyers then found Johnson in his office, feet up, sipping scotch and looking pensive. Johnson reflected that the Chinese and the Soviet Union will think that, following Kennedy's death, the US had lost heart, and that they will 'be taking the measure of us'. Johnson told Moyers that he was not going to let Vietnam go the way of China, but that he wanted to be left alone to get on with things at home (a reference to the Great Society). Jones quotes Johnson's instructions to his advisors:

*"...I told them to go back and tell those generals in Saigon that Lyndon Johnson intends to stay by our word. But, by God, I want them to get off their butts and get out in those jungles and whip hell out of some Communists..."*<sup>3</sup>

## Build-up to the Tonkin Incident

With South Vietnam in chaos, a Communist victory was a clear possibility but with an election due, Johnson knew he had to tread carefully. He had to keep the lid on Vietnam till November; he needed a reason to later escalate the conflict and he needed a means to do this without having to get Congress to declare war.<sup>4</sup> His opportunity would eventually come with the Tonkin Incident in August 1964.

As President, Johnson was surrounded by advisors but these people rarely gave him consistent advice.

- Some of his advisors advocated a hard line in Vietnam: damaging bombing raids against North Vietnam and a greatly increased American military presence.
  - This group became known as the **hawks**.
- However, he also had other advisors who expressed major doubts about the US role in South Vietnam and who advocated a process of disengagement.
  - This group became known as the **doves**.

<sup>2</sup> Maclear, M, *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War*, Thames Methuen, London, 1981, p 112

<sup>3</sup> Jones, H, *Death of a Generation: How the assassinations of Diem and JFK prolonged the Vietnam War*, OUP, New York, 2003, p445

<sup>4</sup> In the American system, it is Congress, not the President, who can make a declaration of war.

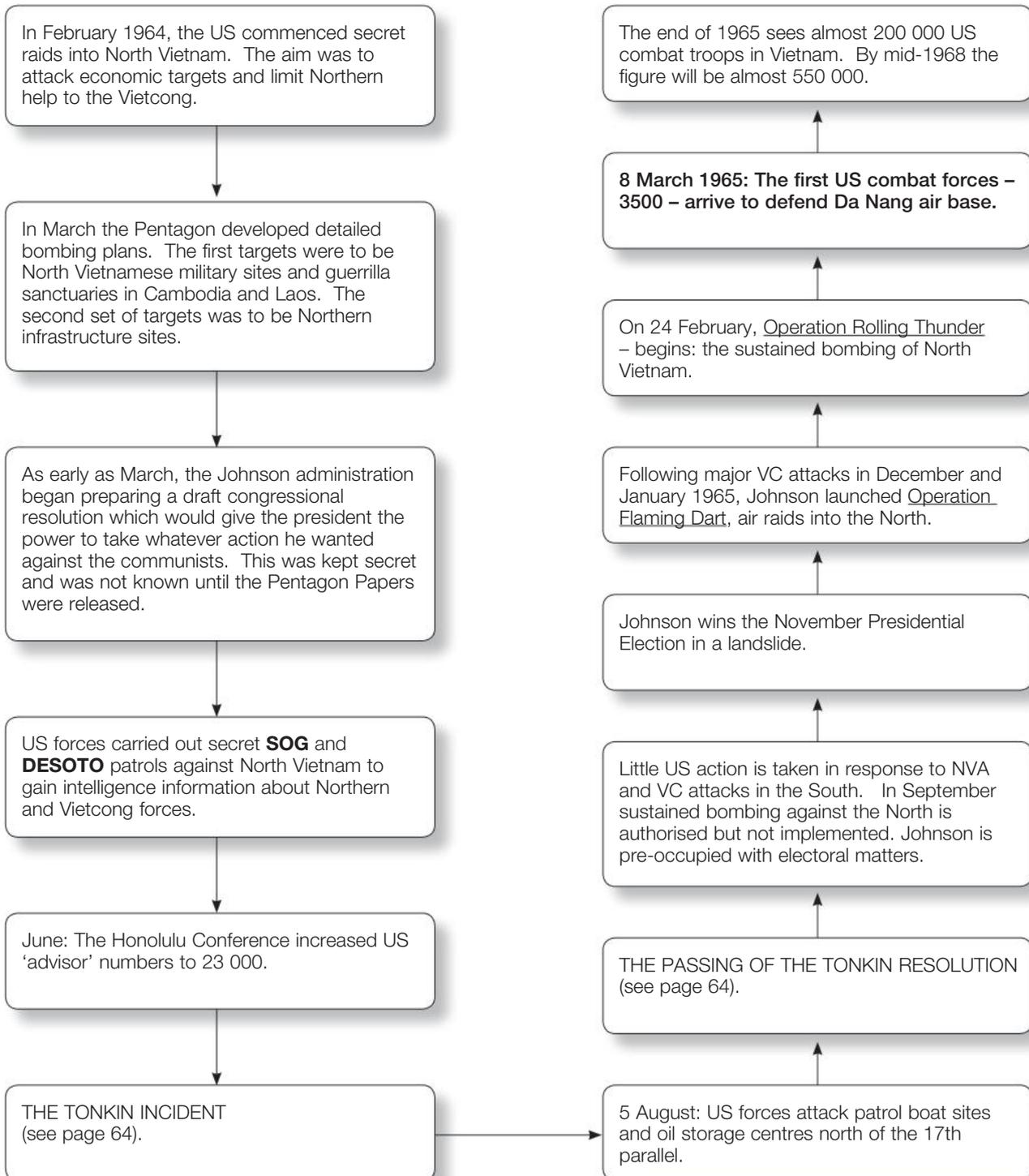
In June Johnson made two ‘hawkish’ appointments:

- General Maxwell Taylor became US Ambassador in Saigon
- General Westmorland was given command of US troops in Vietnam.

Throughout 1964 and 1965, the hawks increasingly caught the ear of the President. This was not surprising considering Johnson’s own personal feelings on Vietnam.

Figure 9.1 summarises the main steps in the US escalation of the conflict.

**Figure 9.1 Steps in the American escalation of the Vietnam conflict**



## The Tonkin Incident and the Tonkin Resolution

During late July 1964, the ship USS Maddox was involved in **DESOTO** patrols off the coast of North Vietnam. The Maddox moved very close to the coast – within seven kilometres – an area claimed by Hanoi as being in North Vietnamese territorial waters. This was clearly a provocative act on the part of the Maddox. North Vietnamese vessels attacked the Maddox. The crew of the Maddox claimed they then sank a North Vietnamese patrol boat and damaged two others before leaving the area.

Two days later the Maddox and the USS C Turner Joy returned to the area. There was a violent thunderstorm at this time. Claims were made by US authorities – subsequently found to be quite untrue – that the US vessels had been attacked again. This could have been the result of confusion caused by the storm or a deliberate lie by the US to give it an excuse to retaliate.

Johnson acted quickly and decisively. He went on nationwide television and stated that the US would not allow its vessels to be attacked with impunity. Air raids quickly followed against various targets in North Vietnam including oil storage facilities in Haiphong harbour. Johnson's action was astute politics:

- It showed him to be a firm, decisive leader.
- He did not take things any farther and risk making Vietnam a negative election issue.

Within days, the Congress had passed the Tonkin Resolution – unanimously in the House of Representatives, and with only two negative votes in the Senate. The Tonkin Resolution, which would remain in force until May 1970, was of crucial importance:

- It gave Johnson the power to take “all necessary measures” to prevent any further aggression.
- In other words, the President had been given a ‘green light’ to do in Vietnam whatever he believed was needed to be done.
  - More importantly he could take these actions without having to go through the Congress.

Once the resolution had been passed, it was neatly “slipped into the drawer” where it would remain, metaphorically speaking, until after the election.

Johnson kept his electoral nerve just before the election. On 1 November 1964, VC units attacked the American air base of Bien Hoa. It was a devastating attack. Four Americans were killed and over 70 wounded, and several B 57 aircraft were damaged. Johnson showed restraint. Within three days he had been re-elected with a massive majority. Over the next two months, Johnson made clear to his advisors that he was ready to escalate the American commitment in Vietnam. He did not have faith in bombing alone and was convinced that substantial ground forces were required.

On 7 February 1965 another VC attack at Pleiku killed nine Americans and wounded over 1000. Johnson launched Operation Flaming Dart, small scale specific air attacks on various North Vietnamese targets. Within a few weeks the Americans began Operation Rolling Thunder, the sustained bombing of North Vietnam. ‘Rolling Thunder’ would continue, with just the occasional pause, for over three and half years.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> It has been said that more bombs were dropped on Vietnam by the US Air Force than were dropped on Germany and Japan during World War II. Claims like this abound in works on the Vietnam War and it is very difficult to verify them. However, the point is clearly made that the bombing that was to be inflicted on Vietnam during the next decade was of horrific proportions.



## What Lyndon Johnson might have said in 1964



*I am not going to be the first President to lose a war. Goddamnit, I'm not gonna have folks say Truman "lost" China, and "Johnson" lost Vietnam!*

*South Vietnam is falling apart. The only way it's gonna survive and stop the communists is for us Americans to go in and take over.*

*I want the lid kept on this business in Vietnam until after I've whipped Barry Goldwater. Then you military boys can do what you've gotta do over there.*

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# ADVICE ON WRITING ESSAYS

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(These comments should be re-read when approaching the sections called ESSAYS 1, ESSAYS 2 and ESSAYS 3.)

## Introduction to essay writing

People who have been marking the HSC for a few years can read an essay and with little hesitation can say “that’s a ‘B’ level answer, 16/ 25, or that’s a ‘mid-A’ range answer, 23/ 25, or this is a ‘D’ answer, 8/ 25. HSC markers do occasionally disagree about answers but once they share their disagreements, the value of the essay becomes clear. It is one of the comforting things about how Modern History is marked at the HSC, that the legendary level of accuracy is almost scientific.

The reason for this is that essay writing is both a literary and a scientific skill. There is no mystery in writing a good essay. Certainly, some people are better writers than others: they might have a wider vocabulary, they might know more, they might have a better turn of phrase, they might understand the issues more clearly. However, everyone can come to terms with the basics and write a reasonable essay.

So, what makes for a successful essay?

1. Answer the question. This sounds almost trite and an insult to the intelligence, but the majority of responses presented in the HSC which score poorly, do so because they do not answer the question. Failing to answer the question can be done in a variety of ways. In summary it can happen because:

a. A student fails to address the issues presented in the question, ie he or she decides to write about something else. For example, in the essay:

*How important were communist guerrilla tactics in the defeat of the United States in Vietnam?*

A student decides to argue that:

- communist guerrilla tactics had nothing to do with the defeat of the United States in Vietnam
- it was the growth of the anti-war movement at home and the effect this had on government policy that led to the American defeat

A nice line of argument, but it is not answering the question. The student could argue the ‘anti-war movement’ line, but first of all he needs to deal with the issue of communist guerrilla tactics, even if it is to show that communist guerrilla tactics were not an important factor. He cannot simply ignore the focus of the question because he wants to write about something else.

A student might argue that:

- yes, communist guerrilla tactics were important in bringing about the defeat of the United States and show why this is so, and then argue “but of course other factors were also of importance such as....”

- as a rule of thumb, if you are going to pursue this style of argument, make sure that about forty to fifty per cent of your essay deals with the subject of the question, in this case 'communist guerrilla tactics'.

b. A student writes about the issues presented in the question, but instead of providing an argument to answer the question, she simply 'describes' or 'tells a story'. For example, in the essay:

*Account for the development of United States policy towards Vietnam between 1954 and 1965.*

A student fails to present an argument, instead she simply narrates:

- she might describe the story of American involvement from US support of the South at Geneva, to early economic assistance and the steady increase in the number of advisors;
- she might then bring in the deteriorating situation in the South, the death of Diem, the Tonkin Incident and Johnson's decision to escalate the war.

This is all relevant, factual detail but she is merely telling a story and not presenting an argument which is showing 'why' the US pursued the policies it did.

c. A student does not really understand the question and has so little factual detail he is unable to sustain even a narrative response.

d. A student does understand the question and attempts an argument but has so little factual detail that the argument cannot be sustained.

'c' and 'd' can only be fixed up with solid work and revision on the part of the student; 'a' and 'b' can be learned.

2. Provide an argument in your introduction which will form the basis of the essay. The introduction is the most important paragraph of the essay; if it is written properly it should leave the marker in no doubt what is going to come up in the essay. So, what does a good introduction involve?

a. Avoid the dramatic 'setting the scene' method. For example, in the essay:

*Account for the development of United States policy towards Vietnam between 1954 and 1965.*

A student should avoid opening like this:

- In a few short years after World War II, the plague of godless communism seemed destined to engulf the world. Stalinist expansionism had plunged Eastern Europe into a dark age of totalitarian tyranny. In 1949, China was also forced to embrace the Marxist creed as another 500 people million became enslaved. As the red tide swept southwards towards the peace-loving people of South Vietnam, the United States acted to save their freedom.

b. Avoid providing lots of factual detail in the introduction. Introduce the broad areas you will discuss, but leave the detail to the body of the essay. For example, in the essay:

*Account for the development of United States policy towards Vietnam between 1954 and 1965.*

This is not a good introduction:

- Even before 1954, the United States had been assisting the French in their war against the Vietminh. In 1955, the South received \$322 million in economic aid; the South was soon totally dependent on American assistance. By 1960 there were 900 US military advisors in the South and by 1963 there were over 16 000.....
- c. Be careful with length. Three lines is not an introduction, no argument can be properly introduced in such a small space. However, a page and half is too long. With average sized writing, 6-8 lines should be enough to present the argument of the essay.
- d. Try to present an argument in your introduction. There is no 'right' answer to a Modern History essay question; the right answer is the argument which you have presented, logically developed and backed up with detailed factual evidence. For example, for the essay:

*Account for the development of United States policy towards Vietnam between 1954 and 1965.*

A student might try to argue:

- The fundamental issue determining United States policy towards Vietnam between 1954 and 1965 was the desire to prevent the further spread of communism. This was the policy of containment. The US feared that if South Vietnam was taken over, all of South East Asia could fall to communism. However, when South Vietnam seemed on the verge of collapse in 1964, the Johnson administration's decision to escalate American involvement was motivated as much by economics and concern at maintaining US prestige, as it was by the policy of containment.
3. Provide your essay with a structure. Your introduction should show where the essay will lead, eg the above introduction might lead to the following structure:
- some points about communist expansionism after 1945 and the communist victory in China in 1949
  - the announcement of the Truman Doctrine and containment, and some early examples of this policy in action (Berlin Airlift, Korean War)
  - then discuss Eisenhower's enunciation of the Domino Theory
  - American faith in Diem and subsequent economic, social and military assistance
  - the deteriorating situation in the South by 1964, especially following Diem's assassination, and US concerns at the economic, as well as the strategic effects of 'losing' the South
  - the significance of the issue of prestige as indicated in the Pentagon Papers
  - the Tonkin Incident and the Tonkin Resolution
  - conclusion: The prime motivating factor of US policy towards Vietnam after 1954 was the containment of communism, given added force with the development of the Domino Theory. The scale of US economic involvement in South Vietnam meant that 'losing' this country would have economic as well as strategic consequences, and the Johnson administration were greatly concerned about the effect a communist victory would have on US prestige.

(NB: this is only one of a hundred ways of dealing with this question)

4. Structure paragraphs carefully. There are some simple rules to obey:

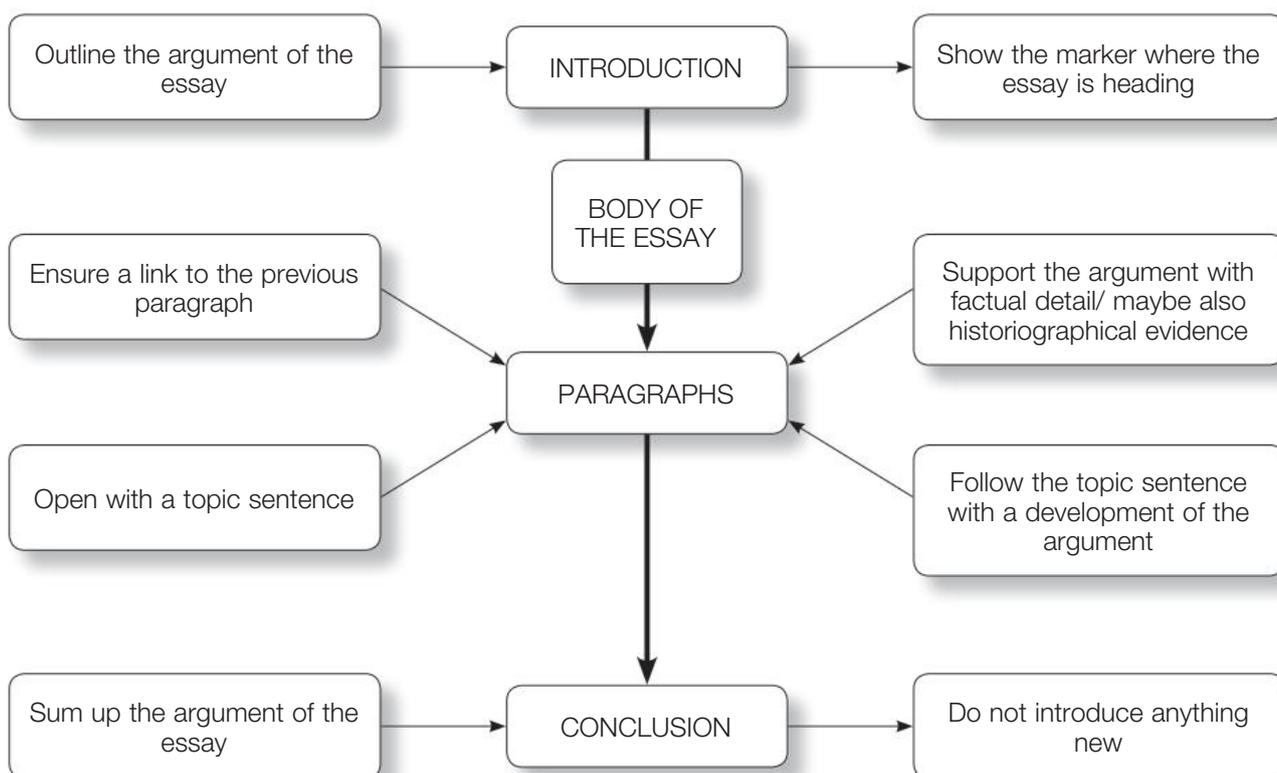
- open with a topic sentence which outlines what the paragraph is going to be about;
- develop the argument presented in the topic sentence;
- support the argument with specific factual detail;
- if appropriate, support the detail with historiographical evidence.
- link your paragraphs – this can be achieved easily with certain stock phrases, eg:
  - “not only was ‘x’ of significance but ‘y’ also had an impact....”
  - “in addition to “a and b”, “c and d” were also to benefit from.....”
  - “in contrast to “e”, “f” reacted quite differently....”

NB: Do not open paragraphs with historiography. The aim should be for the student to show the marker what he knows. Therefore, open with your ideas, back it up with factual detail and then, if appropriate, back up your idea with what a historian has said:

- argument>detail>(maybe) historians’ ideas;
- do not name drop for the sake of it – markers are not fooled or impressed by having lots of historians dropped into an essay when their books have almost certainly never been looked at;
- mentioning fewer historians is better than mentioning lots.

NB: Do not quote, paraphrase! This shows that you understand what the historian is saying; giving a three-line quotation merely shows you have remembered a three-line quotation, whereas paraphrasing the historian’s view in your own words shows that you have understood what you are writing.

The diagram below sums up some of the main ideas the have been discussed in this section.



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# ESSAYS 1:

## Responding to HSC questions on Indochina to 1965

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The purpose of this section is to provide some ideas for the type of questions which might be asked on the “Focus of Study (1) section of the syllabus: Conflict in Vietnam 1954-1964. These outlines are not presented as the ‘be all and end all’ responses to these questions. To provide a sense of reality to this section, what follows is a ‘first draft response’ to each question, ie what were the first ideas that came into the author’s head as he thought about each question?

### Essay No 1:

*“To what extent can it be argued that by 1960s, Diem’s rule of South Vietnam had been successful?”*

This seemingly straightforward question contains various pitfalls of which students need to be aware:

- Avoid providing nothing more than a detailed narrative of events in South Vietnam between 1954 and 1960.
- Equally, students should avoid taking a moralistic line by simply attacking the less savoury aspects of the Diem regime.
- There is no value here in commenting on developments in the North.
- Though mention needs to be made of America’s growing influence, this is not a question about the entry of the US into the Vietnam War. <sup>1</sup>

Students need to present an introduction which outlines what the essay will attempt to argue. The term ‘successful’ needs to be examined. Diem may well have been successful in some areas, though not in others. By acknowledging this, students should be able to produce a more sophisticated response. Diem was clearly successful in consolidating his rule and providing early stability to the regime. Economically, the regime was superficially a success, though beneath the surface the situation was different. The nature of Diem’s rule aroused nationwide opposition which provided the communists with an opportunity to revive their fortunes. Ultimately, Diem was a failure as his rule determined that either Vietnam would become Communist or face another war.

- Students can argue that Diem was clearly successful in establishing and consolidating his authoritarian rule. Refer to the measures taken by the end of 1955 which removed individuals and groups which opposed his rule.
  - The expulsion of coup plotters like General Hinh – thanks to US assistance
  - The destruction of the Binh Xuyen crime syndicate
  - The attack on the religious sects like the Hoa Hai and the Cai Dai

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<sup>1</sup> An argument could be presented that Diem was not a success because he had allowed the Americans to become so pivotal in the economic, military, political and cultural life of the South. The danger with this approach is that students will be writing an essay about the US rather than, as the question asks, about Diem’s rule.

- The Denunciation Campaigns which limited communist influence in the South
- The rigged 1955 referendum which saw Diem replace Emperor Bao Dai as Head of State and the creation of the Republic of Vietnam.
- Diem's decision – with full US backing – to refuse nationwide elections in 1956 which could have resulted in victory for Ho
- Economically, Diem had mixed success.
  - Refer to US aid, the boom economy in the cities, the thriving middle class
  - But temper this with reference to the gross inequality between city and country
  - Many South Vietnamese were far worse off under Diem than they had been under the French
- The brutal nature of the regime, combined with its corruption and nepotism, led to the rise of enormous opposition which provided the communists with an opportunity to revive their fortunes.
  - The regime ruthlessly employed police brutality, imprisonment without trial, torture and execution.
  - Make mention of the regime's inherent nepotism and corruption
  - Refer to Nhu's tactics, Law 10/59, censorship, increasing governmental controls
  - The Agrovillage Program which antagonised the peasants
- Enormous opposition to the regime existed by the early 1960s
  - From peasants angered by the reversal of Vietminh land reforms and the Agrovillage Program – refer to sporadic rural opposition in the late 1950s and the creation of the NLF
  - Show how the NLF gradually came to dominate large parts of the countryside
  - Student opposition in the cities
  - Buddhist opposition which gained world attention
  - Refer to the various military coup attempts which finally succeeded in November 1963 with tacit US approval
- Conclusion: ultimately Diem had been a failure – his policies were deeply unpopular; his regime was corrupt and based on a system of brutality; nearly every sector of society opposed him by 1963. These circumstances made possible the creation of the NLF and its growing domination of the countryside. Following Diem's murder, South Vietnam slipped ever deeper into chaos and violence to the point that by late 1964 a NLF takeover seemed highly likely. This was only prevented by the US decision to intervene fully against the NLF and its Northern supporters.

## Essay No 2

*Assess the importance of the containment of communism in determining United States policy towards Vietnam in the period to 1965.*

This seems to be a fairly straightforward question and covers areas students will be familiar with. However, like all HSC questions it does contain some traps of which students need to be aware.

- The use of the term ‘assess’ is deliberate. Students are being asked to ‘make a judgment’ about an issue:
  - thus, it is necessary to provide an argument early on which presents the student’s ‘judgment’ about the issue, ie the importance of the containment of communism;
  - students who present an argument and attempt to prove it are heading for a band two (16-20/ 25) or band one (21-25/ 25) mark.
- Students must be careful not to dismiss the issue of the containment of communism even if they believe this to be the case:
  - ie students cannot open up their essay by saying: ‘The containment of communism had nothing to do with US policy; instead it was all about this factor and this factor’.
  - even if you believe that the containment of communism was not the issue, you have to address it in your answer, prove that it was not important. Once this has been done, students can then bring in their ‘other factors’.
  - If students do not address the issue of the question, they are heading for a disappointing mark.
- Students must try to avoid simply ‘narrating’ and telling the story of US involvement, starting with the US involvement with the French/ at Geneva/ support for Diem and end up with the first combat troops landing at Da Nang.
  - such narrative/ descriptive responses with no analysis are headed for a band three result (11-15/ 25);
  - even detailed responses could earn only 15/ 25.

A typical response might argue that all US foreign policy after 1945 was determined by concern at the spread of communism which led to the policy of containment. This was given added force with the development of the Domino Theory. However, American involvement was also affected by issues of idealism and economic self-interest. By the mid-1960s, issues of national prestige and Johnson’s own political survival had become the predominant factors.

Briefly introduce some contextual information:

- the post-war world was dominated by the cold war clash between east and west;
- introduce the Truman Doctrine and explain the concept of containment;
- indicate how the policy of containing communism had already been put into practice before Indochina;
- belief in monolithic communism/ fears of Chinese expansionism fed the US view that Ho and the Vietminh were Soviet/ Chinese puppets;
- this idea strengthened by the development of the Domino Theory – explain this;
- hence Indochina was being viewed in strictly cold war/ containment of communism terms.

The US obsession with the containment of communism led to an unquestioning support of South Vietnam:

- very brief background on support for the French;
- US policy at Geneva in 1954;

- then detail the sustained support given to Diem;
- relate this to the growing strength of the Vietcong who were viewed as part of a wider communist threat.

Having spent about half the response on the containment of communism, it would be permissible to argue that of course, other factors also played a role in the US commitment to South Vietnam:

- refer to the idealistic streak in American foreign policy;
- students might even allude to Wilson's idealism at Versailles/ Roosevelt's idealism with the Atlantic Charter and then lead on to Kennedy's idealism on South Vietnam in 1956;
- however, self-interest also played a role such as the protection of US investments, a desire to control South East Asians markets and resources.

Students might then conclude that ultimately, the final decision to commit in 1964-65 was all a matter of prestige, both American and Johnson's own.

- The Pentagon Papers suggest that in 1964 it was the issue of America's standing in the world and its international prestige that had become the key motivating factor directing US policy;
- Johnson was eager to win his own mandate in the 1964 presidential election and realised he could not afford to 'lose' Vietnam.

Conclusion: the containment of communism was the key long-term factor directing US policy towards Indochina as Vietnam came to be viewed through the prism of the cold war. However, idealism and self-interest also played a role, and ultimately the issue of American prestige and Johnson's desire not to lose power.

Historiographical issues have been deliberately left out of this section. It is important for students to develop their own ideas and support those ideas with the historical evidence. If it is appropriate, then the views of specific historians can be included to back up the student's own argument. However, do not name-drop for the sake of it. Hastings/ Karnow/ Maclear/ Jones etc are only of value when they back up the student.

## **Chapter 10:**

# **Nature and effectiveness of the strategy and tactics employed by the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front**

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### **The elephant and the tiger**

The early success of the NLF and NVA against the Americans and the ARVN mirrored the fortunes of the Vietminh during the war against the French (1946-54).

In 1946, Ho Chi Minh was interviewed in Paris by the journalist David Schoenbrun. During the interview, Schoenbrun expressed incomprehension at Ho's confidence in winning a possible war against the French. After all, France was a modern, rich, industrialised and technologically advanced nation which the Vietminh could not possibly match in terms of firepower and economic wealth. Many Vietminh fighters did not even own shoes.

Ho's response to Schoenbrun was threefold. Firstly, Ho suggested that the Vietminh had a secret weapon to use against the French: **nationalism**.

- The Vietminh were fighting for nationhood, for independence and for this they were willing make any sacrifice.
- In fact, morale remained remarkably high amongst the Vietminh throughout the war. However, the longer the war dragged on, so did French morale decline.

This led to Ho's second main point. When one is fighting for one's own country, **time** is not an issue.

- This was a theme in Vietnamese history; it had, after all, taken the Vietnamese a thousand years to remove the Chinese in an earlier era.
- Ho said that the war against the French might take three, five or ten years. Time for the Vietnamese was not an issue. There was no way the people of France would allow their young men to continue fighting indefinitely in a foreign land.

However, Ho's main point was the way in which he saw the war developing. He used the analogy of an **elephant and a tiger**.

- If a tiger stands still, the larger, more powerful elephant will simply crush it to death. Thus, the tiger must never stand still and allow the elephant the chance to use the advantage of its greater strength.
- Instead the tiger must move around, wait till the elephant rests and then, in the dead of night, jump onto the back of the elephant and rip out its flesh. As the elephant awakens, the tiger must retreat back into the jungle.
- The next night the same thing happens. The tiger's attack on the elephant will never be enough to kill the elephant. However, as attack follows attack, the elephant will slowly bleed to death.

This, argued Ho, was how the Vietminh would fight. The massive, powerful French elephant would gradually bleed to death because of the continuous attacks by the weaker but 'more fleet

of foot' Vietminh tiger. Ho Chi Minh's prediction of the course of the French War, applied exactly to the early course of the American War. **It was simply a case of same tiger, different elephant!**

## Guerrilla Warfare

Ho may have used the analogy of the 'elephant and the tiger', but in essence what he was describing was the fundamental tactic of guerrilla warfare. The Vietcong were not a homogenous group. Some of them were full time, highly trained fighters, often working in combination with northern regular troops; some were part of provincial forces who fought in specific areas. And then there were the part-time guerrillas who might farm by day and fight by night.

The tactics followed by the communist guerrillas owed much to the experience of the Chinese communists in their struggle for power. They included the following.

- They avoided major confrontations with American forces in which they would invariably be outgunned;
- They often attacked at night, operated in small groups, travelled light often carrying nothing more than a weapon, some ammunition and some rice.
- The VC used the tactic of ambush.
  - Booby traps could be anywhere – an American soldier might be walking along a track and then fall into a pit of sharpened bamboo **punji** sticks that had been hidden by a cover of grass.
  - Jungle tracks were often mined.
- The terrain of South Vietnam was well suited to guerrilla warfare.
  - Most of the country was jungle and mountainous. It is not easy for conventional forces like the American to move effectively through such terrain<sup>1</sup> but it is ideal for the lightly armed guerrilla.
  - The Vietcong also knew their locale intimately, another advantage for the guerrilla fighter.
- They wore no uniforms and so were able to blend in with the local population.
  - This made life very difficult for the American troops as they could never know who was a VC and who was an innocent villager. The people whom the Americans were fighting and the people whom they were defending dressed the same, looked the same and spoke the same language.
  - Out of frustration and fear, American soldiers often took no chances and played safe by assuming the locals they met were VC.
  - This caused hostility and in fact persuaded many South Vietnamese people to join the Vietcong.
- Anybody could be a VC. The old farmer working in his paddy field by day, the prostitute an American **GI** visited during **R and R**, or even the small boy to whom a GI gave chocolate and chewing gum.
- The Vietcong had a two-sided relationship with the local population.
  - Ho and Giap insisted on a high level of respect for villagers from their men. They were expected to assist them when they could, respect their women and deal with them honestly. Such behaviour earned the VC strong local support.

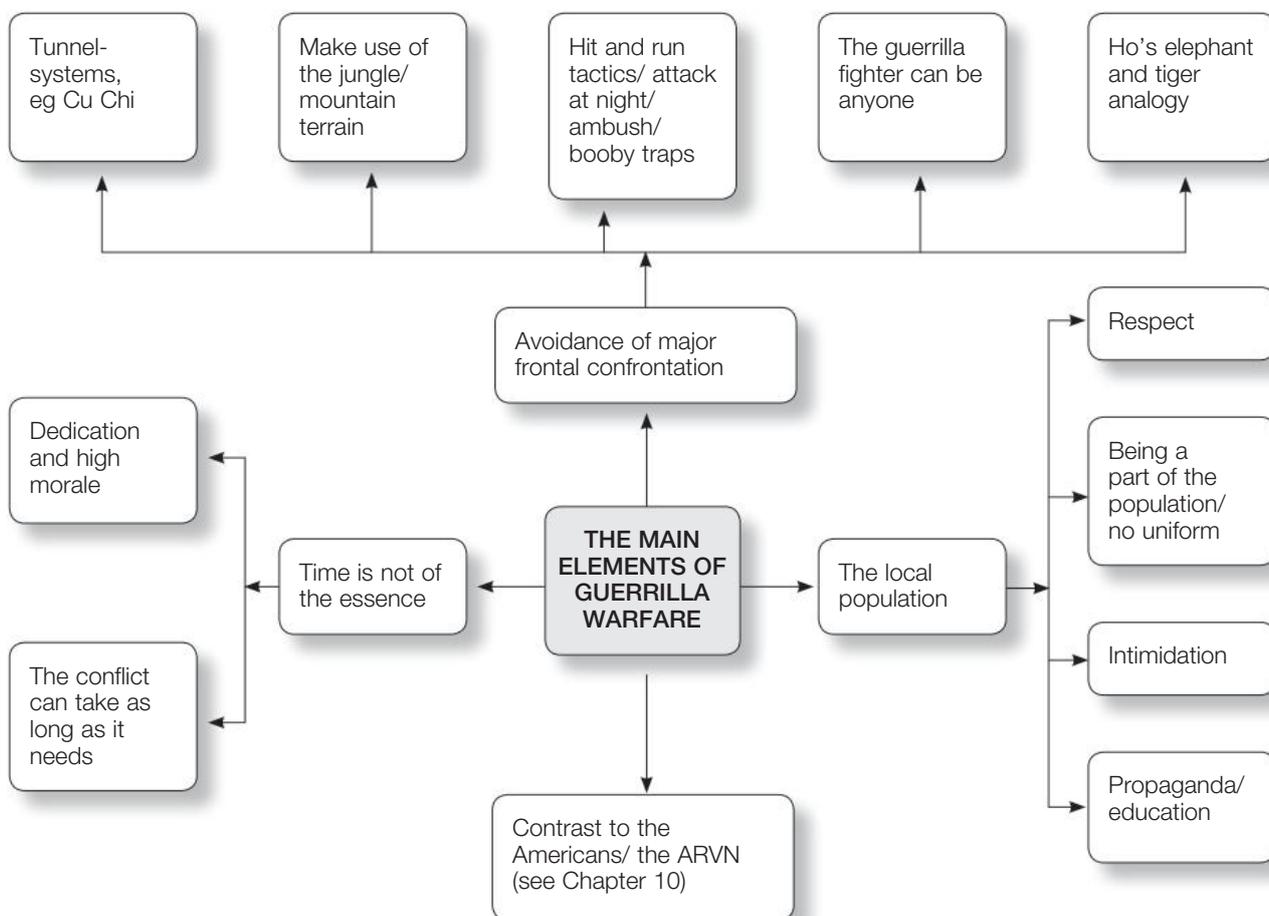
Mao Zedong had said: *the army are the fish; the people are the sea.*

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 11

- However, the VC could also be utterly ruthless to those who were suspected of working for the US or the South Vietnamese regime. Punishment for such people was always quick and merciless.
  - VC activity was thus marked by both idealism and brutality.
  - Vietcong fighters also engaged in political propaganda. The South Vietnamese people were educated about the aims of the movement, about the aim of independence and freedom from colonial (US) control, and the prospect of greater equality after victory had been won.
- Mao Zedong had said: *the gun is useless if the trigger puller is not the missionary of an appealing cause.*
- Vietminh and later Vietcong fighters had developed kilometres of tunnels in South Vietnam which provided sanctuary for the guerrillas.
    - In places these tunnels were barely wide enough for a person to crawl through; in others places they broadened to areas large enough to accommodate sleeping quarters, supply depots and operating theatres.
    - They added further frustration to American soldiers when guerrillas seemed to vanish into thin air. <sup>2</sup>
  - Most VC action occurred in rural areas. However, there were also urban cells; US soldiers always knew that the Saigon bar in which they were drinking could be blown up at any time.

Figure 10.1 summarises some of the main elements involved in guerrilla warfare.

**Figure 10.1 Summary of the main elements involved in guerrilla warfare.**



<sup>2</sup> The Cu Chi network of tunnels north west of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) are now a major tourist highlight. Tourists can crawl through the tunnel networks for considerable distances.

**Exercise 10.1**

Complete the following passage by using the term from the box below.

Ho compared his nationalist fight to that between an elephant and a tiger; to Ho the \_\_\_\_\_ represented the elephant while the \_\_\_\_\_ represented the tiger. Ho believed that \_\_\_\_\_ was on his side, believing that the \_\_\_\_\_ of his troops would not falter, no matter how long the war went. VC guerrilla fighters usually fought at \_\_\_\_\_, in small \_\_\_\_\_, and engaged in hit and run \_\_\_\_\_ style attacks. With their superior knowledge of the \_\_\_\_\_, and the \_\_\_\_\_ topography and \_\_\_\_\_ vegetation, the guerrilla fighter had many advantages. The VC often had peasant \_\_\_\_\_ but they were also known for their \_\_\_\_\_ against their enemies. The VC were well supplied along the \_\_\_\_\_ trail and from 1964 were joined by \_\_\_\_\_ troops. They took over the brunt of the fighting following the VC losses in the \_\_\_\_\_ Offensive of \_\_\_\_\_.

|           |             |             |         |            |        |
|-----------|-------------|-------------|---------|------------|--------|
| Terrain   | morale      | brutality   | groups  | Vietnamese | ambush |
| Americans | mountainous | time        | support | night      | Tet    |
| 1968      | NVA         | Ho Chi Minh | jungle  |            |        |

### What do the historians have to say about the tactics of guerrilla warfare used by the VC?

#### 1. Stanley Karnow: *Vietnam*

Karnow relates stories of his visits to peasant communities in the Mekong Delta south of Saigon. Many peasants were indifferent to the fighting and merely favoured the side which harassed them less. However, he found many peasants who welcomed the Vietcong and saw them as liberators. Yet, as Karnow puts it, the VC's "velvet touch often concealed talons of steel". However, VC brutality was not indiscriminate but aimed at those who betrayed the cause like government officials and informers.

*"...The Vietcong benefited from the image of the Vietminh...and their promise of a better future was enticing...Yet for all their brutality, Vietcong terrorism was usually selective..."*<sup>3</sup>

#### 2. Chester J Pach: (in) *The Sixties: From Memory to History*

Pach makes the point that by 1967, 96% of all American military engagements involved enemy forces no larger than a company, about 150 men. These were not the kind of battles that General Westmoreland wanted to fight.<sup>4</sup> Pach argues that these small-scale battles usually occurred only when the VC wanted them to occur. As a result, the VC were able to control their casualties and frustrate the Americans. In body count terms, the Americans invariably came out on top. However, Pach points out that despite the intensity of American bombing of the North:

*"...Hanoi had increased the flow of reinforcements into South Vietnam and mobilised sufficient resources to carry on the war indefinitely..."*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Karnow, S, *Vietnam*, Century Hutchinson, London, 1983, p 232

<sup>4</sup> America's commander in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland has been described as a logistics genius. He was the man to have on your side when involved in large scale, conventional conflicts. The guerrilla nature of Vietnam fighting did not suit him.

<sup>5</sup> Pach, C J, *And that's the way it was: The Vietnam War on the network nightly news*, from Farber, D (ed) *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1994, p93

### 3. Anthony Joes: *The war for South Vietnam, 1954-75*

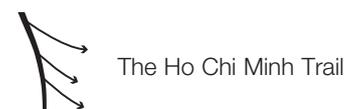
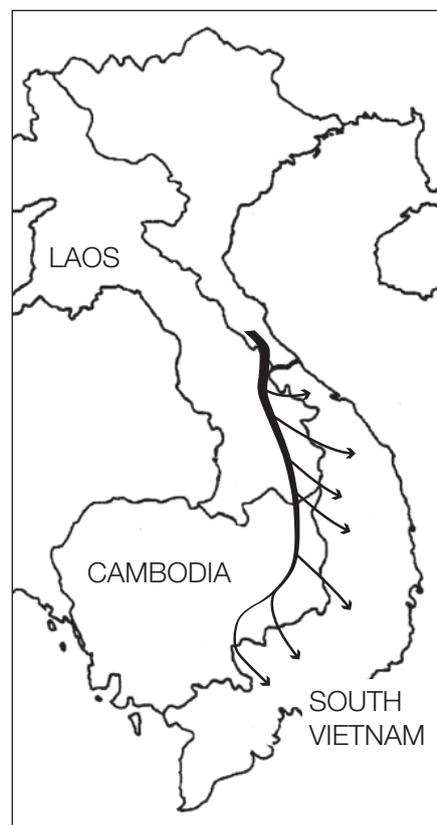
Joes' disgust of Vietcong terror is such that he refuses to enumerate it and instead provides an alternative reference for readers seeking such information. He explains the significance of the campaign of terror carried out by the Vietcong. They targeted 'corrupt or oppressive officials to win popularity' and 'hardworking, upright ones' to intimidate the population and show that the Saigon regime could protect nobody. Teachers were particular targets as they could become opinion leaders in the villages. By 1965, over 25 000 civilians associated with the Saigon regime had been targeted and killed. Joes says that VC activity had a major negative effect on government activities but that more importantly:

*"...It would be difficult above all to overestimate the psychological impact of the constant terror. Through the most heinous attacks on innocent civilians, the Vietcong effectively taught the peasants the dangers of associating with the government..."*<sup>6</sup>

## The Ho Chi Minh Trail

Courageous and resilient and indeed brutal though the Vietcong might have been, they relied heavily on their Northern comrades for supplies, encouragement and reinforcements. With US air power so all pervasive, with half a million US troops on the ground by 1968, not to mention the forces of the ARVN, it was no easy task to keep the VC supplied. What made possible the movement of North Vietnamese (and Soviet and Chinese) supplies South, was the Ho Chi Minh trail or the Truong Son (high mountain) Trail.

**Figure 10.2.**  
**The Ho Chi Minh Trail**



<sup>6</sup> Joes, A J, *The War for South Vietnam, 1954-75*, Praeger, Westport CT, 2001, p 49

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was not one simple track but a mass of criss-crossing routes, in places as many as twenty-five, which varied enormously in size and quality. Some idea of the extent of the trail is shown in Figure 10.2.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of masses of peasant workers, soldiers and even prison labour, the Trail was kept open despite the pounding it received from US bombing. By 1966, General Giap had well over 20 000 working to keep the trail workable. By 1975 as the war was coming to a close, parts of the Ho Chi Minh Trail had been paved and an oil pipeline had been installed. Traffic on the trail varied from lumbering Soviet trucks to donkey pulled carts to the efforts of individual ‘backpackers’.

Anthony Joes makes the point that on the final day of his presidency, President Eisenhower told John Kennedy that Laos was the key to Vietnam. What he was referring to was the fact that the Ho Chi Minh snaked its way through Laos. By the late 1960s, Joes says that there was an average of 2000 trucks a day on the Trail carrying 10 000 tons of supplies to the South. In 1968, over 100 000 North Vietnamese moved south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

*“...Winning the war in South Vietnam, or preventing a Communist victory, required stopping or at least seriously inhibiting the flow of men and supplies into the South.”*<sup>7</sup>

### The North Vietnamese Army

Though guerrilla warfare was a key element of the Vietnam War, it would be wrong to suggest that that was the Vietnam War in its entirety. From the late 1950s to 1964, the war was essentially guerrilla in nature, with most of the fighting being done by Vietcong units. The VC were of course well supplied by the North.

However, from 1964, regular units of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) began moving into South Vietnam in significant numbers. Between 1964 and 1968, General Giap was willing to engage the Americans in occasional set piece battles. The strategy of the DRV was to prolong the conflict, wear down the Americans as it had the French. North Vietnam was willing to lose a dozen men for each American who died.

During the Tet Offensive of 1968<sup>8</sup>, Vietcong losses were considerable. As a result, from 1969 onwards, the bulk of the fighting against the Americans and the ARVN was carried out by regular NVA forces.

- By 1972, the NVA was able to launch full-scale conventional campaigns. The final defeat of the South in 1975 had no elements of guerrilla warfare.<sup>9</sup>
- The presence of large numbers of NVA troops in the South carried with it a great danger for the North – it might justify an American invasion of North Vietnam.
- To safeguard against this, Hanoi ensured its good relations with both the Soviet Union and China. By early 1966, there were Chinese anti-aircraft and mine-sweeper units present in the North.
- Hanoi received such Chinese aid with mixed feelings.
  - It was comforting to have it in case of an American invasion;
  - however, historic Vietnamese fears of Chinese domination persisted, even if their ideology was similar.

<sup>7</sup> Joes, A J, *The War for South Vietnam, 1954-75*, Praeger, Westport CT, p 118

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 12

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 16

Robert Schulzinger presents a vivid image of the NVA troops who headed south. The North always claimed that those northerners who went South were volunteers; some of course were. Others were swayed into volunteering in mass meetings and others were ‘invited to go’. Most captured NVA often stated that they went to the South ‘out of duty’. Their equipment of course never matched that of their American adversaries. Each man carried 10 kms of food for the trip South, and was supposed to take a daily malaria tablet. Schulzinger says that about four men out of each company of 160 would die of disease, accidents, snake-bites or from an air raid on the trip South.

*“...Each soldier wore a uniform of a khaki shirt and pants and carried one spare outfit in his pack. Each had a pair of sandals cut from old truck tyres...The uniforms and sandals were expected to last the recruit five years.”*<sup>10</sup>

### Exercise 10.2

Answer the following questions, placing your answer in the space on the left.

|    |   |  |
|----|---|--|
| 1  | Who did most of the fighting on the communist side between the late 1950s and 1964?           |  |
| 2  | Why was the Ho Chi Minh Trail so important?   |  |
| 3  | How many people did Giap have working on the upkeep of the trail by the mid-1960s?            |  |
| 4  | How effective had the trail become by the late 1960s?   |  |
| 5  | Through which two countries did the Ho Chi Minh Trail pass on its way to South Vietnam?       |  |
| 6  | Why did NVA troops become so important after 1968?  |  |
| 7  | Why was North Vietnam worried about its open involvement in the war in the South?             |  |
| 8  | How important was guerrilla warfare in the final stages of the war?                           |  |
| 9  | Why did North Vietnam have mixed feelings about accepting Chinese aid?                        |  |
| 10 | What two reasons best explain the decisions of so many northern troops to fight in the South? |  |

<sup>10</sup> Schulzinger, R D, A Time for war: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-75, OUP, New York, 1997, p185

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SCENES FROM A GUERRILLA WAR



*The Cu Chi tunnels north west of Saigon*



*Punji stakes*

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## Chapter 11:

# Nature and effectiveness of the strategy and tactics employed by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and the USA

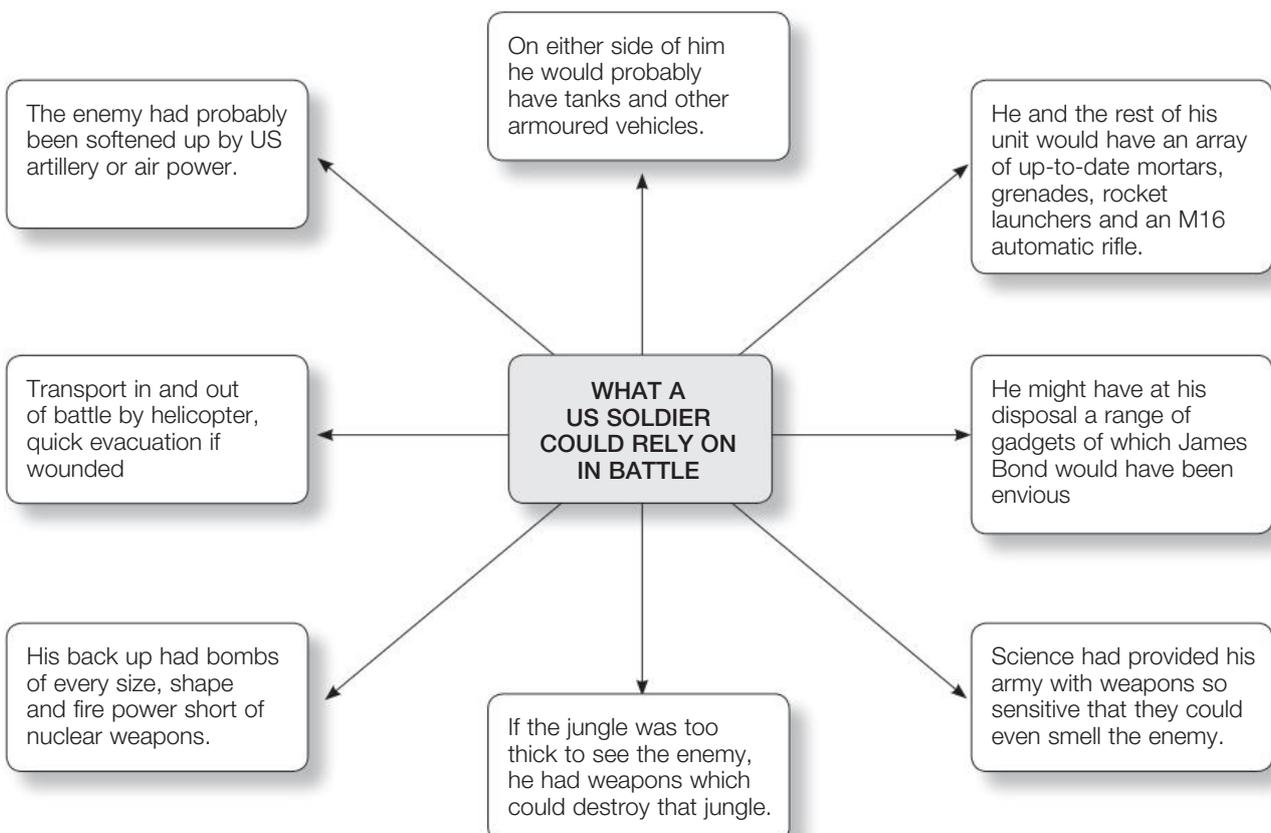
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### 'Not will we win, but how quickly'

In the mid-1960s, the United States sent to Vietnam the most modern, technologically sophisticated fighting force in human history. To many at the time, it seemed utterly inconceivable that the United States would not emerge triumphant. President Johnson referred to North Vietnam as *'a raggedy-ass little fourth-rate country'*. The young marine lieutenant Philip Caputo, later wrote that when he and his comrades marched off into the paddy fields, they shared the *'implicit conviction that the Vietcong would be quickly beaten'*.

Stanley Karnow was a correspondent in Vietnam throughout much of the Vietnam War. He estimates that by 1967, a million tons of supplies a month entered Vietnam to keep US forces going, ie a hundred pounds (45 kgs) per day per every American that was there. Figure 11.1 illustrates what an American soldier could rely on when he went into battle. <sup>1</sup>

**Figure 11.1 What a US soldier could rely upon in battle**



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<sup>1</sup> The information for this diagram comes from: Karnow, S, Vietnam, Century Hutchinson, London, 1983, pp 436-7

Such was the magnitude of US power, Karnow is led to the following conclusion:

*"...All this power intoxicated the Americans who initially went to Vietnam with a proud and overweening sense of confidence...they were certain that US omnipotence would triumph..."*<sup>2</sup>

The array of weaponry, technology and logistical support that the United States could call upon still staggers belief even today. It is interesting to note the incredible range of military paraphernalia that the US had.

- By 1968, there were over 5500 helicopters in Vietnam; the US helicopter was to become the iconic sight and sound of the Vietnam War. The widespread use of helicopters had both advantages and disadvantages.
  - It made possible quick, efficient movement into isolated areas.
  - It made possible the quick evacuation of wounded soldiers – percentage wise, far more wounded survived the Vietnam War than did World War II.
  - However, the helicopter was noisy. It was easy to see and hear and gave the VC warning time to retreat or disappear into their tunnels.
  - The VC gradually learned that there were favourite landing spots for helicopters and dug giant pits covered with grasses which hid large bamboo punji stakes. A helicopter landing on one of these was quickly immobilised.
- The scale of US air power was immense. The point has already been made about ‘more bombs being dropped on Vietnam than in WWII...’. A completely accurate assessment or not, there is no denying the magnitude of the American air war over Vietnam.
  - B 52 bombers, flying at 35 000 feet and often in a V formation could each drop 27 tons of bombs in a single mission. The planes were too high to hear and the first people on the ground knew anything about a bombing raid was when the giant bombs hit. The damage was devastating and the impact horrific. B 52 craters can still be seen in South Vietnam today.
  - Aircraft dropped not only explosives. Cluster bombs dropped amongst people – VC or villagers – had a devastating effect. On contact with the ground, these small bombs shattered and hurled hundreds of metal blades or steel balls randomly. They might not kill but they maimed and immobilised their victims.
  - One particular weapon of air warfare was what became known as ‘puff the magic dragon’. This was a converted DC 3 which could drop flares capable of lighting up an area of 2kms and fire on targets at a rate of 18 000 rounds a minute!
- A commonly used American and ARVN weapon was napalm made from jellied petroleum and dropped in canisters.
  - As the canisters were forced open on hitting the ground, the napalm ignited.
  - An entire village could be quickly incinerated during a raid in which dozens of napalm canisters were dropped. Again, the effect on the people in the villages could be horrific.
- For almost a decade after 1962, the Americans used herbicides and defoliants on the South Vietnamese jungles. This was code-named Operation Ranch Hand.
  - The main defoliant became known as Agent Orange.

<sup>2</sup> Karnow, p 438

- Its purpose was to destroy vegetation and hence deny the Vietcong the opportunity to take advantage of the dense jungle to escape an American ‘search and destroy’ mission.
- Up to 75 million litres of defoliants were dropped on Indochina. The effects of defoliant use can still be seen in Vietnam today with some areas of the country incapable of growing crops. <sup>3</sup>
- The use of defoliants was ultimately self-defeating. It angered South Vietnamese peasants and turned more of them against the government.
- President Nixon ended defoliation in 1969 because farmers back in the United States were complaining that they were suffering shortages of herbicides.
- The Americans also used an array of sophisticated electronic devices. One weapon which was called a ‘people sniffer’ could pick up the smell of ammonia (urine). The problem was that it could not distinguish between animal and human urine and subsequent targeted bombing raid did not always hit enemy targets. <sup>4</sup>

### Exercise 11.1

Match each of the descriptions on the left with one of the terms listed in the box below.

|    |   |  |
|----|---|--|
| 1  | Jellied petroleum dropped in canisters which ignites on contact with the air                  |  |
| 2  | A converted DC 3 capable of lighting up large areas and firing guns at 18 000 rounds a minute |  |
| 3  | Arguably the most iconic sight and sound of the Vietnam War                                   |  |
| 4  | The giant US bombers capable of dropping a bomb load of 27 tons                               |  |
| 5  | A form of herbicide used for destroying jungle vegetation                                     |  |
| 6  | A form of bomb which ejects hundreds of small missiles over a wide area                       |  |
| 7  | The type of automatic rifle used by most American soldiers                                    |  |
| 8  | Word which conjures up the scale of American power during the war                             |  |
| 9  | The American attitude to their expected progress throughout the war                           |  |
| 10 | The main advantage offered by the helicopter  |  |

|              |              |        |             |                       |
|--------------|--------------|--------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Mobility     | B 52         | napalm | helicopter  | confidence            |
| Agent Orange | cluster bomb | M 16   | omnipotence | puff the magic dragon |

<sup>3</sup> We now know that Agent Orange causes long-term medical problems such as cancer and deformities in children born years later. Many veterans have suffered this way; so too have many more Vietnamese.

<sup>4</sup> One of the many sad results of the war was the impact on wildlife. The tiger has almost completely disappeared from this part of the world because of the impact of long periods of warfare.

## US Tactics and Strategy under President Johnson

By 1966, the US had 385 000 troops in Vietnam. US commander General Westmoreland had spent a career in the military expecting to fight set-piece battles of a **conventional warfare** kind against a massive Russian army on the flat plains of Northern Europe. Neither he, nor his officers and men, were ready for what they experienced in Vietnam. VC and NVA forces preferred guerrilla actions where they had the advantage. It was the wisdom of Ho's 'elephant and tiger' thinking.<sup>5</sup>

Westmoreland decided to conduct attrition warfare against the enemy. As part of this, US army units would go out into the countryside and conduct 'search and destroy' missions. The aim varied little from operation to operation – locate the enemy, clear the area of civilians, destroy the villages to deny their use by the VC, carpet bomb the area, perhaps defoliate the surrounding crop areas, and then go in and capture any surviving VC.<sup>6</sup> In a sense, nearly all these missions 'succeeded'. However, this strategy contained fundamental flaws which the Americans never seemed to understand:

- Once an area had been neutralised, the Americans then withdrew. Within a short time, the VC were back.
- Tactics such as these – moving populations, destroying villages, defoliating – only served to further alienate the civilian population.
- These villagers, now deprived of their homes, and afraid of further attacks, moved to the cities. As more and more refugees poured into the cities, South Vietnam's already unstable society became even more destabilised. Centuries old traditions of respect and **filial piety** broke down as the Vietnamese young found the lure of western affluence with all its 'attractions' irresistible.<sup>7</sup>

Similar actions to those described above were carried out throughout 1966 and 1967. Actions taken near the Cambodian border in February 1967 merely had the effect of pushing the VC into Cambodia.<sup>8</sup> Frustration was affecting the US war effort.

- Rolling Thunder had been in progress for three years and yet it was not denting North Vietnam's will. Johnson was once heard to sigh about his Vietnam commanders: "Bomb, bomb, bomb, that's all they know".
- The constant bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail was having no effect as thousands of Giap's workers worked constantly on repair work.
- In fact, the worse the US bombing got, the greater seemed to be the morale and determination of the Vietnamese.
- Westmoreland told Johnson that by mid-1967 there were only 285 000 VC left; the CIA was telling him the figure was more like 500 000.
- Meanwhile on the Home Front, anti-war protests were on the increase, though at this stage the majority of Americans still supported the president and the war.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 10

<sup>6</sup> For a specific example of this technique, see Harper, J, *Conflict Without End*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne 1991, p 64 (the Cedar Falls Operation)

<sup>7</sup> The prostitution of Vietnamese village girls and the drug trade were to become major features of life in South Vietnamese cities during the American War.

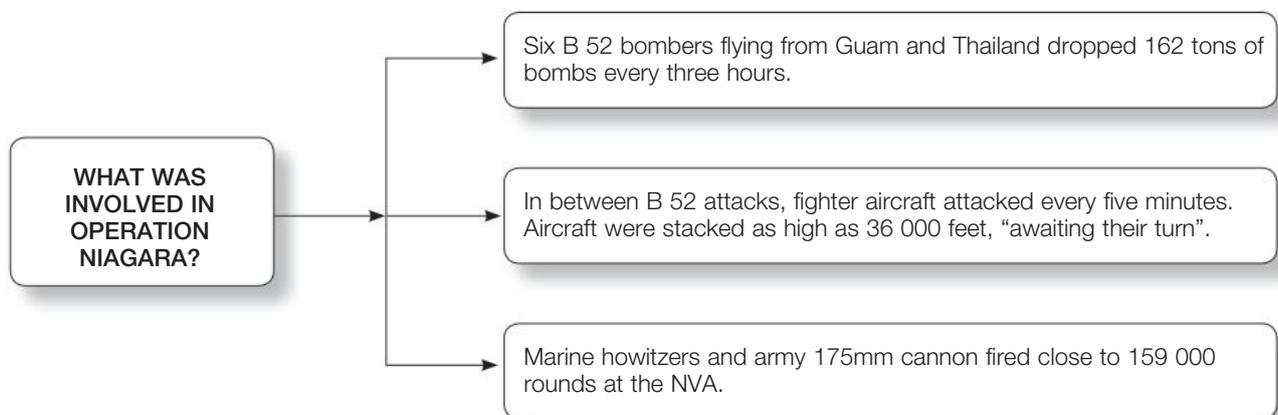
<sup>8</sup> This would eventually have disastrous consequences for this country – see Chapter 17

Divisions were appearing amongst the administration and the military. At Senate hearings in August 1967, civilian and military **hawks** sought an end to limits on the already considerable bombing of North Vietnam. Secretary of Defence, McNamara, said that the only way bombing would stop Hanoi supporting the war would be to totally destroy the country and its people! Johnson was becoming impatient with McNamara's increasingly emotional outbursts. In November 1967, McNamara resigned. He had not been arguing for America to pull out of Vietnam, but to stop the continuing escalation. Others in the administration and the military found this unacceptable. The official administration line was that the war was being won, that 'there was light at the end of the tunnel', that, 'as the daily evidence of body counts showed, the US was winning.'

In September 1967, captured Vietcong intelligence told the Americans that the NVA were beginning to move large numbers of troops and supplies into the area around Khe Sanh, close to the demilitarised zone and the Laotian border. Westmoreland believed that this was the beginning of a major communist offensive. He argued that the NVA were attempting to stage another Dien Bien Phu, a major set piece campaign which would drive out the Americans as the French had been driven out in 1954.

He moved 6000 troops into the area and carpet bombed the areas surrounding Khe Sanh (Operation Niagara). The American bombing during Operation Niagara provides a clear image of how US air power was used in Vietnam. Harpur estimates that the US dropped the equivalent of five Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs! Figure 11.2 highlights the main elements of Niagara.

Figure 11.2 Operation Niagara at Khe Sanh <sup>9</sup>



In January 1968, the NVA attacked the American base. This was to be a major battle lasting three months. The cost for the NVA was devastating – over 10 000 troops killed at the expense of about 500 Americans. The NVA finally pulled out of the battle on 17 April. The Americans abandoned the Khe Sanh base in June.

<sup>9</sup> Figures taken from Sheehan, N, *A Bright Shining Lie*, Picador edition, New York, 1990, p 706

## What do the historians have to say about the Battle of Khe Sanh?

### 1. Neil Sheehan: *A Bright Shining Lie*

Sheehan's story of the life John Paul Vann's career in Vietnam brings out the folly and errors of America's role in Vietnam probably better than any other book has managed. Sheehan's view of Khe Sanh is clear – for Westmoreland it was a mistaken belief that the NVA were genuinely seeking to achieve another Dien Bien Phu. He had stated many times that the communists would attempt such a plan.

*"Hanoi's ambition was Westmoreland's opportunity; he would achieve a Dien Bien Phu in reverse. He would bury Hanoi's divisions under a cascade of bombs and shells."*<sup>10</sup>

However, the NVA had no intention of making Khe Sanh another Dien Bien Phu. The Americans were not the French; the chances of entrapping the Americans, as the French had been, were non-existent. US logistical support dwarfed anything the French could ever have dreamed of and Khe Sanh was far closer to the coast than was Dien Bien Phu. Sheehan argues that Khe Sanh was a diversion aimed at occupying the Americans as the major attack of the Tet Offensive was carried out.

*"...The siege was a ruse to distract Westmoreland, not the Marine garrison. The siege was a ruse to distract Westmoreland while the real blow was prepared."*<sup>11</sup>

### 2. Max Hastings: *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975*

Hastings concurs with most other writers about the significance of Khe Sanh. He says that an any objective examination of Khe Sanh has to be seen as a major NVA defeat: ten NVA died for every US soldier. By the end of the siege, the NVA had to deal with 12 000 sick, 6000 dead and 15 000 wounded. However, Hastings argues:

*"...Westmoreland and the media between them snatched a psychological defeat: MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) was deemed to have fallen victim to a brilliant communist deception – which, in considerable degree, it had.."*<sup>12</sup>

## The ARVN

The South Vietnamese army, the ARVN, were often derided during the war as being poor soldiers, quick to avoid battle, open to corruption and eventually quick to desert. At the time stories abounded about army funds being misappropriated and promotions only being gained if one could pay. Rising through the ranks of the ARVN was often a matter of the right political contacts or family ties rather than an issue of competence. Crucial supplies of medicine, petrol and food were often diverted and sold, on many occasions to Vietcong agents. Senior commanders had many 'ghost soldiers' so that they could claim their pay which of course would be diverted into their own bank accounts.

Many of the ARVN recruits were forced into service or were volunteers from the urban poor. Their training was limited and they allegedly relied upon the Americans to do the fighting. Even worse, was the fact that VC had managed to infiltrate some ARVN units.

<sup>10</sup> Sheehan, N, *A bright Shining Lie*, Picador edition, New York, 1990, p 704

<sup>11</sup> Sheehan, p 710

<sup>12</sup> Hastings, M, *Vietnam: An Epic Strategy 1945-1975*, William Collins, London, 2018, p 409

How accurate is such a picture? It is clear that the ARVN fought bravely both during the Tet Offensive of 1968 and the NVA's Easter Offensive of 1972. Most of the reporting carried out by western journalists during the war came from an American perspective. It was much more comfortable accompanying American units than ARVN units. Some reporters even got their own helicopter, they could rely on clean water and food supplies. This was not always the case if reporters were accompanying ARVN troops. This meant that most of the television and newspaper news talked about what the Americans were doing. Those television images, which would eventually do so much to fuel the anti-war movement, invariably showed lads from Phoenix and Detroit in battle rather than lads from Quang Tri and Nha Trang. The public perception grew that the South Vietnamese were not fighting the battles that they should.

This view of the ARVN is unfair. Certainly, there were severe weaknesses within the ARVN for reasons mentioned above but to label the whole southern army this way is not accurate. One of the few western journalists who made a real effort to work alongside ARVN troops was the Australian, photo-journalist Neil Davis. What follows are points made by Davis in Tim Bowden's biography of Davis called "One Crowded Hour".<sup>13</sup>

- The war meant a great deal to the ARVN and they had to fight it on their own terms; they usually lacked the sophisticated weaponry of the Americans. However, Davis believed that what they were doing in the field was a truer reflection of the reality of what was really going on.
- When interviewed on the tenth anniversary of the fall of Saigon<sup>14</sup>, Davis said he could recall only three weeks in three years when US casualties had exceeded those of the ARVN.
- Davis conceded that you had to choose with which ARVN units to travel but he says he never saw them run away once.
- Davis contrasted the tactics of the ARVN with the Americans.

*"Unlike the Americans who always telegraphed their punches in advance by blanket bombing or artillery strikes, the South Vietnamese would often move quietly into an area and take the Vietcong unawares."*<sup>15</sup>

13 Bowden, T, *One Crowded Hour*, Collins, Sydney, 1987.

14 On the US network NBC's Today show from Hanoi

15 Davis quoted in, Bowden, T, *One Crowded Hour*, Collins, Sydney, 1987, p 129

**Exercise 11.2**

Circle the correct response – THIS IS TRUE/ THIS FALSE – to each statement in the left-hand column.

|  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| 1. General Westmoreland had been trained all through his career for a Vietnam style war.       | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 2. Johnson always had the greatest confidence in his Vietnam commanders.                       | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 3. When McNamara resigned, he was eager for the US to limit its escalation.                    | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 4. US tactics in Vietnam often had serious but unforeseen social consequences.                 | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 5. The NVA fully expected the Battle of Khe Sanh to become America's Dien Bien Phu.            | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 6. Westmoreland believed the Battle of Khe Sanh to be a NVA attempt at another Dien Bien Phu.  | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 7. The use of US air and artillery power during the siege of Khe Sanh was of a limited nature. | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 8. The ARVN had a poor reputation for honesty and willingness to engage in battle.             | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 9. The ARVN's poor reputation was often the result of western reporting of the war.            | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 10. The photo-journalist Neil Davis tended to agree with the negative assessments of the ARVN. | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |

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# Chapter 12:

## Impact of the 1968 Tet Offensive

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### The Tet Offensive

#### *Why so important?*

It would not be an exaggeration to argue that the Tet Offensive of January/ February 1968 completely changed the face of the Vietnam War. Replete with paradox, nothing about the war would be the same again.

- Tet changed American war aims:
  - before the Tet Offensive, the American war aim had been 'to win' (whatever winning had become to mean);
  - after Tet the American war aim had become 'to get out of Vietnam with the minimum loss of face'.
- Tet changed American politics:
  - before Tet President Johnson was busily planning for his re-election;
  - after Tet Johnson's career was in tatters.
- Tet was the most significant military action of the war up to that point:
  - it provided the Americans with their most decisive military victory to date and left the VC devastated;
  - yet after Tet North Vietnam knew it would win.
- Tet altered the cold war consensus that had taken the US into Vietnam:
  - before Tet the anti-war movement, though growing, was still very much restricted to the campuses and radical elements;
  - after Tet mainstream political figures were calling for withdrawal and the anti-war movement would itself become mainstream.

What was in reality a major American military success became a major political and psychological defeat.

#### *What was Tet?*

It had become the practice in the Vietnam conflict to observe a truce during the Tet new year festival which took place each January. In 1968, the Communists broke this traditional period of truce. Hanoi launched a massive, nationwide attack across the whole of South Vietnam. Weeks before, specially trained units had infiltrated into South Vietnam towns and cities, bringing with them a stash of weapons. The attack involved a communist force of 84 000 – 67 000 regular troops and 17 000 guerrillas. There was a major mistake regarding timing. Giap had originally intended the attack to occur on 29/30 January but changed it to 30/31 January. Poor communications prevented news of the change reaching all units. Some units acted prematurely, capturing six towns but this alerted US and ARVN forces to what was happening.

The Communist forces eventually attacked 36 out of 44 provincial capitals and 66 other towns.

The Communists had several interrelated aims in launching Tet. They hoped:

- that the scale and geographical spread of the offensive would spur the people of South Vietnam to rise up against the southern regime;
- that it would cause the collapse of the Thieu (president since 1967) regime;
- that it would convince the Americans of Communist determination and convince them to leave.

Tet did not last long. It was effectively over within three weeks though fighting continued in the central city of Hue until March. <sup>1</sup> The Americans lost nearly 4000 men; the ARVN lost almost 5000 and over 14 000 South Vietnamese civilians died. The destruction was considerable – in Hue three quarters of all the houses had been totally or seriously damaged.

Yet if the US/ ARVN losses had been great, the Communist losses were greater. The VC/ NVA forces lost almost 60 000. Some sources give an even higher figure. The people did not rise up, the Saigon regime did not collapse and US military commanders realised that they had experienced a significant military victory! Many of the Communist losses included political cadres responsible for organising in the South. It would take Hanoi some time to get over this disaster.

### *So why was Tet such a disaster for the Americans?*

The Johnson administration had been telling the people of America that victory was in sight. Stories coming out of Vietnam in 1967 had been positive, ‘body counts’ of Communist dead had been high. And then came Tet. The question most Americans began asking was: “If we are doing so well, if we are winning this war, how the hell were the Communists able to launch such a goddamned massive attack against our forces?” The inference was that the administration had been lying to the American people.

The media have often been criticised by right wing commentators in the United States for overly focusing on the negative aspects of the war. However, up to 1967, the US media had often been guilty of self-censorship rather than deliberately promoting an anti-administration line on the war. However, Tet changed things. When television pictures of the events of Tet reached the lounge rooms of American families, they needed few editorial additions.

- A platoon of VC managed to get into the US embassy in Saigon. Americans view their overseas embassies as sacrosanct and to be defended at all times. Each of the VC invaders was killed.
  - However, TV news was able to show pictures of US forces having to battle VC for their own embassy.
  - The American ambassador had had to escape in his pyjamas.
- VC units were also attacking Saigon’s Ton Son Nhut airbase and the ARVN staff headquarters. Fighting in Saigon continued for almost two weeks.
- TV maps were lit up showing where Communist attacks were taking place. It did not matter that the US were winning everywhere.

<sup>1</sup> There have been many films made with a Vietnam theme. The fighting in Hue is central to Stanley Kubrick’s film “Full Metal Jacket”.

- If the VC are on their knees, how the hell had this been able to happen?
- On 25 February, with Khe Sanh raging, Westmoreland's response was to ask for an additional 206 000 troops. Three days earlier Westmoreland's command had announced that in the previous week 543 US soldiers had been killed – the highest weekly toll for the war so far.
- One of the most famous photographs of the 20th century was taken during the Tet Offensive.
  - It showed South Vietnamese General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, Saigon's Chief of Police, shooting a bound VC prisoner at point blank range in a Saigon street.
  - The newspaper and TV pictures went around the world. The scene caused outrage. People were now asking: "I thought we were the good guys, what the hell is going on?"<sup>2</sup>
- On 27 February America's most respected news presenter, Walter Cronkite uncharacteristically editorialised on live TV.
  - Cronkite was an American institution, trusted by Americans without question and he was proud of his boast of 'telling it just as it is.'
  - Yet now, even Cronkite was drawn to ask what the hell is going on, I thought we were winning and perhaps it is better to accept the war is a stalemate and negotiate.
  - Johnson's response on hearing Cronkite was to say: "If I've lost Walter, I've lost Mr Average Citizen."

### *The results of Tet*

As has been explained, Tet was a major Communist defeat from which it would take some time to recover. However, Westmoreland and other supporters of the war claimed that the press had turned it into an American defeat and a decisive psychological victory for the North. In essence he was right. After Tet, the chances of Westmoreland receiving additional troops were nil; US troops numbers would peak in 1968 at about 550 000. Any possible support for further escalation of the war had ended. Indeed, Westmoreland's own Vietnam career was soon brought to an end.

This was a decisive moment in the war. The North may have been licking their wounds but they now realised that a crucial turning point in the war had been reached. There would be no further US escalation; there could only be one direction in which US policy could go: de-escalation and the gradual withdrawal of US forces. It might take a while, but it would happen. Without the United States' military (and eventually economic) presence, the Southern regime would indeed collapse.

If there was any doubt about this, such doubts were ended when President Johnson spoke to the American people on television on 31 March 1968. Johnson made several telling statements in his speech:

- He renewed the offer made in August 1967 to end the US bombardment of North Vietnam.
- He said the US was prepared to start peace negotiations immediately.

<sup>2</sup> Neil Davis knew Loan. He did not excuse his action but tried to explain it. Just before the incident, VC had attacked a police compound, murdered Loan's best friend, a police colonel, his wife and six children, and then cut their throats. When told where the VC soldier had been captured – the police compound – he just pulled out his gun and fired. (see Bowden, T, *One Crowded Hour*, Collins, Sydney, 1987, pp 159-61)

- He announced that 90% of North Vietnam would immediately be spared from US bombing.

However, the most significant point Johnson made came later. He said that he did not want the presidency to become involved in partisan divisions at home (it was an election year). And so, Johnson announced:

*“..Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.”*

Tet had, in effect, destroyed Johnson’s career.

If the North Vietnamese needed any further evidence that a turning point had been reached from which there was no turning back, it was provided by events inside the United States.

- The Democrat Party’s two leading contenders for the presidential nomination – Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy – were both pushing for an end to the war.
- Even the Republican Party’s nominee, Richard Nixon, was calling for ‘Peace with Honour’.
- On 10 May 1968, official peace talks opened in Paris. It would take almost five years for peace to be achieved.
- Though Tet had devastated Communist forces, this did not mean that the Americans ceased haemorrhaging. In two weeks in May, 1800 American soldiers were killed and 18 000 were seriously wounded. Morale in American was beginning to deteriorate.
- On 31 October 1968, Johnson ended all air attacks on North Vietnam.

Richard Nixon narrowly won the Presidential election in November. Once in power, he would initiate what he called ‘Vietnamisation’, the policy of gradually removing American troops and having the ARVN take up the brunt of the fighting. <sup>3</sup> For the North Vietnamese at least, there was light at the end of the tunnel.

### Exercise 12.1

Read each of the following statements. Circle the correct answer on the right, indicating whether you think that the statement is a fact or an opinion.

|   |   |               |
|---|---|---------------|
| 1 | The Tet Offensive had a major impact on the Vietnam War.  | FACT/ OPINION |
| 2 | The Communists were clearly trying to create another Dien Bien Phu situation at Khe Sanh.             | FACT/ OPINION |
| 3 | There was confusion about when the Tet Offensive was supposed to commence.                            | FACT/ OPINION |
| 4 | 19 Vietcong managed to get inside the American Embassy in Saigon.                                     | FACT/ OPINION |
| 5 | The occupation of the American Embassy by 19 VC was the decisive media image for the American people. | FACT/ OPINION |

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 15

|    |  |               |
|----|--|---------------|
| 6  | The strength of VC forces had enormously weakened as a result of the Tet Offensive.                                | FACT/ OPINION |
| 7  | The US media were biased in their negative handling of the Tet Offensive.  | FACT/ OPINION |
| 8  | President Johnson over reacted by declining his party's possible Presidential nomination.                          | FACT/ OPINION |
| 9  | Though Tet was a military victory it was a psychological defeat.   | FACT/ OPINION |
| 10 | The photograph of General Loan shooting a VC prisoner had a major effect on public perceptions of the Vietnam War. | FACT/ OPINION |

## What do the historians have to say about the Tet Offensive?

### 1. Tim Bowden: *One Crowded Hour*

Bowden quotes photo-journalist Neil Davis at length in the latter's analysis of the significance of the Tet Offensive. Davis points out that the Americans and the ARVN managed to recapture most of the territory that had been taken by the Communists but that because the media had presented Tet as a defeat, the anti-war movement had been given a boost. Davis again highlights that the ARVN had done most of the fighting during the Tet Offensive. Davis says the media presented the attack on the American Embassy as a moral defeat and that they were right but that they were:

*"...wrong in presenting the whole offensive as a military defeat. One immediate result was that the southern born guerrillas, the Vietcong, were effectively destroyed. After that it became war with the North Vietnamese versus South Vietnam and America."*<sup>4</sup>

### 2. Leonard Bushkoff: *Tet broke the US will to win*

Bushkoff covers the usual arguments about Tet. However, he further states that what it did was to bring Americans crashing down to reality. He agrees that Tet was a tactical American victory but that its effect on the American consciousness made it a defeat. He says that Tet put the lie to cold war rhetoric and superpower egotism.

*"...Tet demonstrated conclusively that revolutionaries motivated to suffer and die could checkmate a great military power."*<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Phillip B Davidson: *Vietnam at War – The History 1946-1975*

Davidson was chief of US Intelligence in Vietnam between 1967 and 1969. He attempts to explain why Johnson had failed. He says that it was essentially the result to two factors: the inability to create a viable Southern regime and the impossibility of true escalation against North Vietnam for fear of bringing in the Soviet Union and/ or China on the North's side, and the damage such escalation would do to America's international image. Davidson concludes:

<sup>4</sup> Bowden, T, *One Crowded Hour*, Collins, Sydney, 1987, p 162

<sup>5</sup> Bushkoff, L, *Tet broke the US will to win*, in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 January 1988

“...So America just continued to fight a limited and ineffective war to support a series of unpopular Saigon regimes. The nature of the warfare and criticism back home led to the apparent collapse of the home front and the American forces in Vietnam.”<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Neil Sheehan: A Bright Shining Lie

Sheehan provides an interesting inside look of the White House in late March to highlight how significant Tet had been. His comments refer to conversations taken just days before Johnson’s announcement about not seeking re-election. Ironically, it was Dean Acheson, arguably one of the war’s most important early architects, who summed up the US position after Tet.

“...We can no longer do the job we set out to do in the time we have left and we must begin to take steps to disengage...”<sup>7</sup>

#### What might have been said after Tet



Hi, I'm Private Kowanski, it's late 1968. I don't get it, we defeated the VC during the Tet Offensive. Yet when I'm home all I see is anti-war protesters and the TV keeps going on how we are getting beat in Vietnam.



My name is General Westmoreland, US commander in Vietnam. It's 1968, our defeat of the communists after the Tet Offensive gives us a real chance of victory. Just give me another 200 000 men.



I am General Giap. The Americans think they won during Tet. Let me tell you, the American people realise they are not going to win. The Americans want peace talks. They would not ask for this if they were winning.

<sup>6</sup> Davidson, P B, Vietnam at War: The History 1946-75, OUP, New York, 1991

<sup>7</sup> Sheehan, N, A Bright Shining Lie, Picador edition, New York, 1990, p 722

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# Chapter 13:

## Impact of the war on civilians in Vietnam <sup>1</sup>

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To suggest that the conflict in Indochina had an impact on civilians in Vietnam is rather an obvious statement to make. However, one of the HSC syllabus 'key features and issues' is: *impact of the war on civilians in Indochina*. This means that students have to be ready to deal with this specific point to answer a possible question.

This key feature and issue might be dealt with in a variety of ways:

- by differentiating between the short-term impact and the long-term impact;
- by approaching the issue by breaking it down into a series of themes such as:
  - political impact
  - social impact
  - cultural impact
  - economic impact
  - psychological impact
  - environmental impact
  - future health impact
- a question which asks students to “assess the impact of the Second Indochina War on the civilians of Vietnam” could lead to following angles:
  - the question would probably be interpreted as only having a significance “during” the American War;
  - it would probably not be a wise stratagem to focus ‘only’ on the post-1979 long-term impact.
- Another way of analysing the impact of the war on civilians could be to take issue with the term ‘war’. Impact can then be considered in terms of:
  - What was the impact of the American air war on civilians?
  - What was the impact of the American ground war?
  - What was the impact of the American chemical war?
  - What was the impact of guerrilla warfare on civilians?

Figure 13.1 and Figure 13.2 show some suggested approaches which might be developed when considering the impact of the war on civilians in Vietnam.

### Some thoughts on the impact of the war

#### (i) American bombing:

American bombing and artillery firepower had a massive impact on South Vietnam’s ability to feed itself. The bombing could char forests, destroy rice crops and leave land impossible to cultivate. Cluster bombs often remained ready to release their deadly impact. Large parts of the country became no-go areas because of the vast array of unexploded mines and shells; some still remain so today! A bomb that had targeted a dyke could well leave an area of land previously capable of growing crops submerged in sea water. In the early 1960s, South Vietnam had been a net exporter of rice. By 1965 it became a net importer of rice, such had been the impact of the war.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter will focus only on civilians in Vietnam. Cambodian civilians will be considered in Chapters 17-19; those in Laos in Chapter 20.

Figure 13.1 Impact of the war on civilians: Some ideas (1)

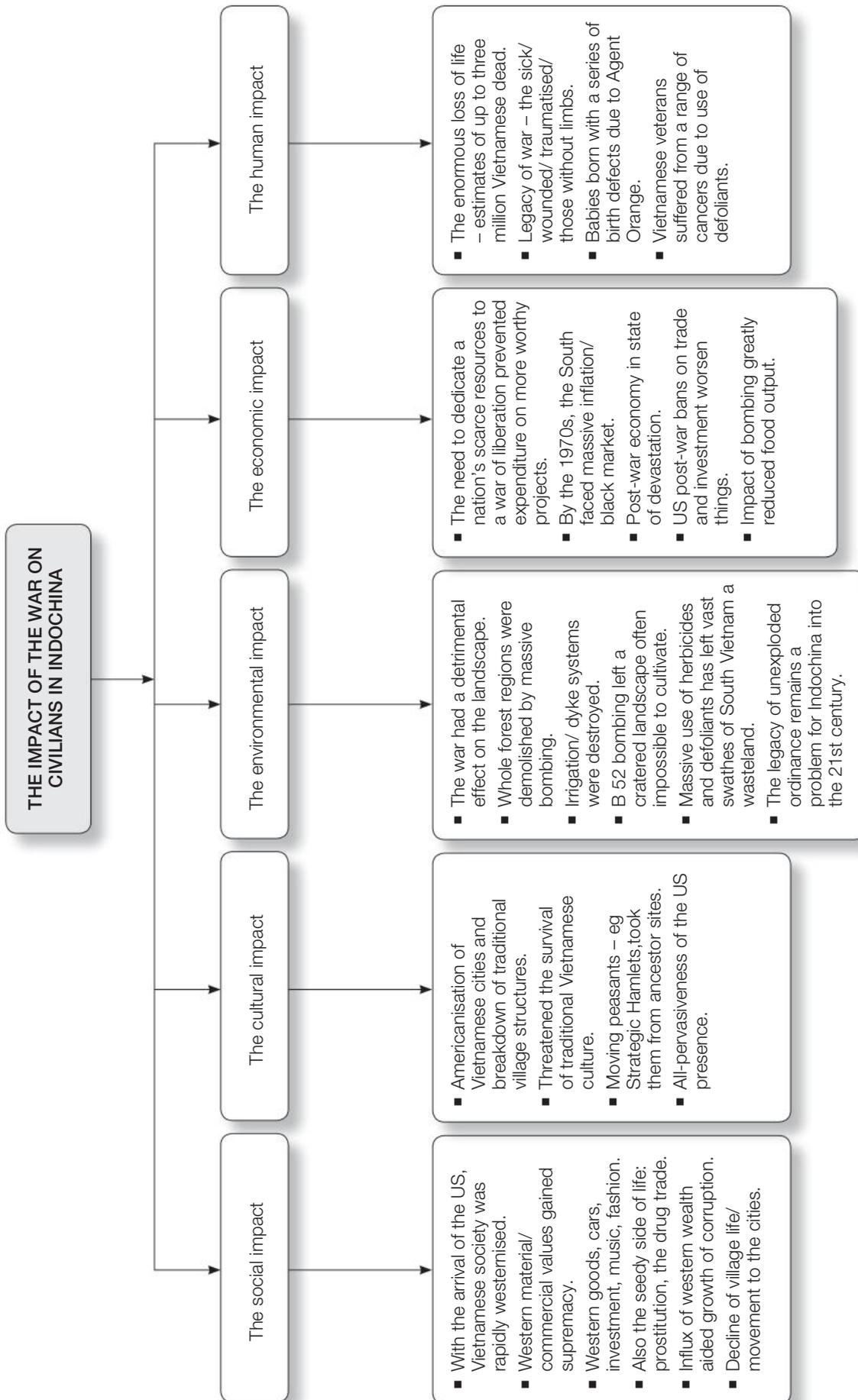
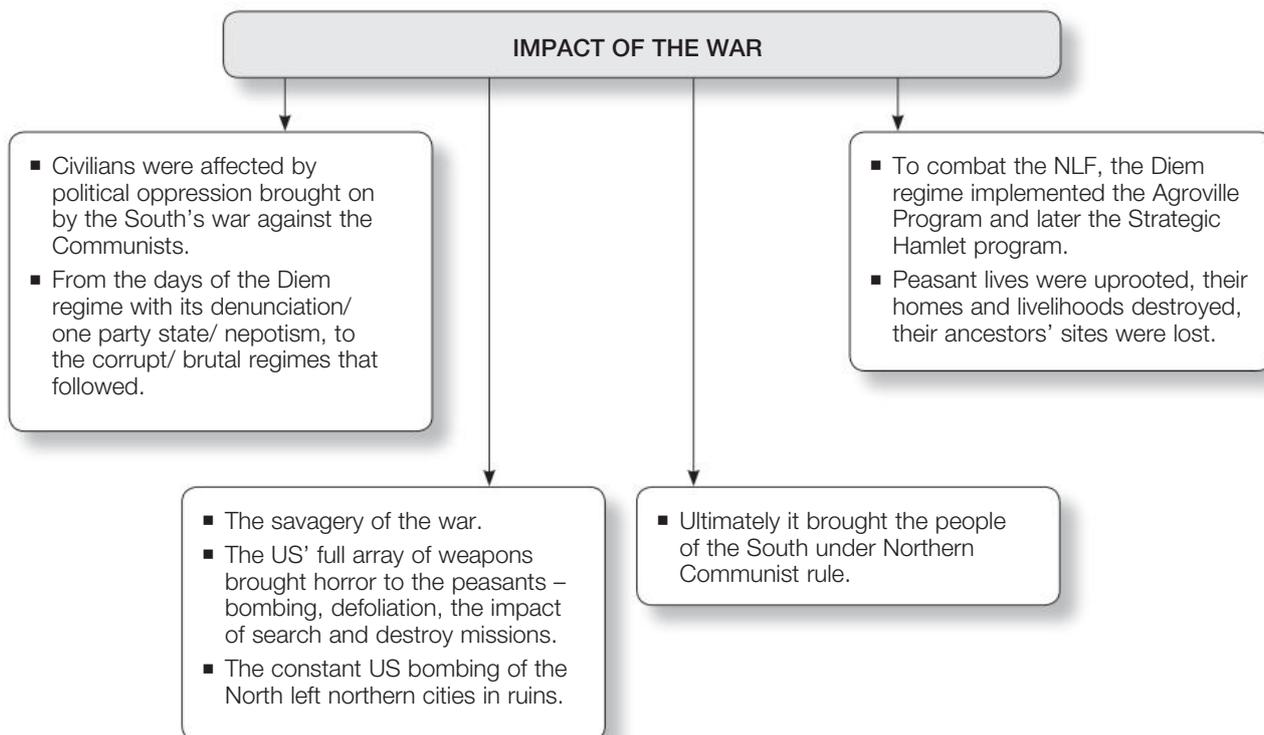


Figure 15.2 Impact of the war on civilians: Some ideas (2)

**(ii) American chemical warfare:**

Defoliation had an enormous impact on the landscape and food production. It was President Kennedy who gave the green light to the process of defoliation; the operation was known as Ranch Hand. Its purpose was to destroy vegetation and thus deny guerrillas the means of hiding from the US/ ARVN forces. Defoliation was accompanied by anti-crop projects. In 1967 alone, a million acres were treated to US chemical bombardment. Between 1962 and 1972, the United States sprayed over 20 million gallons of defoliants/ herbicides on South Vietnam.

The short-term effect was to destroy crops and forests.

The medium-term effect was to cause food shortages, force people (and wildlife) to migrate. As millions of peasants were forced into the cities, they had to endure slum conditions which became ideal breeding grounds for malaria and dysentery.

The long-term effect was to render whole areas impossible to cultivate. Years after the war was over, millions of Vietnamese people would suffer ailments which we now know to be the result of US chemical warfare. Such ailments included cancer and birth defects.

**(iii) North Vietnam**

The people of North Vietnam were fortunate; they had to suffer only bombs. The Australian journalist, John Pilger, said that when he visited North Vietnam he realised that only half the Vietnam War was being reported. Parts of North Vietnam, he said, resembled a 'moonscape'. Schools, hospitals and houses had been obliterated. He reported having been told by North Vietnamese officials that thousands of children had been rendered permanently deaf as a result of Nixon's Linebacker Two bombing campaign in December 1972.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Pilger, J, *Heroes*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1987

*(iv) The Boat People*

Life in Vietnam and Cambodia following the Communist victories in 1975 was bleak. The horrors of Cambodia<sup>3</sup> were not repeated inside Vietnam; however, life was tough in the newly united Vietnam.

- There were executions and thousands spent time in re-education camps.
- The country remained desperately poor, partly due to the effect of the war, partly due to US economic sanctions.
  - The US refused to establish relations with Vietnam for two decades and the “Trading with the Enemy Act” ensured no US trade or investment was headed Vietnam’s way.
  - Many other western governments followed the US lead. The US also used its position in the United Nations to ensure no World Bank loans were given to Vietnam.

The effect of all this was to make life for people inside Vietnam extremely hard.

As a result of both political persecution and economic hardship, tens of thousands of Vietnamese (and Cambodians) tried to escape their countries. They left in rickety boats, had to survive tempestuous seas and attacks by brutal pirates. If they managed to reach the safety of an Asian neighbour – Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong – they faced lengthy stays in refugee camps. If they were lucky, third countries – such as Australia, Canada and the United States – might accept them as refugees. Australia eventually took almost 250 000 Indochinese refugees. Yet another impact of the war on civilians.

**Exercise 13.1**

Read each of the following statements. Indicate by circling your answer whether you think each statement is a fact or an opinion.

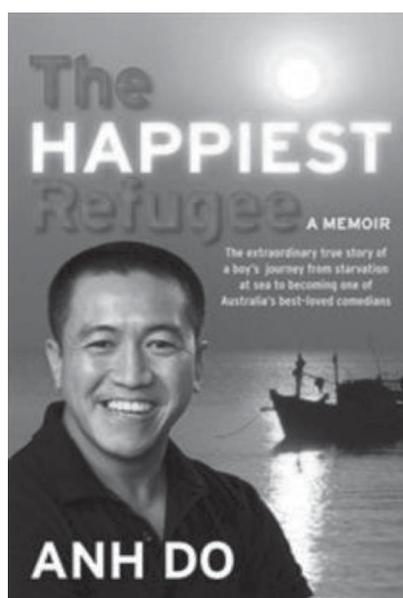
|   |   |                |
|---|---|----------------|
| 1 | Parts of South Vietnam have been permanently destroyed by American chemical warfare.                    | FACT – OPINION |
| 2 | American culture was good for Vietnam as it opened the country up to the world.                         | FACT – OPINION |
| 3 | Prostitution and drugs were the inevitable results of the American disregard for Vietnamese traditions. | FACT – OPINION |
| 4 | Thousands of Vietnamese villagers ended up living in slum area of South Vietnamese cities.              | FACT – OPINION |
| 5 | US economic policy was to blame for the refugee exodus from South East Asia after 1975.                 | FACT – OPINION |
| 6 | Australia took up to 250 000 South East Asian refugees after 1975.                                      | FACT – OPINION |
| 7 | It is to Australia’s eternal credit that it so generously offered homes to so many refugees after 1975. | FACT – OPINION |
| 8 | US bombing destroyed much of the infrastructure of North Vietnam.                                       | FACT – OPINION |

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 19

|    |   |                |
|----|---|----------------|
| 9  | North Vietnamese obstinacy was responsible for the extent of bomb damage during the later years of the war. | FACT – OPINION |
| 10 | The unification of Vietnam was worth all the suffering that had been experienced during the war.            | FACT – OPINION |

***While we are discussing the impact of the Conflict in Indochina on Vietnamese civilians, let us consider the following: (a possible contemporary digression for a class discussion perhaps...)***

Many Indochinese refugees ended up in Australia in the 1980s. Parts of Australia today have a distinctive South East Asian flavour, eg Cabramatta in Sydney's south west. One of those refugees was the comedian/ artist/ star of the ABC show "Brush With Fame and author of the memoir "The Happiest Refugee", Ahn Do. It is worth reflecting on the generosity towards such people shown by the Fraser government in the late 1970s/ early 1980s, compared to that of Australian governments in more recent times.



Perhaps Australia's acceptance of the "boat people" in the 1980s was a result of a feeling of responsibility to these people due to its involvement in the Vietnam War. Perhaps Australia's attitude in the early 21st century reflects a less generous society or increased insecurity in a post 9/11 world....??

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# Notes

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## Chapter 14:

# The nature and significance of anti-war movements in the USA and Australia

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**Anti-war protest in the United States** in the 1960s came as something of a shock to the nation. Before the 1960s, Americans had prided themselves on their patriotism. Their President was always respected or at least the office was, and to protest against a conflict in which American boys were dying would almost be viewed as treasonous. There were no wild street demonstrations against the Korean War, there were no sit-ins and draft-card burning ceremonies in protest at being sent to fight the Japanese or the Nazis during World War II. But Vietnam was different. Before the specifics of the anti-war movements are discussed in detail, there were several factors which made the Vietnam War different to previous wars.

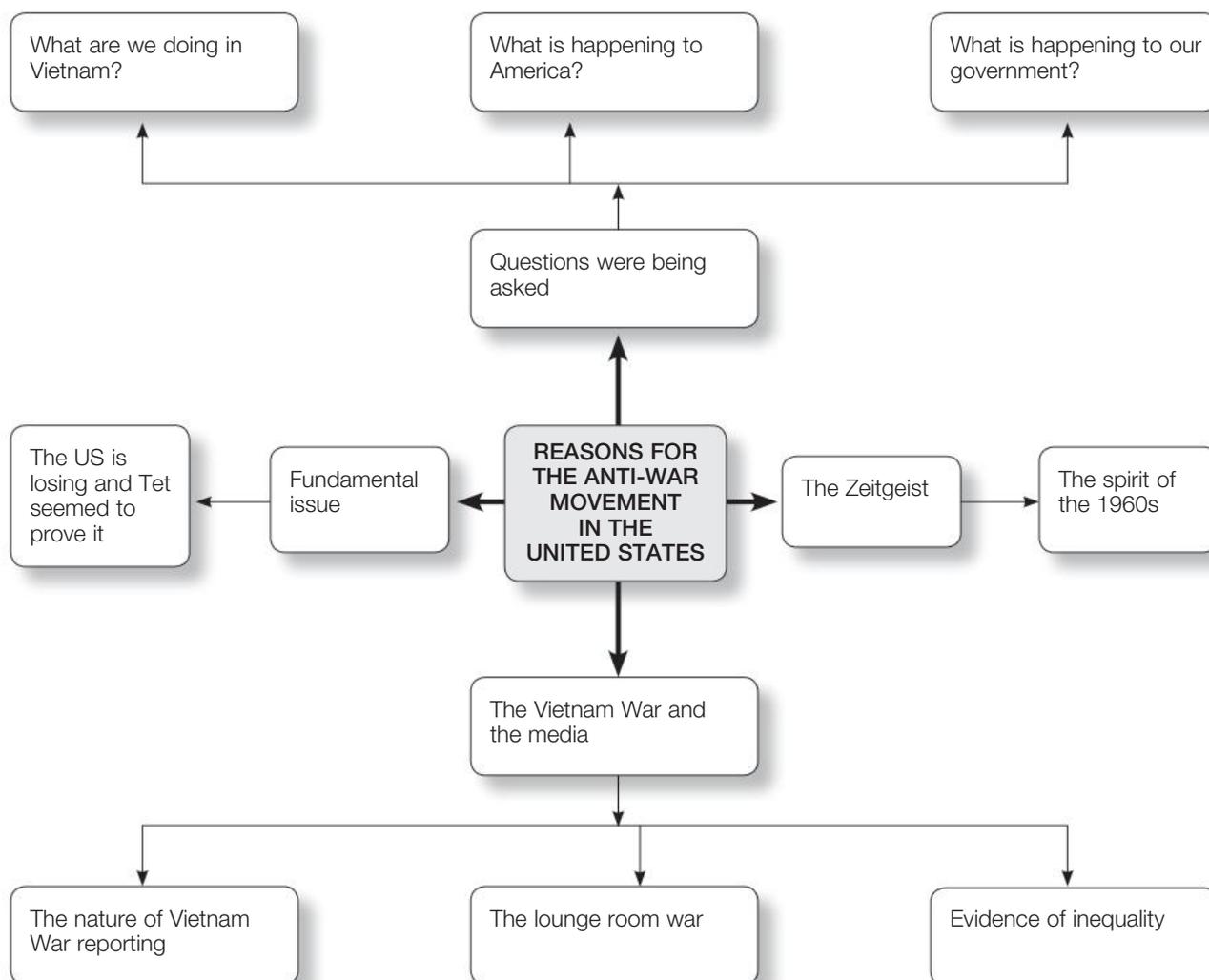
- For the first time, Americans were questioning the morality of a war. The Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbour and the Germans had invaded most of Europe. As news came out of both German and Japanese atrocities, there was no question of who was on the side of right. This was not the case with Vietnam.
- The American people did not get to see the reality of these conflicts. There were newsreel films but this was quite a different coverage to the nightly television pictures which Americans would watch during the Vietnam War.
- The **zeitgeist** of the Vietnam War era was something quite different to the wartime 1940s and the conservative 1950s. The conformity and unquestioning acceptance of authority of an earlier age was under threat in the 1960s.
- The struggles against Japan and Germany were long and hard, but Americans never doubted that they would win. This was not the case over Vietnam.
- The cold war consensus which prevailed in the United States at both a political and public level during the early part of the Cold War broke down over Vietnam.

### Why did an anti-war movement develop in the United States?

There is no simple explanation for the development of anti-war feeling in the US during the 1960s. It should also be remembered that when President Nixon spoke of his 'silent majority' of ordinary Americans supporting the boys in Vietnam, he had a point. Opinion polls of the time suggest that anti-war feeling amongst Americans never exceeded 50%. However, in a democracy when a significant minority begins to question government policy, it cannot be ignored.

Figure 12.1 summarises the major factors which stimulated the growth of anti-war feeling.

Figure 14.1 Summary of the reasons for the anti-war movement in the United States

***Reason 1: The US was not winning***

The fundamental reason for the anti-war movement was simply that the US was not winning the war. Early on there had been general backing of Johnson's escalation. Few people questioned the circumstances of the Tonkin Incident, South Vietnam was seen as a worthy ally, the Domino Theory was believed and there was an acceptance of the cold war consensus that communism had to be contained. Throughout 1967, despite rising casualties, the administration view that the enemy was being beaten and that there was 'light at the end of the tunnel' was generally accepted.

And then came Tet! As was explained in Chapter 11, Tet was an American/ ARVN military victory but that is not how it seemed to the American people.

- Anti-war protests intensified in both scale and violence following the Tet Offensive. The perception now existed that the US was not winning the war.
- In reality this was the long-term prognosis, the US would not win the war, short of the most horrific escalation.

The public does not march and protest against a war that is being won.

## Reason 2: Media Coverage

(i) The debate:

Supporters of the Vietnam War, and of Presidents Johnson and Nixon, argued strongly that one of the main reasons for the growth of the anti-war movement was the impact of US media coverage. The Vietnam War has often been called “the lounge room war” because television was able to bring the horrific images of Vietnam into people’s homes night after night. By the mid-1960s, Americans were also beginning to watch the war in colour. One oft quoted statement of the Vietnam War was that ‘the war was lost in the lounge rooms of Americans.’

The argument presented by pro-war supporters was that both the print media and the major TV news networks were part of a left-wing, anti-war conspiracy. The American public’s views of the war had been distorted by unfair, biased reporters who had an agenda to fuel anti-war feeling and get the United States out of the Vietnam War.

On a superficial level, there is some evidence to support such a view. After all, night after night American viewers were subjected to the following:

- There were scenes of napalm attacks turning villages into fireballs, the impact of B 52 bombing and the sheer horror of war;
- Some news outlets ran a tally count on their nightly news programs which showed how many Americans had died in Vietnam; these tallies would tick over throughout the show, indicating that Americans were being killed as viewers watched;
- In May 1969, Life Magazine ran an edition of its magazine which contained nothing but the photographs of all 241 American soldiers who had been killed that week.
- As early as 1965, some newspapers such as the New York Times and English papers like The Observer, carried reports of VC captives and their alleged civilian supporters being tortured.
- There were horrific accounts of ‘friendly villages’ being hit by ‘accidental’ US air strikes. This begged the question what on earth would happen to unfriendly villages?

However, this view of the media is too simplistic. There was no official army censorship of news coverage of the war but from Westmoreland down, military and administration officials urged reporters to be sensitive in what they reported. For the first couple of the years of the war this in fact happened. The early coverage of the war was generally supportive of ‘our brave boys combating the communists’.

(ii) Television

What was different about Vietnam was the way war could now be reported. War reporting before Vietnam had been a matter of producing weekly newsreels which would be shown in cinemas before a main feature. Some of these were produced in Vietnam. The newsreels lacked immediacy, rarely used close-up shots and had no soundtrack but instead were given a voice-over, often backed-up with stirring music.

This all changed with television.

- The first TV network to work in Vietnam was CBS in 1963.

- TV journalists brought immediacy to their stories.
- Often using hand held cameras, TV cameramen accompanied the troops in the field, sharing the risks of enemy fire.
- Vietnam became a 'domestic' story as the TV networks often featured an individual soldier's experiences, a technique which added human interest and drama to a story.

Such closeness to the action placed journalists in a difficult position. Were they in Vietnam to simply report what happened? To show only what made 'our boys' look good? To act as the conscience of the American people? A classic example of this dilemma came as early as August 1965 with a report produced for CBS by Morley Safer. Safer's report on the American destruction of the village of Cam Ne shocked Americans. His report showed US **GI**s setting fire to the village, in reality mild stuff to what was going to come in years to come. President Johnson was outraged and rang the head of CBS to complain that: "Your boys just shat on the American flag." Johnson had Safer investigated for possible communist affiliations.

The real significance of the Safer story was that the US military was losing control of the story of the war. Each day in Saigon at 17.00 hours, a MACV <sup>1</sup> representative would address journalists about the day's events, hoping to enforce the official military view. He would have charts and maps and masses of statistics to give reporters. These daily events, which became known as the '5.0' clock follies' soon became discredited for the propaganda which they were.

### (iii) The impact of Tet

Tet changed everything. There was no way that journalists could underplay what happened during the Tet Offensive. Journalists were not deliberately distorting what was happening; there were stories that had to be told:

- Vietcong guerrillas having to be ferreted out of the US Embassy,
- General Loan's shooting of the VC suspect in a Saigon street
- the furious fighting on the streets of Hue.

However, Tet was a media turning point as much as it was a turning point in the war as a whole. <sup>2</sup> The media now became more critical, more willing to investigate and even less eager to accept military assurances that everything was going well. Was this left-wing bias or good reporting? What were reporters supposed to do with stories such as:

- the My Lai massacre of March 1968 <sup>3</sup>
- Kevin Buckley's report for Newsweek magazine on Operation Speedy Express in the Kien Hoa province in early 1969 that killed as many as 5000 civilians, an operation far worse than My Lai;
- Nick Ut's horrific photograph of eight-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc following a napalm attack on her villages;
- the US invasion of Cambodia in May 1970. <sup>4</sup>

If Johnson had problems with the media, Nixon totally lost them. Vice-President Agnew called the media a 'small unelected elite' and ordered the FBI to tap journalists' telephones. In the

<sup>1</sup> Military Assistance Command Vietnam

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 12

<sup>3</sup> The massacre of 150 villagers from My Lai by US troops, finally brought to public attention in 1969.

<sup>4</sup> See Section Four

early 1970s, Nixon created a secret group known as ‘the plumbers’ to stop leaks to the press as had happened over the Pentagon Papers.<sup>5</sup>

### Reason 3: Questions being asked

The argument that media reporting of the horrors of the Vietnam War turned Americans against the war is only partly accurate. Most Americans continued to support the war. However, what did change was that media coverage was forcing Americans to ask questions about the war, their leaders, their society, their future.

1. The first obvious question was: ‘What the hell are we doing in Vietnam?’

- US war aims became vaguer as time went on. People were beginning to say things like ‘It’s a Vietnamese war, let them get on with it’ or ‘It’s too far away and if they want to be communist, let them.’
- The longer the war dragged on and the longer became the casualty lists, people questioned the sheer futility of the war.

2. The second question being asked was: ‘What kind of society is America becoming?’

- The United States was supposed to stand for freedom, democracy, human dignity;
- How can these values stand alongside My Lai, napalm attacks and the carpet bombing of a poor third world country like Vietnam?
- The war was sucking the American economy dry; whatever happened to Johnson’s ‘Great Society’ with its plans for social reform?
- The war was tearing America apart at home. During the Vietnam War, the Home Front witnessed race riots, the violence at the 1968 Chicago Convention, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy.
- Some people asked whether the decay at home was the result of the war.

3. The third question being asked was: ‘What’s happened to America’s political system?’

- Governmental practice was being seen as deceptive, callous and lacking in compassion.
- Tet and the later publication of the Pentagon Papers revealed a government that lied to its people.
- Nixon’s ‘ungenerous attitude towards protesters’<sup>6</sup>, the secret bombing of Cambodia and then his expansion of the war at a time when America was supposed to be disengaging further raised questions about the nature of the US system.

### Reason 4: The issue of social inequality

One of the main reasons that Johnson lost the support of civil rights activists like Martin Luther King was the growing feeling that the Vietnam War was not treating all Americans fairly. King had come out against the war as early as 1965. He was attacked by administration officials who argued he was not competent to speak on issues of national security and by white southerners who said that he had finally revealed his true communist sympathies.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 7

<sup>6</sup> National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger’s comment

- King realised that the war was killing the Great Society hopes of black people.
- Black frustrations were seen in race riots which had become a feature of mid-1960s America, occurring in cities as widespread as Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and Newark.
- King came to see the struggle of black people in America as part of a world struggle between the poor and their oppressors.
- As time went on, the perception grew that there was a disproportionate number of black boys being sent to Vietnam. White boys had a much better chance of avoiding the war by taking college deferments.

There was not only a racial divide over Vietnam but also a class divide.

- Middle class families had the means to enable their sons to gain college deferments and avoid having to go to the war.
- However, many working-class and lower middle-class families could not do this. As many veterans later recalled, as the war wore on there was a distinct social bias in the composition of American units fighting in Vietnam. There seemed to be a preponderance of working-class men from the less affluent parts of the country fighting.

### *Reason 5: The spirit of the sixties*

Would the anti-war protests of the young had happened during the conservative 1950s? Or was it the nature of the free-spirited 1960s that played such a key role in fomenting the anti-war movement? The fact that much of the early anti-war protest was led by baby-boomer students on the campuses of America's universities might tend to support such a view.

However, there is another way of looking at this:

- Were the anti-Vietnam protests the result of the spirit of the sixties?
- Or was the radicalism of the sixties the result of the anger that had been generated by opposition to the Vietnam War?

Anti-war protest certainly became part of a wider generational battle that saw the young in conflict with their parents' generation over everything from music to dress to drugs to sexual attitudes. The anti-war feeling of the 1960s, was accompanied by the growing radicalism of the civil rights movement which even had its more violent offshoot with the Black Panther movement. The 1960s saw the beginnings of the Women's Movement and even a nascent gay movement.

Clearly, it could be argued that there is something to be said for the view that the growth of anti-war protest had something to do with the zeitgeist of the 1960s.

### Chronology of the anti-war movements in the United States

|  |  |
|--|--|
| August 1964  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Early opposition included Hiroshima Day protests.</li> <li>■ Some clergymen, pacifists and women’s groups opposed the war on moral grounds.</li> <li>■ These were small scale protests and unimportant to the administration.</li> </ul>  |
| Easter 1965  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) protested in Washington.</li> <li>■ This was a small, peaceful and idealistic movement.</li> <li>■ By the end of 1966, membership had grown to 30 000.</li> </ul>   |
| 1965/ 66   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Student opposition on the campuses grew. There were ‘sit-ins’, burning of draft cards and ‘teach-ins’. The first teach-in was held at the University of Michigan in March 1965.</li> <li>■ By 1973, over 13 500 men had been prosecuted because of their draft resistance.</li> <li>■ Many potential draftees fled to Canada and Sweden.</li> <li>■ Black groups like the Black Panthers led by Stokely Carmichael were strongly against the war.</li> <li>■ In November a Quaker, Norman Morrison, self-immolated outside the Pentagon in protest to the war.</li> </ul> |
| 1967   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ SDS leader Tom Hayden even made visits to North Vietnam, in 1972 with his future wife, actress Jane Fonda.</li> <li>■ Some politicians were beginning to question Johnson’s right to engage in war, eg Senator Fulbright</li> <li>■ In October a major protest occurred with the march on the Pentagon in Washington. It was a peaceful protest but a minority resorted to violence.</li> <li>■ A group called Vietnam Veterans Against the War was established. One of its leading figures was John Kerry who ran for President in 2004.</li> </ul>                      |
| 1968   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Anti-war candidates appeared seeking the presidential nomination, eg Eugene McCarthy.</li> <li>■ Following Johnson’s decision to stand down, Robert Kennedy also entered the race. He was assassinated in June having just won the California Primary.</li> <li>■ The Democrat Convention was held in Chicago. Mayor Daly ordered his police to treat anti-war protestors in the harshest manner. There was considerable violence on Chicago streets at this time.</li> </ul>   |
| <p>Throughout 1968, anti-war protests became more violent. They seemed to be dominated by radical elements including long-haired students, hippies and radical black groups. This actually weakened the anti-war movement. There were many ordinary Americans who were profoundly disturbed by the war and who wanted to protest but the protest movement had been hijacked by radical elements. What was needed to stimulate the anti-war movement was for it to be ‘taken over’ by middle America. The movement had to be decentralised. Protest had to become local, organised by people that ordinary Americans knew and trusted. This was to become the basis of the moratorium movement. The idea behind the moratorium was that people would agree to stop work at a particular moment and then go on to the streets to protest peacefully, en masse.</p> |  |

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| 1969    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ In October 50 000 people took part in a moratorium march in Washington. There were other marches in Detroit, Miami and New York.</li> <li>■ In November a 250 000 people march took place in Washington.</li> </ul>   |
| 1970    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Following Nixon's invasion of Cambodia, major demonstrations occurred on campuses across the country.</li> <li>■ At Kent State University in Ohio, four protesting students were shot dead by National Guardsmen.</li> <li>■ This sparked mass demonstrations across the country, including a 100 000 people march in Washington.</li> <li>■ Counter demonstrations in support of soldiers in Vietnam also occurred at this time, eg a 100 000 strong march in New York.</li> </ul> |
| 1971-72 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The scale of anti-war protests dropped significantly as the policy of Vietnamisation was employed.</li> <li>■ This was because more troops were coming home and casualty figures were dropping significantly.</li> </ul>  |

### What was the impact of the anti-war movement?

- Did the anti-war movement affect America's performance in the war? Those who had supported the war certainly argue yes and seek to blame protestors for what happened in Vietnam. A united America, they argue, could not have been so humiliated. However, the answer is probably no.
  - The fallout from Tet was almost certainly the key factor. It led to Johnson's easing of the bombing campaign and led Nixon to campaign in 1968 on a 'peace with honour' platform.
  - Nixon despised the anti-war protestors yet he still persisted with the Vietnamisation policy.
  - Nixon pursued hardline policies in Vietnam <sup>7</sup> but this did not stop him winning the 1972 election in a landslide.
  - Finally, to argue that the anti-war movement was a decisive factor is to suggest that the war could have been won otherwise. There is little evidence to support this view. <sup>8</sup>

Indeed, it might even be argued that the militant anti-war protests of 1968 actually prolonged the war. Many moderate Americans – public and political figures – were turned away from the anti-war movement by the militants. This weakened the anti-war movement at a time when Tet had boosted it.

- However, the anti-war movement must have certainly heartened the North Vietnamese.
  - Knowing that tens of thousands of Americans were calling for an end to the war, proved to Northern leaders that the Americans, like the French, would eventually have to leave.
- The strength of the anti-war movement also weakened the morale of US troops in the field.
  - Knowing that you while you were risking your life each day in a South Vietnamese paddy field while your peers were safely marching against the war at home must have been disheartening.
  - Even worse must have been the unfriendly reception many veterans faced on their return.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 15

<sup>8</sup> This is an aspect which will be discussed at more length in Chapter 16.

From 1969, President Nixon pursued the policy of Vietnamisation – the withdrawal of US troops/ getting the ARVN to do their own fighting – and peace talks. ***Were these things due to the pressure of the anti-war movement?***

- Nixon was scathing of the anti-war movement: he held it in utter contempt. We have to ask ourselves: “Would a man like Nixon be swayed by long-haired students on the campuses or nice middle-class ladies in a moratorium march? It is hard to answer yes.
- While anti-war protest flared all around him, Nixon continued to mercilessly bomb North Vietnam, secretly bombed Cambodia and even briefly invaded Cambodia.
- Yet, Nixon did pursue Vietnamisation and Peace Talks which took the US out of the war, which was what the anti-war movement was demanding.
- Why? Arguably, Nixon had bigger fish to fry: détente with the Soviet Union and the opening up of China. Maybe here lies a truer explanation of Nixon’s policies. Accommodation with Russia and China made a joke of the Domino Theory. Vietnam was no longer important in the wider scheme of things.

If this is true, it could be argued that the anti-war movement had next to no significance for the actions Nixon took.

A possible challenge to this view is presented by Andrew Z Katz. Katz’s attempts to examine the degree to which President Nixon allowed himself to be governed by public opinion. Was he affected by the rising tide of anti-war feeling or did he ignore it? Nixon always liked to claim that he did not pander to public opinion; he claimed that he would do ‘what his long experience and conviction tells him is right’. However, President, Nixon hired polling experts and frequently commissioned private polls. He ensured that his chief of staff, Haldeman, always sat in on meetings when foreign policy was being discussed to consider the public relations angle.

*“...Polling was used to gauge the receptivity of the public to Nixon’s Vietnam initiatives, to legitimate policies, and to verify when its military and diplomatic strategy required adjustment.”*<sup>9</sup>

## What do the historians have to say about the anti-war movement?

### 1. James Landers: *The Weekly War – Newsmagazines and Vietnam*

Landers tries to analyse how the anti-war movement was covered by American news magazines. The view at the time by right wing commentators was that US news coverage merely convinced the North Vietnamese to delay negotiations and that it also spurred on further anti-war demonstrations. Anti-war protesters certainly learned to time their protests to fit in with newspaper and TV deadlines for maximum coverage. Post-war research, says Landers, has shown that news services ‘framed’ articles and film segments to highlight the more confrontational aspects of protest. This might be speakers yelling at opponents or encouraging others into acts of vandalism or fights with police. Thus, Landers suggests that ‘framing’:

*“...restricted the portrait of antiwar activists to those with scraggly hair, unkempt appearance, or ‘costumed’ apparel, meaning flag draped clothing and facial paint,*

<sup>9</sup> Katz, A Z, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: The Nixon Administration and the Pursuit of Peace with Honour in Vietnam, from *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol 27, Issue 3, 1997

*which conveyed to readers and viewers the idea that only people on society's fringe were protesting the war..”<sup>10</sup>*

**2. Stanley Karnow: Vietnam**

Karnow describes Nixon’s reaction to the first moratorium demonstrations. These marches were respectable, sober and an ‘almost melancholy manifestation of middle-class concern’. Respected figures were now lending their names to the anti-war movement, eg Dr Benjamin Spock and former ambassador Averell Harriman. All this worried Nixon, says Karnow. Nixon had warned the North that bombing would resume in November 1969 if it did not compromise in the peace talks. He feared that if he had to carry out his threat, he might send ‘the United States into convulsions’. To deal with the anti-war feeling, he delivered a speech on 3 November aimed at defusing public disquiet and which sought public patience as he worked towards an honourable peace. He directed his speech at what he called ‘the silent majority of Americans’. Nixon’s final words struck a chord when he said:

*“Because let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat and humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.”*

Karnow concludes that on this occasion Nixon succeeded in defusing anti-war feeling.

*“...The response to the presidential address...was overwhelmingly favourable...Nixon’s ratings in the polls soared...”<sup>11</sup>*

**Exercise 14.1**

Assume the role of each of the following people. In a few lines explain why you are so opposed to America’s continued involvement in the Vietnam War.

I am 21-year-old black man living in Harlem<sup>12</sup>: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

I am a 19-year-old university student from Harvard: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

I am a factory worker from Pittsburgh: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

10 Landers, J, The Weekly War: Newsmagazines and Vietnam, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 2004, p 20  
 11 Karnow, S, Vietnam, Century Hutchinson, London, 1983, p 600  
 12 A black neighbourhood of New York

I am a concerned housewife from Illinois: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I am an ordinary American citizen concerned about what I am seeing on TV: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### **The anti-war movement in Australia**

Early opposition to Australian involvement in the Vietnam War was very limited. The Australian people shared Prime Minister’s Menzies’ concerns about the downward thrust of communism, agreed with his view that Australia needed to back its American ally and a “cold-war consensus” existed similar to that which was present in the United States. The media, and the Returned and Services League (RSL) strongly supported the war.

Pacifists opposed the war on moral grounds as did some religious groups.

- In May 1965, a mothers’ group called “Save Our Sons” was formed that opposed conscripts being sent to Vietnam.
- The Youth Campaign Against Conscription was formed in 1965.
- There were conscientious objectors who refused to do military service for religious reasons, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, or for moral reasons, such as the school teacher Bill White.
  - White’s arrest was a factor in raising doubts within the country about Australia’s involvement in the war.
- By 1967-1968, opposition was growing for similar reasons as in the US. It became more radical and more violent but these protests were often dominated by what the media disparagingly called “long-haired, ratbag students”. However, the violent nature of anti-war protest actually blunted the strength of the anti-war movement, for similar reasons as happened in the US.

By 1970, the Australian anti-war movement was emulating the Moratorium Movement that had developed in the US a year earlier. Protests became larger, peaceful, were locally organised and led. On 8 May 1970, massive moratorium demonstrations were held across Australia. The largest was in Melbourne, where between 80 000 and 100 000 people marched, led by leading ALP (Australian Labor Party) figure, Dr Jim Cairns. By late 1971/ early 1972, most Australian troops had been brought home and the anti-war protests lessened. The final few troops remaining in Vietnam were brought home by the Whitlam government in December 1972.

Australia’s anti-war protests were closely connected to opposition to conscription, re-introduced in 1964. There were growing protests against conscripts being sent to Vietnam. The “birthday lottery” method of deciding who would be called up became labelled by opponents as a “lottery of death”. Conscription was finally brought to an end by the Whitlam government in December 1972.

## Was the anti-war movement in Australia of any significance?

- In terms of the decision to bring home Australian troops from the war, it is unlikely that the anti-war movement was a significant factor.
  - Once the Nixon administration had decided on the policy of “Vietnamisation” and was steadily bringing home American troops, it was inconceivable that any Australian government would maintain a military presence in Vietnam.
- By 1972, all protests were aimed against the maintenance of conscription.
- Veterans were badly affected by the anti-war movement. They were often vilified and spat upon because of their involvement in the war. There was no formal welcome home for the troops until 1987!
- Menzies’ duplicity in 1965 at organising a South Vietnam request for Australian participation in the war was a contributing factor in the gradual erosion of faith in the Australian government. This breakdown of trust also occurred in the United States.
- It could be argued that anti-Vietnam War feeling contributed to the growing unpopularity of the Liberal government and the eventual election of the Whitlam ALP government in December 1972. The ALP had been in opposition for 23 years.

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# Chapter 15:

## Reasons for and the nature of the US withdrawal

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### The long road to peace

#### *The thinking of President Richard Nixon (January 1969-August 1974)*

Richard Nixon was elected President in November 1968. During his campaign, he promised the American people that he would end the Vietnam War and achieve 'peace with honour'. Nixon is a figure about whom few people are neutral.

- To some people he was evil incarnate, the man who brought death and destruction to Vietnam, and was responsible for transforming Cambodia from a quiet backwater into a hell on earth. He was a lying, duplicitous, scheming politician who was finally brought down by the Watergate scandal.
- To others he was a far-sighted statesman who pulled America out of the Vietnam quagmire. His policy of **detente** established warm relations with the Soviet Union and ended over twenty years of non-contact with Communist China. <sup>1</sup>

Nixon had always supported a hard line over Vietnam and frequently criticised Johnson for getting bogged down in the war. He viewed anti-war protesters as traitors. He believed that the solution to Vietnam would be the same as Korea, ie two independent states with South Vietnam continuing as a non-communist country.

However, Tet changed Nixon's view of the war. He no longer talked about achieving victory in Vietnam; America's objective should now be to achieve 'an honourable peace'. This did not mean Nixon was ready to give in to the Communists.

- He believed that the Southern army could be built up to fight on its own and that South Vietnam would survive as an independent state like South Korea.
- American forces could be withdrawn but aid to the South maintained to make the ARVN a viable, independent fighting force. This was the so-called 'Nixon Doctrine', or Vietnamisation
- Nixon also employed what he referred to as the 'Madman Theory'. North Vietnam should be told that Nixon is a mad anti-communist with his finger on the nuclear button and he might do anything. The White House might leak that Nixon was going to do something outrageous to put pressure on Hanoi.
- Negotiations with the Soviet Union and China should be considered.
  - The Soviet Union and China had become rivals, to the point of engaging in armed conflict along their common border.
  - Nixon believed he could play off one against the other and thereby put pressure on North Vietnam to compromise in the peace talks.

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<sup>1</sup> Nixon visited Mao Zedong in China in 1972 and held summit meetings with Soviet leader Brezhnev.

American policy over Vietnam was now dominated by two men: Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger. Nixon and Kissinger worked extremely closely together; Nixon's Secretary of States, William Rogers, was effectively squeezed out of Vietnam policy making. Kissinger saw no place for morality in the exercise of power. He was a believer in Realpolitik – America does whatever it needs to do. Johnson for all his faults genuinely agonised over the deaths of US servicemen and Vietnamese civilians. These were not matters which caused Nixon and Kissinger any loss of sleep!

### *American policy in Indochina under Nixon (1): 1969-71*

Nixon had a very difficult task ahead of him. He had to bring the American troops home, but had to convince South Vietnamese President Thieu he was not being deserted. He wanted Hanoi to negotiate seriously in the Paris Peace Talks but had to prove to them that America was not weakening. However, while needing to put pressure on North Vietnam he had to be sure not to enflame anti-war feeling at home. And of course, he wanted to be re-elected in 1972 and not be a one term President.

- In 1969, the US military began 'Operation Phoenix'.
  - The purpose of Phoenix was to neutralise VC chiefs and their supporters; the Americans and the ARVN were fighting like guerrillas.
  - It was an effective program which significantly weakened VC strength. Almost 20 000 were captured of whom about 6000 were killed.
- In early 1969 the NVA launched a new offensive against the South. Nixon's response was to try and sever links between NVA forces and their supply routes. To this end, in March 1969, Nixon ordered the secret bombing of Cambodia. This was known as Operation Menu. His aim was twofold:
  - (i) to destroy the Communist headquarters across the border;
  - (ii) to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh Trail.
- This tactic failed. Nixon then leaked a story that he was prepared to take massive retaliatory action against the North – this is the Madman Theory in action. This leak seemed to work as the NVA eased up on their offensive.
- Nixon's policy became as complicated as the situation with which he was faced. It now involved:
  - The Madman Theory
  - Bombing Cambodia
  - Vietnamisation
  - Putting diplomatic pressure on China and the Soviet Union to put pressure on North Vietnam.

*The objectives remained constant: US withdrawal with honour, the survival of the Thieu regime in Saigon and his own eventual re-election.*

Nixon seemed to be getting nowhere throughout 1970. The NVA launched another offensive in February. In May, 30 000 US and ARVN troops invaded Cambodia to root out the communist

bases.<sup>2</sup> The invasion was a failure. No bases were found and what communist forces had been there retreated deeper into Cambodia. Combined US/ ARVN casualties amounted to almost 5500. Back in the United States the invasion had again enflamed anti-war protests.<sup>3</sup> Not only did Nixon have to face popular unrest, he was also up against a US Senate that was eager to limit the seemingly unlimited power that the President had accrued since the Tonkin Resolution.

On top of this there was the major problem of declining morale within American forces inside South Vietnam.

- Young boys were being asked to risk their lives every day in a conflict that everyone knew was on the point of being over and for a regime in Saigon that was riddled with corruption.
- Desertion rates in 1971 were five times what they had been in 1966.
- Drugs had become a major problem. In Vietnam they were cheap, plentiful and an easy way to escape the pressures of war. The Pentagon estimated that three quarters of servicemen had tried heroin.
- **Fragging** had become a serious problem. This was the attempted murder by troops of their own officers. In 1971 there were over 500 known attempts of fragging.

Discipline in some units had deteriorated to the point that mutiny was feared by some Pentagon officials.

The rationale behind Vietnamisation was the belief that the ARVN could defend their country without the need of American soldiers. To test this proposition, in February 1971 5000 ARVN troops were sent into Laos to attack NVA supply lines. This was Operation Lam Son. It was an unmitigated disaster and within two weeks half the ARVN force was dead. US film crews sent back to the US pictures of ARVN soldiers fighting each other for places on American helicopters to escape.

*“...American crews coated the skids with grease so the South Vietnamese would stop hanging on in numbers sufficient to bring down the choppers.”<sup>4</sup>*

Just as his military moves had got nowhere, so too had Nixon’s diplomatic efforts. The Paris Peace Talks dragged on, month after month. In May 1971, Nixon offered a deal to North Vietnam – a withdrawal date for US forces, US POWs to be freed, a ceasefire, an end to more Northern troops moving south, Thieu to remain in power and Laos and Cambodia left alone. With no specific mention about US bombing, the North did not take up the offer. By the end of 1971, North Vietnam seemed in American eyes to be as stubborn as ever.

By the end of 1971, three years as President had achieved little.

- The ARVN seemed as unreliable as ever.
- Hanoi was still refusing to compromise on letting Thieu remain in power.
- The Russians and the Chinese were failing to pressure Hanoi to make concessions
- Nixon was sinking in the polls.
- Popular unrest at home remained high.

<sup>2</sup> US involvement in Cambodia will be dealt with in more detail in Chapters 17 and 18.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 14

<sup>4</sup> Davidson, P B, Vietnam at War: The History 1946-75, OUP, New York, 1991, p 119

Nixon's failure to capture the domestic support he felt he deserved affected his judgment dramatically. He became suspicious and emotional. Protesters were now 'bums blowing up the campuses' and he told White House aides that anyone who did not support him he would destroy. Nixon's paranoia and vengeful nature were to lead him into a world of wire-tapping, break-ins, hate lists and cover ups which would ultimately destroy him.<sup>5</sup>

In his book "Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975", Max Hastings provided several examples of the cynicism and duplicity exercised by Nixon and Kissinger. With access to recently released White House tapes, Hastings shows the obsession the two men had with winning the 1972 election.

On 19 March 1971, Kissinger said: "We can't have (South Vietnam) knocked over – brutally – before the election." Nixon replied "That's right".

Kissinger encouraged Nixon not to bring the troops home 'before' the election.

In late May 1971, Kissinger outlined his plans to have a peace deal ready for the 72 election. Kissinger said if South Vietnam has to go to the communists, better that it happened during the first six months of Nixon's 'second' term.

On 12 October 1972, Kissinger was back in Washington, telling Nixon the communists were ready to sign the peace deal. He told Nixon: "The deal we've got Mr President, is so far better than anything we dreamt of. I mean, it will absolutely. Totally wipe out McGovern."<sup>6</sup>

### Exercise 15.1

Place the following events in the correct chronological order. Write your answers in the spaces provided.

| Event                              | Correct order |
|------------------------------------|---------------|
| Operation Lam Son                  | 1st event was |
| Nixon's election as President      | 2nd event was |
| Operation Menu                     | 3rd event was |
| Nixon's resignation as President   | 4th event was |
| Nixon's visit to China             | 5th event was |
| The start of the Paris Peace Talks | 6th event was |

<sup>5</sup> In August 1974, President Nixon was to become the only President in US history forced to resign.

<sup>6</sup> George McGovern was Nixon's Democratic opponent in the 1972 election. Nixon would go on to defeat McGovern in a landslide.

|                                    |                |
|------------------------------------|----------------|
| The Tet Offensive                  | 7th event was  |
| US/ ARVN invasion of Cambodia      | 8th event was  |
| Nixon's May 1971 peace offer       | 9th event was  |
| The beginning of Operation Phoenix | 10th event was |

### *American policy in Indochina under Nixon (2): 1972*

Nixon and Johnson both believed that success in Vietnam was crucial for each man's electoral survival. In 1964, Johnson sought to keep a lid on the Vietnam conflict in order to win against Barry Goldwater.<sup>7</sup> In 1972, Nixon believed totally that failure in Vietnam would mean his certain defeat. He had to get the Americans out, guarantee the survival of Thieu and do it all by November.

On 30 March, North Vietnam began its Easter Offensive, a three-pronged attack against the South. It gained quick success with NVA/ VC forces gaining control of the Central Highlands, some northern provinces and areas just north of Saigon. On 31 March Nixon responded by bombing selected targets and saying "these bastards have never been bombed like they are going to be bombed this time." Haiphong harbour was bombed and then mined; four Soviet ships were hit in Haiphong harbour. At one stage the Americans were dropping 3000 tons of bombs a day. The Northern offensive ended in July but US bombing continued until October.

On 8 October the US bombing came to an end. The two key negotiators in the Paris Peace Talks, Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, seemed to have reached an agreement. The main elements of the agreement included: a US withdrawal within 60 days, a return of US POWs, the right of South Vietnam to decide its own future, a promise of a new DRV/ US relationship and a US promise to help with reconstruction. Over the next two weeks the US flew in almost \$2 billion worth of aid to the Saigon regime. Nixon gave his okay to the plan on 21 October. However, the deal soon struck difficulties:

President Thieu was annoyed that he had not been part of the negotiations. He ordered ARVN troops to attack the NVA. The North saw this as American bad faith.

At home Nixon was advised to hold off signing what was perceived as a weak agreement as this might harm the Republican Party with an election only days away.

Nixon won the election with a landslide victory over his Democrat opponent, George McGovern.

Back in Paris, Kissinger handed Le Duc Tho a long list of amendments to the October plan. Le Duc Tho walked out of the talks and went home to Hanoi. Nixon sent the North Vietnamese an ultimatum to resume talks or face major consequences. Hanoi did not reply. The American response came on 18 December with a new bombing campaign called Operation Linebacker Two.

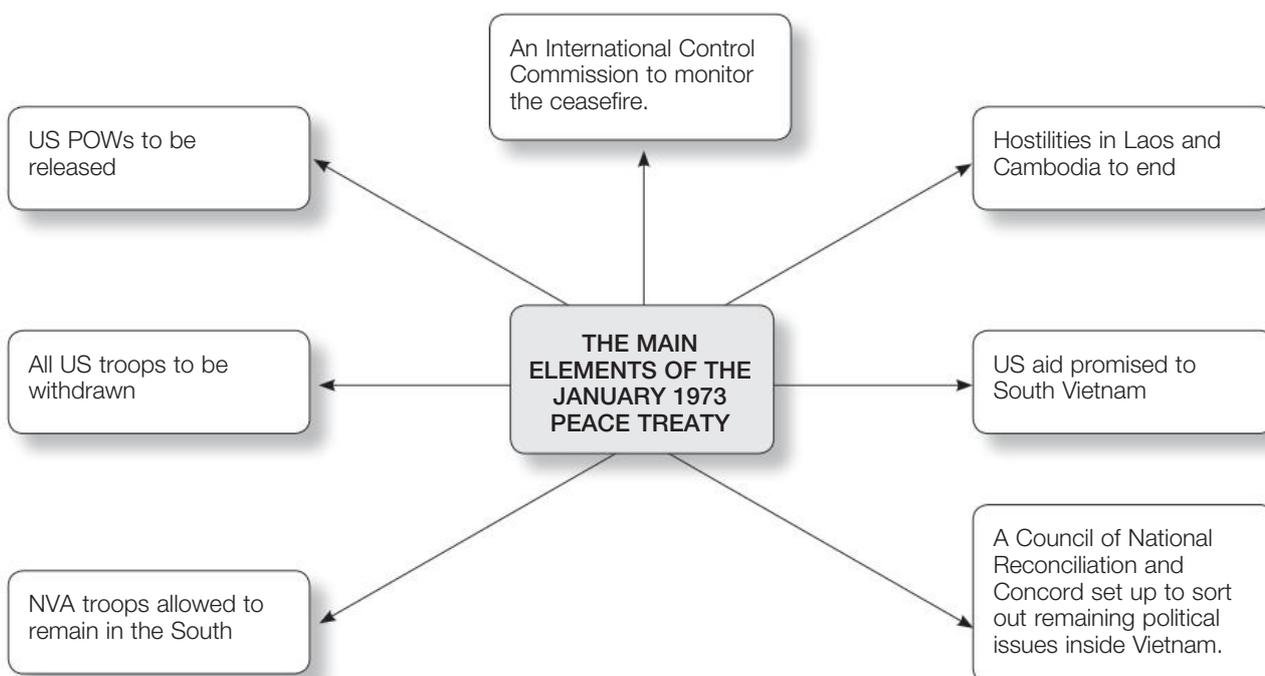
<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 9

- This bombing operation lasted for eleven days; its horrific extent had US newspapers describing their government’s actions as barbaric.
- The American air force flew 2000 sorties over the heaviest populated areas of North Vietnam and dropped over 40 000 tons of bombs.
- Destruction was massive but fatalities low due to effective mass evacuation procedures.
- The Americans also lost 15 B 52s and 93 airmen.

Historians have asked the question, ‘What was the point of Linebacker Two?’ The settlement which was eventually signed actually differed little to the October agreement. Some commentators even doubted Nixon’s sanity!

In early January Le Duc Tho resumed talks. Nixon informed Thieu that the Americans intended signing the agreement, with or without him. Thieu had no choice but to sign. On 15 January the Americans ended all action against the North. On 27 January 1973, the peace treaty to end the Vietnam War was signed! Figure 15.1 illustrates the main elements of the 1973 agreement.

**Figure 15.1 The January 1973 Peace Agreement**



## What do the historians have to say about Nixon's pursuit of peace?

### 1. Phillip B Davidson: *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-75*

Davidson tries to explain why Nixon took so long to achieve peace and get the US out of Vietnam. Electoral survival was obviously a key factor. However, Davidson gives Nixon credit for having more important issues at stake. He says Nixon knew he had to stick with Thieu because of memories of how South Vietnam had fallen apart after Diem. In a rare moment of conscience, Nixon confided to Rogers that the US could not simply desert Thieu as what could he say to all those mothers whose sons had died trying to defend South Vietnam? However, of greatest importance was the issue of America's global role. Nixon believed that the key issue was America's national pride.

*"...The country could not afford to be seen to be defeated...he was convinced that a first American defeat would lead to a collapse of confidence in American leadership and to communist expansion throughout the world."*<sup>8</sup>

### 2. Anthony J Joes: *The War for South Vietnam, 1954-75*

Joes highlights the absurdity of the Peace Agreement. The North Vietnamese obviously never intended to honour the agreement for longer than they had to and the Americans were clearly not going to re-enter the conflict (Congress had passed laws to this effect). Thieu had to hope the US would not totally desert him. Once US bombing had ceased, the North sent over 100 000 men to the South and increased its tank/ artillery strength in the South fourfold. Hanoi made it clear it had no intention of allowing the International Control Commission to stop it doing this.

*"...In light of this absurd situation, the Canadian members of the Commission announced in May 1973 that they would no longer participate and were in fact leaving Vietnam."*<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Charles E Neu: *America's Lost War: Vietnam, 1945-1975*

Neu gives Nixon scant credit for his achievement in Vietnam. Nixon believed he had gained peace with honour but even he felt 'sadness, apprehension and impatience.' Nixon had avoided a right-wing revolt in America, says Neu, but he knew the price had been high – under Nixon 20 000 Americans had died, 107 000 South Vietnamese and 500 000 enemy troops. For what? The peace accords did not bring peace and Nixon realised the North was probably going to resume the struggle. Neu says Nixon and Kissinger could only 'hope' a permanent division could last.

*"...Four years earlier they had badly miscalculated the costs of achieving peace with honour; now it seemed likely that they had also miscalculated the balance of forces in Vietnam."*<sup>10</sup>

8 Davidson, P B, *Vietnam at War: The History, 1946-75*, OUP, New York, 1991, p 129

9 Joes, A J, *The War for South Vietnam, 1954-75*, Praeger, Westport CT, 2001, p 129

10 Neu, C E, *America's Lost War: Vietnam, 1945-75*, Harlan Davidson, Wheeling IL, 2005, p204

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# Notes

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## Chapter 16:

# Reasons for the Communist victory in Vietnam

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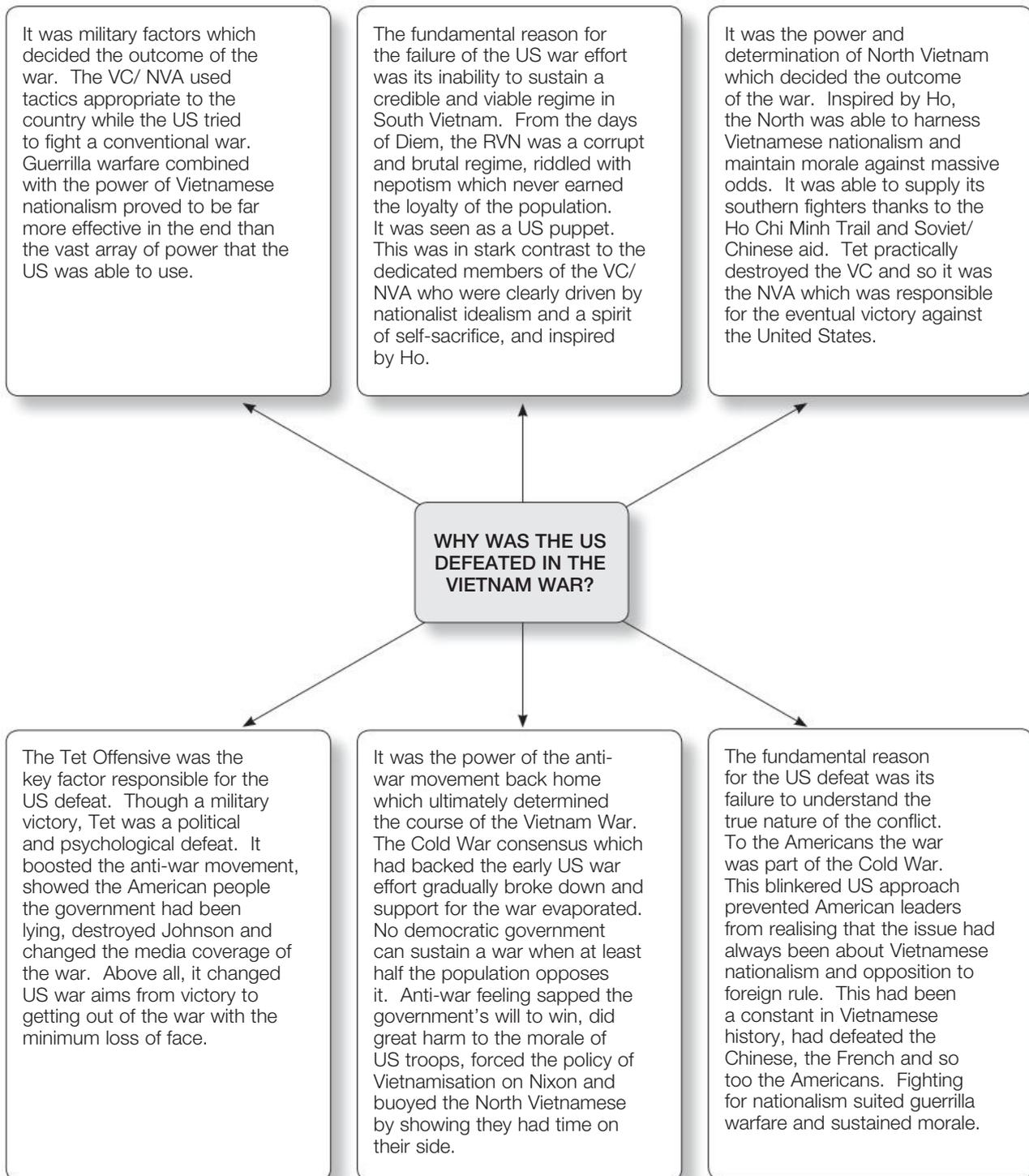
By March 1973, American troops had left Vietnam, apart from a small number left in Saigon. Within just over two years, the South Vietnamese regime had collapsed, North Vietnam was victorious and Vietnam was soon to be united under a communist government. What had happened? Had the Americans been defeated or had the Communists been victorious? The two questions are not necessarily the same. Was the outcome of the war the result of American mistakes, mismanagement of the war, flaws in the Southern regime and the impact of the Home Front? Or was it due to the skills of the Communists, the strength of Vietnamese nationalism, high morale and the spirit of self-sacrifice? Obviously, any explanation for the outcome of the war contains elements of both.

To deal with this issue, two methods will be used. First of all, some of the factors which worked towards a US defeat/ Communist victory will simply be listed. Secondly, a range of possible interpretations will be given.

(i) A simple response: factors working towards a US defeat/ Communist victory

- Communist guerrilla warfare tactics
- The relevance of Ho Chi Minh's 'elephant and tiger analogy'
- VC ability to blend in with the local population
- VC support within the peasant population of the South
- Fear of the VC amongst the peasant population of the South
- The strength of nationalism of the VC/ NVA/ Vietnamese people
- The strength of morale amongst the Communist forces
- Aid provided by the Soviet Union and China to the Communist forces
- The impact of the Ho Chi Minh trail and the US inability to destroy it
- The patience of the Vietnamese in achieving their goals
- The failure of conventional tactics by the Americans
- Lack of support for the Americans amongst large sections of the population
- The indiscriminate nature of American bombing/ use of defoliants/ failure of US social policy which alienated the peasant population
- The cultural insensitivity of the Americans
- The steady decline in the morale of US troops
- The growth of the anti-war movement and its impact on policy
- The impact of the Tet offensive
- The significance of the change of US war aims with Nixon
- The determination of the US Congress to limit presidential powers
- The corruption, nepotism and inefficiency of the Southern regime
- The failure of the ARVN to take on the burden of fighting

And so, the list goes on. However, students are ill advised to simply give a list if asked a question on the reasons for the Communist victory in Vietnam. Now consider Figure 16.1 which offers a more analytical list of possible interpretations.



### The collapse of South Vietnam: 1973-75

The North Vietnamese never doubted that they would eventually defeat the South and unite their country. However, the rapid collapse of the South in 1974 and 1975 came as a surprise even to Northern leaders.

South Vietnam had always relied enormously for its survival on the generosity of the United States. Its economy relied totally on US aid and investment, and the ARVN had been dependent for years on US training, supplies and the US willingness, argue some, to take on most of the fighting. The departure of the US in January 1973 was obviously going to have an enormous impact. However, in early 1973, the picture was not totally black. The Thieu regime had some reason to feel confident about its survival:

- Towards the end of 1972, the US had provided the South with \$2 billion worth of military aid.
- Nixon promised that economic and military aid would continue.
- Thieu believed that if the North broke the Paris Accords, Nixon would resume US bombing of the North.
- The ARVN was one million men strong, one of the biggest armies in the world.
- South Vietnam had the fourth largest air force in the world.

However, there were some major factors working South Vietnam's survival.

- Above all was American Vietnam exhaustion. The people of America and the politicians had simply had enough.
  - Almost 60 000 Americans had died in Vietnam.
  - The war had been monumentally expensive.
  - The war had caused deep divisions in American society which would take a long time to heal.
  - The war brought unprecedented humiliation to the nation.

The Paris Peace Accords had drawn a line under the conflict. America was at last free of Vietnam! There was no way it would re-enter the conflict.

- Nixon had made promises to Thieu. America would not allow the South to be overrun.
- However, very soon Nixon would not be in a position to keep his promises. The Congress was keen to limit presidential war powers.
- In late 1973, Congress passed the War Powers Resolution which limited the president's power to commit troops to foreign conflicts or to increase existing commitments. Nixon vetoed the resolution but Congress overrode it.
- Congress also wanted to cut aid to Indochina. In 1974 aid to South Vietnam was cut from \$1 billion to \$700 million; in 1975 it was ended completely.
- On 15 August 1973, the Congress passed laws which put an end to all US combat operations in Indochina, including the bombing of Cambodia.<sup>1</sup>

Nixon could not assist South Vietnam even if he wanted to.

- Throughout 1973 and 1974, Nixon was embroiled in the Watergate scandal.
  - After the humiliation of the war, the Watergate scandal threw 'salt into America's wounds'. Nixon was guilty of lies, deceit, cover-ups and a willingness to abuse his power.

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 18

- As the nation became absorbed by the scandal, the fate of South Vietnam became irrelevant.
- Nixon was forced to resign over Watergate in August 1974. The new President, Gerald Ford, had the job of restoring the people's faith in government and the world's faith in America.

This was not going to be achieved by involvement in South Vietnam's fate.

The loss of American support was not the only problem South Vietnam faced. By 1974 the country was facing collapse. As US aid dried up, the economy went into freefall. Inflation rocketed and industrial production dropped; unemployment reached 30% and was far higher in certain areas. The already active black market expanded. Those who could were trying to get out of the country and take as much with them as they could. A fatalistic attitude now permeated the South. Morale was dropping, refugees were pouring into Saigon and desertions from the ARVN were on the rise.

It was against this background of American withdrawal and Southern instability that the North Vietnamese decided to move against the South. Throughout 1973 and 1974, North Vietnam was moving more and more troops into the South. By late 1974, the North's military commander, General Van Tien Dung had 22 divisions in the South. However, Dung was not in a hurry. He believed it still might take years to take the South and there was always the possibility of a renewal of US bombing.

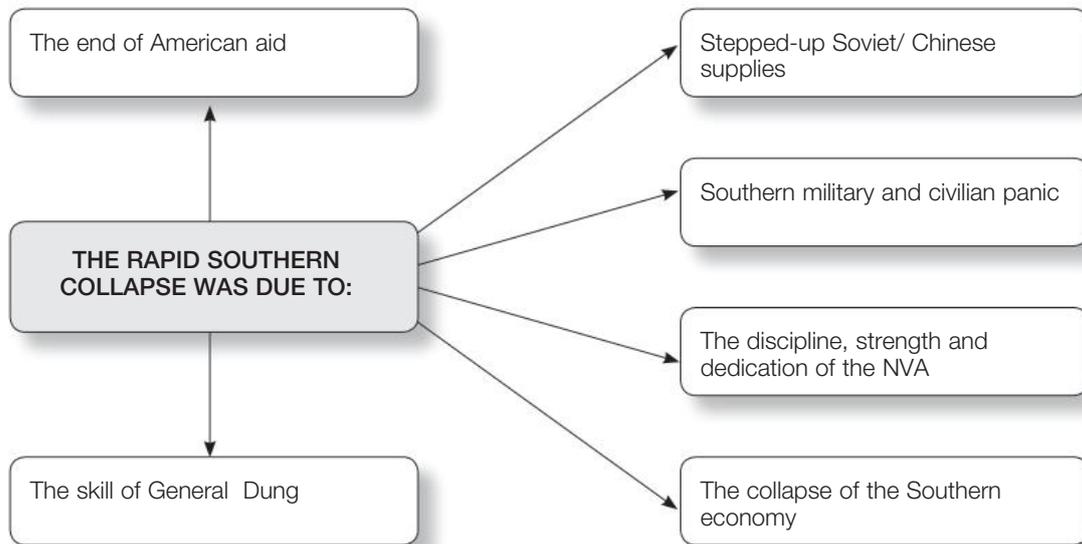
General Dung decided to attack.

- During the second half of 1974, the NVA put a lot of pressure on the northern provinces. In August the ARVN found itself fully stretched after NVA attacks on Ben Cat and Da Nang. There were also communist gains in the Mekong Delta south of Saigon.
- With most ARVN troops in the North, NVA troops attacked and seized Phuc Long province just 100 kms from Saigon in January 1975.
  - The US did nothing.
  - The Soviet Union increased aid to the North.
  - General Dung ordered a general offensive.
- Dung's aim was to cut South Vietnam in half by taking the Central Highlands and taking the town of Ban Me Thuot. Thieu's response was to abandon the northern part of South Vietnam and consolidate in the southern areas.
- This led to a panic-stricken retreat south.
  - ARVN officers abandoned their men and soldiers removed their uniforms, fearing retribution from advancing NVA forces.
  - Up to half a million refugees also fled towards the coast and the hope of a boat south. This became known as the 'convoy of tears; less than 150 000 would survive Northern attacks and reach the coast.
  - Hue was taken by Communist forces on 25 March.
  - Da Nang was taken on 31 March.

- In April, aware that the South was disintegrating, Dung ordered the capture of Saigon by 1 May. On 21 April Thieu resigned; he was succeeded by ‘Big’ Minh. The political affairs of South Vietnam mattered nothing. The ARVN collapsed, more refugees poured into Saigon and the North Vietnamese began their encirclement of the capital.

As the noose around Saigon tightened, the North demanded unconditional surrender. In late April the airstrips were destroyed. The US faced further humiliation as it sought to implement Option IV and fly desperate Vietnamese out of the capital to waiting US ships. <sup>2</sup> However, because of the lack of room on the ships, helicopters had to be pushed into the sea. The final helicopter took off the roof of the US embassy on 30 April. The sight of this panic flight provided yet another terrible iconic photo for the US memory of the Vietnam War. Hours later a North Vietnamese tank crashed into the grounds of the Presidential Palace in Saigon. The North Vietnamese flag was soon flying over the palace. The Vietnam War was over.

**Figure 16.2 Why did the Southern regime collapse so quickly?**



**Exercise 16.1**

Circle the correct response – THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE - to each statement in the left-hand column.

|   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 1. The collapse of South Vietnam was expected to occur quickly following the US withdrawal      | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 2. General Dung believed he would need several years before the Saigon regime was brought down. | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 3. The United States had decided that ‘enough was enough’ when it came to Vietnam.              | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 4. The South Vietnamese economy remained remarkably unaffected by the US departure.             | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |

<sup>2</sup> Those Vietnamese who had worked for US authorities or the Southern regime genuinely feared that there would be a blood bath as the Communists took revenge on traitors and collaborationists.

|   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 5. Morale in the ARVN remained very high up until the very end.                             | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 6. South Vietnam had good reason to believe that it was not faced with immediate defeat.    | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 7. A sense of fatalism seemed to have engulfed the people of South Vietnam.                 | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 8. Option IV provided good propaganda for the US as its Vietnam involvement came to an end. | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |

## What do the historians have to say about the defeat of the Americans?

### 1. Harry G Summers Jr: (in) *The Vietnam War as History*

Summers was in Hanoi in April 1975 as part of a Four Party Joint Military Team and he recalled a conversation he had with NVA Colonel Nguyen Don Tu. Summers stated: "You know we never lost on the battlefield"; the Colonel's response was: "That may be so. But it's irrelevant." This led Summers to discuss the ideas of the 19th century war theorist, Carl von Clausewitz. Clausewitz argued that war is an exercise in will, ie imposing your will on an enemy, or preventing an enemy imposing his will on you. It is not enough to destroy an enemy's army and supplies; one must destroy the enemy's will. The US defeat in Vietnam was the result of the defeat of national will; it came when:

*"...US public opinion turned decisively (against the war)...when Johnson was psychologically defeated by the enemy's Tet Offensive in 1968; and when the alliance between the US and the Republic of Vietnam came unglued (after the Paris Accords).."*<sup>3</sup>

### 2. Mark Clodfelter: *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam*

Clodfelter makes the point that even the massive superiority in US air power was not going to be enough to defeat the Communists. Before Tet, the VC comprised five sixths of the Communist force in the South and was intermingled with the local population. They fought on average one day in thirty. This meant only meagre supplies were needed to be sent south. This could be achieved no matter how much the Ho Chi Minh Trail and North Vietnam were bombed. Clodfelter says that even if bombing had reached such a level that the North ordered the VC to cease fighting:

*"...the Vietcong could still have refused to comply with Hanoi's wishes. The cessation of Northern support was no guarantee that Saigon could survive against the Vietcong..."*<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Stanley Karnow: *Vietnam*

The final decision not to help South Vietnam in April 1975 sealed Saigon's fate, if it had not already been sealed. President Ford said at the time of Saigon's impending fall that the events "portended neither the end of the world nor of America's leadership in the world." Karnow concludes:

3 Summer, H G, in *The Vietnam War as History*, (ed E J Errington), Praeger, New York, 1990, p 184

4 Clodfelter, M, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2006, p 205

*“...the politicians were simply reflecting the opinion of the overwhelming majority of Americans, who favoured no further aid to the Saigon government...”*<sup>5</sup>

#### **4. Max Hastings: Vietnam – An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975**

When discussing the Communist victory/ US defeat, Hastings is quick to highlight the fact the Communists were not the idealised heroes many western left-wing commentators painted them to be. He says that where the Communists were in control, they exercised terror and destroyed personal freedom. He says that Ho Chi Minh and Le Duan ran what was essentially a totalitarian regime. However, the Communists were able to highlight the corruption of the Saigon regime. They told the truth when they called the Saigon regime a puppet of the Americans. They could point to the humiliation of being occupied by foreigners, first the French, then the Americans. The NVA received much from the Soviet Union and China, but Vietnamese peasants never saw Russian or Chinese troops. They saw only their fellow-countrymen, devoid of material possessions, willing to sacrifice themselves for the cause. Hastings sums up this point as follows:

*“...Communist victory was attributable less to the military prowess of the NVA and the Vietcong than to the fact they were Vietnamese...”*<sup>6</sup>

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5 Karnow, S, Vietnam, Century Hutchinson, London, 1983, p 667

6 Hastings, M, Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975, William Collins, London, 2018, p 642

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# Notes

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## ESSAYS 2:

# Responding to HSC questions on The Second Indochina War

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The purpose of this section is to provide some ideas for the type of questions which might be asked on the third section of the syllabus: The Second Indochina War. These outlines are not presented as the 'be all and end all' responses to these questions. To provide a sense of reality to this section, what follows is a 'first draft response' to each question, ie what were the first ideas that came into the author's head as he thought about each question?

### Essay No 1

*"Assess the significance of the Tet Offensive on the outcome of the Vietnam War."*

The big danger here is, as always, the narrative descriptive one. Students have to ensure that their responses do not fall into the following traps:

- Avoid simply providing a blow by blow account of what happened during the Tet offensive.
  - Students might be tempted to write at length about the VC in the American Embassy, or perhaps express outrage at the actions of General Loan or explain what happened in Hue.
  - Such descriptions will only be achieving a maximum of 15/ 25.
- Another possible trap might be to put Tet in the context of a detailed narration with only the most cursory attempt at analysis.
  - A response of this type might start narrating the events of the war from the Tonkin Resolution, refer to various operations and then say that Tet was a turning point.
  - From there students might then narrate the Nixon war policy of Vietnamisation, Peace Talks, Cambodia and the bombing policy.
  - Again, such a narrative can only get 15/ 25 or if the 'turning point' is given a paragraph, might slip into a 16-17/ 25.

The essence of this question is for students to make a judgment about why the Tet Offensive was important in terms of the outcome of the Vietnam War. Clearly, some narrative detail will be needed but the argument is all important. Thus, students must make sure that this is clearly outlined in the introduction.

A possible argument might be:

Tet was the event that ensured the North Vietnamese would win the Vietnam War. Before Tet, the official US policy was victory; after Tet it became to withdraw from the war with the minimum loss of face. Tet had a traumatic effect in 1968. It destroyed President Johnson and probably ended the Democrat Party's chance of winning the 1968 election, it radicalised the anti-war movement and had a dramatic effect on the media coverage of the war. In effect Tet had been an American military victory but a political and psychological defeat.

- This introduction gets the marker's attention with a clear statement of argument right from the start. However, students should be careful that if they do this, their essay then continues to support such a view.
  - It sets out what the essay will attempt to achieve by outlining the bases of the argument to come:
    - the turning point idea;
    - the political effect;
    - the protest movement aspect and the media point;
    - the final point can then be used to sum up the argument in the conclusion.
- Before Tet the US intention had been to achieve victory, not by destroying North Vietnam but by ensuring the viability of an independent South Vietnam. US policies had worked steadily towards this aim.
  - You might refer to leaders' specific utterances.
  - Show how the steady troop build-up suggested the US intent.
  - Comment on the range of operations from 1964-67 which again showed US determination, eg Rolling Thunder, search and destroy missions.
  - The official line of 'light at the end of the tunnel'.
- Bring in the Tet Offensive.
  - You might make a reference to the ongoing events in Khe Sanh, even briefly consider the 'Dien Bien Phu' thinking of Westmoreland.
  - Give some detail of what actually happened during Tet – but students must not fall into the narrative trap here.
- The fundamental notion of Tet is the military victory/ political and psychological defeat line – explain what this means.
  - The public shock of what was happening – combine this with the media images that came out.
  - The 'I thought we were winning this war' idea.
  - Mention the impact on Johnson – his March speech and the impetus this gave to anti-war candidates, McCarthy and Kennedy.
  - Even Nixon was affected; when he won the Republican nomination he campaigned on a 'Peace with Honour' program, not a 'victory program'.
  - Refer to how this would have been seen in Hanoi.
- The media line on Vietnam underwent a change
  - Refer to pre-Tet coverage
  - Describe the Tet coverage
  - Then explain how post-Tet coverage began to focus on the negative aspects, things such as My Lai might be mentioned.

- Provide a link between media coverage and the public perception. The public shock of what was happening – combine this with the media images that came out – stimulated anti-war protest
  - You might refer briefly to the increasingly radical anti-war protest
  - The significance of a substantial section of public opinion now opposed to war
  - In effect Tet ended the cold war consensus on Vietnam.

Conclusion: refer to the military victory/ political-psychological defeat line and relate this to the issues that have been discussed.

### Essay No 2:

*To what extent was the United States defeat in the Second Indochina war the result of its inappropriate tactics and strategies?*

On the face of it, this is a fairly straightforward question. However, let us again begin by pointing out the pitfalls.

- There is a great temptation here to simply jump in and describe at length the various methods of American warfare. This could result in lengthy descriptions of B 52 bombing raids, the use of defoliants, the search and destroy efforts, as well as mention being made of specific weapons and technology.
- Alternatively, students might err and dismiss the US tactics by saying they were useless and lead on to a detailed description of guerrilla warfare and its greater suitability to the conditions.
- This question might also lead to a student to mistakenly give a detailed narration of the events of the war and then conclude vaguely that this proves the US followed inappropriate tactics and strategies.

As always, establish an argument at the beginning. The key to this sort of question is to be able to argue ‘why’ the tactics/ strategies were inappropriate. It would be permissible to allow comparisons with VC/ NVA tactics and strategies but always keep the focus on the US tactics and strategies as that is the issue in the question. Better students might distinguish between tactics and strategies.

A possible argument might be:

United States strategy in the war was fundamentally flawed. It saw the conflict in Cold War terms, sought to preserve a corrupt and discredited regime, and totally failed to understand the nationalist appeal of its enemy. Its fear of global escalation always meant it could never bring its full military power to bear on North Vietnam. Tactically the United States was in error as its methods did not suit the terrain, and were useless against an enemy which fought in a guerrilla manner. Thus, the United States was in error both tactically and strategically.

- The US always viewed the war in Cold War terms which meant it remained committed to a corrupt dictatorship in the South.
  - The Saigon regime had long been guilty of nepotism, corruption and state terror.

- Provide a few examples.
- It could never inspire the loyalty of the Southern population.
- You might refer to its Agrovillage/ US Strategic Hamlets policies.
- In contrast the VC/ NVA wore a mantle of selfless nationalism.
  - They could point to Ho's idealism/ hopes of national unity/ a vision of a more equal future.
  - VC/ NVA propaganda were always able to emphasise their opposition to foreign control.
  - Such aims imbued the VC/ NVA with unlimited patience.
- United States strategic planning was always limited by fears of global escalation of the conflict. It was never really able to bring its full power down on North Vietnam.
  - Refer to the ever-present fear of Chinese intervention (as in the Korean War) and the possibility of Soviet intervention on the North's side.
  - Refer to the belief that such intervention was considered likely if the US invaded North Vietnam/ continued enormous bombing campaigns/ even considered nuclear weapons.
  - Some historians suggest that this was an ungrounded fear; however, that does not matter if people at the time believed it.
- Tactically, the US employed a conventional warfare approach to war. Such an approach to warfare was most inappropriate to South Vietnam.
  - Explain the effect of bombing/ defoliation/ search and destroy methods on the civilian population.
  - Show why Vietnam's mountains and forests made US conventional weapons difficult to use.
  - Explain how VC/ NVA guerrilla methods were better suited to the terrain, allowed them to disappear amongst the civilian population and made it possible to propagandise their cause.

Conclusion: US strategy was fundamentally flawed as it showed a misunderstanding of the conflict and was prevented from using its real power. Tactically its conventional methods and weapons were inappropriate for the terrain of a country like Vietnam. VC/ NVA guerrilla tactics were more appropriate both in terms of actual fighting and in allowing the Communists to get close to the people.

Historiographical issues have been deliberately left out of this section. It is important for students to develop their own ideas and support those ideas with the historical evidence. If it is appropriate, then the views of specific historians can be included to back up the student's own argument. However, do not name-drop for the sake of it. Karnow/ Maclear/ Jones etc are only of value when they back up the student.

## **Chapter 17:**

# **Sihanouk's Cambodia 1955-1970**

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### **Background**

There had been a time between the 9th and 13th centuries when Cambodia had been the dominant state in the Indochina region. It was known at this time as the Angkor Empire. However, the country came under increasing pressure from its neighbours, Thailand and Vietnam. By the middle of the 19th century, its glory days were long gone; indeed, the Cambodian state was almost on the verge of dissolution. As French interest in the region grew, Cambodia became a French protectorate in 1863. By the 1880s, Cambodia had become a French colony and it became one of the five regions of French Indochina (along with Laos, Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China).

Cambodia fared rather better under French rule than did Vietnam. Vietnam was to suffer economic exploitation and any opposition to French rule was brutally suppressed. However, the Cambodian people seemed more content with French rule, the population remained generally passive and the French allowed traditional institutions, such as the monarchy, to continue.

In 1941, the King of Cambodia, Sisowath Monivong, died. As his successor, the French chose his grandson, Norodom Sihanouk. Sihanouk was eighteen.

- Sihanouk attended a French primary school in Phnom Penh, secondary school in Saigon and later cavalry school in Saumur, France.
- As a young man, Sihanouk enjoyed a flamboyant and extravagant lifestyle of almost fantasy proportions. It was the archetypal playboy life of fast cars, casinos and women.
- In interviews Sihanouk often joked about his youth as a 'ladies' man'. He married his sixth wife, Monique Izzi, in 1952.

French rule continued until 1941 when the country was occupied by the Japanese. The Japanese occupied the country between 1941 and 1945. After the war, the French returned but nationalist feeling was developing inside Cambodia. Cambodia finally gained its independence on 9th November, 1953.

### **The rule of Norodom Sihanouk**

#### *(i) Domestic Policy*

On 2 March 1955, Sihanouk **abdicated** in favour of his father. He assumed the leadership of a political party, the Sangkum Reastr Niyum or People's Socialist Community. His party won the election and he then took the position of Prime Minister. One of his first actions was to take Cambodia out of the French Union. When his father died in 1960, he retook the position as head of state, but called himself Prince Sihanouk, rather than King Sihanouk. He remained in power until he was removed in a coup in 1970.

Sihanouk has always been a complex and interesting political character. Intelligent, educated, fluent in several languages, Sihanouk is a television chat show producer's delight. Few political leaders can match his style, his self-deprecation and even his voice! He is a man whose self-indulgence knew few limits. During his time as Cambodia's leader, he took a very keen interest in film making. He wrote, directed and starred in several major Cambodian movies; the Cambodian army and air force were often brought in as extras. Like President Bill Clinton, he was a saxophone playing head of state. Sihanouk also saw himself as a pop singer. His records made it to the top of the charts and his songs were frequently played on Phnom Penh radio.

However, there was another side to Sihanouk. His power was absolute and he would tolerate no opposition to his rule.

- Playing on his royal blood, Sihanouk saw himself as the embodiment of the Cambodian state. He built up a personality cult around himself, his picture was everywhere and newspapers constantly extolled his virtues.
- To consolidate his position, Sihanouk played favourites and created factions within his party. He would frequently appoint and sack ministers; between September 1955 and January 1958, there were nine ministries. This might solidify his hold on power, but it did nothing for creating stability and an effective governing class.
- He was very susceptible to flattery. Corruption became a byword in Sihanouk's Cambodia and he was either unable, or unwilling to do anything about it.
- Under Sihanouk, there was an expansion in education services. However, there was not an appropriate expansion of the economy which might allow his young, newly educated citizens to play a proper role in the country. The leaders of the future opposition to Sihanouk often came from the educated classes.

In 1963, Sihanouk nationalised Cambodia's banks and import/ export trade. In the same year he cancelled US aid. The effect was disastrous, as Cambodia's annual revenue fell almost 15% and the army was suddenly short of everything from uniforms to petrol to equipment to salaries. These measures led the army into areas of corruption and fuelled opposition to his rule. By the mid-1960s, the economy was stagnating and unrest in the countryside steadily increased. In 1967 and 1968, the army ruthlessly put down unrest and up to 10 000 were killed.

Yet, while Cambodia was facing economic crisis, political unrest and war was raging in neighbouring Vietnam, Sihanouk threw himself even more into his film-making. Milton Osborne has written that Sihanouk's "*commitment to film-making was a significant matter with serious political consequences*".<sup>1</sup> It was not just a minor interest, but an activity which saw Sihanouk lessening his involvement in the affairs of state and it led directly to the growing lack of respect for him personally.

### (ii) Foreign Policy

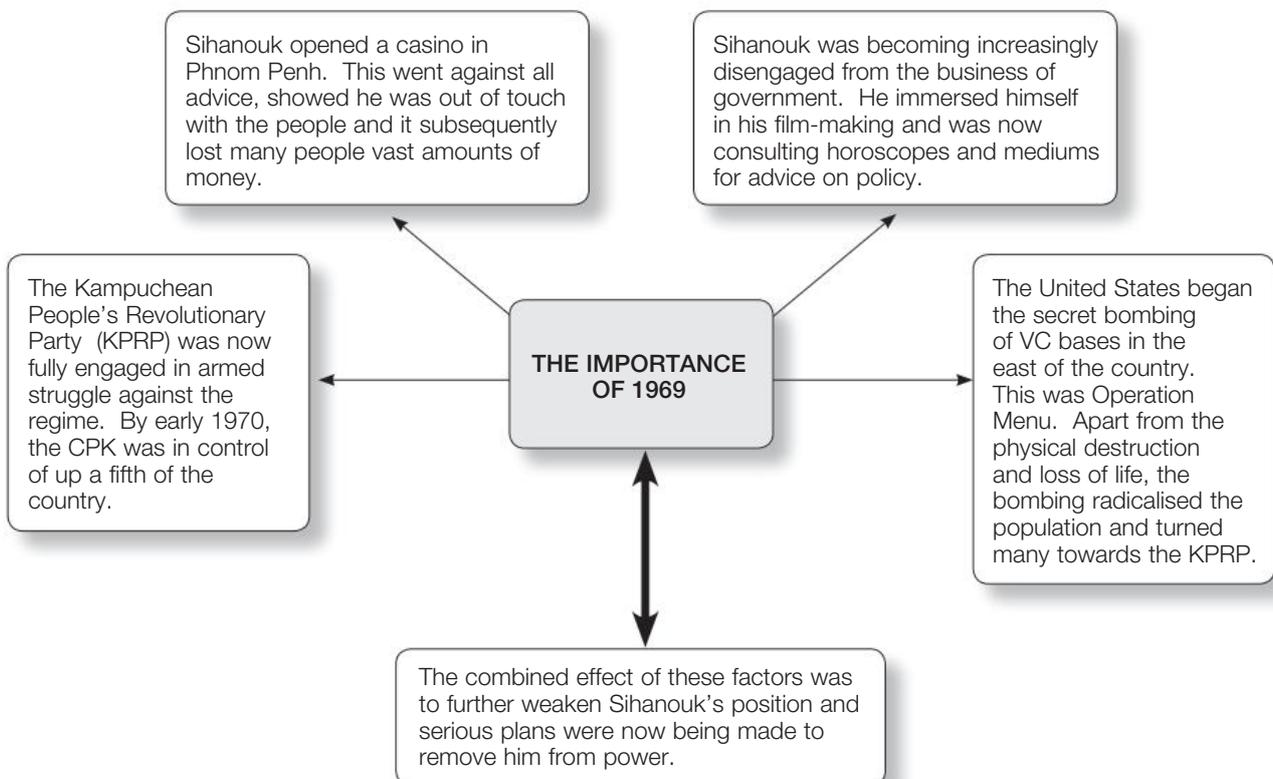
Sihanouk's fundamental aim as ruler was to ensure the neutrality of Cambodia. He fully understood the cold war interest in his region and had to deal carefully with the United States on the one hand, and the Soviet Union and China on the other. His goal was to avoid antagonising either side. By the 1960s, war was raging across the border in Vietnam. Sihanouk was desperate to keep Cambodia out of the conflict and also to prevent the conflict from spreading across the border into Cambodia. On all counts Sihanouk was to fail.

<sup>1</sup> Osborne, M, Before Kampuchea: Preludes to a Tragedy, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1979, p 44

- In 1955 at the Bandung Conference, Sihanouk emphasised Cambodian neutrality. He accepted aid from both the United State and China, and refused the offer to join SEATO when invited in 1956.<sup>2</sup>
- However, Sihanouk became concerned at American behaviour. It was believed at the time, that an assassination attempt on his life in 1958 had been CIA/ ARVN planned. The murder of Diem in November 1963<sup>3</sup> and growing involvement of the US presence in Vietnam greatly alarmed Sihanouk. In February 1964, ARVN forces attacked VC units in Eastern Cambodia.
- In 1965 Sihanouk broke off diplomatic relations with the US.
  - He moved closer to North Vietnam and the NLF.
  - Chinese supplies for the NLF/ NVA were allowed in via the port of Sihanoukville.
  - He also allowed the VC to establish bases in eastern Cambodia.
  - However, at home he allowed his army commander Lon Nol to brutally suppress leftist groups.
- However, by 1969 Sihanouk had become very concerned at the presence of the Vietnamese in the east of his country, and the support that he believed they were giving to Cambodian communist insurgents.
- As a result, in June 1969 he re-established diplomatic relations with the US.

1969 proved to be a pivotal year of Sihanouk's rule. The importance of the year is illustrated in Figure 17.1.

**Figure 17.1 The importance of 1969 for Sihanouk**



<sup>2</sup> SEATO – the South East Asia Treaty Organisation, an anti-communist alliance sponsored by the United States in 1954.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 6



faltering badly due to black market trading, mismanagement of state-owned enterprises and extravagant expenditures. Agricultural problems were mounting, the population was increasing and world price fluctuations were not helping matters. Sihanouk was becoming vulnerable and his enemies were becoming stronger.

*“...By 1967, these problems had become severe, and Sihanouk’s reaction was still to ignore them. Increasingly, he turned over political power to Lon Nol and Sirik Matak. He hoped that something would turn up to save the country’s economy...”*<sup>5</sup>

### 3. S May: Cambodian Witness

May provides a delightful description of Sihanouk’s promotion of his personality cult. He describes the presence of Sihanouk’s ubiquitous portrait, in monk’s robes here, in a military uniform there, in all class rooms, in shops and offices and on billboards. On the radio, if it was not Sihanouk’s speeches that were being heard it was his latest pop song recording. May says that in a magazine that Sihanouk edited himself:

*“...we saw him helping a farmer dig an irrigation canal, reviewing his troops, shooting a film, addressing the National Assembly, giving presents to the monks, opening the annual regatta with his wife, Monique.”*<sup>6</sup>

## The Khmer Rouge

In 1930, Ho Chi Minh established the Indochinese Communist Party but there were only a few Cambodians in it. In 1951 a separate Cambodian Party was created called the Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea, but guided by the North Vietnamese. Soon after this, a young man call Saloth Sar joined the party. Saloth Sar would be known to the world as Pol Pot.

### Pol Pot – background

- Pol Pot was born on 19 May, 1925 in Kampong Thum province, north of Phnom Penh. His was not a poor peasant background.
  - His father had considerable farm holdings.
  - His mother had connections at the Royal Court.
  - He learned the rudiments of Buddhism, and then attended French schools and a catholic college but did not gain a diploma.
- In 1946 he joined the Indochinese Communist Party.
- In 1949 he went to Paris on a government scholarship to study electronics.
  - Again he failed to graduate.
  - However, he developed some close revolutionary contacts, including later Khmer Rouge figures, Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan.
- Throughout the 1950s, Pol Pot lived a double, both as a respectable teacher at a private school, and as revolutionary.

<sup>5</sup> Chandler, D P, A History of Cambodia, Westview Press, Oxford, 1993, p 202

<sup>6</sup> May, S, Cambodian Witness, Faber and Faber, London, 1986, p 87

- In 1960 the KPRP broke away from its Vietnamese patrons. Pol Pot by now was the number three man in the party. In 1963 he became General Secretary; with other leading KPRP figures, he moved into the jungle to organise revolt against Sihanouk's regime.
- In 1965 he met communist leaders in North Vietnam but resented their patronising attitude. He was much happier meeting Mao Zedong in China, which at that time was going through its Cultural Revolution. This was a violent upheaval based on the idea of constant revolution and renewal by removing all 'old' and 'foreign' influences. These ideas would have a major effect on Cambodia from April 1975.<sup>7</sup>
- In 1966, the KPRP changed its name to the Kampuchean Communist Party (KCP) but became known as the "Khmer Rouge". Its powerful Central Committee was headed by Pol Pot and was referred to as 'Angkor'.
- Throughout 1969, the Americans bombed suspected VC sanctuaries in Eastern Cambodia. The destruction and loss of life were enormous. The effect of the bombing raids was to increase the popularity of the Khmer Rouge. Their numbers increased steadily.

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<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 19

# Chapter 18:

## Reasons for the Communist victory in Cambodia

### The ousting of Sihanouk

In January 1970, Norodom Sihanouk left Cambodia and travelled to Paris for medical treatment. Within two months his rule would be over. Sihanouk's Prime Minister Lon Nol had been responsible for the brutal army suppression of opposition forces in the Battambang region in 1967-68. He was strongly anti-Vietnamese and anti-communist, and therefore not surprisingly well disposed to the United States.

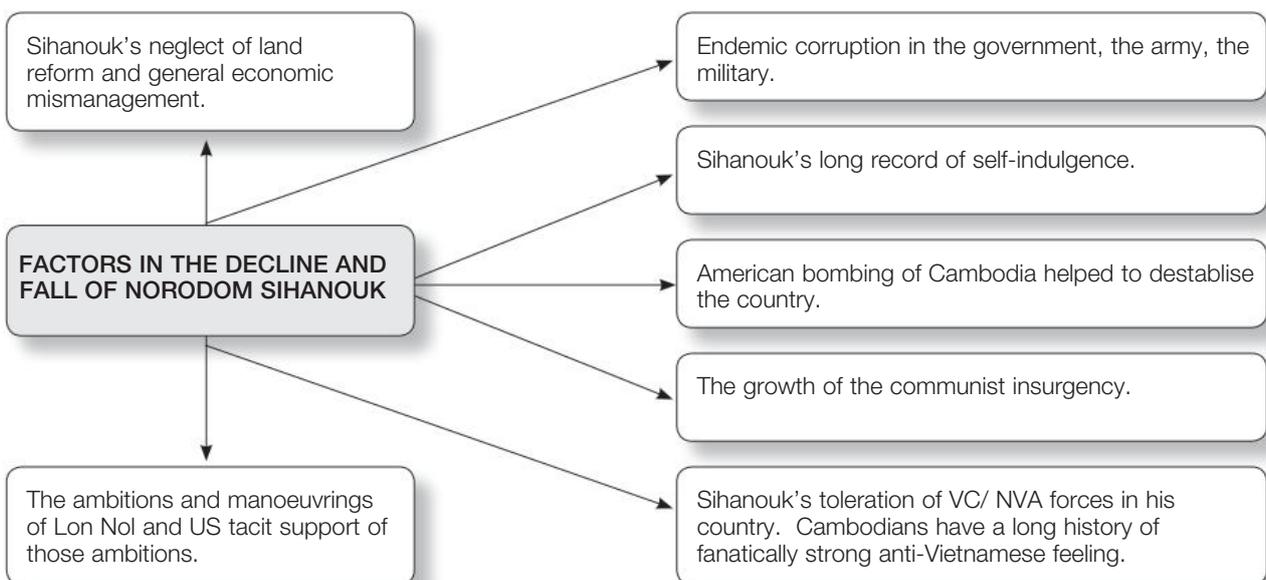
While Sihanouk was away, Lon Nol made a series of moves which clearly would bring him into conflict with the Prince.

- On 31 January he closed down the Phnom Penh casino which had been an initiative of Sihanouk.
- In February, there were several signs suggesting a veer away from Cambodian sympathy for the VC/ NVA towards the US/ RVN position.
  - Nationalist Chinese and South Vietnamese flags flew in Phnom Penh. <sup>1</sup>
  - Arms shipments to the VC were deliberately held up.
  - The government changed the country's bank notes. This meant that all currency in VC hands was now worthless.
  - On 11 March the Chinese and North Vietnamese embassies in Phnom Penh were sacked.
  - On 13 March those VC based in eastern Cambodia were ordered to leave.

On 18 March, the country's National Assembly declared that Sihanouk was no longer the head of state.

Why was it that Sihanouk was overthrown? Figure 18.1 suggests some possible reasons.

**Figure 18.1 Reasons for Norodom Sihanouk's fall**



<sup>1</sup> Flying a Nationalist Chinese (Taiwan) flag would anger Communist China which claims ownership of Taiwan as one of its provinces.

## The Lon Nol Regime

Winston Churchill once described the Soviet Union as: “*a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.*”<sup>2</sup> His description could well be applied to Cambodia between 1970 and 1975. Cambodia became a country of confused, competing forces.

Following his overthrow, Sihanouk announced that he had formed a United Front of Kampuchea with his old enemy, the Khmer Rouge, to fight against Lon Nol. In 1973, he even entered war-torn Cambodia and posed for photographs with Khmer Rouge guerrillas wearing their black guerrilla outfit. This was tremendous propaganda coup for the Khmer Rouge.

- Sihanouk wanted his power back, opposed Lon Nol, was working with the Khmer Rouge but did not trust them, briefly associated himself with the North Vietnamese and then proclaimed his anti-communism.
- The Khmer Rouge hated Sihanouk but realised it was a good propaganda move to associate themselves with his name. They sought the downfall of Lon Nol. The Cambodian communists and the Vietnamese communists had cooperated up to the 1970s. However, rather than fraternal communist ties, it was the Cambodian hatred of the Vietnamese which was to affect ties between the Khmer Rouge and the North Vietnamese.
- Lon Nol wanted to keep Sihanouk out of power, sought the eventual destruction of the Khmer Rouge but, like the Khmer Rouge, wanted to remove the hated Vietnamese from the country.
- The NVA/ VC forces were determined not to be forced out of their bases which they had set up in Eastern Cambodia. They would fight the Lon Nol army – and any other Cambodian forces – to this end.
- The United States were still embroiled in Vietnam. It had already bombed Cambodia secretly in 1969<sup>3</sup> and would continue to escalate its involvement in the country until 1973. The US wanted to sustain the Lon Nol regime and destroy NVA/ VC bases in the country; the destruction of the Khmer Rouge would, of course, be an added bonus.

The period of the Lon Nol regime, 1970-75, is thus an incredibly complicated one. It is a period of non-stop violence but, between whom and why, becomes a complex web to unweave. What follows is an attempt to do this.

### (i) Cambodian nationalists versus the North Vietnamese: Stage One

The North Vietnamese reaction to Lon Nol's seizure of power was swift. Several NVA divisions moved into eastern Cambodia with the intention of overthrowing Lon Nol. In April 1970, there were NVA-Cambodian clashes close to Phnom Penh. The Lon Nol government accused those Vietnamese living in Phnom Penh of collaborating with the invading forces; many Vietnamese living in Cambodia were to be massacred.

In response to the NVA assault, thousands of Cambodian students volunteered to join military units to push the NVA out.<sup>4</sup> At this stage Lon Nol can probably be depicted as a popular, genuine Cambodian nationalist, leading a small, inexperienced army of a small nation against a vastly more experienced army of a much larger neighbour.

<sup>2</sup> Churchill speaking in a radio broadcast in October 1939

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 17

<sup>4</sup> Historically, Cambodian-Vietnamese relations had been marked by strong hatreds verging on the fanatical.

(ii) US/ ARVN forces versus the VC/ NVA (inside Cambodia):

In May and June 1970, US and ARVN troops (total 80 000) invaded border areas to clean out suspected communist camps. A great deal of weaponry and supplies were captured<sup>5</sup> but very few of the enemy. This action greatly complicated the situation in the country:

- Communist (North/ Vietcong) Vietnamese retreated deeper into the country;
- As the US/ ARVN assault attacked the VC/ NVA forces, this would presumably place them on the same side as the Cambodians.
- However, the situation was not that simple.
  - The Cambodian people now also had another Vietnamese army – the South’s – in its midst.
  - Some of the Southern troops did not treat the local Khmer population well. Old hatreds simmered below the surface.
- The South Vietnamese troops withdrew with the Americans, though later in the year they attacked a communist base in north east Cambodia. The ARVN force and its commander were routed.

(iii) Cambodian nationalists versus the North Vietnamese: Stage Two

The weaker Cambodian forces maintained their morale into 1971. However, disaster hit them during the operation to open a road from Phnom Penh and Kompong Som to the North.<sup>6</sup> This operation was known as Chenla II; it was a catastrophe. Despite having American air support, the stretched Cambodian army lines were sliced up as NVA troops trapped groups of enemy soldiers in small areas and destroyed them.

Throughout 1971, the position of the Cambodian army (known as FANK 7) deteriorated. It was short of supplies and arms, had suffered the disaster of Chenla II and Lon Nol’s command weakened due to a stroke he had suffered.

Cambodia’s political and military situation at the start of 1972 remained very confusing. There were now several groups in action, each vying for power:

1. There was the official republican government under Lon Nol and his FANK forces. This government was becoming as distant from the ordinary people as had been that of Sihanouk. Lon Nol’s supporters were now presenting him as a ‘god President’ in the same way Sihanouk had been a ‘god king’.
2. In the countryside the Khmer Rouge, led by Khieu Samphan, had become a military force to be reckoned with.
3. Sihanouk was in China. He had flirted with the Khmer Rouge in 1970 and had been seen to support North Vietnamese leader, Pham van Dong. However, by 1972, Sihanouk was loudly proclaiming his opposition to communism.
4. There were many local small insurgent groups.

<sup>5</sup> Over 25 000 personal weapons and over 2000 larger weapons such as rocket launchers.

<sup>6</sup> NVA forces were still deep in the country. In early 1971 they had attacked Phnom Penh airport.

<sup>7</sup> Forces Armees Nationales Khmeres

#### *(iv) The Khmer Rouge versus the Lon Nol regime: Civil War*

In January 1973, the Paris Peace Accords were signed ending the Vietnam War. The Accords called for all foreign troops to be withdrawn from Cambodia. However, NVA forces lingered in Cambodia for several months and US bombing continued in support of the Lon Nol regime. Foreign activity in Cambodia was over by late 1973. The North Vietnamese were preparing for action against South Vietnam, and the US Congress had ordered an end to the bombing.

The more extreme Khmer Rouge leaders saw the North Vietnamese peace agreement with the US as a ‘stab in the back’ as it now allowed the full brunt of US power to be brought down upon them.

By 1973, the Khmer Rouge had grown from strength to strength. The corruption and detachment of the Lon Nol regime persuaded many Cambodians, including intellectuals, to join the Khmer Rouge. US aid to Lon Nol was in the billions of dollars. The American bombing had been of horrific proportions; between February and August, up to 275 000 tons of bombs were dropped – more than Japan received in World War II! It devastated large parts of the Cambodian countryside. Lon Nol forces also attacked suspected Khmer Rouge supported villages. To escape the carnage, there was a mass movement of refugees into Phnom Penh.

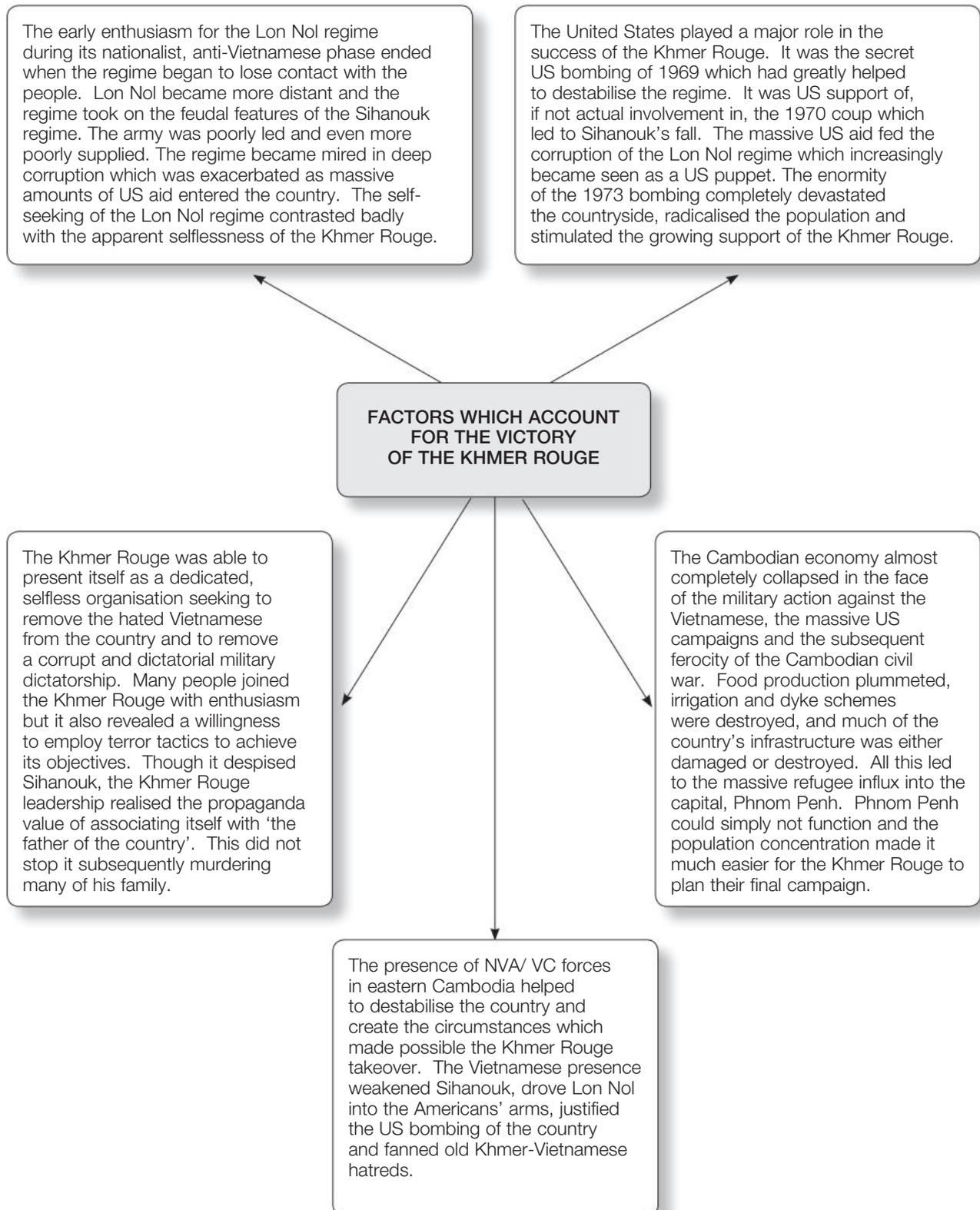
The Lon Nol regime was increasingly seen as a US puppet and responsible for the bombing. As a result, many Cambodians living in the countryside rallied to the Khmer Rouge against the Lon Nol regime (though it needs to be noted that many others were forced into Khmer Rouge ranks).

Cambodia was now in the midst of a “civil war”.

- In early 1974, the Khmer Rouge launched an attack on Phnom Penh; it failed.
- By 1974, the Khmer Rouge was dominant in the rural areas and the humanitarian situation in the capital was becoming desperate.
- In early 1975, the Khmer Rouge attacked Phnom Penh again. By early April, it had cut all communication links with the capital and began to tighten its noose around the city.
- On 1 April 1975, Lon Nol fled out of the country, reportedly with one million dollars.
- The Khmer Rouge gained control of Phnom Penh on 17 April, 1975.

Figure 18.2 summarises the factors leading to the victory of the Khmer Rouge in 1975.

Figure 18.2 Factors leading to the victory of the Khmer Rouge



**Exercise 18.1**

Answer the following questions in the spaces provided.

|    |  |  |
|----|--|--|
| 1  | How was Norodom Sihanouk removed from power?                           |  |
| 2  | Explain Sihanouk's attitude towards the Khmer Rouge?                   |  |
| 3  | Explain the Khmer Rouge's attitude towards Sihanouk.                   |  |
| 4  | What was Lon Nol's view of the NVA/ VC forces inside Cambodia?         |  |
| 5  | What was Chenla II?  |  |
| 6  | How did the United States exacerbate the situation inside Cambodia?    |  |
| 7  | What happened following the departure of foreign forces from Cambodia? |  |
| 8  | What happened to Phnom Penh between 1973 and 1975?                     |  |
| 9  | Why did the ranks of the Khmer Rouge swell?                            |  |
| 10 | What happened in April 1975?   |  |

**Exercise 18.2**

Place the following events in the correct chronological order. Write the correct order of events in the spaces provided.

|   |           |  |
|---|-----------|--|
| The fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge       | 1st event |  |
| The coup which led to the overthrow of Sihanouk | 2nd event |  |
| The end of the US bombing of Cambodia           | 3rd event |  |

|   |            |  |
|---|------------|--|
| Lon Nol's flight from Cambodia                                | 4th event  |  |
| The Chenla II operation                                       | 5th event  |  |
| The US/ ARVN invasion of eastern Cambodia                     | 6th event  |  |
| Lon Nol's launches attacks against NVA/ VC forces in Cambodia | 7th event  |  |
| The Paris Peace Accords                                       | 8th event  |  |
| Secret American bombing of Cambodia                           | 9th event  |  |
| Creation of Sihanouk's National Front of Kampuchea            | 10th event |  |

## What do the historians have to say about the Lon Nol period: 1970-75?

### 1. John Pilger: *Pol Pot – The Monster we created*

John Pilger always writes with enormous passion and commitment. His work is unpopular with American presidents and Australian prime ministers because he refuses to accept the official views of leaders and endeavours to dig deeper and find what he would term 'the truth'. The rise of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge is a point in case. Pilger argues that the fundamental reason for the rise of the Khmer Rouge was the horrific scale of the American bombing between 1969 and 1973 and the US invasion in 1970. Pilger says the US dropped more bombs on Cambodia than it did on Japan in World War II and in the process killed 750 000 Cambodian peasants. Before the bombing, the Khmer Rouge was irrelevant. However, Pilger argues that the bombing and:

*"...the invasion provided a small group of extreme ethnic nationalists with Maoist pretensions, the Khmer Rouge, with a catalyst for a revolution that had no popular base among the Cambodian people."*<sup>8</sup>

### 2. Michael Vickery: *Cambodia (Kampuchea) History, Tragedy, and Uncertain Future*

Vickery argues that the US bombing of 1973 had a significant impact on the 'thinking' of the Khmer Rouge. Its destructiveness probably prevented a successful Khmer Rouge offensive of that year. However, he suggests that a victorious Khmer Rouge in 1973

<sup>8</sup> Pilger, J, Pol Pot: The monster we created, in The Guardian Weekly, April 26, 1998

might have had a far less radical leadership than the victorious Khmer Rouge of 1975. The US bombing was blamed partly on the North Vietnamese who had signed a peace agreement with the Americans, allowing them to focus on Cambodia. However, Vickery suggests another possible consequence:

*“...The terror of the bombing also imprinted a hatred of city folk on the young survivors of the raids, who blamed Phnom Penh for having called in the American bombers.”*<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Tim Bowden: *One Crowded Hour*

As in Vietnam, Australian photo-journalist Neil Davis tried to cover events by travelling with the local troops. In late November 1974, he began filing stories from Phnom Penh which illustrated the sense of decay and desperation which was affecting the capital. In one story, he wrote about a Cambodian soldier who was being charged a month's salary for a bag of rice. In anger and frustration, the soldier unpinned a hand grenade and threw it. Davis reported that, fortunately, nobody was hurt. On another occasion, Davis provided a more amusing Phnom Penh story. He tells how some Cambodians tried to avoid the draft:

*“...many young Cambodians are willing to declare themselves insane. Forged lop-top (crazy) certificates declaring that the bearer is unbalanced or mentally disturbed, can be bought in Phnom Penh for about..\$30 – quite good value in this sellers' market...”*<sup>10</sup>

## The Killing Fields

For anyone wishing to gain an understanding of events inside Cambodia in the final years of the Lon Nol regime, and more importantly life under the Khmer Rouge (see Chapter 19), the Oscar-winning film ***The Killing Fields*** should be compulsory viewing. Directed by Roland Joffe, it stars Sam Waterson and Haing S Ngor (who won an Oscar for his role as the Cambodian journalist, Dith Pran).



<sup>9</sup> Vickery, N, Cambodia (Kampuchea): History, Tragedy, and Uncertain Future, in Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, Vol 21, Issue 2-4, 1989, p 46

<sup>10</sup> Davis, N, in The Far East Economic Review, 29 November 1974, quoted in: Bowden, T, One Crowded Hour, Collins, Sydney, 1987, p 309

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# Chapter 19:

## Democratic Kampuchea under Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge

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### Food for thought

After the holocaust of World War II, it was believed that such inhumanity to man would never be allowed to occur again. However, in recent times, events in the old Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s, and in several African locations in the early 21st century, have proven how baseless such hopes have been.

And so too with Cambodia between April 1975 and early 1979. The horrors inflicted upon the people of Cambodia, or Kampuchea, as the new Khmer Rouge rulers preferred to call their country, defy understanding. As with the Nazi atrocities during World War II, the most disturbing thing about Cambodia is that the people behind the horrors of Khmer Rouge rule do not appear as monsters. Most of the Khmer Rouge leaders were educated, intelligent men, often characterised by a moderate nature.<sup>1</sup> Pol Pot was remembered for his charm, his gentleness and his school teacher demeanour. In a piece in The Australian newspaper, Canberra historian Paul Monk is led to remind us:

*“...that massive evil is not necessarily the work of monstrous psychopaths, but of organised groups convinced of the righteousness of what they do.”<sup>2</sup>*

Pol Pot died in April 1998.<sup>3</sup> An obituary produced in the English *Guardian Weekly*, provides a stark image of the horror that Pol Pot and his comrades brought on their country:

*“...His paranoia and brutality sent it into a chasm of darkness in which as many as two million people died. Pol Pot’s enduring legacy is the thousands of mass graves that litter Cambodia...”<sup>4</sup>*

### The evacuation of Phnom Penh

Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge on 17 April 1975. At first the young fighters who entered the city – many were only fifteen – were cautiously received. The Lon Nol regime had been unpopular and peace was universally welcomed; however, the reality of Khmer Rouge discipline was soon to be felt. The first action of the new regime was to order the mass evacuation of Phnom Penh and the other cities. One reason for this action could have been the need to avoid a potential urban famine. Another excuse given at the time was the need to protect people from the American bombing which, it was claimed, was about to begin.

The evacuation was rapid and brutal.

- Over two million people were forced out of the city and allowed to take no food or belongings with them. Those who refused to obey, or who could not keep up were beaten or shot.

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1 For such a view of Pol Pot, see David Chandler’s biography of Pol Pot: Brother Number One (Westview Press, Boulder Colorado, 1999)

2 Monk, P, in The Australian, 12 June, 1993

3 A useful source of information regarding Pol Pot (and other leaders) can be found in the obituaries which followed his death in April 1998.

4 Templer, R, in The Guardian Weekly, 26 April, 1998

- No exceptions were made. The old, the lame, children, hospital patients and pregnant women were treated in the same manner as younger, healthy people.
- Up to half a million people died during the forced evacuations.

This brutal expulsion had the effect of breaking down existing social relationships, of stalling the development of any possible opposition and of cowering the population into a fearful acceptance of Khmer Rouge authority.

### **The aims of the Khmer Rouge** <sup>5</sup>

The new regime declared their first year of rule: Year Zero. The implication was clear, there was going to be a brand new start for the country. Pol Pot had spent time in China during the 1960s, during the violent upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. He was impressed with what he saw in China: the notion of continuous revolution, the attempt to sever ties with the past, the mobilisation of the young and the rejection of alien, foreign influences. It was this revolutionary flavour that the Khmer Rouge now brought to Cambodia, though arguably in an even more radicalised form.

There was never a simple document setting out a set of ideological aims for the new regime but the objectives of the Khmer Rouge can probably be summed up as follows:

1. The preservation of Khmer racial purity.
2. The preservation of Khmer cultural purity.
3. The development of a communal way of life.
4. The creation of a new Cambodian society.

There was a strong racist streak that ran through the thinking of the Khmer Rouge. Communist movements are meant to decry such ideas, but the Khmer Rouge brand of communism was steeped deeply in the land, history and traditions of Cambodia. The regime wanted to maintain the purity of the Khmer race and to this end, non-Khmer groups were targeted.

- The fanatical hatred of the Vietnamese has already been referred to. Those Vietnamese who were still in Cambodia – some families had lived there for generations – were persecuted. Many fled to Vietnam; many of those who could not make it were killed.
- “New arrivals” such as the Chinese were driven out or killed.
- Ancient minorities, such as the Muslim Cham people and the Montagnards, were also targets of Khmer Rouge repression.

Khmer cultural purity also had to be maintained. With a maniacal obsession with what was perceived as a better, purer, Khmer past, the regime sought to eliminate modern influences.

- Modern transport, modern economic institutions and even modern medicine were to be destroyed and not allowed to pollute the nation.
- Foreign influences also had to be rooted out. This included not only the obvious material influences, but also the non-material, such as foreign ideas, foreign education and even foreign languages.

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<sup>5</sup> The Khmer Rouge regime referred to their country as Kampuchea. The term Cambodia will continue to be used to avoid confusion.

There was a strong move to enforce a communal way of living.

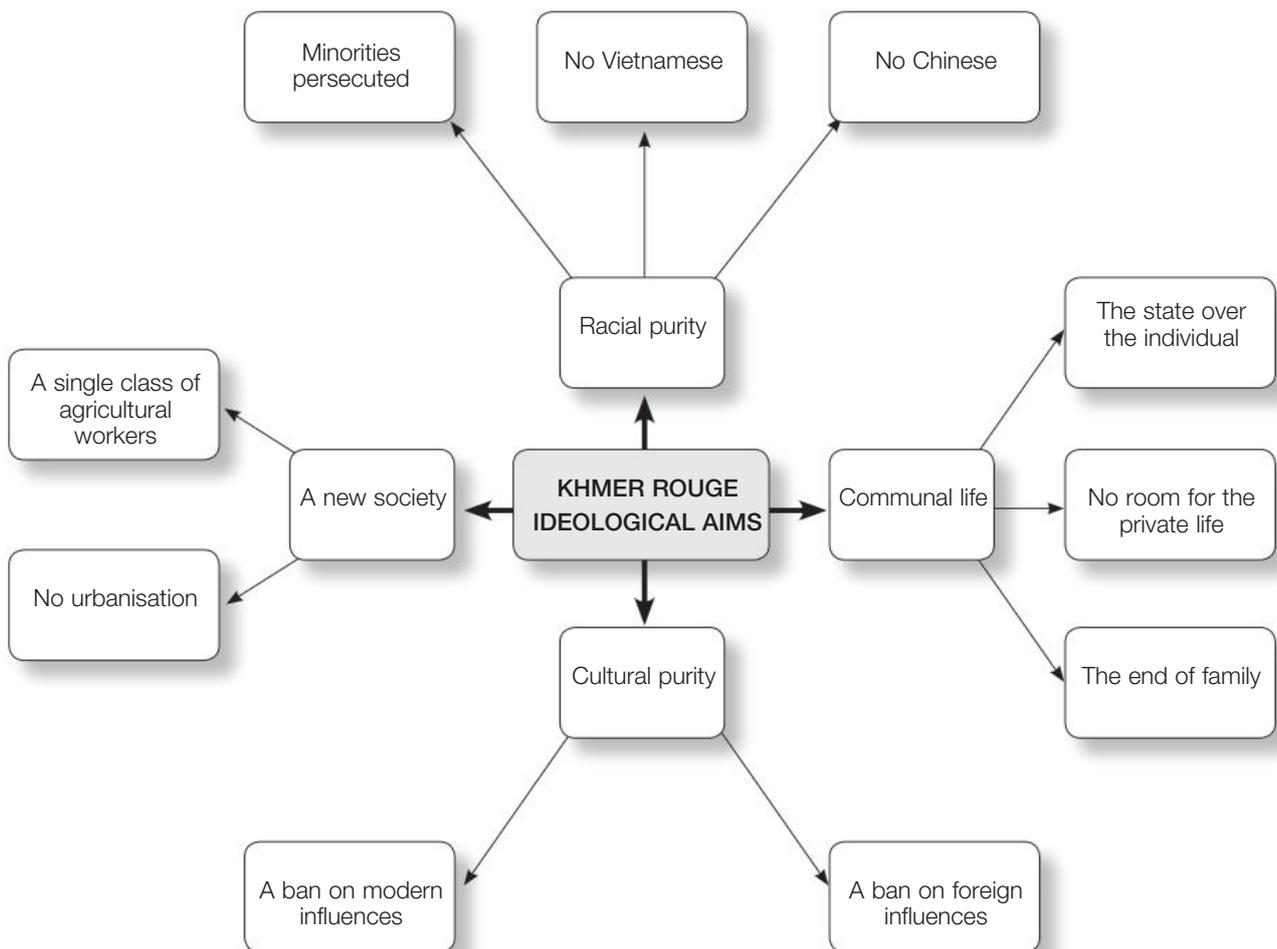
- The traditional family was decried; the first loyalty of children was to be not to their natural parents but to Angkor (the organisation);
- There was no private life and the usual life activities were carried on communally. This included eating, sleeping, getting married.
- **Ankor** was everything – it was the state not the individual that mattered.

All these policies would create, so the Khmer Rouge hoped, a new society.

- This would be an agricultural society, like the times of old. A society organised as a system of communes would achieve a harmonious pure existence.
- There was no room for urban communities; the evacuations were intended to be permanent.

The aims of the Khmer Rouge are summarised in Figure 18.1

**Figure 18.1 A summary of the aims of the Khmer Rouge**



### Year Zero in practice

The Australian journalist, John Pilger, was one of the first westerners to go into Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge had been overthrown. He described that when he walked through the streets of Phnom Penh he came across pyramids of cars, ambulances, typewriters, washing machines, refrigerators, generators and hair dryers, overgrown by the jungle. This was

symptomatic of what the Khmer Rouge sought to do – eradicate the modern world and foreign influence from the country.

Technology was rejected. Anything which was modern, and particularly foreign, was to be destroyed, or discarded and allowed to rot. All evidence of western technology and behaviour were forbidden. Pilger's observations touched only the surface.

- Modern, western medicine was banned. Antibiotics were flushed away, hospitals left to decay, incubators destroyed. Only natural remedies native to Cambodia were now allowed.
  - Anyone who owned up to being a doctor risked death as a class traitor who had been tainted by foreign/ modern ideas.
  - Sickness was viewed as idleness; even pregnancy was seen a means of evading work.
- Electricity, the use of refrigeration, generator power and machinery were banned. The back-breaking work to which the people were subject on the communes was to be done by hand or the most primitive equipment.

Western economic life was also a target. In the Khmer Rouge world, there were to be no banks, no currency, and no trade. Many stone buildings were destroyed, especially schools. The Phnom Penh national library became a pig sty.

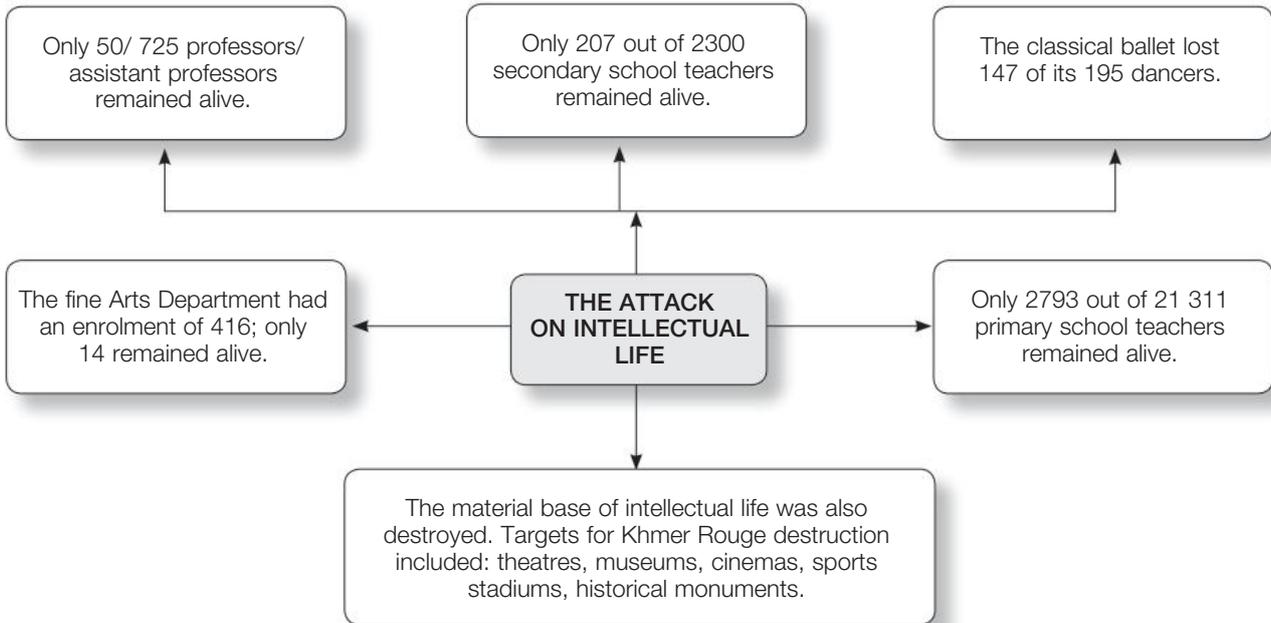
- This did not stop the Khmer Rouge using modern weapons.
- It also did not stop them from accepting significant amounts of economic and military aid from China.

To be an intellectual in Year Zero was to risk death. Intellectuals, the educated, those who could speak French or English, were all targeted because they had been polluted by foreign influences.

- Only the Cambodian peasant was worthy of a place in the new Khmer Rouge world.
- Child police agents would check the hands of commune workers. Soft hands were evidence of an urban, intellectual lifestyle.
- Wearing glasses invited punishment.
- The wearing of western fashion instead of the acceptable black peasant garb was totally unacceptable.
- In order to survive, it was necessary to hide one's past, keep one's head down, keep quiet and never draw attention to oneself.

The tribunals of the 1980s which were set up by the new regime to examine the impact of the Khmer Rouge suggested that the intellectual life of the country had been decimated. Figure 19.2 gives some idea of this impact. (The new regime clearly had an interest to blacken the name of the Khmer Rouge, but this was not a difficult task).

Figure 19.2 Impact of the Khmer Rouge on Cambodian intellectual life



Following the mass evacuations of the towns and cities, Cambodians found themselves forced to live the commune lifestyle.

- Privacy disappeared, meals were eaten communally.
- Work was all that mattered, anything up to 16 hours a day for which the most meagre rations would be the reward.
- Family life and affection were frowned upon.
- Everyone was under constant surveillance and could be questioned and punished for the slightest indiscretion, real or imagined.
- Evenings were spent being given political instruction and singing patriotic songs.

Religion was a particular target of the Khmer Rouge. Religion was foreign, ignorant and superstitious. It promoted a loyalty beyond Ankor and so could not be tolerated.

- Up to 90% of the Cambodian population was Buddhist. The Khmer Rouge sought to destroy all remnants of Buddhism. Almost 3000 pagodas were destroyed. Very few of Cambodia's 82 000 monks survived the regime.
- The regime sought to destroy any evidence of Islam. The 114 mosques of the Cham people were destroyed.

*"...The Cham were almost fully exterminated. The district of Kompong Xiem, Kompong Cham province, had five hamlets with a total Muslim population of about 20 000, but not a single inhabitant survived. Koong Neas district had seven hamlets with about 20 000 Muslim inhabitants too, of whom only four survived."*<sup>6</sup>

- Similar treatment was handed out to the many ethnic minorities who lived in Cambodia's border regions. All signs of ethnic individuality – dress, language, customs, habits, beliefs – were ruthlessly abolished.

<sup>6</sup> Shubin, V, Kampuchea: Destruction of Millions, in Genocide, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1985, p 154

Cambodia during the time of Khmer Rouge rule became known as “The Killing Fields”. The eponymous film of 1984 should be compulsory viewing for all students seeking to gain an understanding of the impact of US bombing, how the Khmer Rouge gained power and to get some idea of what communal life was like in the new Cambodia. However, the term “Killing Fields” has a deeper relevance than the name of a Hollywood film. Apart from all the horrors so far enumerated, there is also the issue of the loss of life to consider. In 1975, Cambodia’s population was approximately eight million.

There will never be a 100% accurate figure of the total loss of life during the time of the Khmer Rouge. Many were executed, whole groups were massacred; many died following torture in Tuol Sleng, the location of the so-called interrogation centre S-21 in Phnom Penh. Many others died of mistreatment, starvation and disease. The following estimates have been offered.

- In his book *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, Ben Kiernan suggest a figure of 1.67 million people died – 21% of the population.
- The new Cambodian government in 1982 suggested 3 million.
- The Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes in Phnom Penh offers a figure of between 1.7 to 2.2 million.

**Exercise 19.1**

Circle the correct response – THIS IS TRUE/ THIS FALSE – to each statement in the left-hand column.

|  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| 1. The Khmer Rouge had a deep-seated belief in the maintenance of Khmer racial purity.               | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 2. The evacuation of Phnom Penh was a temporary expedient to save the people from a possible famine. | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 3. Minority groups within Cambodia were respected by the Khmer Rouge and their culture treasured.    | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 4. The maintenance of freedom of religion was a priority for the Khmer Rouge regime.                 | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 5. Relations between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam were strained from the start of Khmer Rouge rule.   | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 6. China supported the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978.                             | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 7. The Khmer Rouge was riven with rivalry and dissension.  | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 8. Loss of life under the Khmer Rouge is estimated to be about 25% of the population.                | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 9. Freedom of thought and emotion were not permitted under the Khmer Rouge.                          | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |
| 10. Under the Khmer Rouge the individual was always more important than the state.                   | THIS IS TRUE/ THIS IS FALSE |

## Conflict within the Khmer Rouge

It would be wrong to think of the Khmer Rouge as a united body free of internal dissension. Totalitarian regimes have a habit of ‘purging’ unreliable elements and of seeking out often non-existent traitors. Stalin’s Russia in the 1930s is the classic example; the same practice occurred within the Khmer Rouge.

The party actually kept its identity secret from the people until well into its period of rule. It was not common knowledge that Pol Pot was leader. In 1976, he ‘resigned’ for health reasons only to reappear as leader shortly after. It was also in 1976 that the first major purge of the party occurred. It occurred over a minor issue – disagreement on whether to consider 1951 or 1960 as the date of the party’s founding. To Pol Pot any disagreement over policy was the equivalent of treason; many high-ranking party members were executed in this first purge.

Pol Pot talked of ‘microbes within the party’ which had to be sought out and destroyed. By the end of 1978, thousands of mostly loyal party members ended up in Tuol Sleng accused of treachery. Pol Pot’s paranoia knew few limits.

## Khmer Rouge Foreign Policy

Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge was an isolated country. Contact with the rest of the world was forbidden, all in the cause of maintaining Khmer purity. However, this exclusion did not apply to Communist China. Pol Pot and other leaders held China in high regard. It was China’s Cultural Revolution of the 1960s which had done much to inspire Pol Pot’s fanatical vision for Cambodia. Pol Pot visited Mao Zedong in Beijing in June 1975 and the latter is said to have spoken admiringly of the Khmer Rouge’s achievements:

*“...We have won a splendid success – to do away with classes by a single stroke.”*

Close links with China were valuable for the Khmer Rouge who remained isolated from the rest of the world. However, China was not acting simply out of altruism or strong ideological bonds. For China, close links with the Khmer Rouge was all part of its geopolitical strategy.

- Since 1960, China had been in ideological, and occasionally military conflict, with the Soviet Union. Thus, any friend of the Soviet Union will become an enemy of China. Vietnam’s close post-1975 links with the Soviet Union made it an enemy of China, despite their close links during the Vietnam War.
- Thus, any enemy of Vietnam was China’s friend. The Khmer Rouge had long resented the patronising attitude of North Vietnam towards its party and conflict between Cambodia and Vietnam had become a reality as early as mid-1975. It made sense to China to therefore back the Khmer Rouge.
- Consequently, for reasons of ideology and geopolitics, China and the Khmer Rouge drew very close.

Relations between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam were strained right from the start. The inter party tensions were mentioned above and the traditional hatreds between Cambodians and Vietnamese have already been mentioned several times. Khmer Rouge forces were in armed conflict with Vietnam as early as April 1975 over ownership of several small islands in the Gulf of Siam.

Through 1976, relations remained 'correct'. Pol Pot understood his relative weakness compared to Vietnam, and after thirty years of warfare Vietnam did not wish to become embroiled in another conflict. However, border clashes began to develop, often prompted by ill-disciplined troops and not ordered by Hanoi or Pol Pot. However, each clash furthered distrust between the two sides.

Pol Pot harboured dreams of a greater Cambodia. There were Khmer minorities living in southern Vietnam and he expected them to rise and demand union with Cambodia. Poorly armed, vastly outnumbered and poorly organised, no such anti-Vietnamese rebellion was going to occur. In Pol Pot's crazed view of things, the Khmer minorities inside Vietnam were guilty of treason. When his forces crossed into Vietnam on border raid, the Khmer people were treated mercilessly.

Relations between Cambodia and Vietnam deteriorated throughout 1978.

- Cross-border raids by both sides continued. On one occasion, Vietnam took thousands of Cambodian villagers hostage and they joined the many Cambodians who had fled the Khmer Rouge.
  - Many of these were groomed as a possible government in exile and given military training.
  - One of these exiles was Hun Sen who would eventually become leader of a post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.
- Vietnam signed a 25 Year Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union and in December 1978 announced that a Kampuchean Front for National Salvation had been set up to remove the Khmer Rouge regime.
- The new Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, called Vietnam 'the hooligans of the east'.

On Xmas Day 1978, 100 000 Vietnamese invaded north eastern Cambodia. Most Khmer Rouge troops were in the east and south west of the country and the Vietnamese faced little opposition. The original Vietnamese aim had been to occupy the north east but as opposition was so limited, they moved on Phnom Penh. Phnom Penh contained about 50 000 bureaucrats and workers; it was abandoned on 7 January 1979. Pol Pot and other Khmer Rouge fled to the north west. It was the end of Khmer Rouge rule in Cambodia.

Most people welcomed the Vietnamese invasion and the end of Pol Pot. Chandler sums up the attitude of many Cambodians when he says:

*"...For them, what had happened in the 1970s made as little sense as an earthquake, a prairie fire, or a typhoon..."*<sup>7</sup>

In early 1979, a brief war flared up between China and Vietnam. In support of its Khmer Rouge ally, China invaded northern Vietnam. The conflict lasted about six weeks and at the time there were serious fears that it might escalate. China eventually withdrew, arguing that it had 'taught Vietnam a lesson'.

## Epilogue

The misery of the Cambodian people was not over. For the next twelve years a Third Indochina War would be fought. The pro-Vietnamese Heng Samrin/ Hun Sen regime placed in power after the Vietnamese invasion had to fight for its existence against a Resistance Coalition comprising the forces of the Khmer Rouge, Sihanouk and Son San. Cold War politics now

<sup>7</sup> Chandler, D, A History of Cambodia, Westview Press, Boulder Colorado, 1992, p 225

re-entered the story. The Hun Sen regime was backed by Vietnam and the Soviet Union. As a result, the western powers backed the other side. After all the horrors of 1975-78, the United States, Britain and Australia were now in common cause with the Khmer Rouge! The war came to an end in 1991. A UN brokered peace deal<sup>8</sup> was put in place and Cambodia has steadily tried to return to normality. Several Khmer Rouge leaders have been captured and tried, many have escaped. Pol Pot died in 1998. Today Cambodia is led by Hun Sen, the country remains desperately poor and the mass of unexploded mines which litter the countryside is testament to the long years of warfare that outside powers had imposed upon it.

In 2017, the last Khmer Rouge figures were tried. These included Nuon Chea, the party ideologue, sometimes known as Brother No 2 and Khieu Samphan, the regime’s nominal head of state. Hun Sen has been in power for over thirty years. His hold on power is total and no democratic opposition is tolerated.

**Exercise 19.2**

Place the following events in the correct chronological order. Write your answers in the appropriate space on the right.

|   |            |  |
|---|------------|--|
| The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia                                   | 1st event  |  |
| The Khmer Rouge seize power   | 2nd event  |  |
| Death of Pol Pot  | 3rd event  |  |
| The 1976 purging within the Khmer Rouge                               | 4th event  |  |
| 25 Year Friendship Treaty signed between Vietnam and the Soviet Union | 5th event  |  |
| Establishment of the Heng Samrin regime in Cambodia                   | 6th event  |  |
| The evacuation of Phnom Penh  | 7th event  |  |
| End of the Third Indochina War  | 8th event  |  |
| War between China and Vietnam   | 9th event  |  |
| China’s Cultural Revolution   | 10th event |  |

<sup>8</sup> Australia’s Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans, was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for his work on the Cambodian Peace Plan.

## What do the historians have to say about the nature, aims and methods of Pol Pot?

### 1. Valentin Shubin: *Kampuchea – Destruction of Millions*

Shubin was a Soviet writer who had been present at trials of former Khmer Rouge figures held in the early 1980s. Shubin writes in a polemical manner, not surprising as his publisher, Progress Press, was part of Soviet propaganda. However, much of what Shubin has to say has been corroborated by western writers. He highlights the extremities of life on the communes. He enumerates the suffering of the people, including the work load, lack of food and constant surveillance. However, he argues that it was not only the people's actions which were constantly watched.

*“...Ruthless police control was enforced on the thoughts and feelings of the people. They were not allowed to think, to suffer, to laugh, to cry. Despair, compassion, request were all regarded as manifestation of dissatisfaction and opposition. The agents registered even the expression of the face, and any sadness or indignation could well be the reason for the given person to be sent to death.”*<sup>9</sup>

### 2. David Chandler: *Brother Number One*

Chandler endeavours to provide some meaning to what happened in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. At one level he suggests it could be seen as a brave, idealistic attempt to create a new utopia free of the capitalist world. On another level it could be seen as the result of a massive misreading of Cambodia's past, the country's freedom of manoeuvre and the interests of the peasants, for whom everything was allegedly being done. At a third level Chandler suggests Pol Pot and other Khmer Rouge leaders:

*“...displayed a thirst for power and an unlimited capacity for distrust. Believing himself surrounded by enemies, Pol Pot approved the torture and execution...(of thousands). Most of those put to death were loyal members of the party...”*<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Ben Kiernan: *The Cambodian Genocide: Issues and Responses*

Kiernan comments on the historical debate about the structure and intellectual origins of the Khmer Rouge regime. Kiernan shows that some writers see the regime as decentralised and riddled with factional and regional division. However, he disagrees with this view. To Kiernan 'Pol Potism' was “not a centrifugal peasant ideology but a centralising one'. It was able to conscript a national labour and even communalised the people's meals. The root of Pol Pot's thinking was indeed Khmer racist chauvinism but it also contained elements of Mao's 'Great Leap Forward', Stalinism and Third World nationalism. The Khmer roots were strong but he concludes:

*“...it was fuelled by strategies and tactics adopted from unacknowledged revolutionary models in other countries.”*<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Shubin, V, *Kampuchea: Destruction of Millions*, in *Genocide*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1985, p 152

<sup>10</sup> Chandler, D, *Brother Number One*, Westview Press, Boulder Colorado, 1999, p 3

<sup>11</sup> Kiernan, B, *The Cambodian Genocide: Issues and Responses*, in *Genocide: Conceptual and Historical Dimensions*, (ed Andreopoulos, G J), University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1994, p 191

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## Chapter 20:

# Impact of the conflict on Laos

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### Background

Laos is a small land-locked country, squeezed in between its more powerful neighbours, Vietnam to the east, and Thailand to the west. It also shares a small border with China to the north, Myanmar in the north west and Cambodia to the south. Even before the arrival of the French, life for Laotian peasants had always been a struggle against famine and the monsoon. As with Vietnam, society was feudal in structure though the Sino-Confucian influence was less marked in Laos than in Vietnam. The predominant religion was Buddhism though Hinduism was also prevalent. The majority Lao people shared their land with various minority populations in the more isolated, mountainous parts of the country.

- Since the 14th century, the Lao people had no clear identity as a nation, no clear territorial markers or political independence.
  - Laos was never a centre of power as Vietnam or Thailand were.
  - The weak Lao kingdom of Lan Xang reached its zenith in the fifteenth century.
  - In 1563, its capital moved from Luang Prabang to Vientiane.
- Throughout the 18th century, internal division made Laos prey to Thailand, to whom it lost territory in the west.
- During the 19th century, Laos suffered raids from Chinese plunderers in the north.
- The French takeover of Indochina began in 1858 with the capture of Tourane.
  - French control of Indochina was complete by 1893, when Laos itself became a protectorate.
  - The French fought the Thais for influence in the country and put down the occasional Lao rebellion.
  - However, French rule in Laos was far less brutal than it was in Vietnam. 'Benign indifference' best sums up the nature of French rule in Laos.

### Political developments in Laos from 1945

Following the surrender of the Japanese in 1945, a Lao Issara (Free Lao) was declared. The French were willing to negotiate with it, and following their re-occupation of the country in April 1946, the French put in place the Lao king as head of state. In the years that followed, the pro-Communist Pathet Lao allied themselves with the Vietminh in the struggle against the French. It fought the French in north-western Vietnam and eastern Laos.

- Laos gained its independence from France in October 1953.
- The 1954 Geneva Accords allowed for a coalition between the Royal Lao government of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and the Communist Pathet Lao under Prince Souphanouvong. The monarchy stayed in place.
- In 1954, the Pathet Lao controlled two Lao provinces in the north and north west of the country.

- In 1957, the Accords provided for armed forces of the Pathet Lao being absorbed into the Royal Lao army. However, disagreements between the two developed.
- The Pathet Lao made gains in the 1958 elections and the coalition collapsed.
- In May 1959, Prince Souphanouvong was arrested and so Pathet Lao forces retreated to their northern strongholds. Political instability in the country continued.
- In August 1960 there was a military coup led by Captain Kong Le. This regime did not last long and Souvanna Phouma again found himself as Prime Minister.

Subsequent years would see intermittent conflict between royalist and Pathet Lao forces. However, by now, Laos had become an international issue.

### Laos becomes an international issue

Laos began to feature as a minor part of the wider Cold War.

- The Soviet Union and North Vietnam were providing the Pathet Lao with arms and supplies;
- the US was backing the royal forces. The US feared Chinese interest in Laos and began to pour money into the country.

When President Eisenhower held his briefing with the new US President, John Kennedy, their conversation did not mention Vietnam. It was all about Laos. Laos was seen as a potential “falling domino”. In 1960, the world’s attention began to focus on the communist versus anti-communist struggle in Laos. The historian Max Hastings makes the point that at the time, the New York Times gave three times as much space to stories about Laos as it did to stories about Vietnam. By now, there were violent conflicts between the various Lao factions on the streets of Vientiane. The Americans believed that a communist takeover could soon be a reality.

The CIA officer, Bill Lair, persuaded Hmong chieftain Vang Pao to begin a guerrilla campaign against the communists in return for arms and cash. In 1960, the US provided \$5 million; by 1962 the figure had risen to \$11 million and by the end of the 1960s it had risen to over \$500 million. There were 700 CIA personnel in Laos, some involved in military operations, some merely moving supplies.

- US military leaders were keen to commit troops but Kennedy preferred to stick with covert operations.
- In this, Kennedy was supported by his Deputy Special Assistant for National Security, Walt Rostow. He urged Kennedy to focus on Vietnam and provide support to Diem.

An international conference was called in an attempt to neutralise Laos. In July 1962, new Geneva Accords were signed by the US, the Soviet Union, China, North and South Vietnam calling for the neutralisation of Laos. This agreement would never prove to be effective. In 1964, there was a flare-up in fighting inside Laos and so France, the Soviet Union, India and Cambodia reconvened the 1962 Geneva Conference. The US was not keen on participation as it feared that the neutralisation of Vietnam might become a possible issue.

Max Hastings quotes Daniel Ellsberg <sup>1</sup>, who then was working for US Secretary of Defence McNamara. Ellsberg identified 1964 as *“the last time in which a loyal bureaucrat could*

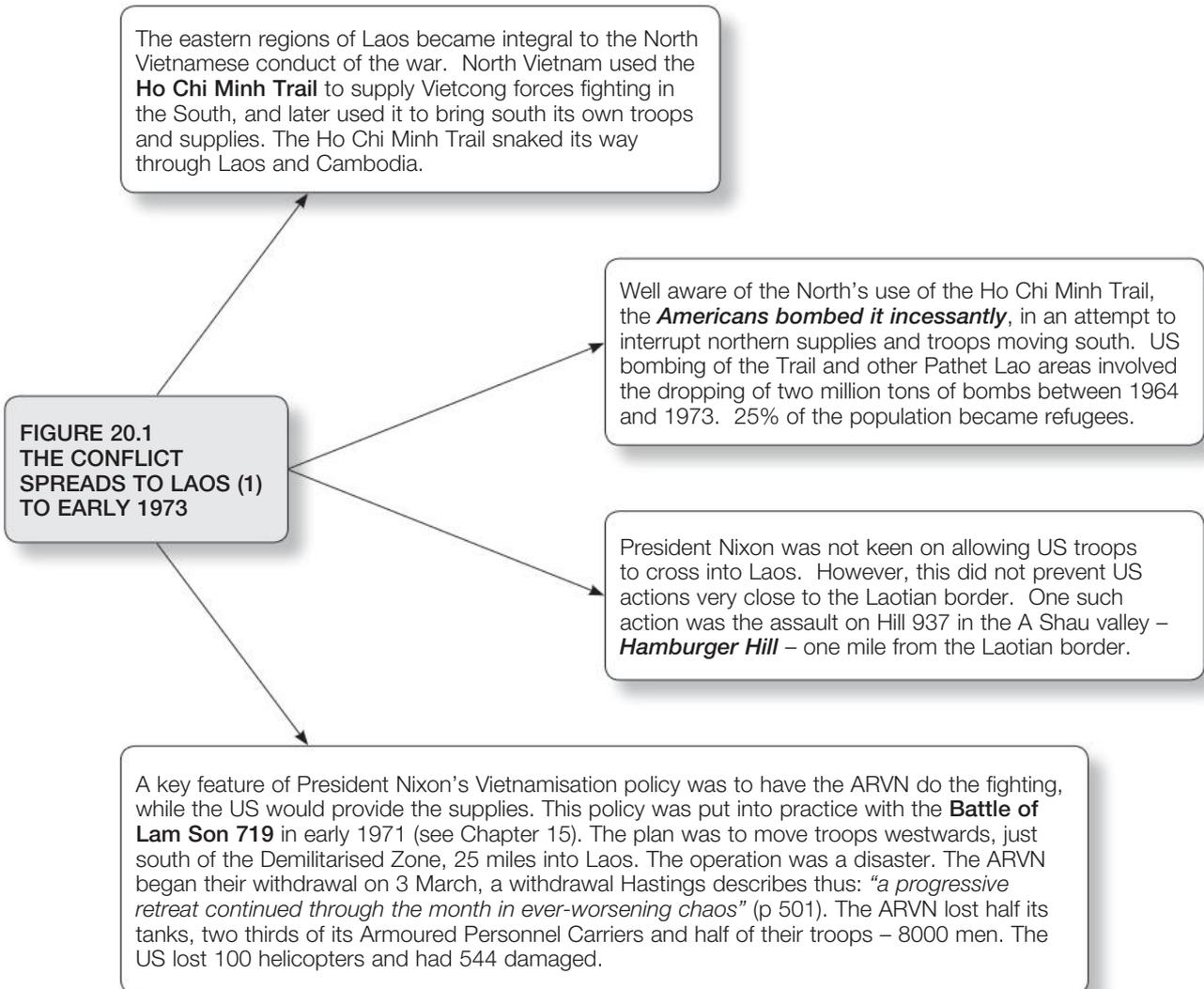
<sup>1</sup> This is the same Daniel Ellsberg who would be responsible for the Pentagon Papers release in 1971.

*conceive of it being appropriate for the US just to cut its losses.”<sup>2</sup> By mid-1965 it was too late; Johnson had won the 1964 election and the US was too embroiled in Vietnam to get out.*

### Laos and the wider conflict (1): To early 1973

By the mid-1960s, Indochina was all about Vietnam. However, this did not mean that Laos would be able to isolate itself from the wider war. Figure 20.1 summarises how the wider conflict impacted on Laos.

Figure 20.1 The conflict spreads to Laos (1) to early 1973



### Laos and the wider conflict (2): From early 1973

Following the Paris Peace Accords of January 1973, the NVA had over 100 000 troops along South Vietnam’s border with Laos and Cambodia, ready for an eventual attack. Meanwhile, inside Laos, an agreement on the ‘Restoration of Peace and Reconciliation’ in Laos was signed on 21 February between the Pathet Lao and the Royal government. An attempt was being made to reinstitute the 1962 Accords and the creation of a coalition government, a ‘Provisional Government of National Union’ (PGNU). Souvanna Phouma became Prime Minister and Prince

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in: Hastings, M, Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975, William Collins, London, p 178

Souphanouvong was the Chairman of the National Political Consultative Council (NPCC). The PGNU gradually broke down. The fall of Phnom Penh in April 1975 stimulated the Pathet Lao to make a move for sole power. They captured strategic locations and by August controlled Vientiane. In November, King Savang Jatthana abdicated and Souvanna Phouma resigned. On 2 December 1975, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic was established. Souphanouvong became President while Kaysone Phomvihane became Prime Minister.

**Exercise 20.1**

Place the events listed on the left in the correct chronological order.

|  |            |  |
|--|------------|--|
| Establishment of Pathet Lao government   | 1st event  |  |
| \$11 million of US aid given to Laos     | 2nd event  |  |
| Pathet Lao captures Vientiane            | 3rd event  |  |
| Battle of Lam Son 719                    | 4th event  |  |
| Hamburger Hill action                    | 5th event  |  |
| French protectorate over Laos            | 6th event  |  |
| Military coup led by Kong Le             | 7th event  |  |
| Paris Peace Accords                      | 8th event  |  |
| Fall of Phnom Penh                       | 9th event  |  |
| Laos gained its independence from France | 10th event |  |

## What do the historians have to say about the Impact of the conflict on Laos?

### Martin Stuart-Fox: Laos

Stuart-Fox makes the point that outside influence decided Laos' fate. The Laotian communists gained their inspiration and resources from the North Vietnamese. The resistance to their pursuit of power was sustained firstly by the French, then the Americans. The eventual seizure of power by the Pathet Lao was the result of the Paris Peace Accords, the US withdrawal plus Watergate. Laos did not experience the horrors that were to engulf Cambodia and to a much lesser extent Vietnam. He puts this down to the 'brotherly Lao spirit'.

*"...the destiny of Laos had been set by events in other states. From its origins.. (to)..the American decision to cease further participation (in the Indochina conflict).."*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart-Fox, M, Laos, Frances Pinter, London, 1986, p 34



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## ESSAYS 3:

# Responding to HSC questions on the spread of the conflict to Cambodia

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The purpose of this section is to provide some ideas for the type of questions which might be asked on the fourth section of the syllabus: Spread of the conflict to Cambodia and Laos. These outlines are not presented as the 'be all and end all' responses to these questions. To provide a sense of reality to this section, what follows is a 'first draft response' to each question, ie what were the first ideas that came into the author's head as he thought about each question?

### *Essay*

*Assess the impact on Cambodia of the Khmer Rouge's attempt to implement its aims.*

This seemingly straight forward question contains the usual traps for the unwary HSC student. The sight of the term 'Khmer Rouge' can lead to all sorts of misinterpretations of this question.

- The major error would be to simply jump straight in and give a detailed account of what the Khmer Rouge did.
  - Such a response might give an account of the policies of Khmer Rouge rule from the evacuation of the towns and cities in 1975 to the enforced commune lifestyle to the horrors of Tuol Sleng.
  - This kind of narrative/ descriptive response would probably inadvertently reach into a 'B' grade band, as any description of what the Khmer Rouge did is bound to refer to the impact it had on the people.
  - However, the lack of sophistication of such a response would preclude it any chance of moving into the 'A' band.
- To be avoided is the emotional response. Horrific though these events were, students are producing an examination response and so emotional hyperbole is to be avoided.
- There is also the danger that some students may waste time by providing biographical data regarding Pol Pot – not required.
- Equally, there is the danger students might want to tell the history of the Khmer Rouge – again, this is to be avoided, unless it is specifically explaining Khmer Rouge aims.
- This is not a question about the rise to power of the Khmer Rouge, and so a lengthy focus on the Lon Nol period is not required.

This question is actually quite complex.

- The use of the term 'assess' means that students are meant to provide a judgment and not simply narrate/ describe.
- The inclusion of the term 'aims' means that it is not enough to simply explain what the Khmer Rouge did and how this affected the country. It is necessary to explain 'why' they were doing this.

- Thus, the actions of the Khmer Rouge must be linked to their aims as well as their impact on the country.

Does this question require information regarding the internal power struggles, foreign policy and the subsequent invasion of the country by Vietnam in December 1978? If a student can argue that the Khmer Rouge's attempt to implement its aims led to intra-party struggles and the antagonism of Vietnam, the answer is yes.

A possible response might go something like this:

On gaining power, the Khmer Rouge sought to create a brand-new society in Cambodia with strong links to a mythical Khmer past. This new society would be based on Khmer racial purity, Khmer cultural purity, be agriculturally based and enforce a communal way of living. The achievement of these aims would involve the destruction of anything modern, foreign or urban. The Khmer Rouge's attempt to implement these aims would lead to death on a massive scale and the creation of a totalitarian society based on fear and paranoia. The Khmer Rouge's paranoia and radicalism would lead to it tearing itself apart and antagonising its Vietnamese neighbour.

- It is necessary to introduce the aims – do this in a fairly general way, without providing a lot of detail.
- Then isolate each aim, show what it hoped to do and then provide factual detail to indicate how each aim was achieved and what this meant for the people and country of Cambodia.
  - eg. The pursuit of Khmer cultural purity could lead to a discussion of the Khmer Rouge's attitudes to things modern, foreign and urban – explain why.
  - Show how these attitudes were put into action – provide detail of the destructiveness of the regime.
  - Specify the impact on the people – eg health standards, the cultural destruction, the development of fear.
- The same method can be followed for examining other aims, eg the pursuit of Khmer racial purity.
  - A link can perhaps be made to foreign policy and the Khmer Rouge's pursuit of a strongly antagonistic line towards the Vietnamese.
  - Ultimately this would lead to the Vietnamese invasion and another twelve years of war.
- The fanaticism of the regime's pursuit of its radical ideology led to rifts within the Khmer Rouge and led to intra party strife.
  - The victims of Khmer Rouge violence were not only innocent peasants and intellectuals but also 'innocent' cadres.

Conclusion: the pursuit of the Khmer Rouge's radical vision of a new, pure Khmer society led to death and destruction on a massive scale. It sowed the seeds of its own destruction by tearing the party apart and bringing about the Vietnamese invasion.

An alternative approach to this question could be to structure in a more thematic way. When considering the impact on Cambodia, separate the economic, social, cultural, political and foreign policy impact of the Khmer Rouge's attempts to implement its aims.

The same rules would apply:

- Avoid being overly descriptive/ narrative
- Be sure to encompass aims/ implementation and impact within the answer.

Historiographical issues have been deliberately left out of this section. It is important for students to develop their own ideas and support those ideas with the historical evidence. If it is appropriate, then the views of specific historians can be included to back up the student's own argument. However, do not name-drop for the sake of it. Chandler/ Kiernan/ Pilger etc are only of value when they back up the student.



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# Glossary

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|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| abdicated             | gave up the throne  |
| ankor                 | the 'organisation', term used to indicate the Khmer Rouge governing authority           |
| ARVN                  | Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South)   |
| Bay of Pigs           | site of a CIA-backed invasion of Cuba to overthrow Fidel Castro                         |
| Black Panthers        | radical, sometimes violent black civil rights group of the 1960s                        |
| cadres                | party members   |
| CIA                   | Central Intelligence Agency   |
| Confucianism          | Chinese system of thought which shows how one should lead one's life                    |
| containment           | American post-war policy of trying to stop the spread of communism                      |
| conventional warfare  | style of warfare involving large armies facing each other in combat                     |
| COSVN                 | Central Office for South Vietnam  |
| counterinsurgency     | strategy for fighting against guerrilla fighters  |
| coup                  | an overthrow of a government, possibly violent  |
| covert-action         | secret activity   |
| demilitarised zone    | an area in which no military presence is allowed  |
| DESOTO                | naval electronic intelligence patrols   |
| détente               | improving relations between two former enemies  |
| Dien Bien Phu         | site of major French defeat at the hands of the Vietminh in May 1954                    |
| Domino Theory         | idea that if South Vietnam falls to communism, other South East Asian states will fall, |
| one after the other   |   |
| doves                 | US officials in favour of de-escalation and negotiations in the Vietnam War             |
| DRVN                  | Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North)  |
| filial piety          | respect shown by a person to one's better or elder                                      |
| fragging              | murder of US officers by lower rank US soldiers   |
| Gestapo               | Nazi secret police  |
| GI                    | "general issue", the ordinary US soldier  |
| Great Society         | President Johnson's program for welfare and civil rights reforms                        |
| guerilla warfare      | hit and run, ambush, small scale style of fighting                                      |
| hawks                 | US officials in favour of escalation and against negotiations in the Vietnam War        |
| Ho Chi Minh Trail     | North Vietnam's supply route to the South which often went into Laos and Cambodia       |
| holocaust             | Nazi extermination of Jews and other minorities in World War II                         |
| in absentia           | in the absence of   |
| Kampuchea             | Khmer name for Cambodia   |
| Lam Son 719           | Disastrous ARVN campaign early 1971   |
| Lao Dong              | Vietnam Workers Party (North)   |
| largesse              | willingness to give gifts, especially in a condescending manner                         |
| mandarins             | leading government and bureaucratic officials   |
| mandate of heaven     | the idea that a ruler holds power because he has the favour of the gods                 |
| McCarthyism           | practice in 1950s America led by Senator McCarthy to seek out suspected communists      |
| mission civilisatrice | French notion of bringing civilisation to its colonial territories                      |

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| moratorium      | practice in which people stop work to go out and protest against the Vietnam War       |
| My Lai          | site of US massacre of South Vietnam villagers   |
| nationalisation | government takeover of private enterprise  |
| nepotism        | the favouring of friends and family  |
| New Frontier    | President Kennedy's program of social reform   |
| NLF             | National Liberation Front  |
| NVA             | Army of North Vietnam  |
| Pathet Lao      | Laotian Communists who took power in December 1975                                     |
| POW             | prisoner of war  |
| punji stakes    | sharpened bamboo stakes placed in pits as a booby trap                                 |
| R and R         | rest and recreation  |
| reactionary     | extremely conservative, opposed to any change at all                                   |
| RVN             | Republic of Vietnam (South)  |
| self-immolation | setting oneself alight   |
| sharecropping   | practice of farming in which a farmer has to pay a percentage of the crop as a tax     |
| SOG             | Studies and Observation Groups engaged in intelligence gathering                       |
| sputnik         | Soviet satellite launched in 1957  |
| Tet Offensive   | major communist offensive of January/ February 1968                                    |
| totalitarianism | system of government in which the state has total control over all aspects of life and |
| society         |  |
| utopia          | an idealised world, a paradise   |
| VC              | Vietcong   |
| Vietcong        | opponents of the South Vietnam regime (see NLF)  |
| Watergate       | scandal involving President Nixon which led to his resignation                         |
| WHAM            | winning hearts and minds   |
| zeitgeist       | spirit of the age  |

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# Dramatis Personae

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|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| Abrahms, General      | US Commander in Vietnam, 1968-1972  |
| Bao Dai               | (French puppet) Emperor of Vietnam 1926-55  |
| Cabot Lodge, Henry    | US Ambassador to South Vietnam  |
| Cronkite, Walter      | respected US newsreader   |
| Davis, Neil           | Australian photo-journalist   |
| Deng Xiaoping         | leader of China in the late 1970s   |
| Dulles, John Foster   | US Secretary of State, 1953-59  |
| Eisenhower, Dwight    | US President, 1953-61   |
| Ellsberg, Daniel      | Journalist who leaked the Pentagon Papers   |
| Ford, Gerald          | US President, August 1974-January 1977  |
| Gia Long              | Emperor of Vietnam 1802-20  |
| Giap, Vo Nguyen       | Vietminh commander at Dien Bien Phu   |
| Goldwater, Barry      | Republican presidential candidate in 1964   |
| Hayden, Tom           | anti-war protester  |
| Heng Samrin           | nominal head of the post Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia                                   |
| Ho Chi Minh           | President of North Vietnam, 1954-69   |
| Hun Sen               | current (2008) leader of Cambodia   |
| Kennedy, John         | US President, January 1961-November 1963  |
| Kennedy, Robert       | Democratic presidential aspirant in 1968, assassinated June 1968                          |
| Khieu Samphan         | leading Khmer Rouge figure  |
| Kissinger, Henry      | key figure in Nixon administration, National Security Advisor                             |
| Lansdale, Colonel     | American advisor to President Diem  |
| Le Duc Tho            | North Vietnam's negotiator in Paris Peace Talks   |
| Loan, General         | South Vietnamese army general who shot the VC captive in the famous photo of 1968         |
| Lon Nol               | leader of Cambodia 1970-75  |
| Luther King , Martin  | US civil rights leader in the 1950s/60s, assassinated April 1968                          |
| Mao Zedong            | leader of Communist China, 1949-76  |
| McCarthy, Eugene      | Democratic presidential aspirant in 1968  |
| McNamara, Robert      | US Secretary of Defence under Kennedy and Johnson   |
| McNaughton, John      | Assistant Secretary of Defence under Johnson  |
| Mendes France, Pierre | French Prime Minister at the time of the 1954 Geneva Conference                           |
| Ngo Dinh Diem         | President of South Vietnam, 1955-63   |
| Ngo Dinh Nhu          | President Diem's police chief   |
| Nhu, Madame           | Ngo Dinh Nhu's wife, acted as First Lady for Diem   |
| Nixon, Richard        | US President, January 1969-August 1974  |
| Osborne, Milton       | Australian diplomat, expert on Cambodian affairs  |
| Pham van Dong         | Vietminh negotiator at Geneva, later Premier of (North) Vietnam                           |
| Phan Thi Kim Phuc     | young girl who was a victim of a napalm attack in 1972, subject of the Nick Ut photograph |
| Pilger, John          | Australian journalist, one of the first westerners into post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia         |
| Pol pot               | Khmer Rouge leader  |

**DRAMATIS PERSONAE**

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|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| Prince Souphanouvong  | Pathet Lao leader  |
| Quang Duc             | Buddhist monk who self-immolated, 1963   |
| Rogers, William       | US Secretary of State under Richard Nixon  |
| Roosevelt, Franklin   | US President, 1933-45  |
| Safer, Morley         | CBS journalist   |
| Sihanouk, Norodom     | leader of Cambodia, 1955-70  |
| Son San               | leading figure in the Resistance Coalition against the Heng Samrin regime after 1979 |
| Souvanna Phouma       | Prime Minister of Laos   |
| Thieu, President      | President of South Vietnam, 1967-75  |
| Tran Le Xuan          | see Madame Nhu   |
| Tri Quang             | Buddhist leader in South Vietnam, 1963   |
| Truman, Harry         | US President, April 1945-January 1953  |
| Westmoreland, General | US Commander in Vietnam, 1964-68   |

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# ANSWERS TO REVISION EXERCISES

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## Exercise 1.1

1st – Japan’s move into northern Vietnam; 2nd – Creation of the Vietminh;  
3rd – The Potsdam Conference; 4th – Surrender of Japan; 5th – The August Revolution;  
6th – Ho’s Declaration of Independence; 7th – British/ Chinese occupation of Vietnam;  
8th – Return of the French in numbers; 9th – Negotiations between Ho and the French;  
10th – French attack on Haiphong

## Exercise 3.1

victory – conventional – guerilla – Navarre – Dien Bien Phu – Giap – 7 May – 8 May –  
compromise – 17th – Ho – Bao Dai – elections

## Exercise 4.1

Truong Chinh – feudalists – Lao Dong – Giap – Ho Chi Minh – cooperative – Agricultural  
Tribunal – Nghe An

## Exercise 4.2

1 – false; 2 – false; 3 – true; 4 – false; 5 – false; 6 – true; 7 – true; 8 – true.

## Exercise 5.1

1 – Diem returns to Saigon; 2 – Diem is appointed Prime Minister by Bao Dai; 3 – Failed  
coup led by General Hinh; 4 – US grants South Vietnam an aid package of \$322m; 5 – Diem  
defeats the Bin Xuyen; 6 – Diem defeats the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao; 7 – Diem launches  
the Denunciation Campaign; 8 – Referendum result turns South Vietnam into a Republic; 9 –  
Economic ties with France are cut; 10 – Cancellation of the nationwide elections.

## Exercise 5.2

1 – the practice of favouring family and friends; 2 – he was Diem’s closest advisor and ran  
the security services; 3 – Nhu’s wife; she took on the role of the RVN’s ‘First Lady’; 4 –  
strict security laws, the use of imprisonment, torture and execution to suppress opposition,  
censorship; 5 – a government ‘protected’ site which aimed to remove villagers from communist  
influence; 6 – it took them from their traditional homes where their ancestors would have been  
buried; 7 – enormous praise was heaped upon him; 8 – it was due to the influx of enormous  
US aid; 9 – reliance on US aid, the disparity of living standards in the city and the country; 10 –  
Diem was being supported only because there was no one else the Americans could back

## Exercise 6.1

After the Geneva Agreement, the North was not prepared for an armed struggle in the  
South. As a result it urged caution and patience on its cadres in the South. However, Diem’s  
repressive policies were proving so successful, it seemed possible he might destroy the  
communist presence in the South. Anti-Diem attacks began to occur in 1958-59. In December  
1960, the National Liberation Front was set up whose aim was to overthrow Diem and create  
the conditions for possible reunification. The NLF quickly grew in strength. Its growth was both

the result of an appealing propaganda message and a willingness to be utterly brutal towards its enemies. By late 1961, it was estimated that it controlled up to 80% of the Southern countryside.

### Exercise 6.2

1 – Attempted military coup against Diem in November 1960; 2 – The rebel air force attack on the Presidential Palace; 3 – The Buddhist flag controversy in Hue; 4 – Tri Quang's protest against Diem; 5 – The self-immolation of Quang Duc; 6 – Minh and Khanh approach ambassador Cabot Lodge; 7 – A coup is staged against Diem; 8 – Cabot Lodge offers Diem passage out of the country; 9 – The murder of Diem and Nhu; 10 – Minh appointed head of the Revolutionary Military Council.

### Exercise 7.1

1 – true; 2 – true; 3 – false; 4 – false; 5 – false; 6 – true; 7 – true; 8 – false.

### Exercise 7.2

1 – Domino Theory; 2 – Pentagon Papers; 3 – self-interest; 4 – containment; 5 – Eisenhower; 6 – Kennedy; 7 – Truman; 8 – McNamara; 9 – Nixon; 10 – prestige.

### Exercise 8.1

1 – it was fighting the Japanese and training Vietminh against the Japanese; 2 – hopeful, believed he could work with the US; 3 – the French War was being seen in Cold War terms; 4 – it was willing to support Diem in these moves; 5 – its economy was totally reliant on the US, its military becoming increasingly reliant; 6 – US forces who were training ARVN forces in counterinsurgency techniques; 7 – WHAM (winning hearts and minds); 8 – Strategic Hamlet Program; 9 – extremely, 16 700 present in the country and many were flying in combat roles for the ARVN; 10 – no definite answer, depends on which historical one wishes to consult.

### Exercise 9.1

President Johnson made it very clear on assuming the presidency that he had no intention of allowing Vietnam to be lost to the Communists. In early 1964, he authorised secret sabotage raids against the North. In March, Johnson's advisors worked on a Congressional Resolution to be presented to Congress, 'when the opportunity arose'. That opportunity seemed to come on 2 August with the North Vietnamese attack on the USS Maddox. An alleged second attack on 4 August led to US air attacks on the North the following day. Congress passed the Tonkin Resolution a few days later. In November Johnson won the election. In February the US launched Operation Flaming Dart. A couple of weeks later, Operation Rolling Thunder began. The first combat troops arrived in Vietnam in March 1965.

### Exercise 10.1

Americans – Vietnamese – time – morale – night – groups – ambush – terrain – mountainous – jungle – support – brutality – Ho Chi Minh – NVA – Tet – 1968

**Exercise 10.2**

1 – Vietcong; 2 – vital for getting supplies/ reinforcements to the South; 3 – 20 000; 4 – extremely, 2000 trucks a day moving along it, 100 000 Northern troops moved South along it in 1968; 5 – Laos, Cambodia; 6 – VC losses in the Tet Offensive; 7 – fear of an American invasion; 8 – not very; 9 – historic concerns about Chinese domination of Vietnam; 10 – duty, orders.

**Exercise 11.1**

1 – napalm; 2 – puff the magic dragon; 3 – helicopter; 4 – B 52; 5 – Agent Orange; 6 – cluster bomb; 7 – M 16; 8 – omnipotence; 9 – confidence; 10 – mobility.

**Exercise 11.2**

1 – false; 2 – false; 3 – true; 4 – true; 5 – false; 6 – true; 7 – false; 8 – true; 9 – true; 10 – false.

**Exercise 12.1**

1 – fact; 2 – opinion; 3 – fact; 4 – fact; 5 – opinion; 6 – fact; 7 – opinion; 8 – opinion; 9 – opinion; 10 – fact.

**Exercise 13.1**

1 – fact; 2 – opinion; 3 – opinion; 4 – fact; 5 – opinion; 6 – fact; 7 – opinion; 8 – fact; 9 – opinion; 10 – opinion.

**Exercise 15.1**

1st: – The Tet Offensive; 2nd – The Start of the Paris Peace Talks; 3rd – Nixon's election as President; 4th – The beginning of Operation Phoenix; 5th – Operation Menu; 6th – US/ ARVN invasion of Cambodia; 7th – Operation Lam Son; 8th – Nixon's May 1971 peace offer; 9th – Nixon's visit to China; 10th – Nixon's resignation as President.

**Exercise 16.1**

1 – false; 2 – true; 3 – true; 4 – false; 5 – false; 6 – true; 7 – true; 8 – false.

**Exercise 17.1**

Norodom Sihanouk came to the throne, aged 18 in 1941. In 1955 he abdicated and assumed a role in national political life. As soon as he became prime minister, Sihanouk sought to maintain the neutrality of Cambodia. He became very concerned about American influence and the growing US presence in South Vietnam. This led him to break off relations with the US and he gravitated towards North Vietnam, the NLF and China. However, he became concerned with the growth of communist insurgency inside Cambodia which he believed the North Vietnamese were supporting. He re-established relations with the US. In 1969 the US began bombing VC bases in Eastern Cambodia in Operation Menu. This had the effect of turning many Cambodian peasants towards the Communist Party of Kampuchea.

**Exercise 18.1**

1 – in a coup when absent from country seeking medical attention/ Lon Nol took several anti-Sihanouk steps/ National Assembly declared his rule over; 2 – hated them but willing to work with them to remove Lon Nol; 3 – despised him, but realized the propaganda value of being associated with his name; 4 – he wanted to remove them, led a nationalist crusade against them; 5 – attempt to open Phnom Penh-Kompong Som road/ Cambodian forces decimated; 6 – its massive bombing campaign and massive support for Lon Nol; 7 – civil war intensified between Lon Nol forces and the Khmer Rouge; 8 – gradually strangled by Khmer Rouge forces, filled with millions of refugees; 9 – impact of US bombing/ unpopularity of Lon Nol regime/ force; 10 – Lon Nol fled/ Khmer Rouge took control on 17 April.

**Exercise 18.2**

1st – Secret American bombing of Cambodia; 2nd – The coup which led to the overthrow of Sihanouk; 3rd – Creation of Sihanouk's National Front of Kampuchea; 4th – Lon Nol's launches attacks against NVA/ VC forces in Cambodia; 5th – The US/ ARVN invasion of eastern Cambodia; 6th – The Chenla II operation; 7th – The Paris Peace Accords; 8th – The end of the US bombing of Cambodia; 9th – Lon Nol's flight from Cambodia; 10th – The fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge.

**Exercise 19.1**

1 – true; 2 – false; 3 – false; 4 – false; 5 – true; 6 – false; 7 – true; 8 – true; 9 – true; 10 – false.

**Exercise 19.2**

1st – China's Cultural Revolution; 2nd – The Khmer Rouge seize power; 3rd – The evacuation of Phnom Penh; 4th – The 1976 purging within the Khmer Rouge; 5th – 25 Year Friendship Treaty signed between Vietnam and the Soviet Union; 6th – The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia; 7th – Establishment of the Heng Samrin regime in Cambodia; 8th – War between China and Vietnam; 9th – End of the Third Indochina War; 10th – Death of Pol Pot

**Exercise 20.1**

1st – French protectorate over Laos; 2nd – Laos gained its independence from France; 3rd – Military coup led by Kong Le; 4th – \$11 million of US aid given to Laos; 5th – Hamburger Hill action; 6th – Battle of Lam Son; 7th – Paris Peace Accords; 8th – Fall of Phnom Penh; 9th – Pathet Lao captures Vientiane; 10th – Establishment of Pathet Lao government