

## **Addendum E: The American Experience in the Vietnam Struggle for Independence**

Following the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, the French returned to their former colony only to find an independence movement led by Ho Chi Minh. Using the very words of our own Declaration of Independence, Ho led a successful revolution against the French colonial government that culminated in the division of Vietnam into political entities divided by the 17th parallel. Although the United States had supported up to 75% of the costs of the French effort at recolonization, the Geneva Peace Accord in 1954 saw their departure, which soon resulted in the arrival of American advisors and aid to the government of Ngo Dinh Diem for the new government of South Vietnam. However, Ho was in control of North Vietnam.

The Geneva Accord called for elections to be held in 1956 with the intention that they might result in a peaceful reunification. However, Diem failed to hold the elections since he anticipated an electoral defeat. He expected American assistance even if he reneged on holding the election. He was right about the Americans, but wrong about the long-term consequences.

The National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) emerged in 1960 and the new President, John F. Kennedy, was soon sending more advisors and aid in 1961. By 1963, Washington had lost faith in Ngo and approved of a coup d'etat that culminated in Ngo's assassination on November 1, 1963. Kennedy, himself, was to be assassinated in a little more than three weeks, on November 22, 1963. For the next two years, there was a revolving door in the political leadership of South Vietnam as Lyndon Johnson began his Great Society with its War on Poverty.

On August 7, 1964, the American Congress overwhelmingly passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution that gave the President broad authority that was tantamount to a declaration of war, but not quite. In February 1965, the U.S. began strategic bombing of North Vietnam but to no avail.

On March 8, 1965, U.S. Marines sent an amphibious force along coast of South Vietnam at DaNang. By the end of 1965, 184,000 Americans were in country. By 1968, 525,000 Americans were fighting with some allied forces, e.g., South Koreans, and 685,000 South Vietnamese against an estimated 240,000 Viet Cong. By the end of the conflict in 1975, it is estimated that U.S. forces had employed over 500 times more munitions than had the Viet Cong.

As the war progressed, a policy of "Vietnamization" was intended to transfer the majority of the fighting from the Americans to the South Vietnamese. However, in 1970 and 1971, combined forces invaded Cambodia and Laos, respectively providing grist for the mill in the anti-war movement within the U.S., in particular.

In March 1972, the North Vietnamese initiated a broad offensive with increased bombings. Following the U.S. elections, the bombing was intensified and became known

as the "Christmas" bombings that were said to have led to the renewed peace talks in Paris where an agreement was reached that allowed the U.S. to claim an end to the war "with honor." Yet, NLF/Viet Cong troops were allowed to remain in the south by terms of the treaty.

On June 24, 1970, Congress had abrogated the Tonkin Gulf resolution, which made it legally difficult for the U.S. to reengage after the 1973 Peace Agreement if there had been any remaining inclination. The U.S. did continue bombing until August 15, 1973 when it pulled out of Cambodia. The South Vietnamese government survived until April 1975. Nguyen van Thieu, who had ruled the south since 1965, resigned on April 21st. On April 30, 1975, the capital, Saigon, fell.

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**Sources:** U.C. Berard; Houghton Mifflin's *Vietnam: A Teacher's Guide*; and the Asia Society, New York.