

The Vietnam War



Seeds of Conflict 1945 - 1960

1941

Communist activist Ho Chi Minh secretly returns to Vietnam after 30 years in exile and organizes a nationalist organization known as the Viet Minh (Vietnam Independence League). After Japanese troops occupy Vietnam during World War II, the U.S. military intelligence agency Office of Strategic Services (OSS) allies with Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh guerrillas to harass Japanese troops in the jungles and to help rescue downed American pilots.

1945

March 9, 1945 - Amid rumors of a possible American invasion, Japanese oust the French colonial government which had been operating independently and seize control of Vietnam, installing Bao Dai as their puppet ruler.

Summer - Severe famine strikes Hanoi and surrounding areas eventually resulting in two million deaths from starvation out of a population of ten million. The famine generates political unrest and peasant revolts against the Japanese and remnants of French colonial society. Ho Chi Minh capitalizes on the turmoil by successfully spreading his Viet Minh movement.

July 1945 - Following the defeat of Nazi Germany, World War II Allies including the U.S., Britain, and Soviet Union, hold the Potsdam Conference in Germany to plan the post-war world. Vietnam is considered a minor item on the agenda.

In order to disarm the Japanese in Vietnam, the Allies divide the country in half at the 16th parallel. Chinese Nationalists will move in and disarm the Japanese north of the parallel while the British will move in and do the same in the south.

During the conference, representatives from France request the return of all French pre-war colonies in Southeast Asia (Indochina). Their request is granted. Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia will once again become French colonies following the removal of the Japanese.

August 1945 - Japanese surrender unconditionally. Vietnam's puppet emperor, Bao Dai, abdicates. Ho Chi Minh's guerrillas occupy Hanoi and proclaim a provisional government.

September 2, 1945 - Japanese sign the surrender agreement in Tokyo Bay formally ending World War II in the Pacific. On this same day, Ho Chi Minh proclaims the independence of Vietnam by quoting from the text of the American Declaration of Independence which had been supplied to him by the OSS -- "We hold the truth that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among them life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This immortal statement is extracted from the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. These are undeniable truths."

Ho declares himself president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and pursues American recognition but is repeatedly ignored by President Harry Truman.

September 13, 1945 - British forces arrive in Saigon, South Vietnam.

In North Vietnam, 150,000 Chinese Nationalist soldiers, consisting mainly of poor peasants, arrive in Hanoi after looting Vietnamese villages during their entire march down from China. They then proceed to loot Hanoi.

September 22, 1945 - In South Vietnam, 1400 French soldiers released by the British from former Japanese internment camps enter Saigon and go on a deadly rampage, attacking Viet Minh and killing innocent civilians including children, aided by French civilians who joined the rampage. An estimated 20,000 French civilians live in Saigon.

September 24, 1945 - In Saigon, Viet Minh successfully organize a general strike shutting down all commerce along with electricity and water supplies. In a suburb of Saigon, members of Binh Xuyen, a Vietnamese criminal organization, massacre 150 French and Eurasian civilians, including children.

September 26, 1945 - The first American death in Vietnam occurs, during the unrest in Saigon, as OSS officer Lt. Col. A. Peter Dewey is killed by Viet Minh guerrillas who mistook him for a French officer. Before his death, Dewey had filed a report on the deepening crisis in Vietnam, stating his opinion that the U.S. "ought to clear out of Southeast Asia."

October 1945 - 35,000 French soldiers under the command of World War II General Jacques Philippe Leclerc arrive in South Vietnam to restore French rule. Viet Minh immediately begin a guerrilla campaign to harass them. The French then succeed in expelling the Viet Minh from Saigon.

1946

February 1946 - The Chinese under Chiang Kai-shek agree to withdraw from North Vietnam and allow the French to return in exchange for French concessions in Shanghai and other Chinese ports.

March 1946 - Ho Chi Minh agrees to permit French troops to return to Hanoi temporarily in exchange for French recognition of his Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Chinese troops then depart.

May-September - Ho Chi Minh spends four months in France attempting to negotiate full independence and unity for Vietnam, but fails to obtain any guarantee from the French.

June 1946 - In a major affront to Ho Chi Minh, the French high commissioner for Indochina proclaims a separatist French-controlled government for South Vietnam (Republic of Chochinchina).

November 1946 - After a series of violent clashes with Viet Minh, French forces bombard Haiphong harbor and occupy Hanoi, forcing Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh forces to retreat into the jungle.

December 19, 1946 - In Hanoi, 30,000 Viet Minh launch their first large-scale attack against the French. Thus begins an eight year struggle known as the First Indochina War. "The resistance will be long and arduous, but our cause is just and we will surely triumph," declares Viet Minh military commander Vo Nguyen Giap. "If these [people] want a fight, they'll get it," French military commander Gen. Etrienne Valluy states.

1947

October 7- December 22 - The French conduct Operation Lea, a series of attacks on Viet Minh guerrilla positions in North Vietnam near the Chinese border. Although the Viet Minh suffer over 9000 casualties, most of the 40,000 strong Viet Minh force slips away through gaps in the French lines.

1949

March 8, 1949 - The French install Bao Dai as puppet head of state in South Vietnam.

July 1949 - The French establish the (South) Vietnamese National Army.

October 1949 - Mao Zedong's Communist forces defeat Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Army in the Chinese civil war. Mao's victory ignites American anti-Communist sentiment regarding Southeast Asia and will result in a White House foreign policy goal of "containment" of Communist expansion in the region.

1950

January 1950 - The People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union recognize Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

China then begins sending military advisors and modern weapons to the Viet Minh including automatic weapons, mortars, howitzers, and trucks. Much of the equipment is American-made

and had belonged to the Chinese Nationalists before their defeat by Mao. With the influx of new equipment and Chinese advisors, General Giap transforms his guerrilla fighters into conventional army units including five light infantry divisions and one heavy division.

February 1950 - The United States and Britain recognize Bao Dai's French-controlled South Vietnam government.

February 1950 - Viet Minh begin an offensive against French outposts in North Vietnam near the Chinese border.

February 7, 1950 - In America, the era of 'McCarthyism' erupts as Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin gives a speech claiming the U.S. State Department harbors Communists. As a consequence of McCarthyism, no U.S. politician is willing to appear to be 'soft' on Communism.

June 30, 1950 - President Harry S. Truman orders U.S. ground troops into Korea following Communist North Korea's invasion of the South. In his message to the American people, Truman describes the invasion as a Moscow-backed attack by "monolithic world Communism."

July 26, 1950 - United States military involvement in Vietnam begins as President Harry Truman authorizes \$15 million in military aid to the French.

American military advisors will accompany the flow of U.S. tanks, planes, artillery and other supplies to Vietnam. Over the next four years, the U.S. will spend \$3 Billion on the French war and by 1954 will provide 80 percent of all war supplies used by the French.

September 16, 1950 - General Giap begins his main attack against French outposts near the Chinese border. As the outposts fall, the French lose 6000 men and large stores of military equipment to the Viet Minh.

September 27, 1950 - The U.S. establishes a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Saigon to aid the French Army.

1951

January 13, 1951 - 20,000 Viet Minh under Gen. Giap begin a series of attacks on fortified French positions in the Red River Delta (extending from Hanoi to the Gulf of Tonkin). The open areas of the Delta, in contrast to the jungle, allow French troops under the new command of Gen. Jean de Lattre to strike back with devastating results from the 'De Lattre Line' which encircles the region. 6000 Viet Minh die while assaulting the town of Vinh Yen near Hanoi in the first attack, causing Giap to withdraw.

March 23-28 - In the second attack, Giap targets the Mao Khe outpost near Haiphong. But Giap withdraws after being pounded by French naval gunfire and air strikes. 3000 Viet Minh are killed.

May 29-June 18 - Giap makes yet another attempt to break through the De Lattre Line, this time in the Day River area southeast of Hanoi. French reinforcements, combined with air strikes and armed boat attacks result in another defeat for Giap with 10,000 killed and wounded. Among the French casualties is Bernard de Lattre, the only son of General De Lattre.

June 9, 1951 - Giap begins a general withdrawal of Viet Minh troops from the Red River Delta.

September 1951 - Gen. De Lattre travels to Washington seeking more aid from the Pentagon.

November 16, 1951 - French forces link up at Hoa Binh southwest of Hanoi as Gen. De Lattre attempts to seize the momentum and lure Giap into a major battle.

November 20, 1951 - Stricken by cancer, ailing Gen. De Lattre is replaced by Gen. Raoul Salan. De Lattre returns home and dies in Paris two months later, just after being raised to the rank of Marshal.

December 9, 1951 - Giap begins a careful counter-offensive by attacking the French outpost at Tu Vu on the Black River. Giap now avoids conventional warfare and instead wages hit and run attacks followed by a retreat into the dense jungles. His goal is to cut French supply lines.

By year's end, French casualties in Vietnam surpass 90,000.

1952

January 12, 1952 - French supply lines to Hoa Binh along the Black River are cut. The road along Route Coloniale 6 is also cut.

February 22-26 - The French withdraw from Hoa Binh back to the De Lattre Line aided by a 30,000 round artillery barrage. Casualties for each side surpassed 5000 during the Black River skirmishes.

October 11, 1952 - Giap now attempts to draw the French out from the De Lattre Line by attacking along the Fan Si Pan mountain range between the Red and Black Rivers.

October 29, 1952 - The French counter Giap's move by launching Operation Lorraine targeting major Viet Minh supply bases in the Viet Bac region. But Giap outsmarts the French by ignoring their maneuvers and maintains his position along the Black River.

November 14-17 - The French cancel Operation Lorraine and withdraw back toward the De Lattre Line but must first fight off a Viet Minh ambush at Chan Muong.

1953

January 20, 1953 - Dwight D. Eisenhower, former five-star Army general and Allied commander in Europe during World War II, is inaugurated as the 34th U.S. President.

During his term, Eisenhower will greatly increase U.S. military aid to the French in Vietnam to prevent a Communist victory. U.S. military advisors will continue to accompany American supplies sent to Vietnam. To justify America's financial commitment, Eisenhower will cite a 'Domino Theory' in which a Communist victory in Vietnam would result in surrounding countries falling one after another like a "falling row of dominoes." The Domino Theory will be used by a succession of Presidents and their advisors to justify ever-deepening U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

March 5, 1953 - Soviet leader Josef Stalin dies. The outspoken Nikita Khrushchev succeeds him.

July 27, 1953 - The Korean War ends as an armistice is signed dividing the country at the 38th parallel into Communist North and Democratic South. The armistice is seen by many in the international community as a potential model for resolving the ongoing conflict in Vietnam.

November 20, 1953 - The French under their new commander Gen. Henri Navarre begin Operation Castor, the construction of a series of entrenched outposts protecting a small air base in the isolated jungle valley at Dien Bien Phu in northwest Vietnam.

Gen. Giap immediately begins massing Viet Minh troops and artillery in the area, sensing the potential for a decisive blow against the French. Giap's troops manually drag 200 heavy howitzers up rugged mountain sides to target the French air base. The French, aware of Giap's intentions, mass their own troops and artillery, preparing for a showdown, but have grossly underestimated Giap's strength.

1954

March 13, 1954 - Outnumbering the French nearly five-to-one, 50,000 Viet Minh under Gen. Giap begin their assault against the fortified hills protecting the Dien Bien Phu air base.

Giap's artillery pounds the French and shuts down the only runway, thus forcing the French to rely on risky parachute drops for re-supply. Giap's troops then take out their shovels and begin construction of a maze of tunnels and trenches, slowly inching their way toward the main French position and surrounding it.

March 30-May 1 - The siege at Dien Bien Phu occurs as nearly 10,000 French soldiers are trapped by 45,000 Viet Minh. French troops soon run out of fresh water and medical supplies.

The French urgently appeal to Washington for help. The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff now consider three possible military options: sending American combat troops to the rescue; a massive conventional air strike by B-29 bombers; the use of tactical atomic weapons.

President Eisenhower dismisses the conventional air raid and the nuclear option after getting a strong negative response to such actions from America's chief ally, Britain. Eisenhower also decides against sending U.S. ground troops to rescue the French, citing the likelihood of high casualty rates in the jungles around Dien Bien Phu. No action is taken.

May 7, 1954 - At 5:30 p.m., 10,000 French soldiers surrender at Dien Bien Phu. By now, an estimated 8000 Viet Minh and 1500 French have died. The French survivors are marched for up to 60 days to prison camps 500 hundred miles away. Nearly half die during the march or in captivity.

France proceeds to withdraw completely from Vietnam, ending a bitter eight year struggle against the Viet Minh in which 400,000 soldiers and civilians from all sides had perished.

May 8, 1954 - The Geneva Conference on Indochina begins, attended by the U.S., Britain, China, the Soviet Union, France, Vietnam (Viet Minh and representatives of Bao Dai), Cambodia and Laos, all meeting to negotiate a solution for Southeast Asia.

July 21, 1954 - The Geneva Accords divide Vietnam in half at the 17th parallel, with Ho Chi Minh's Communists ceded the North, while Bao Dai's regime is granted the South. The accords also provide for elections to be held in all of Vietnam within two years to reunify the country. The U.S. opposes the unifying elections, fearing a likely victory by Ho Chi Minh.

October 1954 - Following the French departure from Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh returns after spending eight years hiding in the jungle and formally takes control of North Vietnam.

In the South, Bao Dai has installed Ngo Dinh Diem as his prime minister. The U.S. now pins its hopes on anti-Communist Diem for a democratic South Vietnam. It is Diem, however, who predicts "another more deadly war" will erupt over the future of Vietnam.

Diem, a Roman Catholic in an overwhelmingly Buddhist country, encourages Vietnamese Catholics living in Communist North Vietnam to flee south. Nearly one million leave. At the same time, some 90,000 Communists in the south go north, although nearly 10,000 Viet Minh fighters are instructed by Hanoi to quietly remain behind.

1955

January 1955 - The first direct shipment of U.S. military aid to Saigon arrives. The U.S. also offers to train the fledgling South Vietnam Army.

May 1955 - Prime Minister Diem wages a violent crackdown against the Binh Xuyen organized crime group based in Saigon which operates casinos, brothels and opium dens.

July 1955 - Ho Chi Minh visits Moscow and agrees to accept Soviet aid.

October 23, 1955 - Bao Dai is ousted from power, defeated by Prime Minister Diem in a U.S.-backed plebiscite which was rigged. Diem is advised on consolidating power by U.S. Air Force Col. Edward G. Lansdale, who is attached to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

October 26, 1955 - The Republic of South Vietnam is proclaimed with Diem as its first president. In America, President Eisenhower pledges his support for the new government and offers military aid.

Diem assigns most high level government positions to close friends and family members including his younger brother Ngo Dinh Nhu who will be his chief advisor. Diem's style of leadership, aloof and autocratic, will create future political problems for him despite the best efforts of his American advisors to popularize him via American-style political rallies and tours of the countryside.

December 1955 - In North Vietnam, radical land reforms by Communists result in land owners being hauled before "people's tribunals." Thousands are executed or sent to forced labor camps during this period of ideological cleansing by Ho Chi Minh.

In South Vietnam, President Diem rewards his Catholic supporters by giving them land seized from Buddhist peasants, arousing their anger and eroding his support among them. Diem also allows big land owners to retain their holdings, disappointing peasants hoping for land reform.

1956

January 1956 - Diem launches a brutal crackdown against Viet Minh suspects in the countryside. Those arrested are denied counsel and hauled before "security committees" with many suspects tortured or executed under the guise of 'shot while attempting escape.'

April 28, 1956 - The last French soldier leaves South Vietnam. The French High Command for Indochina is then dissolved.

July 1956 - The deadline passes for the unifying elections set by the Geneva Conference. Diem, backed by the U.S., had refused to participate.

November 1956 - Peasant unrest in North Vietnam resulting from oppressive land reforms is put down by Communist force with more than 6000 killed or deported.

1957

January 1957 - The Soviet Union proposes permanent division of Vietnam into North and South, with the two nations admitted separately to the United Nations. The U.S. rejects the proposal, unwilling to recognize Communist North Vietnam.

May 8-18 - Diem pays a state visit to Washington where President Eisenhower labels him the "miracle man" of Asia and reaffirms U.S. commitment. "The cost of defending freedom, of defending America, must be paid in many forms and in many places...military as well as economic help is currently needed in Vietnam," Eisenhower states.

Diem's government, however, with its main focus on security, spends little on schools, medical care or other badly needed social services in the countryside. Communist guerrillas and propagandists in the countryside capitalize on this by making simple promises of land reform and a better standard of living to gain popular support among peasants.

October 1957 - Viet Minh guerrillas begin a widespread campaign of terror in South Vietnam including bombings and assassinations. By year's end, over 400 South Vietnamese officials are killed.

1958

June 1958 - A coordinated command structure is formed by Communists in the Mekong Delta where 37 armed companies are being organized.

1959

March 1959 - The armed revolution begins as Ho Chi Minh declares a People's War to unite all of Vietnam under his leadership. His Politburo now orders a changeover to an all-out military struggle. Thus begins the Second Indochina War.

May 1959 - North Vietnamese establish the Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN) to oversee the coming war in the South. Construction of the Ho Chi Minh trail now begins.

The trail will eventually expand into a 1500 mile-long network of jungle and mountain passes extending from North Vietnam's coast along Vietnam's western border through Laos, parts of Cambodia, funneling a constant stream of soldiers and supplies into the highlands of South Vietnam. In 1959, it takes six months to make the journey, by 1968 it will take only six weeks due to road improvements by North Vietnamese laborers, many of whom are women. In the 1970s a parallel fuel pipeline will be added.

July 1959 - 4000 Viet Minh guerrillas, originally born in the South, are sent from North Vietnam to infiltrate South Vietnam.

July 8, 1959 - Two U.S. military advisors, Maj. Dale Buis and Sgt. Chester Ovnand, are killed by Viet Minh guerrillas at Bien Hoa, South Vietnam. They are the first American deaths in the Second Indochina War which Americans will come to know simply as The Vietnam War.

1960

April 1960 - Universal military conscription is imposed in North Vietnam. Tour of duty is indefinite.

April 1960 - Eighteen distinguished nationalists in South Vietnam send a petition to President Diem advocating that he reform his rigid, family-run, and increasingly corrupt, government. Diem ignores their advice and instead closes several opposition newspapers and arrests journalists and intellectuals.

November 1960 - A failed coup against President Diem by disgruntled South Vietnamese Army officers brings a harsh crackdown against all perceived 'enemies of the state.' Over 50,000 are arrested by police controlled by Diem's brother Nhu with many innocent civilians tortured then executed. This results in further erosion of popular support for Diem.

Thousands who fear arrest flee to North Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh will later send many back to infiltrate South Vietnam as part of his People's Liberation Armed Forces. Called Viet Cong by Diem, meaning Communist Vietnamese, Ho's guerrillas blend into the countryside, indistinguishable from South Vietnamese, while working to undermine Diem's government.

December 20, 1960 - The National Liberation Front is established by Hanoi as its Communist political organization for Viet Cong guerrillas in South Vietnam.