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The Unwinnable Vietnam War

By Fred Donner

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Although the Vietnamese had been rebelling against the French since their arrival in S.E. Asia, World War I was the initial catalyst for Vietnam's independence. Vietnamese and other Indochinese troops, notably Cambodians, in the French colonial forces went to Europe and the Middle East in World War I to serve in both combat and support roles.



Photos of victims of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam galvanized public awareness about the barbarity of the war. (Photo taken by U. S. Army photographer Ronald L. Haeberle)

French estimates vary as to the numbers killed and wounded. However, the surviving veterans were exposed to western literature and political views that they took home. Simply put, the “independence genie” was out of the bottle not to be recorked.

Having already promised the Philippines independence, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) did not want the French, British, or Dutch back in their previous S.E. Asia colonies after World War II. FDR’s postwar plan for Indochina was a three-power high commission somewhat like the Allied partition of Berlin with a 25-year duration to work out independence. The Chinese would get the northern sector, the British the central, and the Americans the south approximating the three regional divisions of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin China.

But with FDR dead, the 1945 Potsdam Conference divided Vietnam along the 16th parallel just south of Danang with the Chinese Nationalists to the north and the British to the south. The Chinese Nationalists promptly proceeded to loot the north fueling centuries of traditional Chinese-Vietnamese animosities while the British used surrendered Japanese troops to chase Viet Minh in the south before returning French forces arrived in late 1945 and early 1946.

U.S. military aid began flowing to the French shortly after VJ Day thus turning the French colonial restoration effort into an anti-communist war that in Western thinking trumped anti-colonialism. In the 1950s the U.S. assumed an ever-expanding role in the Vietnam conflict to help keep France in the newly-formed NATO alliance. Predictably the Vietnamese simply took the U.S. as French replacements to be battled likewise.

In reality World War II marked the fast-approaching end of European colonialism worldwide. Ho Chi Minh, Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, and other anti-colonialists were at the Versailles Treaty negotiations in 1919 seeking at least token recognition for colonial subjects. Spurned, they never gave up but after the independence stimuli of two World Wars future Vietnam independence was effectively unstoppable regardless of what France or the U.S. might do to contain it.

The only U.S. option that might have worked, at least temporarily, would have been a full-fledged military invasion of the north or perhaps a North Vietnamese rebellion. The U.S. and South Vietnamese commando raids and psychological and propaganda warfare against the north were hampered from all-out efforts to prepare an invasion or stimulate a rebellion for two reasons.

First, after encouraging Hungary to rebellion in 1956 against their Soviet-backed government and failing to back them up, it would not be U.S. policy to do so again, although there has been a notable exception or two.

The Hungarian rationale is explained in *The Secret War Against Hanoi* by professor Richard H. Shultz, Jr. of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. And second, an invasion of North Vietnam was an automatic war with China that would have violated Gen. Maxwell Taylor’s well-known dictum of no more land wars in Asia.

Incremental Escalations

The only “secrets” the Pentagon Papers revealed in 1971 were that U.S. policy makers made continuing small incremental escalations of the war desperately hoping each one would mysteriously negate the need for another. This was simply wishful thinking that Vietnam resistance would weaken and the nightmare would disappear. Finally, there was no defined “end state” describing what specific conditions would constitute a U.S. victory in Vietnam.

The logical question is what other policy might have produced a different outcome. Obviously FDR’s three-power plan could have been tried. Could Ho Chi Minh have been the Tito of Indochina? Could Charles DeGaulle have taken a different tack? Could the U.S. have found a way to work with a Ho Chi Minh government? The U.S. has worked with all manner of undesirable governments around the world never demanding perfection so we will never know what a theoretical different outcome for Vietnam might have been.

In April 1964 I was an Air Force lieutenant on Taiwan when I volunteered to go directly to Vietnam to command a unit at Bien Hoa Air Base. (Lieutenants as commanders were a rarity in the Air Force.) It didn’t take me long to realize that Vietnam was a lost cause when I heard how some Americans were speaking about or, worse yet, to some Vietnamese.

I realized “this turkey ain’t gonna fly” if this is what we think of our alleged allies. I was in Vietnam a combined seven years in the Air Force, as an Air America manager, and later a church group staffer, but nothing changed my mind as to the eventual outcome.

Many bemoaned the fact that the U.S. Congress did not fulfill its Paris Peace Accord obligations to support the South Vietnamese, specifically ignoring President Ford’s pleas to do so in April 1975. The Case-Church Amendment of June 1973 prohibited any further U.S. military activity in Vietnam. Rarely mentioned is that in 1973 President Nixon wrote a secret letter in carefully couched language offering the North Vietnamese \$3.25 billion in reconstruction aid.

In the atmosphere of 1975 Congress was not about to send money to North or South Vietnam. Whatever anyone may think of how it happened, Vietnam was finally and fully independent as Ho Chi Minh declared it on September 2, 1945, the same day the Japanese surrendered on board the *U.S.S. Missouri*. Unfortunately for 58,000 American families who later lost loved ones in Vietnam, only the latter event was newsworthy at the time.