

Different Visions for Vietnam

In 1954, the Geneva Accords split Vietnam into two parts—North and South. Although the leaders of both parts wanted an independent Vietnam, they differed greatly on what they wanted Vietnam to be.

In the 1800s, during the European powers' scramble for colonies, France took control of Indochina. By 1900, this region in Southeast Asia consisted of three French possessions: Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

In Vietnam, French colonists and some wealthy Vietnamese owned most of the factories in the cities and productive land in the countryside. The great majority of Vietnamese were peasants, poor rice farmers who paid high rents to landlords to work small plots of land.

During World War II, the Japanese seized control of Vietnam and eventually installed a puppet regime under Bao Dai, head of the Vietnamese royal family. When Japan surrendered in 1945, Ho Chi Minh emerged as the main leader for Vietnamese national independence. American journalist David Halberstam described Ho as “part Gandhi, part Lenin, all Vietnamese.”

Ho Chi Minh: Independence and Communism

Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969) was born in a village in central Vietnam. His name at birth was Nguyen Sinh Cung. His father had been a civil servant working for the French government, but quit in disgust with French rule and worked as a teacher. Ho grew up hating the French colonial occupation of his country. In 1911 at age 21, he left Vietnam in search of some way to gain independence for Vietnam. He worked as a cook on a French steamship, traveling to Africa and the American ports of Boston and New York. He lived in London for two years before moving to Paris in 1917.

In Paris, he worked odd jobs, joined with other Vietnamese exiles, and was active in socialist politics. He called himself Nguyen Ai Quoc (“Nguyen the Patriot”). In 1919, following World War I, Ho wrote and hand-delivered a petition to the Allied Powers attending the Versailles Peace Conference in France. His petition called for democratic reforms in Vietnam, but he never received any response.

While in France, Ho learned of the Russian Communist Revolution of 1917. He began to read the works of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the new Soviet Union. Impressed by them, he joined the newly formed French Communist Party. In 1923, he went to Moscow for training by the Communist International (Comintern), the organization established by Lenin to promote a world communist revolution.

Later in life, Ho remarked that only the communists showed any interest in freeing the Vietnamese and other colonial peoples. Today, historians debate whether Ho was mainly a patriot, using communism to liberate Vietnam, or mainly a Comintern agent, using Vietnam to further communist revolution in the world.

Ho went on to China where he formed the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). The ICP emphasized overthrowing French rule in Vietnam and confiscating the land of the rich landlords and redistributing it to the poor peasants.

After the Japanese took control of Vietnam during World War II, Ho started using the name Ho Chi Minh (“The Bringer of Light,” or “The Enlightener”). Ho formed a new organization, known as the Viet Minh, to fight for Vietnamese independence. To gain wide support, the Viet Minh promoted a moderate political program, focusing on reducing peasant land rents.

From a mountain cave in Vietnam near the Chinese border, Ho recruited a guerrilla army to fight the Japanese. He also began to build his reputation as the only real leader for Vietnam's independence. Ho even worked with and received military aid from American agents.

A few days after Japan surrendered in August 1945, the Viet Minh took control of the main cities of Vietnam, including Hanoi in the north and Saigon in the south. On August 25, Ho entered Hanoi. On September 2, 1945, he appeared before thousands of Vietnamese in Hanoi to proclaim Vietnam's independence. In his proclamation, Ho quoted the beginning sentences of the American Declaration of Independence.

The Viet Minh established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam with Ho Chi Minh as president. Hoping to win the support of all elements of Vietnamese society, Ho argued against immediately changing Vietnam into a communist society.

France, however, was not ready to give up its colony. It sent troops to retake Vietnam. By the end of 1946, French troops had driven the Viet Minh out of Saigon and Hanoi. France then re-established its colonial government headed by Bao Dai, the former Japanese puppet.

The Viet Minh revived its war for independence, this time against the French. The French occupied all of Vietnam's major cities and little else. The Viet Minh worked to gain the support of the peasants in the countryside by giving them land confiscated from wealthy landlords.

Communist China supplied some advisors and military aid to the Viet Minh. But Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin never trusted Ho Chi Minh. He did not think he was a true Marxist and offered the Viet Minh little help. But the United States viewed the war as a struggle against international communist expansion. It had seen China fall to communists in 1949 and communist North Korea invade South Korea in 1950. President Harry Truman started providing the French with military aid and advisors.

The French attempted to destroy the Viet Minh using their superior army and weapons. But Ho's guerrilla fighters prevented the French from occupying the countryside. The war dragged on. Then in 1954, French forces suffered a humiliating defeat at a fortified outpost called Dienbienphu. Ho's forces controlled more than three-fourths of the country. The French agreed to negotiate with the Viet Minh. France, the Viet Minh, Britain, the Soviet Union, China, and the United States met at Geneva, Switzerland, to work out an agreement to end the war.

The Soviet Union and China, fearing American military intervention in Vietnam, persuaded Ho Chi Minh to accept the temporary division of the country into North and South Vietnam. The Geneva Accords, which the United States did not sign, scheduled elections to reunify the country in 1956.

In the fall of 1954, "Uncle Ho," as millions of Vietnamese called him, returned to Hanoi, the capital of North Vietnam. The government began a rapid transition to a communist society in North Vietnam. For the next two years, North Vietnam conducted a "class war." The government confiscated privately owned land and businesses. The government executed up to 15,000 "cruel landlords" and others accused of treason. Nearly 1 million more, many of them Catholics, abandoned their homes and fled to non-communist South Vietnam. Ho admitted that "errors have been made," but did little about them. As the time neared for elections to reunify North and South Vietnam, a new anti-communist leader emerged in South Vietnam with his own ideas about Vietnam.

Ngo Dinh Diem: Anti-Communism With a Pioneer Spirit

Ngo Dinh Diem (1901–1963) was born into an important Vietnamese Catholic family. More than 80 percent of the people of Vietnam were Buddhists. But the official religion of France was Catholicism, and being Catholic helped Diem rise in the French colonial civil service. At age 25, he became a provincial governor. In 1933, he was named minister of the interior. But Diem quickly grew frustrated with French rule and resigned from the government. He stated that he would not "act against the interests of my country."

For the next 12 years, Diem lived in Hue, which was then the capital of Vietnam. When the Viet Minh briefly took control of Vietnam in 1945, they took Diem into custody. Seeking support from Catholics in the country, Ho Chi Minh invited Diem to join the Viet Minh government in Hanoi. Ho pointed out that both of them wanted the same thing: an independent Vietnam. Diem refused Ho's offer. The Viet Minh had killed one of his brothers, and Diem held strong anti-communist views. He left Vietnam for almost a decade. He ended up living in the United States and making contacts with many influential Americans. Following the Geneva Conference in 1954, Bao Dai, the head of the government of South Vietnam, appointed Diem as prime minister. Bao Dai thought that Diem's American contacts would prove useful. The next year, Diem deposed Bao Dai and made himself president of South Vietnam.

Diem formed an anti-communist government that relied heavily on his family members and other Vietnamese Catholics. But he lacked support from most other South Vietnamese. Fearing that Ho Chi Minh would easily win the elections planned for 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower backed Diem's refusal to go ahead with them.

Ho Chi Minh worried that the Americans might intervene if he launched a full-scale war of liberation in South Vietnam.

Even so, in 1959, Ho agreed to begin guerrilla warfare against Diem's regime. North Vietnam, aided by military supplies from China, began to send fighters and arms into South Vietnam over a maze of jungle trails, called by Americans the "Ho Chi Minh Trail."

In 1960, Ho helped form and began supporting the National Liberation Front (NLF) and its guerrilla force, the Viet Cong. Among other things, the NLF promised to establish a "democratic regime," distribute land to poor peasants, end illiteracy, and refuse a military alliance with any other nation.

To counter Ho Chi Minh's vision for a communist Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem organized a series of projects that depended on the people to volunteer their labor and resources for the good of all. Diem wanted to spark a cooperative pioneer spirit among the South Vietnamese to defeat the communists and build a new nation from the bottom up. Diem, however, believed this effort required strong leadership from the top to compel uneducated peasants to work together for their own good.

During the late 1950s, Diem tried to organize model pioneer settlements, which the peasants would build while farming nearby plots of land. But Diem's officials often uprooted families from their traditional villages to inhabit these new settlements. Once in the settlements, the peasants resented Diem's government forcing them to take time away from tending their crops to construct the model towns.

Discontent, encouraged by the always-present Viet Cong, grew against Diem. As the guerrilla war intensified, a new American president, John F. Kennedy, took office.

The United States: Blocking the Spread of Communism

In April 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower had predicted that if all Vietnam became a communist nation, nearby countries would also fall to communism "like a row of dominoes." President Kennedy agreed with this "domino theory" and believed the United States had to take a stand against South Vietnam falling to the communists.

Like Eisenhower, Kennedy did not send U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam. Instead, he ordered more American military advisors and equipment to build up Diem's army so it could defeat the Viet Cong. Kennedy also wanted to provide economic aid directly to the impoverished peasants. Finally, he concluded that Diem must increase his popularity by relaxing his tight grip over South Vietnam's government and allowing more democratic freedoms.

Diem welcomed U.S. military help, but thought that sending economic aid directly to the peasants would make them too dependent on the Americans. He also resented Kennedy's attempts to interfere with how he ran his government.

In 1961, Diem and his brother, Nhu, launched a new self-help program. It relied on the people to fortify their existing settlements, form self-defense militias, and create their own local government and economy. Diem believed these "strategic hamlets" would protect the people from the Viet Cong and inspire a true Vietnamese path to a new nation.

This new program, however, suffered from the same fault as the pioneer settlements. It again burdened the peasants by demanding their labor and time. Government officials focused more on forcing the people rapidly to construct fortifications rather than developing among them a "revolutionary spirit," as Diem wanted.

As the "strategic hamlet" program floundered, more and more young men from peasant villages of South Vietnam joined the Viet Cong. They saw the Diem regime as the enemy.

In the cities, Buddhists began openly protesting Diem's discrimination against them. Diem had long favored the Catholic minority over the Buddhists. The spark that ignited the protests came in May 1963 when officials in Hue stopped Buddhists from flying flags during a festival. The Buddhists noted that Catholics had been allowed to fly flags at a recent festival. When thousands of Buddhists gathered to hear a speaker, the Vietnamese Army sent troops to break up the gathering. The troops fired their guns and eight children and one woman died in the stampede trying to escape.

Diem claimed that the troops were not his, but Viet Cong. When Diem refused to investigate the incident further, Buddhists began protesting. They held rallies and hunger strikes. Diem ignored them. Then individual Buddhists began setting themselves on fire. American officials urged Diem to take action. Diem turned them down. His sister-in-law and close advisor, Madame Nhu, further incited the protestors with public insults. Referring to the Buddhists, Diem's sister in law told

a reporter, "Let them burn, and we shall clap our hands."

As protests increased, Diem decided to clamp down. Troops raided Buddhist temples in many cities, dragging off more than a thousand people, injuring and killing some. Protests only increased, with many young people joining in.

As chaos mounted, generals in the Vietnam army started plotting against Diem. On November 1, 1963, they overthrew his government. The next day they executed Diem and his brother Nhu. The United States did not directly participate in Diem's overthrow, but welcomed it. President Kennedy and his advisors knew about the generals' plot ahead of time and did nothing to stop it. But the executions shocked President Kennedy. He had expected the generals would send Diem into exile.

President Kennedy believed that the new military government in Saigon would defeat the Viet Cong and make South Vietnam a barrier to communist expansion in Asia. Kennedy hoped the Americans could withdraw from South Vietnam in a year or two. Just three weeks later, however, on November 22, Kennedy was assassinated.

The Final Failure

The new U.S. president, Lyndon Johnson, carried on Kennedy's policy in Vietnam. But the South Vietnam government was shaky. In 1965, Johnson ordered U.S. troops into Vietnam. Eventually, 500,000 American soldiers took over most of the fighting. U.S. troops were able to hold back the Viet Cong. But the South Vietnamese government remained weak.

In 1973, after more than 58,000 American soldiers and a million Vietnamese had been killed, North Vietnam reached an agreement with President Richard Nixon to withdraw all U.S. military forces. When the last Americans left Saigon in 1975, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regular troops swiftly took control of South Vietnam.

Ho Chi Minh died in 1969 before achieving his vision of an independent and communist Vietnam. The Communist Party leaders who followed him imposed a harsh regime that crushed any dissent and forced peasants to work on large government-owned farms. As a result, thousands fled the country. Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

For Discussion and Writing

1. What mistakes do you think Ho Chi Minh, Ngo Dinh Diem, and the United States made in developing their visions for nation-building in Vietnam?
2. Do you think the Vietnam War was a civil war or a war of aggression? Why?
3. What advice about South Vietnam would you have given to President Johnson in 1963? Why?

ACTIVITY

Your Vision for America

- A. What is your vision for America in the 21st century? Form 10 small groups. The members of each group should discuss and describe what they would want America to be like in one of the following areas by the year 2050:

1. schools

5. health care

government

2. business and work

6. environment

9. role of America in the world

3. technology

7. leisure time

10. space exploration

4. transportation

8. role of the federal

- B. Each group should report the vision it has developed for its area. The other members of the class should then have a chance to express their opinions on the group's vision.