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**The Vietnam War:**  
**U.S. Foreign Policy and the Impossible**  
**Victory (1954-1975)**

A dissertation submitted to the department of English in partial fulfillment for the requirements of the Master Degree in Literature, Civilization and English Language Teaching

By

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this dissertation is my own independent research work and free from plagiarism. All sources of information I have used are fully identified and properly acknowledged as required. Furthermore, I confirm that this work has not been previously submitted for any other degree to any other university or institution.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to my beloved parents who never left my side. They have always been there for me, providing me with love, support and guidance. I will always appreciate their unconditional and unfailing encouragement and everything they have done for me.

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere and deepest gratitude and appreciation to my supervisor, Brahim ARIBI, who patiently guided and supported me throughout the process of writing this dissertation. Without his valuable assistance, contribution and encouragement, this dissertation would not have seen the light. Additionally, I would also like to express my very profound gratitude to my family for their continued encouragement and support. Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank my friends and all those who were interested in my work.

## **Abstract**

This dissertation focuses on U.S. foreign policy during the Vietnam War and the reasons behind the U.S. failure in Vietnam. It tries to explain how the United States became increasingly involved in Vietnam. It also examines the development of the U.S. foreign policy by focusing on the policies undertaken by U.S. presidents who were in office throughout the course of the war. It further investigates the factors that contributed to the U.S. major defeat in Vietnam despite its money, manpower and technology. This research provides valuable information regarding U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the presidential decision making in the war. It also provides a clearer understanding of American failure in Vietnam and may direct future research on the lessons of the Vietnam War.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NLF	National Liberation Front
NSAM 328	National Security Action Memorandum 328
NSC-64	National Security Council Memorandum #64
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
PLA	Chinese People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SVN	State of Vietnam
U.S.	United States
VC	Viet Cong
VNA	Vietnamese National Army
WWII	World War II

# General Introduction

The Vietnam War is one of the most problematic and controversial wars in the American history. After the Second World War, containing communism was the center of the U.S. foreign policy. Thus, the United States became progressively involved in Vietnam. After the French defeat in Vietnam, the United States committed itself to support and keep the power of the anti-communist regime in South Vietnam. But the fact that this regime was corrupt, dictatorial and repressive caused a sense of confusion among Americans and made them question the American involvement in Vietnam. In addition, American foreign policy goals changed throughout the Vietnam War and were not clearly defined. The United States Americanized the war at the beginning, but it ended up establishing Vietnamization policy by the end. Eventually, despite its major military and economic power, the United States was unable to achieve victory and it had to withdraw from Vietnam. Therefore this Study sheds light on the American foreign policy towards Vietnam during the Vietnam War and the reasons for American defeat in this war.

In recent years, a number of writers have focused on the issue of U.S. involvement in Vietnam and American foreign policy during the Vietnam War. Gary A. Donaldson (1996) indicates that the United States established itself after the Second World War as the world leader and the defender of freedom and anti-communist countries. He explains that America fought in Vietnam to show the other countries of the world that it would contain the spread of communism in Southeast Asia and that it had the power to do that depending on its money, advisors and its military force. However, the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam revealed the weakness of the U.S. military power.<sup>1</sup> Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco (2000) suggest that it is acceptable to believe that Kennedy was saying that he would make decisions

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Donaldson, *America at war since 1945: politics and diplomacy in Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1996)

to withdraw U.S. forces from Vietnam even without establishing capitalism and democracy in South Vietnam. But this may not really indicate that he was planning to withdraw, because in different occasions he made it clear that he would not withdraw with the expectation of failure rather than success. Furthermore, Young and Buzzanco indicate that Johnson's delay in initiating a real beginning of a massive escalation of the war was because he couldn't plan for it in a short time. It was only by the late 1964 that he authorized such escalation in Vietnam. Before this date, he did not work to make sure that the military force would have enough soldiers for the escalation since he was still hoping to find a way to avoid it.<sup>2</sup> According to Brian VanDeMark (1991), the Vietnam War represents the greatest tragedy in U.S. relations of the Twentieth century. U.S. intervention in Vietnam led people to wonder who took the United States into this war and for what reason. VanDeMark tries to shed light on who led the United States into this tragedy. He focuses on the period from November 1964 to July 1965 in which America became largely involved in Vietnam, analyzing and evaluating the major decisions that had been made during this period. The U.S policy makers of this period did their best to support and keep the power of the anti-communist regime in South Vietnam. VanDeMark doesn't justify these decisions, but he argues that they had not been made easily or in a short time. He explains that Johnson did not lead America into what had been called the "quagmire" of Vietnam directly and immediately, but slowly and carefully. It took him more than six months to make such decision.<sup>3</sup>

America's attempts to develop South Vietnam as a capitalist and democratic state and to prevent a communist victory in the area had failed. No administration succeeded in achieving this goal and the Vietnam War ended in a major defeat for the United States. According to Maxwell Taylor (1972), there were many lessons that the United States could learn from the

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<sup>2</sup> Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco, *A Companion to the Vietnam War* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Limited, 2002)

<sup>3</sup> Brian VanDeMark, *INTO THE QUAGMIRE: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995)

Korean War experience. Thus, he attributes some of the U.S. failure in Vietnam to the fact that many of these lessons were not taken into account in the Vietnam conflict.<sup>4</sup> Gary A. Donaldson (1996) attributes the U.S. defeat in Vietnam to the failure of American military tactics against the Viet Cong tactics. He also refers to the type of the conflict in Vietnam which was not familiar to the U.S. soldiers as another factor that made the war in Vietnam unwinnable.<sup>5</sup>

The Vietnam War has been widely studied and discussed. However, it still remains a confusing and controversial topic that needs much more research. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explain how the United States became increasingly involved in what has become one of the most problematic and controversial wars in American history. Moreover, this study aims to focus on the evolution of U.S. foreign policy towards Vietnam during the war. It attempts to examine and analyze the decisions and actions undertaken by U.S. presidents who were in office throughout the course of the war. In so doing, it also aims at investigating the factors that contributed to the American defeat in Vietnam. It tries to provide a clear understanding of the failure of the world's superpower to defeat a small third world nation. Thus, this study is guided by the following questions:

1. How did the United States foreign policy evolve during the Vietnam War?
2. What led to the U.S. defeat in Vietnam?

The approach used in this study to answer the research questions is a politico-historical approach. The primary source of data collection is through qualitative method. It includes library research and other materials such as books, articles and journals which discuss the various aspects of the research topic.

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<sup>4</sup> Maxwell Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares* (New York: Norton, 1972)

<sup>5</sup> Gary Donaldson, *America at war since 1945: politics and diplomacy in Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1996)

This dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first chapter will be concerned with the research historical background which will provide background information about the topic such as the origins of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam and the events that paved the way to the war. The second chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of the U.S. foreign policy towards Vietnam during the war. It will explain the presidential handling of the war and the role of each president in the conflict. The third chapter will try to explain the reasons of the American failure in Vietnam. Thus, it will be subdivided into two sections in order to examine these reasons on both fronts: Vietnam and American home front.

# **Chapter One**

## **Historical Background**

The Vietnam War, also known as the Second Indochina War, is one of the longest and most problematic wars in the American history. It is a controversial war that greatly influenced the American foreign policy .While there is some debate over its exact start date, most scholars consider the Vietnam War to have begun on March 8, 1965 when President Johnson sent the first U.S. combat troops to Vietnam. However, American involvement in Vietnam started shortly after World War II with the U.S. decision to support the French attempt to re-establish their control over Indochina. America's involvement in Vietnam gradually increased, its role changed from supporting the French in fighting their war in Vietnam to eventually replacing them. The U.S Foreign policy of the post-World War II period was based on containing the influence of communism. After the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and their withdrawal from Vietnam, the United States took over the responsibility of defending the new anti-communist government, which was established in South Vietnam after the Geneva conference, from a communist takeover. The American goal was to prevent any further expansion of communism into South Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia.

### **A. The First Indochina War and the Origins of U.S. Involvement in Vietnam**

In the second half of the nineteenth century the French had gained control over the territory that included Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. This French colony was called French Indochina. Vietnamese nationalists struggled against the French rule, but the French colonial administration severely repressed any kind of resistance. Many of these nationalists chose to leave Vietnam including Ho Chi Minh who in 1917 moved to France where he became a

communist. Indochina remained under the French rule until the beginning of World War II. France was invaded by the German troops in May 1940 and by the following month the French government had quickly surrendered. The Japanese decided to take advantage of the French defeat at home, which weakened the French position in Vietnam, and in 1941 they forced the French colonial administration to allow Japanese soldiers into Indochina. However, the Japanese left the French colonial administration in charge.<sup>1</sup> By October, there were around 10,000 Japanese soldiers placed in the area. Shortly after the Japanese invasion, Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam and with other Vietnamese nationalists formed a Vietnamese nationalist guerrilla organization known as the Viet Minh, or League for the Independence of Vietnam, to fight for the Vietnamese independence. The members of the Viet Minh led by their military commander General Vo Nguyen Giap, launched guerrilla operations against both the Japanese and the French. During World War II, the United States, which had become involved in war with Japan as a result of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, supported the Viet Minh in their fight against the Japanese Troops.<sup>2</sup>

The Viet Minh were increasingly successful in their fight against the Japanese and by 1945 they controlled large parts of North Vietnam. In early 1945, the Japanese no longer trusted the French and decided to get rid of them. Thus, the Japanese coup de main of 9 March put an end to the French colonial administration in Indochina and the French troops were disarmed and captured by the Japanese, placing the Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai as their puppet ruler. However, Japan surrendered to the United States and its allies by the following August, providing a golden opportunity for the Viet Minh. Seizing this opportunity, the Viet Minh moved quickly to fill the temporary power vacuum created by the Japanese surrender.<sup>3</sup> Ho Chi Minh called for a general uprising, which later came to be known as the

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<sup>1</sup> Reg Grant, *The Vietnam War* (Chicago: Britannica Digital Learning, 2012) p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Reg Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

August Revolution, taking control of Hanoi and most of Vietnam. The Emperor Bao Dai was forced to abdicate his throne. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared the Vietnamese independence in Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square, announcing the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). In his declaration of independence, Ho Chi Minh sought recognition and support from great powers as he argued, "We are convinced that the Allied nations which at Tehran and San Francisco acknowledged the principles of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Viet Nam."<sup>4</sup> However, The DRV was not recognized by the great powers. The Potsdam Conference was held in Berlin in July 1945 by the World War II Allies including the United States, Britain and Soviet Union in which they agreed to temporarily divide Vietnam at 16th parallel. Thus, the British would move to replace the Japanese troops south of the 16th parallel while the Nationalist Chinese would move to replace those to the north.<sup>5</sup> Following the Japanese withdrawal, Bao Dai was forced to abdicate his throne.

By the end of the Second World War, the French wanted to regain their control over Indochina. They thought that the colony of Indochina is important to rebuild their damaged economy in the postwar period. In addition, the French leaders also believed that they could restore some of their prestige, which was severely damaged after the embarrassing defeat of 1940, by reasserting their influence over the area. However, France's economic and military condition after WWII made its return to Vietnam extremely a difficult mission.<sup>6</sup> The first French troops soon arrived in South Vietnam in August 1945 to take control from the British, but the Viet Minh, who were not really strong in the South, immediately responded with guerrilla operations against both the French and British troops and bloody fights broke out

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<sup>4</sup> Archimedes Patti, *Why Vietnam?: Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkeley: university of California press, 1982), p. 252.

<sup>5</sup> Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1983), p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Donaldson, *America at war since 1945: politics and diplomacy in Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1996), p. 74.

between them in Saigon. In October, General Jacques Philippe Leclerc arrived with French reinforcements, and with the support of the British, the French were able to eventually force the Viet Minh out of Saigon and make them retreat into the countryside. After recognizing that the French fully controlled South Vietnam, the British prepared to withdraw their forces from the region. Ho Chi Minh, as a reaction to the French aggression, called for a Vietnamese resistance against the French in the South, insisting on Vietnam's unity and independence. He also wrote at least eight letters to the American President Harry Truman, asking him to support the Viet Minh and Vietnam's independence from the French. However, Truman never forgot the fact that Ho Chi Minh was a communist and never answered.<sup>7</sup>

By February 1946, the French were able to completely control South Vietnam. However, they were unable to remove the Chinese troops that were in complete control south of the 16th parallel. They also didn't have enough troops in Vietnam to fight the Viet Minh forces which were much stronger in the North. Ho Chi Minh believed that the French were the lesser of the two evils, thus, he chose to negotiate Franco-Viet Minh agreements under which the French would replace the Nationalist Chinese forces south of the 16th parallel and that would guarantee Vietnam's independence. He signed an agreement with France in which his DRV would be recognized as a free state within the French Union, but Ho Chi Minh in return would permit France to place 25,000 soldiers in Vietnam for Five years. Ho, justifying his decision to allow the French return to some pro-Chinese colleagues in a meeting in Hanoi, argued:

Don't you realize what it means if the Chinese remain? Don't you remember your history? The last time the Chinese came, they stayed a thousand years. The French are foreigners. They are weak. Colonialism is dying. The white man is finished in

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<sup>7</sup> Duc Tran, "Echoes from the Past: An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Vietnam War," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*, 2014, available from <https://www.armstrong.edu/history-journal/history-journal-echoes-from-the-past-an-inquiry-into-the-nature-and-causes>, [Accessed March 29, 2016]

Asia. But if the Chinese stay now, they will never go. As for me, I prefer to sniff French shit for five years than eat Chinese shit for the rest of my life.<sup>8</sup>

Ho Chi Minh examined Vietnam's history, the current situation in Vietnam and what would better serve Vietnam's future; he felt that the French, unlike, the Chinese would not stay for a long time and that the white man had no future in Asia any more. However, the French were determined to restore their colonial rule in Vietnam and they had no intention of giving up power in the area. The French violated the Franco-Viet Minh agreements of March as they proclaimed a separate government in the South for Cochinchina in June. It was clear that the French and the Viet Minh would not reach a compromise and that a Franco-Viet Minh war over controlling Vietnam was inevitable. On 23 November 1946, the French began a massive naval bombardment of the port city of Haiphong, killing at least 6,000 Vietnamese and another 25,000 were wounded and subsequently Haiphong had fallen to the French. On December 19, after the Viet Minh were forced out of Hanoi, General Giap called for armed resistance and attacked the French troops in Hanoi, marking the official beginning of the First Indochina War. Ho appealed to the all Vietnamese to rise against the French: "Those who have rifles will use their rifles; those who have swords will use their swords; those who have no swords will use spades, hoes or sticks.... Long live an independent and unified Vietnam! Long live the victorious Resistance."<sup>9</sup>

After taking control of most of the cities of Vietnam, such as Hanoi and Haiphong in the north, Hue in central Vietnam, and Saigon in the south, the French believed that they could defeat the Viet Minh easily and quickly, depending on their military superiority. After being forced out of the cities to the countryside, the Viet Minh effectively launched a guerrilla war against the French. They planned a series of surprise attacks against scattered French units

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<sup>8</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press 1983), p. 153.

<sup>9</sup> Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 22.

and then disappeared into the vast jungles, thus, they held a big advantage over the French. They also had the support of most of the people, especially the peasants. During this time, the Soviet Union did not recognize the DRV and ignored to give it any kind of assistance. However, in 1947 President Harry Truman, taking into consideration the fact that Ho Chi minh was a communist and the U.S. commitment to fight the spread of Communism everywhere, authorized financial credits of \$160 million to the French to bolster and equip their military forces in Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

It was clear that the Viet Minh was a movement fighting for the independence of Vietnam from French colonial rule. The French public opinion would not support the suppression of such independence movement. In order to make their war in Vietnam acceptable for the French public opinion, the French had to turn the Vietnamese war for independence into a civil war. Then, they would choose to defend one side of this Vietnamese civil war; this side was made to appear the legitimate side. The French had to create a nationalist movement in the South that was in opposition to the Viet Minh movement in the North and with French colonial rule. They placed Bao Dai, the former emperor of Vietnam, as head of state in South Vietnam, Cochinchina, in July 1949, with Saigon as its capital. But only few Vietnamese were convinced by this puppet regime. The French also established the Vietnamese National Army (VNA) as the state military force.<sup>11</sup>

By the end of 1949, the situation had changed dramatically. After the victory of Chinese Communists under the leadership of Mao Zedong over Nationalists in October 1949; he declared the creation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Ho Chi Minh, who was significantly encouraged by Mao's victory, went to China to seek Chinese assistance for the Viet Minh in their war against the French. In January 1950, both China and the Soviet Union

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<sup>10</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

officially recognized Ho's government, the DRV. Hence, the Chinese started sending supplies, military advisors and equipment to the Viet Minh forces over the Chinese border. American policy makers considered such recognition as evidence that Ho's government was a communist one. Therefore, the Truman administration recognized the State of Vietnam (SVN), the French puppet government of Bao Dai, the next February.<sup>12</sup> France, now with the Viet Minh receiving support from the newly proclaimed Republic of China and the Soviet Union, could not hold on much longer. Thus, the French requested U.S. military and economic support to continue their war in Vietnam. The communist victory in China and the Soviets' successful test of their first atomic bomb fueled U.S. anti-communist feelings and made the United States increasingly alarmed by the spread of communism in Asia. Thus, when Communist North Korean forces invaded South Korea in 1950, President Harry Truman intervened by sending American troops into Korea to stop this invasion. Meanwhile, the American attitude toward France's war against communists in Vietnam also changed as the United States increasingly provided money and arms to the French. America's official position concerning Indochina was fixed when President Harry Truman approved the National Security Council Memorandum 64 (NSC-64) in March 1950. The NSC-64 asserted the strategic importance of Indochina to the United States in securing its national interests in Southeast Asia. It clearly stated that a communist takeover of Indochina would result in the fall of Southeast Asia as well.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the United States would support fighting against communist aggression in Indochina. In May, President Harry Truman approved the French request for military and economic assistance. The Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was created by the United States in Saigon in September to supervise the American military aid to the French and train the VNA troops. The total American financial aid to France to sustain their war in Vietnam was \$150 million in 1950. This number was tripled to

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<sup>12</sup> Ronald H. Spector, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> Noam Chomsky, *For Reasons Of State* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003), p. 40.

\$450 million one year later. By 1953, it was increased to reach \$785 million. Nearly 80 percent of all war supplies used by the French were provided by the United States by the year of 1954. Gary Donaldson argued that during the period “Between 1950 and 1954 the French war in Vietnam was generally being waged by the United States with French troops; the French army had become an instrument of American foreign policy in Vietnam.”<sup>14</sup> Because of the enormous U.S. amounts of military aid and economic assistance to the French through these years, the French war in Vietnam was becoming an American war to stop the spread of communism in the area fought by the French forces. In other words, the United States used the French troops as a tool to achieve its Cold War foreign policy of containing communism in Vietnam.

Between September and October, the Viet Minh units, led by General Giap, attacked the French forts along the Chinese border. Consequently, the French lost more than 6000 troops, who were either killed or captured, and large quantities of arms and military equipment to the Viet Minh. After this major defeat, General Carpentier was replaced in December by General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny as the French commander in chief of the French army in Indochina. In order to stop the Viet Minh advance, General de Lattre built a fortified defensive line, known as De Lattre Line, across the Red Delta River area, this line extended from Hanoi to the Gulf of Tonkin. In January 1951, the Viet Minh forces launched a series of unsuccessful attacks against the French strongpoints around the Red Delta River in attempt to defeat the French defenses there. But the French successfully defended their positions, forcing General Giap to withdraw his Viet Minh troops from the Red River Delta by June. By the end of 1951, General de Lattre, suffering from cancer, returned to France and was replaced by General Raoul Salan who followed a more defensive strategy in fighting the Viet Minh. By June of 1952, with the Chinese increasing their direct material aid to the Viet Minh

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<sup>14</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

and French demanding more American aid, the Truman administration sent an additional \$150 million in military aid to the French and warned to provide the French with naval and air units in case the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) entered Vietnam to help the Viet Minh in their fight against the French. Furthermore, the choice to take direct military action against China was also under discussion.<sup>15</sup>

When Truman left office in January 1953, Dwight D. Eisenhower became the next American president. By then, it was clear that the French defensive strategy was not effective and that the French were losing the war in Indochina. On the other hand, the Viet Minh forces became much stronger, gaining support, experience and military strength. Eisenhower believed that if the French were defeated in Indochina, then all of Southeast Asia would eventually come under communist influence. Eisenhower, like Truman, was reluctant to commit American military forces in Indochina, but he greatly increased U.S. military and economic aid to assist the French effort in the area. The Eisenhower administration, unsatisfied with the failure of French military defensive strategy and tactics, wanted the French to adopt a plan that would guarantee the French victory in Indochina within two years and to pursue a more aggressive military strategy, a strategy in which the French should take the offensive rather than waiting the Viet Minh to initiate the attack. Eisenhower also asked the French government to make it clear for the Vietnamese people that they would gain their independence after defeating the Viet Minh forces so that they would help the French in their war against the Viet Minh.<sup>16</sup> Thus, under pressure from Eisenhower administration, the French chose General Henri Navarre to replace General Salan on May 20 as the new Commander of French forces in Indochina. General Navarre was charged in a time that the war was going badly for the French to change the French military strategy to a more offensive

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<sup>15</sup> George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick J. Hearden, *The Tragedy of Vietnam*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 49.

strategy in conducting the military operations so that the French would hold a strong negotiating position with the Viet Minh.

After analyzing the situation in Vietnam that was clearly in favour of the Viet Minh, General Navarre developed a new aggressive military strategy known as the Navarre Plan to win the war and destroy Giap's divisions. The plan aimed at strengthening the VNA and increasing the number of its troops to take the place of the French forces in conducting the defensive operations, adding approximately nine French battalions to the French units in Indochina, recalling the scattered French forces from their isolated fortifications, and preparing to engage Giap's Viet Minh divisions into a decisive main battle in the North in an attempt to eliminate them depending on the French firepower. The French submitted the Navarre Plan to the Truman administration in order to support it and put it into action. Although there was no guarantee of the plan's success, Eisenhower agreed to fund it and consequently authorized an additional \$385 million to finance the plan and help the French in implementing it.<sup>17</sup>

## **B. Dien Bien Phu and the French Defeat in Vietnam**

In November 1953, the French established a fortified base at Dien Bien Phu with nearly 16,000 soldiers. Although General Navarre chose Dien Bien Phu because of its strategic value to the Viet Minh, the French troops were in a very difficult situation there. Dien Bien Phu was completely surrounded by high mountains and unsecured jungle. By the end of January 1954, five Viet Minh divisions, under General Giap, were able to push their heavy artillery up the mountains and successfully surrounded the French positions and cut off all the roads leading to the French fortress. On March 13, the Viet Minh artillery placed in the nearby mountains began firing down the French strongholds. The French were unable to hit the Viet Minh

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<sup>17</sup> David L. Anderson, *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 122.

positions as they couldn't spot them high above the mountains. The next day, the Viet Minh continued their attacks using their artillery effectively to destroy the airstrip so that no plane could land. By now, the French had to deliver all the supplies and reinforcements to the units at Dien Bien Phu by parachute. The French situation went from bad to worse by April; dropping supplies by parachute became almost impossible as the Viet Minh forces succeeded in controlling more than 90 percent of the airfield. The French, isolated at Dien Bien Phu and short of supplies, fought strongly against Vietnamese soldiers, but they were unable to break the siege. Accordingly, the French made it clear that only a U.S. intervention with airstrikes could prevent their defeat at Dien Bien Phu. President Eisenhower discussed with the U.S. congress the situation at Dien Bien Phu and the possibility of U.S. intervention to break the Viet Minh siege by bombing Viet Minh positions around the French garrison through U.S. air strikes. The U.S. congressional leaders made it clear that there would be no U.S. intervention in Vietnam without allies. Thus, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles called for united action to assist the French at Din Bien Phu. However, the British refused to participate in any military action in Vietnam as well as the other members of the NATO. Consequently, Eisenhower rejected the French request to intervene alone in Vietnam without Congressional approval. According to Gary Donaldson, "Eisenhower himself was less than eager to intervene in Vietnam. He had been elected on a platform to end the war in Korea, and with the truce talks all but completed at Panmunjom, he could hardly drag the United States into another Asian war."<sup>18</sup> Though President Eisenhower supported the French to prevent a communist victory in Vietnam, he didn't want to intervene militarily in the area. He was basically elected to bring the war in Korea to an end, so he would not simply involve America into another war in the same region. During his news conference of February 10, 1954, Eisenhower made it clear that he was against U.S. involvement in a war in Vietnam as he

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<sup>18</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-82.

replied to a question about U.S intervention in Indochina: “I would just say this: no one could be more bitterly opposed to ever getting the United States involved in a hot war in that region than I am; consequently, every move that I authorize is calculated, so far as humans can do it, to make certain that that does not happen.”<sup>19</sup> In the first week of May, the Viet Minh troops were successful enough to advance and take control of several French strongholds. Eventually, on 7 May, the Viet Minh divisions managed a full scale attack in which they captured the remaining French positions at Dien Ben Phu. This humiliating defeat at Dien Bien Phu ended the French colonial rule in Indochina.

At a conference of foreign ministers of Britain, the Soviet Union, France and the United States in February 1954, the French Foreign Minister George Bidault, despite American objection, insisted to include the issue of Indochina on the agenda of the Geneva Conference that was intended to discuss the Korean issue the next April.<sup>20</sup> The U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles tried to prevent the French from negotiating on Indochina as he feared that it would not serve the U.S policy of containment and would end with the loss of Indochina to the Communists. Therefore, the United States wanted the French to pursue the war in Indochina and achieve a military victory over the Viet Minh. When the French military situation at Dien Bien Phu became desperate by April, the French called for immediate U.S. air intervention to break the siege. Congressional leaders indicated that the United States would intervene only as a part of coalition with Britain. However, Britain refused to support such united action before the Geneva conference, favoring negotiations to settle the issue of Indochina. Eisenhower and Dulles had no intention to really intervene to rescue the French at Dien Bien Phu because they were aware of the fact that British participation and

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<sup>19</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, “The President's News Conference,” February 10, 1954, Peters and Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, available from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=10130>, [Accessed March 25, 2016].

<sup>20</sup> Kathryn C. Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), p. 80.

Congressional approval are conditions that can't be fulfilled easily. However, they tried to keep the French hope of close American intervention so that the French would be motivated to continue their fighting against the Viet Minh.<sup>21</sup> Eventually, the Truman Administration ignored the French request to intervene. Dulles couldn't convince Bidault to not negotiate on Indochina, thought he still didn't want the French to begin negotiating with the Viet Minh before they improve their military situation so they would negotiate from a position of strength.<sup>22</sup> However, the Navarre Plan failed and the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu weakened the French position.

Just few hours after the fall of Dien Bien Phu on May 7, Dulles delivered a speech to the nation over radio and television in Washington in which he expressed the U.S. attitude toward the Geneva Conference and Indochina. He said that the current circumstances in Indochina by that time were not appropriate for a direct U.S. military intervention in the area. However, the Geneva Conference might contribute to making the complex situation there clear. He also warned that the United States would be "gravely concerned if an armistice or cease-fire were reached at Geneva which would provide a road to a Communist takeover and further aggression. If this occurs, or if hostilities continue, then the need will be even more urgent to create the conditions for united action in defense of the area."<sup>23</sup> American fear of a communist takeover of Indochina was clearly reflected in Dulles' public address. Only a serious threat of a communist domination, which might be caused by negotiations in Geneva, would stimulate the United States to meet the required conditions for united action to contain communism in the area.

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<sup>21</sup> Eva Dragosits, "The U.S. State Department Position at the Geneva Conference on Indochina in 1954," (MA thesis, Eastern Illinois University, 1992), pp. 36-37.

<sup>22</sup> Archimedes Patti, *op. cit.*, p. 407.

<sup>23</sup> William Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 173.

### **C. The Geneva Conference and the Division of Vietnam**

In the wake of the French defeat, the Geneva Conference on Indochina began on May 8, the day after the fall of Dien Bien Phu. Delegates from the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, Britain, the United States, France, the SVN (South Vietnam), the DRV (North Vietnam), Laos and Cambodia attended the conference at Geneva, Switzerland to discuss the issue of Indochina. By this time, more than three-quarters of Vietnam were under the Viet Minh domination. The French approached the conference with a proposal for an immediate ceasefire in Indochina. After two months and half of intensive negotiations, on July 21, the Geneva Accords were signed. In these agreements the French and the Viet Minh agreed on a cease-fire during which Vietnam would be temporarily divided into two areas, North and South, at the 17th parallel. The North would be controlled by the Viet Minh, while the SVN would control the South. Consequently, the Viet Minh would withdraw to the North and the French troops would withdraw to the South. It was also stated that general elections for the reunification of divided Vietnam under one ruling government would be held throughout the country after two years under international supervision in July 1956. During this period, no foreign state would be allowed to send troops or establish new military bases in North or South Vietnam. In addition, it was agreed that Laos and Cambodia would gain their independence and remain as free territories.<sup>24</sup> At the beginning, the Viet Minh were reluctant to sign the agreements because they expected much more after their military victory at Dien Bien Phu, but under the pressure of the Chinese and Soviet delegations, they finally agreed to sign despite the objection of the SVN. The Soviets and the Chinese didn't want to give the United States an excuse to commit its military troops in Vietnam. Unsatisfied with the negotiations and the French desire to achieve a peace settlement, the United States

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<sup>24</sup> Jeff Drake, "How the U.S. Got Involved In Vietnam," Available from <http://www.vietvet.org/jeffviet.htm> [Accessed March 27, 2016].

participated in the conference just as an observer. Considering the possibility that Ho Chi Minh would win the programmed elections due to his popularity throughout Vietnam, the United States refused to sign the Geneva Accords. At a press conference on July 23, Dulles stated that the independence of Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam is among the positive outcomes of the negotiations at Geneva Conference. Moreover, the United States would focus in the future on preventing the spread of communism throughout the rest of Southeast Asia.<sup>25</sup> With the French withdrawal from Vietnam, the United States supported Ngo Dinh Diem, a fierce anti-Communist, to succeed Bao Dai as the new leader of South Vietnam. The United States considered Diem as the perfect choice to save South Vietnam from falling into the hands of Communism. Furthermore, the United States joined Britain, Australia, New Zealand, France, Pakistan, the Philippines and Thailand at Manila in September to sign the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) which was basically created to maintain the stability of the area and to respond to any perceived communist threat there. Eventually, SEATO “became the justification and the explanation of the American commitment to defend an anti-Communist state in South Vietnam.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, United States began its military and financial support to the new anti-communist government in South Vietnam, paving the way to a massive military intervention in Vietnam.

The U.S. involvement in Vietnam originated in the early years of the Cold War through supporting the French effort to regain their colonial control over Indochina. The U.S. Cold War foreign policy aimed at containing communist expansion and the growing Soviet influence. Since Vietnam, or Indochina as a whole, was considered to have a strategic importance to the U.S. security interests in Southeast Asia, the United States supported the French in their fight against the Viet Minh to prevent a communist victory in the area. However, the Viet Minh were able to defeat the French forces at the battle of Dien Bien Phu,

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<sup>25</sup> Eva Dragosits, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>26</sup> Marilyn B. Young, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

ending the French hope of recolonizing Indochina. After this humiliating defeat, the French days at Vietnam were numbered and they wanted only to achieve a settlement at the Geneva Conference and an immediate military cease-fire. The conference at Geneva ended the war between the French and the Viet Minh, but it postponed the Vietnamese hope of a united and independent Vietnam. The Geneva Accords temporarily divided Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel into communist north and anti-communist south with reunification elections to be held in July 1956. The United States did not sign the Geneva agreements, opening the way for the U.S. policy that it would undertake in Vietnam over the next twenty years. It started supporting the newly established anti-communist government in the South, ruled by Ngo Dinh Diem, so that it could defend itself against any attack from the Communist North Vietnam.

## **Chapter Two**

### **U.S. Foreign Policy During the Vietnam War**

The U.S. officials were alarmed by the Viet Minh victory over the French in Indochina. They regarded the creation of a communist regime in North Vietnam, led by Ho Chi Minh, as a new challenge to the U.S. Cold War foreign policy of containing the spread of communism after the loss of China. Thus, they were determined to prevent any further expansion of communism in Southeast Asia. After the French defeat in Vietnam and the division of the country into a communist north and anti-communist south, the Eisenhower administration created a new anti-communist government in South Vietnam. It strongly committed itself to this newly established government, providing it with money, arms and military advisors so that it could defend itself against any future attacks from North Vietnam. Eisenhower's successor, John F. Kennedy, significantly enlarged the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam by increasing the number of U.S. military advisors there. After his assassination, President Kennedy was succeeded by Lyndon B. Johnson who chose to escalate the war after the Gulf of Tonkin incident. He ordered the bombing of North Vietnam and gradually sent U.S. ground combat troops to fight in Vietnam. However, He could not win the war. When Richard Nixon became president, he attempted to honorably end the war and preserve the U.S. credibility. However, the war would eventually end in U.S. defeat and the reunification of Vietnam under a communist rule.

#### **A. Eisenhower and U.S. Commitment to South Vietnam**

After losing control over most of their colonies in Indochina, It became clear for the Eisenhower administration that it was just a matter of time for the French to withdraw from South Vietnam and that Ho Chi Minh would easily win any future elections throughout Vietnam. In the wake of losing North Vietnam to communists, Eisenhower and Dulles

supported the creation of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) as a new state in the South Vietnam to prevent any further communist advance in the area. Since Bao Dai was not seen as the right leader to represent the American interests in Vietnam, they supported Ngo Dinh Diem, a nationalist who disliked both the French and the Viet Minh, to lead this newly created state.<sup>1</sup> The United States, just like France did before, set up a new friendly anti-communist government in South Vietnam that was in opposition to the communist regime in the North. This was another attempt to make the Vietnamese war for independence look like a civil war between the North and the South. The United States supported the side that would serve its interests in Vietnam which was South Vietnam under the leadership of Ngo Dinh Diem, who was appointed as a prime minister by the Emperor Bao Dai in June 1954. However, Diem's government attracted little popular support in the South. It was a puppet government created by the United States, as was the case with Bao Dai's government which was a French puppet government.<sup>2</sup> On the basis of his promise to bring the Korean War to an end, Eisenhower was elected as president in November 1952. He was reluctant about engaging the United States in another war in Asia. But in 1954 he made his decision not to intervene militarily in Vietnam in order to rescue the French at Dien Bien Phu. However, he considered the strategic importance of Vietnam as he believed that developing Vietnam as capitalist and democratic state is highly important to secure U.S. interests in Southeast Asia. He gave a press conference on April 7, 1954, in which he expressed what became known as the "domino theory" saying, "You have a row of dominoes set up, and you knock over the first one and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly."<sup>3</sup> According to this theory, the loss of Vietnam to communist control would lead to the collapse of other Southeast Asian countries, one after another like dominoes.

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<sup>1</sup> James E. Westheider, *The Vietnam War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Donaldson, op. cit., p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Isserman and John S. Bowman, *Vietnam War*, Rev. ed. (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), pp. 17-18.

President Eisenhower adopted a “New Look” foreign policy which aimed at creating a balance between vital U.S. economy and the Cold War commitments, the possibility of using nuclear weapons against any communist threat, relying on covert actions by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) against governments that were directly or indirectly under communist influence, helping the allies to be stronger and trying to maintain good relations with neutral governments. Therefore, Eisenhower used the CIA that was created in 1947 as an alternative to direct military intervention. According to him the CIA was an affective instrument of his foreign policy to support friendly governments and halt communist advance.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, covert CIA operations, which Eisenhower frequently relied on to handle many of his foreign affairs, were also much less costly than direct military interventions. Many of the major covert operations undertaken by the CIA were successful in carrying out Eisenhower’s foreign policy objectives such as the 1953 Iranian coup d’état and overthrowing the Guatemalan government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in 1954. Such successes made the U.S. policy makers overconfident as they felt that they could change the world events relying on covert CIA activities. The justification of using such covert operations as a tool of the U.S. foreign policy was boosted by the U.S. experience in Korea. So the United States was able to deal with world affairs secretly, avoiding controversial and costly U.S. military involvement through sending combat troops. After the French withdrawal, the United States started using this covert-style activity in Vietnam as a result of the lessons of the Korean War.<sup>5</sup> By setting up SEATO, Dulles wanted this organization to be a Southeast Asian equivalent to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). So it would serve the United States in Southeast Asia the same way NATO did in Europe. It was mainly created to react against any communist

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<sup>4</sup> Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, “Dwight D. Eisenhower: Foreign Affairs,” available from <http://millercenter.org/president/biography/eisenhower-foreign-affairs>, [Accessed April 15, 2016]

<sup>5</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85.

attack or threat in Southeast Asia. Thus, America's involvement in Vietnam became highly justified by SEATO.<sup>6</sup>

By October 1954, the Eisenhower administration decided to provide a direct military and economic aid to South Vietnam. U.S. military advisors were also sent to South Vietnam in order to train and equip the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), which was the South Vietnamese military force. By 1961, the U.S. economic and military support to Diem's South Vietnam had reach \$300 million per year in addition to about \$85 million in military weapons and equipment. Moreover, the United States took the responsibility of paying the salaries of the government officers of South Vietnam and funding the construction of the military facilities in the region.<sup>7</sup> With American support, Diem Set up a referendum on October 1955 through which South Vietnamese could choose between having a monarchy under Bao Dai or a republic under Diem. This referendum resulted in major victory for Diem over Bao Dai with 98.2 percent of the votes. Consequently, Diem announced himself as a president of a newly created RVN. However, it was clear that Diem received much more votes than the number of the registered voters in the city of Saigon. Not all Americans in South Vietnam such as Lawton Collins, Eisenhower's ambassador to South Vietnam, trusted Diem's capacity to handle and maintain a new stable government. Yet, the supporters of Diem in the United States were able to convince Eisenhower that the decision to stick with Diem was the right one.<sup>8</sup> By this time, Ho Chi Minh and other communist leaders consolidated their power in the North, expecting to win the programmed elections of 1956 and consequently reunifying Vietnam under the leadership of the Viet Minh. However, Diem refused to participate in the elections with the United States supporting his decision, violating the

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<sup>6</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 87.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Isserman and John S. Bowman, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

Geneva Accords. According to President Eisenhower, Ho Chi Minh would win 80 percent of the votes, if the elections of 1956 took place throughout Vietnam.<sup>9</sup>

The U.S. support to cancel the national elections placed America in a difficult and embarrassing situation, taking into consideration its attitudes toward democracy and free elections. The United States justified its position arguing that the national elections would result in an easy communist victory since Ho Chi Minh was much more popular than Diem throughout Vietnam. Thus, the United States worked to prevent the elections from taking place. Ho Chi Minh tried to put an international community pressure on the United States to implement the Geneva Accords and make Diem participate in the elections by sending requests to all the countries that had signed the Geneva Accords in which he assured the necessity of holding the elections. However, it became clear that none of these countries was interested in supervising an election in Vietnam. In addition, the Soviets and the Chinese, Ho's communist allies, accepted the idea of two separate Vietnams that should be considered as independent members in the United Nations. Such events made it clear to Ho Chi Min that Vietnam would not be reunified politically, so he started with his advisors thinking that since there could be no political solution, the only way to reunify their country was through military means. The Vietnamese people had a long history of struggle to gain their own independence. First, they fought for their independence from the Chinese, then from the French colonial rule, then the Japanese colonialism and then they found themselves once more struggling for their liberation against the French. By this time, they would fight against the Americans who had created their own puppet government in South Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> During Diem's visit to the United States in May 1957, President Eisenhower publically referred to him as a "tough miracle man" who had been able to defend South Vietnam from the threat of communism. He also expressed the importance of Dime's government to the United States in its fight against

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<sup>9</sup> Maurice Isserman and John S. Bowman, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-88.

communism. So the Eisenhower administration wanted Diem to be viewed as strong South Vietnamese leader and his RVN as a remarkable success. Massachusetts senator John F. Kennedy also in 1956 called Diem's South Vietnam "the finger in the dike" which was blocking "the red tide of Communism" in the rest of Southeast Asia.<sup>11</sup>

Diem's South Vietnamese government was undemocratic, repressive, corrupt and unpopular. Thousands of South Vietnamese who questioned or opposed Diem's regime were jailed, tortured or even executed without trial by 1959. Diem also ordered to close down all the newspapers which criticized his regime. The United States forced Diem's government to follow the land reform program to gain support of the peasants in South Vietnam. The Diem government responded to the U.S. pressure to carry out some reforms to win the support of the peasants in South Vietnam. After undertaking Diem's land reform program through which peasants were supposed to benefit from the redistribution of land, it was clear that the government failed to implement such program as it ended up taking back the land that had been given to the peasants by the Viet Minh when they were struggling against the French rule; this land was returned to large landowners. Thus in 1960, only 15 percent of South Vietnamese people owned 75 percent of the land in the South. In an attempt to gain more support for his government, Diem launched the agrovillage program in 1959 to forcibly relocate peasants from regions that were under communist control to regions that were under government control secured by the ARVN. However, this program made the peasants angry since they were forced to abandon their homes, lands and fields; most of them had no desire to relocate. Eventually, the failure of the agrovillage program led to its abandonment by 1961. Then, the strategic hamlet program was launched in 1962 under which South Vietnamese peasants were brought together into secured villages to protect them and win their support.

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<sup>11</sup> David L. Anderson, *The Vietnam War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 32-33.

Like the agrovillage program, the strategic hamlet was also a failed program.<sup>12</sup> All Diem's plans and efforts, urged on by the United States, to gain the South Vietnamese peasants' support for his government were generally ineffective and had failed to achieve its desired results.

Between 1958 and 1959, communists in South Vietnam considerably gained strength. Thus, they requested for Hanoi's permission to use force against Diem's rule. A number of these soldiers were members of the Viet Minh who remained in the South in the mid-1950s to launch a campaign of propaganda against Diem's Government. However, Hanoi initially ordered to avoid any kind of military action and to wait for the right time to be ready to respond militarily. In December 1960, communists in the South formed the National Liberation Front (NLF) to unite all factions of opposition to Diem's regime and the Viet Minh supporters to overthrow the South Vietnamese government. By that time, there was a disagreement between landlords and tenants in South Vietnam in which the NLF, also known as the Viet Cong (VC), were on the tenants side, whereas, the landlords were backed by Diem's government. Consequently, the Viet Minh gained more support from the peasants who were angry at the Diem regime. By then, troops, weapons and supplies started moving from North Vietnam to the Viet Cong in the South along the Ho Chi Minh Trail through the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia. Despite Hanoi's orders, the VC started limited campaigns of violence in the form of assassinations, harassing attacks and other acts of violence. Accordingly, Ho Chi Minh had to accept this fact and authorized the VC to undertake limited military operations to resist the Diem regime in 1959. By 1961, there were 4000 assassinations of South Vietnamese government officials attributed to the VC each year. The Diem government reacted to these activities with severe repression in different parts of South Vietnam, alienating popular support because of the growing criticism of its repressive policies. According to the South Vietnamese peasants, the Diem government was not much

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<sup>12</sup> Maurice Isserman and John S. Bowman, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

better than the French.<sup>13</sup> In the late 1950s, the VC started a limited armed resistance to overthrow Diem's repressive regime. However, Diem responded with increased repression in an attempt to contain this insurgent threat by attacking all suspected communists in the South. The result was losing popular support and pushing the VC to adopt more and wider violent means and tactics to resist the Diem regime. Furthermore, South Vietnamese peasants supported the VC against Diem, dreaming of a better future after the downfall of his regime.

Elbridge Durbrow, the United States Ambassador in Saigon, was against using the entire American aid to strengthen Diem's armed forces unlike Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's younger brother and his chief adviser, insisted to do. Durbrow recommended that it should be used to encourage the economic and political development of South Vietnam in order to overcome South Vietnamese discontent and increase the regime's popular support. He also proposed to the Eisenhower administration to use the threat to cut military assistance to Diem in an attempt to make him adopt some reforms and measures that could help to avoid more public criticism such as land reform and liberty of press. Durbrow's views and recommendations were not welcomed by some American officials. According to Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams, the commander of the U.S. MAAG in Vietnam, Durbrow's suggestion to threaten the Diem government to cut military supplies by the time it had to counter armed and violent opposition was unacceptable. He also argued that there would be no economic development and political reforms without eliminating this opposition militarily first. Brigadier General Edward Lansdale described Durbrow's recommendations as "insulting, misinformed, and unfriendly." Despite their different attitudes, neither the ambassador nor the generals suggested reconsideration of the U.S. commitment to support South Vietnam, reflecting the fact that all of them were taking U.S. interests in Vietnam into consideration. Eventually, the Eisenhower administration ignored to threaten Diem and kept providing Saigon with

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<sup>13</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89.

primarily military assistance.<sup>14</sup> In January 1961, shortly before John Kennedy took the Presidential oath of office and started assuming his duties as the new American president, Lansdale returned from his visit to South Vietnam. He reported the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam and warned of an imminent communist victory as the VC “have started to steal the country and expect to be done in 1961.”<sup>15</sup> According to Lansdale’s report, the situation in South Vietnam was deteriorating and this could result in quick overthrowing of the Diem government by the VC. On January 19, 1961, the last day of his presidency, Eisenhower briefed his successor John F. Kennedy on the situation in Southeast Asia. He concentrated in his discussion with Kennedy on communist advances in Laos, not in Vietnam. He told him, “if Laos is lost to the free world, in the long run we will lose all of Southeast Asia. . . . You are going to have to put troops in Laos. With other nations if possible — but alone if necessary.”<sup>16</sup> So Eisenhower believed that Laos is important to keep the rest of Southeast Asia and that a communist takeover in Laos would eventually result in a communist domination in the rest of Southeast Asia, ignoring to mention Vietnam. Eisenhower’s view was based on his domino theory which had a major influence on U.S. foreign policy of the successive administrations. Moreover, he told Kennedy that it might be necessary to intervene militarily with allies or unilaterally if necessary through SEATO to prevent a communist takeover in Laos.

## **B. Kennedy and the Growing U.S Commitment**

On 20 January 1961, John F. Kennedy became the new president of the United States, inheriting a significant U.S. commitment to the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem. He believed in containing communism and the domino theory. He had been also among the American supporters of Diem to lead the newly formed government in South

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<sup>14</sup> David L. Anderson 2005, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), p. 31.

Vietnam. In his inaugural address, President Kennedy stated, “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”<sup>17</sup> This was a warning message through which Kennedy made it clear to the world that the United States would strongly resist communism throughout the world and it was that what would direct his foreign policy. Just few days before Kennedy’s inaugural address, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev made a speech in which he expressed his intention to help “wars of national liberation” throughout the world.<sup>18</sup> Eisenhower’s strategy of “massive retaliation”, which was based on the threat to use nuclear weapons in response to any communist aggression, had proved to be ineffective deterrent policy. Therefore, Kennedy and his foreign policy advisors replaced it with “flexible response” as a new defense strategy to deal with communist “brush fires” around the world or what Khrushchev referred to as wars of national liberation. This strategy, which was initially developed by General Maxwell D. Taylor, allowed responding to different situations with various options, through covert operation, conventional warfare or nuclear weapons, if required. Though flexible response was enormously expensive, Kennedy and his foreign policy advisors were convinced that it was necessary to deter communist aggression throughout the world.<sup>19</sup> The U.S. foreign policy suffered different reverses during the first months of the Kennedy presidency in Cuba, Berlin and Laos. Thus, the Kennedy administration had to take a firm stand against communist threat somewhere, it was agreed to be Vietnam.<sup>20</sup> President Kennedy told a New York Times reporter, “Now we have a problem in making our power credible, and Vietnam is the place.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library, “Inaugural Address of John F. Kennedy,” available from [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/kennedy.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kennedy.asp), [Accessed May 10, 2016].

<sup>18</sup> Maurice Isserman and John S. Bowman, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>19</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>20</sup> David L. Anderson 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> Maurice Isserman and John S. Bowman, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

So he aimed at preserving the U.S. global credibility by increasing his attention on Vietnam as the best place to do so.

President Kennedy had been deeply interested in “counterinsurgency” plan as one form of flexible response to fight communist guerrillas through counterinsurgency operations. The U.S. Special Forces arrived for the first time in South Vietnam in 1957 to train the ARVN troops how to fight communist guerrillas through counterinsurgency tactics and anti-guerrilla warfare. Kennedy believed that the U.S. Special Forces could be used as an effective counterinsurgency force, authorizing them to wear green berets as their official distinctive headgear, since then they came to be known as the “Green Berets.” In May 1961, 400 more Special Forces advisors were sent by Kennedy to South Vietnam.<sup>22</sup> General Maxwell Taylor, president’s chief military advisor, and Walt Rostow, deputy national security assistant, had been sent to South Vietnam in October in order to report on the military situation there. Gary Donaldson argued:

if Kennedy had opposed further intervention (or if he had any doubts about the policy of U.S. intervention at all), he would not have sent Taylor and Rostow. Taylor, the president’s chief military advisor, was pushing hard for both his flexible response foreign policy and counterinsurgency; and Rostow was the administration's chief advocate for intervention in Vietnam.<sup>23</sup>

According to Donaldson, Kennedy’s decision to send Taylor, who was an advocate of flexible response defense strategy, and Rostow, who favored a deeper U.S. involvement in Vietnam, to South Vietnam meant that he was not against enlarging American involvement in Vietnam. As expected, they expressed in their report the necessity to expand U.S. support and presence in South Vietnam because of the deteriorating situation there and that the Diem’s

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<sup>22</sup> Maurice Isserman and John S. Bowman, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

government would not survive without such support. They also suggested sending 8000 American soldiers to South Vietnam in order to help dealing with the damage caused by the Mekong Delta floods. Taylor- Rostow's suggestion to send American troops to South Vietnam was not welcomed, but Kennedy felt that he needed to protect the U.S. credibility and prestige through standing up strongly against communist threat in Vietnam after his foreign policy reverses during his first years in office. There were nearly 800 American military advisors in South Vietnam by the time Kennedy became president in January 1961. This number had increased to 3,000 by the end of the year. One year later, it had expanded to reach 11,000 U.S. advisors with U.S. pilots and helicopters supplying air cover to ARVN troops. So Kennedy was enlarging the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam by increasing the number of U.S. advisors there, it was limited but growing escalation of U.S. involvement. The VC number in the South, On the other hand, had also increased from 7,000 in 1960 to approximately 140,000 by 1964. Furthermore, the escalation of U.S. involvement in South Vietnam was accompanied with increased assistance from both China and the Soviet Union to North Vietnamese. There was also a considerable increase in the flow of weapons and supplies from North Vietnam into the South through the Ho Chi Minh Trail.<sup>24</sup>

The attempts of the Diem government to win the support of South Vietnamese peasants and control the countryside through the strategic hamlet program failed because it was against the desire of the peasants who didn't want to leave their ancestors' lands. By the summer of 1963, Diem was getting weaker because of his unpopular, corrupt and repressive government. A number of Buddhist monks burned themselves to death in protest against Diem's repressive regime. By that time, Americans were able to see, for the first time, some of these Buddhist monks in addition to massive demonstrations against the Diem government on U.S. television screens. The increased commitment to Diem began to cause problems to the United States in

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<sup>24</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

Vietnam; especially Diem's refusal to implement the reforms urged by the United States. This led the Kennedy administration to abandon Diem and encourage his overthrow. On November 1, 1963, a military coup d'etat led by the ARVN generals took place against Diem in which Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu were arrested and murdered the next day. The Kennedy administration formally recognized the new government of South Vietnam led by General Duong Van Minh on November 8. The new American ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, assured this new leader that the United States would keep supporting South Vietnam. However, On Friday 22 November, President Kennedy was assassinated and was immediately succeeded by Lyndon B. Johnson.<sup>25</sup> Again the U.S. commitment to Vietnam passed to another administration and Johnson reaffirmed that inherited commitment to aid South Vietnam. He chose to escalate the war in Vietnam by deepening and expanding the U.S. involvement there.

### **C. Johnson and the Escalation of the War**

When Lyndon Johnson became president after Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, there were more than 16,000 U.S. military advisors in Vietnam. So he inherited a commitment to South Vietnam which was much deeper than the one Kennedy had inherited before. Shortly after being sworn into office, Johnson made his attitude toward Vietnam clear as he told the ambassador Lodge, "I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went."<sup>26</sup> He asserted that he would not let the tragedy of the loss of China to be repeated in South Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia. General Duong Van Minh's new government was not able to improve the deteriorating situation in Saigon. In January 1964, Minh was overthrown by General Nguyen Khanh who would make no difference also. Two months later, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara

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<sup>25</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp 93-95.

<sup>26</sup> Brian VanDeMark, *INTO THE QUAGMIRE: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 25.

visited Saigon and reported to the President Johnson that the situation in South Vietnam had clearly deteriorated and was collapsing and that the new South Vietnamese government led by Khanh proved to be weak. Thus, he urged to increase the U.S. aid to South Vietnam. Consequently, Johnson increased the number of American military advisors in South Vietnam to reach 23,000 by the end of the year with \$50 million in economic assistance. Moreover, General William Westmoreland was appointed by Johnson to command the U.S. military advisory forces in South Vietnam, destroyer patrols were also authorized along the North Vietnam coast.<sup>27</sup> On 2 August, the USS Maddox, an American destroyer, was attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin. One of the boats was sunk as the Maddox fired back and two others were damaged by the carrier Ticonderoga which assisted the Maddox. Two days later, the Maddox joined by the destroyer Turner Joy reported that they were under another North Vietnamese torpedo attack. Although, there were doubts about the certainty of the second attack against the U.S. destroyers, Johnson responded to this incident by authorizing air strikes against the naval bases of North Vietnam. President Johnson relied on what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin to obtain a congressional resolution through which he could approve “all necessary measures to repel any armed attacks against the forces of the United States and to prevent further armed aggression.”<sup>28</sup> The U.S. Congress, by an almost unanimous vote, passed this Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on 7 August which would be used later as a justification to escalate the war in Vietnam. Johnson’s strong but limited response to the incident in the Gulf of Tonkin helped him in his presidential campaign as the November 1964 election ended in a major victory for Johnson against the Republican candidate Barry Goldwater, who favored expanding the war in Vietnam.<sup>29</sup>

In South Vietnam, the situation was getting worse with a very unstable government. The ARVN forces were ineffective, suffering from series of defeats and increased desertion rate,

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<sup>27</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p 97.

<sup>28</sup> David L. Anderson 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 44-45.

whereas the VC were making significant advances. In addition, regular North Vietnamese troops started moving South in the late 1964. President Johnson and his advisors feared that South Vietnam was about to collapse and agreed on the need to bomb the North in order to save the situation in the South. On February 7, 1965, the U.S. base at Pleiku in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam was attacked by VC forces. Eight American soldiers were killed and ten U.S. planes were destroyed in that attack. This led President Johnson to respond by authorizing retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam. These air strikes were increased as the VC launched another attack against U.S. installation in Qui Nhon. Shortly after these attacks, Johnson authorized a sustained bombing campaign of North Vietnam known as Rolling Thunder. The number of sorties flown against North Vietnam gradually increased from 25,000 in 1965 to 79,000 in 1966 to 12,000 sorties per month by the end of the year.<sup>30</sup> Despite the three years of sustained bombing campaign, the supplies from the North continued to flow, the ARVN troops suffered heavy casualties from the VC and the political situation in South Vietnam further deteriorated. So it became clear that Rolling Thunder did not succeed in such agricultural country. In order to provide ground protection to the U.S. air base at Danang, Johnson sent two U.S. Marine battalions that landed there on 8 March 1965.<sup>31</sup> Those were the first U.S. ground combat troops to arrive in Vietnam. This American air and ground escalation led North Vietnam to increase the number of regular North Vietnamese troops moving into the South.<sup>32</sup> President Johnson changed the role of these U.S. Marine ground troops from defensive to a more active role against the VC by approving National Security Action Memorandum 328 (NSAM 328) On April 2. This was another significant decision made by Johnson, leading to the Americanization of the war in Vietnam. In April, he also increased the number of U.S. ground troops in South Vietnam to 82,000 as

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<sup>30</sup> Gary Donaldson, op. cit., p. 100.

<sup>31</sup> David L. Anderson 2005, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>32</sup> John Whiteclay Chambers II, "Vietnam War (1960–1975)," *The Oxford Companion to American Military History*, 2000, available from [http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Vietnam\\_War.aspx](http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Vietnam_War.aspx), [Accessed June 02, 2016].

Westmoreland requested , allowing them to undertake offensive operations against the VC. Since Westmoreland was repeatedly asking for more troops, this number increased to reach approximately 184,300 U.S. troops by the end of the year.<sup>33</sup>

By the end of 1967, the number of U.S troops fighting in Vietnam had reached 500,000 and Westmoreland was still requesting for more troops. However, this escalation was accompanied with heavy casualties as the number of Americans who had been killed in Vietnam increased to more than 16,000 by that time, with achieving nothing. This resulted in a growing public discontent with Johnson's policies and in an increasing antiwar movement. Secretary of Defense McNamara, who was a strong advocate for U.S. intervention in Vietnam, sent President Johnson a memo in which he suggested that the United States should stop sending more American soldiers, limit the military operations to the South, reduce the bombing of the North and seek a negotiated settlement of the war which was destroying U.S. global credibility. On 2 November, the president held a meeting with the "Wise Men," a group of former foreign policy advisors which included Maxwell Taylor, Clark Clifford, McGeorge Bundy, Omar Bradley, Henry Cabot Lodge, Dean Acheson, George Ball and others. Johnson consulted them about his policy in Vietnam, but without sharing the McNamara memorandum with them. They supported his Vietnam policy and didn't want the United States to abandon the war.<sup>34</sup> So Johnson's Vietnam policy was not questioned by the Wise Men as he received their support. He showed no intention to change it until the Tet Offensive took place in early 1968, which was generally considered as the turning point in the Vietnam War.

In November 1967, Westmoreland returned to the United States to give a report about the military situation and the progress of the war in Vietnam. He was confident that the war was progressing toward victory, assuring reporters and the American public that he would win

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<sup>33</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>34</sup> David L. Anderson 2005, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58.

the war within two years.<sup>35</sup> By that time, the cities were controlled by the American and the ARVN troops whereas the Countryside was controlled by the Viet Cong. On January 31, 1968, the VC and North Vietnamese regular troops launched a major offensive that would become known as the Tet Offensive against five of South Vietnam's major cities and several U.S. and ARVN military installations. Though the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese lost nearly 58,000 men and did not achieve a military victory, they were able to affect the course of the war. After eight weeks of fighting, approximately 4,000 U.S. soldiers, 5,000 ARVN troops, and more than 14,000 South Vietnamese civilians were killed. The Tet offensive made it clear to Americans at home that Westmoreland's claim, that they were winning the war, could not be trusted anymore and many of them turned against the war. The American public opinion and the Johnson administration's credibility and popularity were highly influenced by the Tet offensive.<sup>36</sup> In February, General Westmoreland again requested additional 206,000 troops, but Clark Clifford, who replaced McNamara as secretary of defense on March 1, recommended Johnson to deny the request, arguing that sending more troops would do nothing. Clifford had to be a supporter of Johnson's escalation policy in Vietnam, but now he began to oppose the war and wanted to bring it to an end. In March, Johnson again held a meeting with the Wise Men, but this time his Vietnam policy didn't receive their support. A few days later on March 31, desperate Johnson announced that he had ordered to stop the bombing of North Vietnam and that he had no intention to stand for re-election, but he would instead look for a negotiated peace in Vietnam.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Vice President Hubert Humphrey was nominated as a Democratic candidate in the November presidential election in which he was defeated by Republican Richard Nixon. On May 10, peace negotiations between the United

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<sup>35</sup> Maurice Isserman and John S. Bowman, op. cit., p. 117.

<sup>36</sup> Gary Donaldson, op. cit., pp. 115-116.

<sup>37</sup> Alan Woods, "The Tet Offensive: the turning point in the Vietnam War," *In Defence of Marxism*, 30 Jan 2008, available from <http://www.marxist.com/tet-offensive-part-one.htm>, [Accessed June 06, 2016].

States and Hanoi started in Paris, but it achieved nothing as the war continued between both sides.

#### **D. Nixon and the Preservation of American Credibility**

Richard Nixon was elected as president in November 1968 with the goal of preserving his nation's credibility by bringing the war in Vietnam to an "honorable end." So his administration did not seek to achieve victory in Vietnam, but it sought to achieve what Nixon called "peace with honor." President Nixon and his national security advisor Henry Kissinger maintained the peace negotiations in Paris started by Johnson. They also attempted to mollify the antiwar movement by gradually withdrawing the American troops from Vietnam and at the same time preparing ARVN forces to gradually take over the responsibility for the war and fight on their own; such strategy became known as "Vietnamization." Furthermore, they secretly started bombing neutral Cambodia in March 1969, targeting the VC and North Vietnamese troops sanctuaries in the area.<sup>38</sup> The first U.S. troop withdrawal started with the president's June announcement of bringing 25,000 men home in August. By the end of the year, nearly 115,000 U.S. troops had been brought home.

The peace talks which were taking place in France failed to achieve a negotiated settlement. Nixon and Kissinger wanted an independent non-communist South Vietnam whereas North Vietnamese delegates insisted on a reunified Vietnam under a coalition government with a complete removal of American forces from the South. Thus, Kissinger started conducting secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese in February 1970. Between February and April, Kissinger secretly held three meetings with the North Vietnamese delegate Le Duc Tho in Paris. However, these meetings accomplished nothing as the North Vietnamese insisted on the same demands. In April 1970, President Nixon declared that additional 150,000 U.S. troops would be withdrawn from Vietnam within the next year.

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<sup>38</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

Moreover, in the same month the president Nixon also declared that The U.S. and ARVN troops were invading Cambodia to attack the enemy sanctuaries in the area. However, the invasion led the enemy to abandon their sanctuaries to penetrate deeply inside Cambodia. Widening the war by invading Cambodia intensified the antiwar movement as it evoked massive protests and student strikes around the country. Four Kent State University students were shot to death during an antiwar demonstration in early May. Shortly after this incident, about 450 campuses throughout the United States were witnessing strikes.<sup>39</sup> In February 1971, Laos was invaded by ARVN soldiers in an attempt to stop the flow of supplies moving south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in order to buy time for Vietnamization. However, the invasion failed to achieve its objective and the antiwar movement was further intensified.

On April 24, there were massive antiwar demonstrations in Washington, D.C. and San Francisco. President Nixon increased the U.S. troop withdrawals during 1971 so that only 175,000 U.S. soldiers were left in Vietnam. In order to show that Vietnamization was working well, Nixon was gradually decreasing the number of American troops in Vietnam over four years from more than 500,000 in 1969, to 175,000 by the end of 1971, and to only 50,000 by 1972. During this period, he made many television speeches, announcing each time a reduction in the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam and proclaiming that every withdrawal was a proof of the success of Vietnamization plan. However, there had been always other U.S. troops left in Vietnam who would fight and die there to hide the fact that such plan would never succeed.<sup>40</sup> The rapid reduction of the American troops in Vietnam, the inability of the South Vietnamese forces to fight effectively and the growing American opposition to the war encouraged the North Vietnamese to stick to their settlement terms in Paris. By the end of 1971, it became clear that the Nixon-Kissinger strategy had failed as it weakened the U.S. position at the bargaining table and fueled domestic protests and the antiwar movement

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<sup>39</sup> Gary Donaldson, op. cit., pp. 124-125.

<sup>40</sup> Ken Hughes, "The Paris 'Peace' Accords Were a Deadly Deception," *History News Network*, 31 Jan. 2013, available from <http://hnn.us/articles/paris-peace-accords-were-deadly-deception>, [Accessed June 06, 2016].

without ending the conflict. In March 1972, North Vietnamese troops supported by tanks, rockets, and heavy artillery launched a massive attack, known as the Easter Offensive, on South Vietnam. By that time, few U.S. combat troops, about 6,000, were left in Vietnam. The ARVN troops were defeated in the northern provinces of South Vietnam and lost the Quang Tri province. In response to this Offensive, President Nixon authorized massive U.S. air strikes against the attackers in April. On May 2, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho secretly held another meeting in Paris, but again they accomplished nothing. Thus, President Nixon felt it was necessary to take action in order to bring the North Vietnamese into negotiations. On May 8, he ordered a massive bombing campaign against North Vietnam with the mining of Haiphong harbor. This resulted in recapturing the Quang Tri province by the ARVN forces in September and ending the Easter Offensive.<sup>41</sup> By that time, the Easter Offensive Proved that Vietnamization was a failure since ARVN forces were ineffective without U.S. air strikes.

The Easter Offensive didn't weaken Nixon's chances for reelection as he won a huge victory over the Democratic candidate George McGovern in the 1972 presidential election. Before the presidential election in October, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho almost reached a negotiated settlement. However, Nguyen Van Thieu, the South Vietnamese president by that time, didn't accept a settlement in which North Vietnamese forces were allowed to remain in South Vietnam. After the presidential election, Kissinger continued negotiations with Le Duc Tho presenting sixty-nine changes in the agreement requested by Thieu. However, Hanoi rejected these changes. In December, President Nixon order an intensive B-52 bombing against Hanoi known as the Christmas Bombing and threatened Thieu to cut the U.S. economic and military assistance of South Vietnam if he kept rejecting the agreement. The bombing forced the North Vietnamese to return to negotiations on January 8, 1973. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho finally reached a peace agreement which was announced on January 23 and

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<sup>41</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-130.

officially signed in Paris on January 27. This time Thieu was forced to accept the agreement. In this peace agreement, the United States and North Vietnam agreed on immediate cease-fire, complete withdrawal of all American troops from Vietnam, the release of all American prisoners of war and preventing more troops from both sides to be introduced into the South.<sup>42</sup> Nixon had withdrawn the last American troops from South Vietnam by the end of March. After a complete U.S. withdrawal, things were going from bad to worse in South Vietnam. The ARVN forces were unable to fight and they had no more arms to use so that President Thieu resigned on April 21, 1975. Nine days later, Saigon became under North Vietnamese control after the surrender of South Vietnamese forces, marking the end of the Vietnam War with the American failure to prevent a communist victory in Vietnam.

After the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the division of Vietnam at Geneva Conference in 1954, the Eisenhower administration aimed at securing U.S. interests in the area by establishing a new anti-communist government in South Vietnam, under Ngo Dinh Diem's leadership, to prevent any communist aggression from the North. The Eisenhower administration committed itself to supporting the newly established RVN to ensure that it would develop as viable capitalist nation. Eisenhower trapped himself into commitment to South Vietnam as part of U.S. containment policy and handed it over to his successor. Kennedy inherited this commitment and deepened the American involvement in Vietnam as he significantly expanded the number of U.S. military advisors in South Vietnam. Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, gradually escalated the war by bombing North Vietnam and sending increasingly U.S. ground troops to South Vietnam. However, he was unable to achieve victory and the war became extremely unpopular. By the time Richard Nixon became president, he tried to achieve a negotiated settlement of the war in which he could preserve the U.S. honor and credibility. After U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, the North Vietnamese

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<sup>42</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-133.

unified Vietnam under their control after invading South Vietnam and defeating ARVN forces. So The United States failed to prevent a communist victory in Vietnam and lost the war.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Reasons for American Defeat**

The Vietnam War ended in a major military defeat to the United States. Following U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, the North Vietnamese invaded South Vietnam, unifying the country under a communist rule. In order to understand this humiliating defeat of the world's superpower there should be an examination of the factors leading to this defeat not only in Vietnam itself, but also at the American home front. In Vietnam, the nature of the war played a major role in U.S. failure there. The U.S. Soldiers faced guerrilla warfare in Vietnam which was new for U.S. soldiers and they had no experience in how to deal with it. In addition, the military strategy that the United States pursued in Vietnam was ineffective against guerilla tactics. The VC determination to fight and their dedication to the cause of unifying Vietnam were also a vital factor that contributed to U.S defeat because it weakened the American will to keep fighting the war. Furthermore, the United States did not learn from the lessons and the mistakes of the Korean experience. On the other hand, there were other factors at American home front that contributed to the American defeat in Vietnam such as the media, the antiwar movement, the impact of the Tet Offensive and the consequences of the war on U.S. Economy. All these factors, directly or indirectly, affected the outcome of the war and played a role in U.S. failure in Vietnam.

#### **A. In Vietnam**

The nature of the war and the battlefield in Vietnam gave the VC and regular North Vietnamese soldiers a huge advantage over the American troops. The war in Vietnam was not like the war in Korea with a front and isolated battlefield. This made the American soldiers feel that the enemy was everywhere. The U.S. soldiers were victorious in most of the battles

in which there was a direct confrontation with the enemy, but because of the nature of the war in Vietnam, winning battles was not a measure of success. The American soldiers in Vietnam were not enough in terms of number to hold one area for a long time so they were moving from one area to another. Thus, the enemy was able to take back each area left by the U.S. troops. One of the most significant difficulties that the United States faced in Vietnam was its failure to isolate the battlefield. The military fight in Vietnam was not like the military fight in Korea, where the isolated battlefield was the Korean peninsula. In Vietnam, the United States was unable to prevent infiltration of communist troops and materiel because of its inability to secure the northern and western borders with Laos and Cambodia. The absence of isolated battlefield meant the absence of military fronts and direct confrontations with the enemy having no difficulty in receiving supplies.<sup>1</sup> The U.S soldiers were not familiar with the terrain and the environment in Vietnam unlike the VC who took advantage of this and relied on successful guerrilla tactics in their fighting. American soldiers had no prior experience in guerrilla fighting. Consequently, they found themselves fighting a war in which the enemy might attack at any time, cause considerable damage and then disappear into the countryside before the arrival of any air support. The fact that U.S soldiers were dealing with an enemy that was operating in the shadows made them confused and disturbed and created fear among them. Because there was no isolated battlefield, the enemy units were given the advantage to choose the place and the time of the battle. It was that what made the war in Vietnam unlike the wars that the United States had fought before.<sup>2</sup>

The United States Started the Vietnam War with no clear military strategy. This was the result of overconfidence, so it ended up with no military strategy. The U.S. policy makers and even soldiers thought that the physical presence of U.S. troops in Vietnam alone would be

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-109.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

sufficient to make the North Vietnamese back down and bring the war to an early end. Therefore, this overconfidence put the United States in a difficult situation from which it had no workable military strategy in Vietnam since its physical presence didn't intimidate the VC and North Vietnamese communists or compelled them to surrender.<sup>3</sup> Then, the United States followed a strategy which was based on superior firepower and bombings in order to gain military advantage over the enemy. However, this was not an effective strategy against the VC who were fighting a successful guerrilla war. The U.S. massive bombing campaigns, 7 million tons of bombs, reflected the ineffectiveness of this strategy. The U.S. air power was useless because of the possibility of accidental bombing of their own U.S. troops since the VC were close to these troops. The vast jungles and the underground tunnels also helped the VC to escape aerial detection. In addition, the fact that there was no clear distinction between the VC and ordinary civilian Southern Vietnamese made it difficult for the U.S troops to distinguish between the two. Consequently, the use of U.S. superior firepower and bombing resulted in the destruction of many villages, the killing of thousands of innocent people and the creation of millions of refugees, proving that this strategy was not effective in fighting against guerrilla fighters. In May 1967, McNamara realized that the U.S air strikes and artillery bombardment would have only damage the U.S. global reputation and credibility as he warned, "The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 noncombatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one."<sup>4</sup> After two years of depending on superior firepower and bombings, McNamara became worried that this military strategy would distort America's international image because of the destruction of villages and civilian casualties without achieving real military progress in the war against a small third world

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<sup>3</sup> Gary Donaldson, op. cit., p. 106.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Walter, "McNamara Recalls, and Regrets, Vietnam," *The New York Times*, 9 April 1995, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/04/09/world/mcnamara-recalls-and-regrets-vietnam.html>, [Accessed June 29, 2016]

nation. The failure of this strategy led many American soldiers to question the tactics they were following in their fight against the VC. In addition, some of them also started to question the war itself because of the huge numbers of innocent civilian casualties. Consequently, they became less motivated to keep fighting.

The Vietnamese people lived years of oppression by foreign nations and they had a long history of struggle for their independence and freedom. The VC and North Vietnamese troops were determined to fight to the end and were committed to unify Vietnam. They were motivated to fight together for their freedom against the U.S. invaders who lacked the support of their population. Maxwell Taylor, the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, was impressed by the Viet Cong's fighting power and persistence. In late 1964, he viewed the way the VC were keeping to retrieve their losses and rebuilding their forces as one of the secrets of the guerrilla war. He also pointed out that the VC soldiers were incredibly keeping up morale.<sup>5</sup> The United States was militarily strong, but it lacked the political will and determination to fight like the VC. It ignored Vietnam's long history of struggle and underestimated the North Vietnamese commitment and dedication to their cause. After the war came to an end, Dean Rusk, who served as a Secretary of State during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, admitted that underestimating the North Vietnamese tenacity and overestimating the patience of Americans were the two mistakes that he made in Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> The VC recognized the fact they were unable to defeat the American troops militarily, so they aimed to defeat them politically. General Vo Nguyen Giap in 1990 reflected this strategy when he said:

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<sup>5</sup> James Ferns, "Why did the US lose the war in Vietnam?" *International Socialist Group*, 2 August, 2012, available from <http://www.international-socialist.org.uk/index.php/2012/08/why-did-the-us-lose-the-war-in-vietnam/>, [Accessed June 30, 2016]

<sup>6</sup> Eric Pace, "Dean Rusk, Secretary of State in Vietnam War, Is Dead at 85," *The New York Times*, 22 Dec 1994, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/12/22/obituaries/dean-rusk-secretary-of-state-in-vietnam-war-is-dead-at-85.html>, [Accessed June 20, 2016]

We were not strong enough to drive out a half million American troops, but that wasn't our aim. Our intention was to break the will of the American government to continue the war. Westmoreland was wrong to expect that his superior firepower would grind us down. If we had focused on the balance of forces, we would have been defeated in two hours. We were waging a people's war ... America's sophisticated arms, electronic devices and all the rest were to no avail in the end. In war there are the two factors - human beings and weapons. Ultimately, though, human beings are the decisive factor. Human beings! Human beings!<sup>7</sup>

The VC aimed at breaking the American will to keep fighting the war by their determination to fight to the end and their readiness to sacrifice their lives to the cause of winning the war and unifying Vietnam. The United States relied on superior firepower to destroy the enemy. So the war was like superior firepower against human beings, but the human beings would ultimately decide the outcome of the war, not weapons. In addition most of the American soldiers in Vietnam were conscripts after 1965 because of the military draft. Many of whom were young soldiers found themselves in a war they didn't want to be involved in. They were sent to Vietnam to fight a war they hardly believed in. Thus, training and motivating these troops was a real challenge.

There were many lessons to be learnt from the Korean War experience, but these lessons were not seriously analyzed or taken into account in U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The United States once again became involved in another war in Asia, a war that the U.S. public largely opposed at home. General Maxwell D. Taylor, who took part in both Korean War and Vietnam War, wrote:

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley Karnow, "Giap Remembers," *The New York Times*, 24 June 1990, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/06/24/magazine/giap-remembers.html>, [Accessed June 20, 2016]

The national behavior showed a tendency to premature war-weariness and precipitate disenchantment with a policy which had led to a stalemated war. This experience, if remembered, could have given some warning of dangers ahead to the makers of the subsequent Vietnam policy. Unfortunately, there was no thorough-going analysis ever made of the lessons to be learned from Korea, and later policy makers proceeded to repeat many of the same mistakes.<sup>8</sup>

The U.S. policy makers and leaders who involved the United States in Vietnam didn't learn from the lessons of Korea and from the experience they went through there in the later conflict in Vietnam. They even made many of the same mistakes they did in Korea. Moreover, the situation in Korea was similar to the situation in Vietnam in many cases. After World War II, both Korea and Vietnam were divided into a communist North and non-communist South. The United States went to war in both countries mainly to remain as the world's superpower and to show the world that it was able to oppose and prevent the spread of communist influence throughout the world. Moreover, both countries were of no military or strategic actual value to the United States.<sup>9</sup> However, the lessons of the Korean War experience were not learnt or taken into consideration by the U.S. policy decision makers in Vietnam.

## **B. At the American Home Front**

The Vietnam War was characterized by extensive media coverage. It was the first war in which Americans were able to view it on television at their homes. They witnessed what was happening in Vietnam through television coverage of the war. For the first time in history, they were exposed to many and different shocking pictures of killed and wounded American soldiers, destruction of whole villages and dead bodies of innocent civilians

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<sup>8</sup> Maxwell Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares* (New York: Norton, 1972), pp. 135–136.

<sup>9</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70.

including women and children such as the images of the My Lai massacre. This caused a massive change in the American public opinion and attitude toward the war. The American people came to recognize the reality of the war and started losing support for the war and turning against it. In 1975, Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher and communication theorist, said, “Television brought the brutality of war into the comfort of the living room. Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America – not on the battlefields of Vietnam.”<sup>10</sup> So due to television coverage, the United States lost the war at home before it lost it in Vietnam. Media coverage played a major role in distorting the view of the war for Americans. It reflected the brutality of the war and revealed what was described as the “credibility gap” between the U.S. decision makers and the American people concerning how the war was conducted or carried out in Vietnam and what was really happening there. The media also revealed that many of the 1965 increases in troop numbers were kept secret from the American people, that the numbers of casualties during the course of the war were not real and that the war waged on Laos and Cambodia was without congressional approval and was kept secret from the American people also. However, all what the media had revealed about the war in Vietnam was real without fabrication unlike the U.S. decision makers who, in many occasions, were not honest in providing information to the American public. Media had the power to turn the American people against the war by showing them its realities.<sup>11</sup> They no longer supported their nation's war effort and this led to massive antiwar protests in America.

The American government was trying hard to convince both the American public and the press that the enemy troops were becoming weak and that the war was being won. However, The Tet Offensive, which was considered as the turning point of the war, made it clear that the communist forces were not weak and that the war is far from being won. The

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<sup>10</sup> Terry Leonard, “Vietnam: The loss of American innocence?” *Stars and Stripes*, 11 Nov 2014, available from <http://www.stripes.com/news/special-reports/vietnam-at-50/vietnam-the-loss-of-american-innocence-1.313305>, [Accessed June 12, 2016]

<sup>11</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-111.

media did not present the Tet Offensive as an American military victory over communist forces or as an American military defeat. Walter Cronkite, a respected and influential TV journalist, assessed the Tet Offensive saying that there was no winner or loser, it was a stalemate. He didn't say that the Tet Offensive was a major military victory for the United States, putting the Johnson administration in a serious political problem.<sup>12</sup> The Tet Offensive played a major role in intensifying antiwar sentiments as it showed the American people the actual strength of the communist forces. Gary Donaldson explained the impact of the Tet Offensive on the American home front:

The Tet Offensive, launched by the Viet Cong on January 31, 1968, was not a Viet Cong military victory; in fact, it probably did not even achieve its minimum goals. But it turned the direction of the war in Washington; it turned large numbers of Americans against the war, and finally, it brought down Lyndon Johnson's administration.<sup>13</sup>

The communist forces did not achieve a military victory in the Tet Offensive, they experienced massive failure. However, they succeeded in achieving a strategic, political and psychological victory in the American home front. This victory was represented by the contribution of the Tet Offensive in declining the American people's support for the war in Vietnam and turning them against it. In addition, The Tet Offensive put the Johnson administration in a bad political situation because it was not able to make the American public believe that the Tet Offensive was a U.S. decisive victory over the communist forces. This problem was the result of the motivational and encouraging statements made by the administration about the war before the incident of Tet, which was now questioned and highly criticized by the U.S. public. Thus, the Johnson administration's credibility at home was

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<sup>12</sup> Edwin E. Moïse, *The A to Z of the Vietnam War*, Vol 9 (Scarecrow Press, 2005), pp. 16-17.

<sup>13</sup> Gary Donaldson, op. cit., p. 114.

seriously damaged by the Tet offensive.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, Johnson announced that he would partially stop the bombing of North Vietnam, calling for a negotiated settlement. He also announced that he was serving his final term as president and that he had no intention of declaring himself as a candidate in the next presidential elections.<sup>15</sup>

The prosecution of the war in Vietnam was affected by the antiwar movement. Before 1965, groups of students and intellectuals began a small opposition to the war in Vietnam. With Johnson's escalation of the war in 1965, the bombing of North Vietnam and the introduction of U.S. combat troops, the Anti-Vietnam War protests started to gain remarkable strength in the United States. The United States, between 1965 and 1966, witnessed a growing opposition to the war especially among students, who were engaged in marches, campus strikes, sit-ins and teach-ins. Opposition to the war increased with the progress of the war. The protesters were against the war for many reasons. They may have considered the war to be morally wrong and unjustified, especially the bombing campaigns against North Vietnam. They may also have viewed that the U.S. engagement in Vietnam to back up a dictatorial and repressive regime went against the American ideals. The military draft also played a major role in intensifying the antiwar protests. Many Young men became active in the antiwar movement because they didn't like being sent to a war they didn't want to be involved in. Most of those who were drafted to fight in the war were from middle-class families. This made the war even more unpopular. African-Americans were against the war mainly for the same reasons, in addition to the fact that the number of deaths in African-American soldiers was more than that of white soldiers.<sup>16</sup> In October 1967, about 100,000 people took part in one of the most significant antiwar protests against the war in Washington, DC, at the Lincoln Memorial. Nearly half of these demonstrators moved to the Pentagon to call for an end to the

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<sup>14</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

<sup>15</sup> Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco, *A Companion to the Vietnam War* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Limited, 2002), p. 463.

<sup>16</sup> Gary Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

war. In 1968, protests against the war grew rapidly after the Tet offensive. By this time, according to a Gallup poll, only 35 percent of Americans were satisfied with Johnson's handling of the war, whereas 50 percent were dissatisfied and against his policies toward Vietnam. Antiwar movement became more powerful and profound with the establishment of the first Vietnam draft lottery in December 1969. This led thousands of young Americans to flee to Canada in order to not be conscripted. The tension of antiwar protests increased in 1970 when four students were killed by National Guard troops during a protest against U.S. invasion of Cambodia at Kent State University.<sup>17</sup> The domestic opposition to the Vietnam War was rapid and profound and with the progress of the war it became out of control. The United States was fighting unpopular war in Vietnam and was fighting to keep peace at home. The antiwar movement motivated the North Vietnamese troops to keep fighting and contributed in preventing the escalation of the war and limiting U.S. military involvement. It pushed the American policy makers to rethink their strategies and policies in Vietnam, affecting the outcome of the war.

The U.S. economy was damaged by The Vietnam War, leading to a domestic increase in inflation during the mid-1960s. The American people were dissatisfied with the prices which began to rise and they felt that the war in Vietnam was threatening their prosperity because they knew that the war was behind this economic problem. The U.S. taxpayers were providing around \$150 billion for the war. However, a poll revealed that that 70% of Americans were against raising taxes to finance the war. In addition, there was a gradual reduction in the money that was dedicated to many of the promised social programs and projects because of the war effort in Vietnam. In 1968, it was estimated that killing one single communist soldier in Vietnam was costing the United States around \$322,000 whereas only \$53 was spent on each U.S. poor citizen. Consequently, anti-poverty campaigners were

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<sup>17</sup> History.com, "Staff Vietnam War Protests," *A+E Networks*, 2010, available from <http://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-protests>, [Accessed June 28, 2016]

dissatisfied with their country's priorities and many of them turned against the war. Furthermore, the United States considerably increased its military spending in Vietnam from \$5.8 billion in 1966 to \$26.5 billion in 1968, increasing the possibility for the United States to suffer from major economic problems associated with inflation during the post-war period.<sup>18</sup> So, the economic factor also pressed the United States to stop this expensive war and withdraw from Vietnam.

After all human and economic costs in Vietnam, the United States lost the war against a small third world nation. This shocking defeat was attributed to different factors that made the Vietnam War unwinnable. Some of these factors had to do with the war in Vietnam itself. The American soldiers in Vietnam found themselves fighting a different type of war which they were not accustomed to. Their military strategy failed against guerilla tactics that the enemy mastered successfully. Moreover, the VC and North Vietnamese troops were motivated and determined to unify their country and they were ready to sacrifice themselves and everything they could for this sake. Besides, there were other domestic factors that led to U.S. defeat in Vietnam. The media coverage of the war played a critical part in bringing the war to an end. Many Americans started to view the war as immoral and unjust. In addition, the antiwar movement rapidly intensified and caused a domestic unrest that the American government had to deal with. The Tet Offensive also had a strong impact on U.S. public and its support for the war. Moreover, the U.S. economy was highly damaged by the war that its continuation could lead to an economic crisis. Consequently, all these factors had an accumulative effect on the war and contributed in pushing the United States to withdraw from Vietnam.

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<sup>18</sup> James Ferns, "Why did the US lose the war in Vietnam?" *International Socialist Group*, 2 August, 2012, available from <http://www.internationalsocialist.org.uk/index.php/2012/08/why-did-the-us-lose-the-war-in-vietnam/>, [Accessed June 30, 2016]

## **General Conclusion**

By the end of WWII, the U.S. foreign policy aimed at containing the influence of communism. Consequently, the United States began its gradual involvement in Vietnam with the aim of supporting the anti-communist regime in South Vietnam and preventing a communist victory in the area. American involvement in Vietnam started as military and economic support to South Vietnamese. Then, it changed to a direct military intervention in Vietnam. By the end, U.S. foreign policy was more interested in preserving American credibility rather than containing communism. So the U.S. presidents didn't clearly define their foreign policy goals during the course of the Vietnam War. Their policies meandered and changed throughout the war. At the beginning, the U.S. policy centered on Americanizing the war, however, it became more oriented towards Vietnamization policy by the end of the war. Moreover, the war ended in a shocking and humiliating defeat for the United States which failed to achieve victory against a small third world nation despite all the massive military, financial and human costs.

Shortly after WWII, the United States became involved in Vietnam through supporting the French attempt to re-establish their control over Indochina. It supported the French in their fight in Vietnam to prevent a communist victory in the area because of its Cold War foreign policy which centered on containing communism. After the French defeat at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, The Eisenhower administration committed itself to supporting the newly established RVN in the South. Then, the U.S. involvement in Vietnam was deepened by the President Kennedy who expanded the number of U.S. military advisors in South Vietnam. The war was gradually escalated by Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, as he started bombing North Vietnam and increasingly sending U.S. ground troops to South Vietnam. However, he couldn't achieve victory and the war became extremely unpopular. When Richard Nixon became president, he aimed at preserving the U.S. credibility. Thus, he started

a gradual withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam under what became known as Vietnamization policy. After U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, the North Vietnamese invaded South Vietnam and unified the country under their control. The United States failed to prevent a communist victory in Vietnam and it had to withdraw its forces from the country. This shocking defeat is attributed to different reasons in Vietnam and at the American home front as well. In Vietnam, the reasons for American defeat included: the nature of the war, the failure of the U.S military strategy, The Viet Cong determination and power to fight and the unlearned lessons of the Korean War. Moreover, there were other reasons at the American home front that were behind U.S. failure in Vietnam like the media coverage of the war, the impact of the Tet Offensive, the antiwar movement and the consequences of the war on U.S. economy. Examining these reasons and factors helps to understand the defeat of a world's superpower against a small third world nation like Vietnam.

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**The Vietnam War:**

**U.S. Foreign Policy and the Impossible Victory (1954-1975)**

**Abstract:**

This dissertation focuses on U.S. foreign policy during the Vietnam War and the reasons behind the U.S. failure in Vietnam. It tries to explain how the United States became increasingly involved in Vietnam. It also examines the development of the U.S. foreign policy by focusing on the policies undertaken by U.S. presidents who were in office throughout the course of the war. It further investigates the factors that contributed to the U.S. major defeat in Vietnam despite its money, manpower and technology. This research provides valuable information regarding U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the presidential decision making in the war. It also provides a clearer understanding of American failure in Vietnam and may direct future research on the lessons of the Vietnam War.

**Résumé:**

Cette thèse se concentre sur la politique étrangère américaine pendant la guerre du Vietnam et les raisons de l'échec des États-Unis au Vietnam. Elle essaie d'expliquer comment les États-Unis sont devenus de plus en plus impliqués au Vietnam. Elle examine également le développement de la politique étrangère des États-Unis en mettant l'accent sur les politiques entreprises par les présidents américains qui étaient au pouvoir au cours de la guerre. Elle étudie en outre les facteurs qui ont contribué à la défaite majeure des États-Unis au Vietnam malgré l'argent, la main-d'œuvre et la technologie. Cette recherche fournit des informations précieuses concernant la participation des États-Unis au Vietnam et la prise de décision présidentielle dans la guerre. Elle permet également une meilleure compréhension de l'échec américain au Vietnam et peut orienter les recherches futures sur les leçons de la guerre du Vietnam.

**ملخص :**

هذه الأطروحة تركز على السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية خلال حرب فيتنام وكذا الأسباب التي كانت وراء فشل الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية في هذه الحرب. فهي تحاول أن تشرح كيف أصبحت الولايات المتحدة تتدخل بشكل متزايد في فيتنام و تدرس تطورها سياستها الخارجية من خلال التركيز على السياسات المنتهجة من طرف رؤسائها الذين كانوا في السلطة خلال هذه الحرب. كما أنها تدرس أيضا العوامل التي ساهمت في هزيمة الولايات المتحدة في فيتنام رغم قوتها العسكرية والإقتصادية و تطورها التكنولوجي. وبالتالي فإن هذه الأطروحة توفر معلومات قيمة حول تدخل الولايات المتحدة في فيتنام وعملية صنع القرار الرئاسي الأمريكي في الحرب، إضافة إلى أنها تحاول أن توفر فهما أوضح للفشل الأمريكي في فيتنام وقد توجه بحوث مستقبلية حول الدروس المستخلصة من حرب فيتنام.