Dien Bien Phu

1954 battle changed Vietnam's history

By Bruce Kennedy
CNN Interactive

It is seen by many military scholars as one of the great battles of the 20th century -- and a defining moment in the history of Southeast Asia. And yet the Battle of Dien Bien Phu receives rarely more than a passing mention in most history texts.

After World War II, France was able to reinstall its colonial government in what was then known as Indochina. By 1946 a Vietnamese independence movement, led by communist Ho Chi Minh, was fighting French troops for control of northern Vietnam. The Viet Minh, as the insurgents were called, used guerrilla tactics that the French found difficult to counter.

In late 1953, as both sides prepared for peace talks in the Indochina War, French military commanders picked Dien Bien Phu, a village in northwestern Vietnam near the Laotian and Chinese borders, as the place to pick a fight with the Viet Minh.

"It was an attempt to interdict the enemy's rear area, to stop the flow of supplies and reinforcements, to establish a redoubt in the enemy's rear and disrupt his lines," says Douglas Johnson, research professor at the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute. "The enemy could then be lured into a killing ground. There was definitely some of that thinking involved."

Hoping to draw Ho Chi Minh's guerrillas into a classic battle, the French began to build up their garrison at Dien Bien Phu. The stronghold was located at the bottom of a bowl-shaped river valley, about 10 miles long. Most French troops and supplies entered Dien Bien Phu from the air -- either landing at the fort's airstrip or dropping in via parachute.

Dien Bien Phu's main garrison also would be supported by a series of firebases -- strongpoints on nearby hills that could bring down fire on an attacker. The strongpoints were given women's names, supposedly after the mistresses of the French commander, Gen. Christian de Castries. The French assumed any assaults on their heavily fortified positions would fail or be broken up by their artillery.

The size of the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu swelled to somewhere between 13,000 and 16,000 troops by March 1954. About 70 percent of that force was made up of members of the French Foreign Legion, soldiers from French colonies in North Africa, and loyal Vietnamese.

Viet Minh guerrillas and troops from the People's Army of Vietnam surrounded Dien Bien Phu during the buildup within the French garrison. Their assault on March 13 proved almost immediately how vulnerable and flawed the French defenses were.

Dien Bien Phu's outlying firebases were overrun within days of the initial assault. And

the main part of the garrison was amazed to find itself coming under heavy, withering artillery fire from the surrounding hills. In a major logistical feat, the Viet Minh had dragged scores of artillery pieces up steeply forested hillsides the French had written off as impassable.

The French artillery commander, distraught at his inability to bring counterfire on the well-defended and well-camouflaged Viet Minh batteries, went into his dugout and killed himself.

The heavy Viet Minh bombardment also closed Dien Bien Phu's airstrip. French attempts to resupply and reinforce the garrison via parachute were frustrated -- as pilots attempting to fly over the region found themselves facing a barrage from anti-aircraft guns. It was during the resupply effort that two civilian pilots, James McGovern and Wallace Buford, became the first Americans killed in Vietnam combat.

The supply planes were forced to fly higher, and their parachute drops became less accurate. Much of what was intended for the French forces -- including food, ammunition and, in one case, essential intelligence information -- landed instead in Viet Minh territory. Meanwhile, the Viet Minh steadily reduced the French-held area -- using what their commander, Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, called "a tactic of combined nibbling and full-scale attack."

Closed off from the outside world, under constant fire, and flooded by monsoon rains, conditions inside Dien Bien Phu became inhuman. Casualties piled up inside the garrison's hospital.

Dien Bien Phu fell to the Viet Minh on May 7. At least 2,200 members of the French forces died during the siege -- with thousands more taken prisoner. Of the 50,000 or so Vietnamese who besieged the garrison, there were about 23,000 casualties -- including an estimated 8,000 killed.

The fall of Dien Bien Phu shocked France and brought an end to French Indochina.

"The very first memory I have of talking foreign affairs with my father was when Dien Bien Phu fell," Anil Malhotra, a World Bank official from India, said in a recent interview. "It was a source of great pride in the developing world. A small Asian nation had defeated a colonial power, convincingly. It changed history."

Following the French withdrawal, Vietnam was officially divided into a communist North and non-communist South -- setting the stage for U.S. involvement.

In 1963, as Washington was deepening its commitment in Vietnam, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev made a telling remark to a U.S. official.

"If you want to, go ahead and fight in the jungles of Vietnam," Khrushchev said. "The French fought there for seven years and still had to quit in the end. Perhaps the Americans will be able to stick it out for a little longer, but eventually they will have to quit, too."

From Tonkin Gulf to Persian Gulf

Veteran AP correspondent considers how war reporting has changed

By Richard Pyle

From the day in early 1963 when a U.S. admiral in Saigon chastised an American reporter for not being "on the team", relations were tense between officials running the Vietnam War and the reporters covering it.

The press in those early days was not particularly critical of the United States commitment to the small Southeast Asian country, but it was beginning to question the methods -- and to doubt much of what U.S. leaders insisted was true.

Again and again, official assertions of "progress" on the battlefield proved hollow; the "body count" became a metaphor for exaggerated victory claims.

That "credibility gap" remained a fixture of the Vietnam War. It took on new meaning in the communists' Tet Offensive of early 1968, in the later invasions of Cambodia and Laos, right up to May 1975, when North Vietnamese tanks finally crashed the gates of South Vietnam's Presidential Palace and helicopters lifted the last desperate evacuees from the U.S. Embassy roof.

Disillusioned by the first loss of a war in its history, battered by low morale and a host of other problems, the U.S. military establishment looked for reasons. Many officials accused the media of having undermined the cause by emphasizing the negative and even encouraging a communist triumph.

While the press made mistakes and had its excesses, such allegations were essentially unfounded. The so-called "living room war" of television was actually lost through flawed policy decisions and the inability of the Saigon regime, even with U.S. support, to match the resoluteness of the communist forces seeking to overthrow it.

Vietnam 'embargoes'

Historically, the U.S. military has followed a public information policy that tilts toward disclosure rather than suppression but is tailored to the demands of a particular conflict. In World War II, Allied leaders enforced strict censorship for obvious reasons of military security. Censorship again was imposed in Korea, although less effectively since journalists were not subject to it outside the war zone.

Some senior officials, including President Lyndon Johnson, advocated censorship in Vietnam. The idea was studied repeatedly -- at least three times in 1965 alone -- and each time was rejected as impractical, even counter-productive. Though frustrated by freewheeling disclosures of information, officials conceded there was no way to control an international press corps of several hundred people from dozens of countries.

Yet operational security needed to be protected as much as possible. The answer was an honor system under which American and South Vietnamese military officials briefed journalists under "embargoes" to be lifted when the first shots were fired. Violators risked loss of their press credentials, and some violations did occur, but they were fairly rare and usually minor. Responsible journalists recognized security as a valid concern, not worth violating for a cheap headline.

In fact, the very issue of security in Vietnam was all but moot. Hanoi had agents and sympathizers in key positions of South Vietnamese society, including the military and -- as was dramatically revealed after the fall of Saigon -- in the press corps as well. When Saigon's forces invaded Laos in early 1971, the enemy already knew the entire plan, right down to which mountain tops would be used as artillery and helicopter bases. The information came from official South Vietnamese documents, not press reports.

'Five o'clock Follies'

The foundation of reporting in Vietnam was the famous -- or infamous -- "Five o'clock Follies," the daily briefing where military officials provided news releases and verbal accounts of battlefield and air activity. These briefings were much ridiculed, and there were many valid criticisms. But some of the loudest complainers in the press were those who rarely, or never, went into the field.

For all their failings, the Follies were not the pack of lies that some critics suggested. The best reporters and news organizations recognized the value of an on-the-record, official version of events to compare with information from field reporters and other sources.

As important as it was to get the official version, there was no substitute for hands-on coverage, and reporters and photographers were always in the field. We drove down roads until the emptiness told us not to go any further. We trudged and sweated with the infantry and Marines, made harrowing helicopter assaults into landing zones, cowered behind paddy dikes as bullets cracked overhead. We waited long hours at isolated helicopter pads, saw B-52 strikes blossom like giant brown flowers, learned the culinary tricks of a C-ration diet, interviewed generals, lieutenants, sergeants and privates in their natural habitat, where the truth at least was bullet-proof.

Field officers and soldiers welcomed journalists; they wanted people at home to know what they were doing and enduring, and recognized our readiness to share their perils to tell their story. Some 75 reporters, photographers and camera crewmembers were killed covering Indochina from 1962 to 1975.

Little to show for Gulf War

Flash forward to 1991, the year of the Persian Gulf War. Only a handful of reporters (including this writer) covered both, and thus could see the similarities and the differences.

By that time, war -- and ways of covering it -- had changed dramatically. Along with new weapons and concepts came a new media. A massive influx of journalists flooded into Saudi Arabia, many of them relying for the first time on instant communications with

computers and satellites. This revolutionized the means of reporting and transmitting news, making control of the battlefield more difficult and the old rules of operational security irrelevant. Vietnam, by comparison, had been simple.

The military struggled to solve these problems and essentially failed. Assigned to rigid "pools" that limited mobility and impeded the delivery of news, reporters clashed heatedly with military officials, accusing them of censorship. Temporary news blackouts in the name of security caused further tensions. Perhaps the most glaring failure of Gulf War news coverage was the shocking paucity of television footage and photographs: Given the vast size of the allied commitment, there was precious little to show that the war had actually taken place.

In the end, military officials said the media restrictions would have ended after a few days if the fighting had continued. It was the very swiftness of the sword in a "100-hour war" that left both media and military dissatisfied -- and wondering whether a more satisfactory policy would be in place for any future conflict.

Blood All Over

(Editor's note: Following are excerpts from an article published in TIME magazine on July 16, 1965.)

"They are swinging wildly," said President Johnson last week in an apt description of the latest, desperate meat-ax assaults by the Communist Viet Cong. With the monsoon season well under way, the Reds were gambling on the combined effects of weather and surprise to nullify the superior power of the U.S. and its South Vietnamese allies.

Pouncing on the government outpost at Ba Gia, a Viet Cong battalion killed 30 South Vietnamese and captured two 105 mm howitzers. Ba Gia's defenders quickly snapped back, drove the Reds out and pinned them down while U.S. planes came in, inflicting heavy casualties. A second Communist blow fell farther to the west, where Viet Cong raiders overran the district capital of Dak To, then ambushed a relief column coming in by road from Kontum. Again the Reds could not hold onto what they had taken: after two days of fighting, the Viet Cong pulled out.

Saigon's forces were doing some hunting of their own in the Mekong Delta. After days of tracking, they caught up with a Viet Cong unit known as the "Soctrang Dynamic Battalion," de-dynamized it with air strikes and artillery. The Reds lost 212 dead. Later in the week, the Communists trapped a government battalion 40 miles north of Saigon, killing 151 men (including four American advisers).

That's the kind of war it continues to be in Viet Nam. Since the monsoon began, the Viet Cong have lost some 4,500 dead to about 1,900 on the government side. Last week 8,000 more Marines landed at Danang, raising the total of Americans in South Viet Nam to 63,000, and President Johnson told a press conference that another 10,000 U.S. troops will soon arrive. Experts in Saigon foresaw 150,000 men by year's end. While last week's frenetic activity may have reflected a certain Communist desperation, the President was blunt about what the built-up U.S. forces face. Said he: "We expect it will get worse

before it gets better."

Hanoi last week was ready for total war. So was Ho Chi Minh, the goat-bearded god of Vietnamese Communism and, at 75, Asia's oldest, canniest Red leader. North Viet Nam's Ho was making his last and most steely stand, and his young country seemed ready to win or die with him. Since February, U.S. air strikes into North Viet Nam have pounded Ho steadily: in more than 4,050 sorties, jets and prop bombers have razed at least 30 military bases, knocked out 127 antiaircraft batteries, shattered 34 bridges. In their wake, the planes left ablaze 17 destroyed truck convoys and an equal number of weapons-carrying trains, along with 20 radar stations, 33 naval craft and the entire Dong Hoi airbase. Yet even as the bomb line crumped closer to crowded Hanoi, there was no sign of Ho's flinching.

What makes kindly old "Uncle Ho" so hard-nosed? What is it that sends the men from Uncle (some 6,000 or more this year alone) southward as insurgents against an enemy that could crush Hanoi in an instant? More than anything, it is a sense of confidence in methods that have worked splendidly in the past. Ho, after all, has been riding a winning streak for 20 years. Through wile and determination, he aided in evicting the Japanese in 1945, then got the French to throw out the Chinese Nationalists in 1946, finally ejecting the French themselves in 1954. He now believes that the same techniques will work against the U.S. -- not only in South Viet Nam but in all of Southeast Asia.

Ho's heady resolve is fed by three powerful forces.

First comes covetousness: North Viet Nam hungers for the rice of the South and the rich alluvial delta of the Mekong River. Though Ho and other Hanoi leaders speak mistily about the "reunification of the great Vietnamese people" as if it were some grand historical mission, they actually have contempt for their southerly brothers, whom they accuse of being afflicted with a "Cote d'Azur" mentality.

Second among Ho's drives: Communist ideology. At this stage of development, the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam craves victory in a "war of national liberation." Once South Viet Nam fell, Ho could turn his attention to extending Vietnamese control over Cambodia, Thailand and Laos. As one historian observes, "The Vietnamese have contributed very little to Asian culture, and quite a bit of its violence."

Third comes Ho's fear of his Communist allies: only a reunified Viet Nam, he believes, can maintain its entity in the shadow of Red China. More than 1,000 years of Vietnamese history were spent under direct Chinese domination, and most of the rest was devoted to fighting the Chinese off. Indeed, the very name Viet Nam in Chinese means "cross over to the south."

With those forces driving him, Ho is determined to fight and win. "We held off the French for eight years," he told historian Bernard Fall in 1962. "We can hold off the Americans for at least as long. Americans don't like long, inconclusive wars. This is going to be a long, inconclusive war."

Stop the dirty war of the U.S.A. in Indochina!

(The following editorial appeared in the March 28, 1965, edition of Pravda and has been translated from the Russian.)

U.S. Air Force planes are bombing the peaceful cities and villages of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, destroying hospitals and schools; women, old people and children are dying at the hands of the murderers. Every day the wire brings new reports of atrocities by the American aggressors. The world has now become witness to a monstrous new crime by the American imperialists, who have dropped bombs containing poisonous substances on the inhabitants of Vietnam. Our generation and generations to come will never forget the barbarous action of the American aggressors; they will never succeed in washing away the disgrace of their crimes.

Vietnam. The eyes of millions of people in all countries of the world are now turned to this corner of the Earth. The criminal actions of the American imperialist circles, who have committed acts of aggression against the peace-loving people of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the other peoples of Indochina, are evoking a wave of angry protest among honest people on all continents.

The participants in the Consultative Meeting of Representatives of Communist and Workers' Parties in Moscow, in their statement, expressed solidarity with the heroic Vietnamese people and Vietnamese Workers' Party and called for international solidarity in the struggle against the aggressive actions of the American military.

A resolute condemnation of the aggressive adventures of the U.S.A. is contained in the statements of the governments of the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the C.P.R. [People's Republic of China], the G.D.R. [German Democratic Republic, or East Germany], Hungary, Bulgaria, Rumania, the Mongolian People's Republic, the K.P.D.R. [Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North Korea], and the Republic of Cuba, Yugoslavia and Albania. "The marauding raids by aircraft of the American armed forces on populated points in the D.R.V. [Democratic Republic of Vietnam]," the Soviet government statement says, "evoked the anger and resolute condemnation of the Soviet people and of all peoples who oppose imperialist arbitrariness and aggression."

In the face of the above-mentioned actions of the U.S.A., the statement points out, the Soviet Union will be forced together with its allies and friends to take further measures to safeguard the security and strengthen the defense capability of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Let no one have any doubt that the Soviet Union will fulfill its internationalist duty.

A wave of protest rallies against the atrocities of the American military in Vietnam has swept our entire boundless country.

The central agencies and newspapers are receiving messages from Soviet citizens who, guided by feelings of fraternal solidarity and socialist internationalism, express a

willingness to take part in the struggle of the Vietnamese people for freedom and independence.

A stream of letters in which people are protesting against the American aggression is pouring into the international organizations and the governments and editorial offices of many states.

Mankind demands: "Hands off Vietnam!"

Marine Lt. Philip Caputo landed at Da Nang in 1965 with the first U.S. ground combat unit committed to fight in Vietnam. After a 16-month tour of duty, he returned home, though he was later to return to Vietnam as a correspondent for the Chicago Tribune, eventually covering the fall of Saigon in 1975. As he put it: "I was with the first American combat unit sent to the war ... then I was among the last Americans to be evacuated from the place." Caputo is the author of "A Rumor of War," a highly acclaimed memoir of his experiences in Vietnam. He was interviewed for the COLD WAR series in June 1996.

On landing in Vietnam with the U.S. Marines in 1965:

Our expectations were, we were going to stay there a month to 90 days, help the South Vietnamese recover, and then we would get out. And sometime -- I don't know if it was right then, the day of the landing -- but sometime later on we got this idea that the United States was invincible. Not unjustifiable, we thought, because we'd never lost a single war we'd ever fought. I think we'd fought 12 or 13 wars before then and we'd won every one, including the one against ourselves.

I can remember one of my squad leaders, when we were leaving our base in Okinawa to go down to the airfield to get on the plane to take us to Vietnam, and he said: "Hot damn, Vietnam." We were all kind of hot to go, hot to get into something -- do something that was other than train and drill. And there was a kind of feeling -- I don't know if anybody ever said this -- a sort of feeling that, being U.S. Marines, our mere presence in Vietnam was going to terrify the enemy into quitting.

Our general expectations were, I think, [that] we were going to be there 30 to 90 days, something like that. So 10 years later that certainly proved to be incorrect.

On his first impressions of Vietnam:

It was the astonishing heat, the incredible and exotic beauty of the country, and that it didn't look as I imagined a nation at war should look: it didn't have those black-and-white flickering World War II images of bomb craters and barbed wire all over the place, although there was certainly barbed wire and shell craters. But it was actually kind of pacific-looking when we landed there, although the plane that I was in, a C-130 transport, actually took ground fire when we came in: We had four holes in the wings.

And as the weeks rolled on, we began to wonder what we were doing there at all. The most action that I think we saw for the first month or six weeks were a few sniping

incidents. I did have a corporal who stepped on a booby-trap and lost part of his foot; and we ran a couple of small-scale patrols into the villages immediately surrounding the airfield; and every now and then you'd hear mortar fire thumping in the distance. But it seemed as though we weren't really necessary at that time. At least, as I say, for the first month or six weeks.

On his first experiences in combat:

After this month or six-week period passed we were given a change in operational orders, moving from a purely static defensive posture to a more active defense -- which meant helicoptering out into the bush or walking out into the bush on patrols or on small-scale ... operations. And then one began to get an idea of how different this conflict was from those others Americans had fought in and how difficult it was going to be.

I can remember one of those very first patrols that I was on, taking something like eight or nine hours to move my platoon a kilometer through this swamp and this dense jungle -- [a] bamboo forest that we were hacking at with machetes -- and actually almost losing a squad leader of mine in something like quicksand. I remember he took a step and he disappeared up to his neck in mud, and we were just able to pull him out before he went in completely.

I would say that initially the terrain and the climate and the attendant diseases were more of an adversary than the Viet Cong were. I mean, we had ... God, there was one patrol we were in and we took one single casualty from enemy action (and quite a minor one, literally a flesh bullet wound in the hand) and 33 casualties or some number like that from heat exhaustion and heat stroke. It was 117 degrees that day and we were lumbering out there with 30- and 40-pound packs, 20-pound flak jackets and another 10 to 20 pounds of rifles and ammunition. You can imagine what effect that's going to have [on] people who are sort of accustomed to temperate climates.

There was a strain of malaria over there that the malaria pills were not very effective against ... and another [illness] that we used to called "F-U-O," which meant ... "fever unknown origin." It wasn't very serious but it would put people out of action for a day or two days or three. ...

Sometime around September of 1965, when the monsoon set in -- and what happened then was that with the coming of the rainy season, that suppressed our ... 100 percent air superiority; [the rains] kept the helicopters and the jet fighter bombers down --- the Viet Cong were able to move about with greater freedom. And so they began an offensive during the monsoon season of 1965 and the weather, the heat, was like something none of us had ever experienced before. I mean, it would rain 24 hours a day for a week, two weeks, sometimes three at a time. You were constantly drenched, and now you had people out of action with "immersion foot" or "trench foot," as it used to be called. Running the patrol was extremely difficult, because half the time you were swimming rather than walking. And casualties began to get somewhat serious, without any kind of compensation in the sense that you saw that you were accomplishing something. ...

In a three-month period, out of about a thousand men, [my] battalion had 440 casualties -

- which by World War II standards, over that amount of time, wasn't very much -- but you weren't achieving anything. You were just constantly walking out over the same ground and the enemy that you were supposed to be defeating statistically kept coming back for more and kept inflicting more casualties. ...

On fighting a guerrilla war:

As soon as we began to go on these more offensive operations, we were pretty much told, "What you're supposed to [do is] go up there, just kill the enemy." That was it. ... "We can't gain ground here, we can't gain and hold ground here; we've just got to kill more of them than they can withstand." A war of attrition. And so the gauge of that of course became the number that you killed.

And then the problem with that was that [with] so many of their forces, especially in those early days, being insurgents, they were often indistinguishable from the general population out there. So how do you distinguish a civilian from a Viet Cong? Well, of course he shoots at you or he's armed. But how about what happens after a firefight and you find bodies out there, but no weapons? And we were told ... "Well, if it's dead and Vietnamese, it's VC." Those were the exact words. So I'm quite sure that out of those rather impressive statistics, although they did suffer casualties I think that no Western army would have ever tolerated, a lot of those statistics were civilians. I'm sure of it. ...

We required this kind of instant hair-trigger alertness ... and this sense of suspicion would develop. I mean, it got to a point where outside of certain areas, you simply trusted absolutely no one. I mean, from a 5-year-old kid to a 75-year-old woman; I mean ... you never did see people in between those

Robert McNamara was Secretary of Defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. He was a key architect of early U.S. policy in Vietnam and supported the U.S. military involvement. But as the war escalated yet failed to bring results, and as resistance to the war mounted at home, McNamara began to push for a negotiated solution. In 1968, after opposing further bombing of North Vietnam, he lost influence in the Johnson administration and left to become president of the World Bank. He was interviewed for this episode of COLD WAR in June 1996.

On why the United States became involved in Vietnam:

[The domino theory] was the primary factor motivating the actions of both the Kennedy and the Johnson administrations, without any qualification. It was put forward by President Eisenhower in 1954, very succinctly: If the West loses control of Vietnam, the security of the West will be in danger. "The dominoes will fall," in Eisenhower's words. In a meeting between President Kennedy and President Eisenhower, on January 19, 1961 -- the day before President Kennedy's inauguration -- the only foreign policy issue fully discussed dealt with Southeast Asia. And there's even today some question as to exactly what Eisenhower said, but it's very clear that a minimum he said ... that if necessary, to prevent the loss of Laos, and by implication Vietnam, Eisenhower would be prepared for the U.S. to act unilaterally -- to intervene militarily.

And I think that this was fully accepted by President Kennedy and by those of us associated with him. And it was fully accepted by President Johnson when he succeeded as President. The loss of Vietnam would trigger the loss of Southeast Asia, and conceivably even the loss of India, and would strengthen the Chinese and the Soviet position across the world, weakening the security of Western Europe and weakening the security of North America. This was the way we viewed it; I'm not arguing [we viewed it] correctly -- don't misunderstand me -- but that is the way we viewed it. ...

On JFK and Vietnam:

There were three groups of individuals among his advisers. One group believed that the situation [in South Vietnam] was moving so well that we could make a statement that we'd begin withdrawals and complete them by the end of 1965. Another group believed that the situation wasn't moving that well, but that our mission was solely training and logistics; we'd been there long enough to complete the training, if the South Vietnamese were capable of absorbing it, and if we hadn't proven successful, it's because we were incapable of accomplishing that mission and therefore we were justified in beginning withdrawal. The third group believed we hadn't reached the point where we were justified in withdrawing, and we shouldn't withdraw.

Kennedy listened to the debate, and finally sided with those who believed that either we had succeeded, or were succeeding, and therefore could begin our withdrawal; or alternatively we hadn't succeeded, but that ... we'd been there long enough to test our ability to succeed, and if we weren't succeeding we should begin the withdrawal because it was impossible to accomplish that mission. In any event, he made the decision [to begin withdrawing advisers] that day, and he did announce it. It was highly contested. ...

Kennedy hadn't said before he died whether, faced with the loss of Vietnam, he would [completely] withdraw; but I believe today that had he faced that choice, he would have withdrawn rather than substitute U.S. combat troops for Vietnamese forces to save South Vietnam. I think he would have concluded that U.S. combat troops could not save Vietnam if Vietnam troops couldn't save it. That was the statement he in effect made publicly before his death, but at that time he hadn't had to choose between losing Vietnam, on the one hand, or putting in U.S. combat troops on the other. Had he faced the decision, I think he would have accepted the loss of Vietnam and refused to put in U.S. combat troops.

On the 1963 coup in Saigon:

I believe the U.S. should not have given support to a coup. I think, in hindsight, most would agree with that conclusion. It was not a universal conclusion at the time, by any means.

I think one of the things it showed was that we didn't know either our opponents (in this case the North Vietnamese) or even our allies (in this case the South Vietnamese). I don't think we knew the society; I don't think we knew the leaders; I don't think we knew who was likely to follow [deposed South Vietnamese President] Diem. This was one reason that those who opposed the coup among Kennedy's advisers, one reason they opposed it.

They couldn't get any indication of who was likely to follow, or whether the regime would be stable. And of course, what ultimately happened was, the regimes that followed Diem were not stable. It was like a revolving door: prime ministers were going in and out every few months or few weeks, over a period of time. But we as leaders, we as a society, did not properly understand, fully understand, as I suggest, either our allies or our opponents. ...

I'm only speculating now, but as I have learned more about the Vietnamese ... I've sensed the strong nationalism, the strong motivation that nationalism was to both the South and the North, and the strong nationalistic feelings of their leaders, Ho Chi Minh and Diem. Had Diem lived, I'm inclined to think he would neither have requested nor accepted the introduction of large numbers of U.S. combat forces. He would not have wished to put his nation in a sense under the control of a foreign power, even a friendly foreign power. I think the war would have taken a totally different course. Now that is only speculation, but I think it's an important point, because if I'm correct, it shows we didn't understand even our allies, much less our opponents. And this is one of the major lessons of the conflict.

On LBJ and Vietnam:

President Johnson, as Vice President under President Kennedy, had not been deeply involved in Vietnam. He'd visited Vietnam once or twice; he had been in many of the meetings, but he wasn't a major participant in them. But he in effect had inherited a war. He was determined to carry on Kennedy's policies, for a variety of reasons, and in a variety of areas: civil rights, but also in connection with Vietnam. Moreover, he had inherited Kennedy's advisers: the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, National Security Adviser, Chairman of Joint Chiefs, and so on. ...

We were deeply disturbed, deeply disturbed [by the unstable South Vietnamese government]. And the president, as a politician, was determined to do everything he possibly could to stabilize that government politically. He in effect sent me over there at one time, on one visit with Max Taylor, the Chairman of Joint Chiefs. He said, "I want to see you across that country on TV every day, supporting the President of Vietnam. We have got to stabilize that government." But there are limitations to what external military force can do. External military force cannot reconstruct a failed state, and Vietnam, during much of that period, was a failed state politically. We didn't recognise it as such. ... But he was determined to do everything within his power -- economic power, political power, military power -- to stabilize that nation politically. It proved impossible.

[LBJ] in a sense had to choose: was he prepared to give up South Vietnam and run the risk that Eisenhower pointed to, [that] the dominoes would fall? Or, if the South Vietnamese couldn't prevent that loss, was he prepared to put in U.S. combat troops, which violated Kennedy's belief that it was a Vietnamese war that only the South Vietnamese could win? And when he came to that point ... he said in effect: "I'm going to prevent the loss of South Vietnam; I'm going to prevent the dominoes from falling; I'm going to maintain the security of the West, and I'm going to put in U.S. troops to do it." Now, the decision wasn't as clear-cut at the time as I've made it sound today, but that was essentially the choice.

On the Gulf of Tonkin incident:

We were certain at the time that the first attack took place. I believe the date was August 2nd, 1964. We made every effort to be certain that we were right, one way or the other -- it had occurred or it hadn't occurred. And it was reported that there were North Vietnamese shell fragments on the deck of the U.S. destroyer Maddox. I actually sent a person out to pick up the shell fragments and bring them to my office, to be sure that the attack did occur. I am confident that it did; I was confident then, I am confident today. That was the August 2nd attack.

On August 4th, it was reported another attack occurred. It was not clear then that that attack had occurred. We made every possible effort to determine whether it had or not. I was in direct communication with the Commander-in-Chief of all of our forces in the Pacific (CINCPAC) by telephone several times during that day, to find out whether it had or hadn't occurred. He had reports from the commanders of the destroyers on the scene: they had what were known as sonar readings -- these are sound readings. There were eyewitness reports. And ultimately it was concluded that almost certainly the attack had occurred. But even at the time there was some recognition of a margin of error, so we thought it highly probable but not entirely certain. And because it was highly probable -- and because even if it hadn't occurred, there was strong feeling we should have responded to the first attack, which we were positive had occurred -- President Johnson decided to respond to the second [attack]. I think it is now clear [the second attack] did not occur. I asked [North Vietnamese] General Giap myself, when I visited Hanoi in November of 1995, whether it had occurred, and he said no. I accept that.

On the Gulf of Tonkin resolution:

Was Congress misled regarding the Tonkin Gulf resolution? Did they misunderstand the resolution? My answer, and it's important, is: yes and no. The resolution is very clear; the English language is clear in its expression in the resolution. The resolution gave full authority to the president to take the nation to war in Southeast Asia. Senator Cooper from Kentucky asked Senator Fulbright, who was the floor manager during the debate, "Does this resolution mean the President will have the authority to take the nation to war in Southeast Asia?" And Senator Fulbright said, "Yes." So there was no misunderstanding on that. But the Senate had been led to believe the president would not use that authority without seeking further counsel from the Senate; [and] he didn't [seek further counsel]. And in that sense, I think they were misled. ...

Both the hawks and the doves wished to avoid the debate [over committing U.S. forces]. At one point, President Johnson asked the leader of the hawks and the leader of the doves in the Senate: "Should we go back and ask the Senate to debate whether we should or shouldn't introduce U.S. forces, using the authority already granted to us by the Tonkin Gulf Resolution?" And both the hawks and the doves said, "No, don't bring it back - it'll tear us apart." And they were right in one sense. They were wrong on their conclusion that the resolution should not have been debated retroactively; [but] they were right it would have torn them apart. Why would it have torn them apart? Because the nation was divided at that time. Throughout the seven years I was in the Defense Department on Vietnam, the nation was divided. The majority of the people, the press and the Congress,

throughout the seven years, up until early 1968, were in favor of preventing the fall of Vietnam, because they believed in the domino theory. And they were prepared to send U.S. troops and carry on U.S. combat operations in Vietnam to prevent that loss. But there was a growing minority, and had the issue actually been debated, it would have torn the Congress apart. And that was one of the reasons why the hawks and doves agreed it shouldn't be debated.

Beyond that, the President was fearful that if he raised this issue for public debate, there were many in the country and many in the Congress who believed that we should go all-out militarily to overcome North Vietnam -- including invading North Vietnam and bombing it to the point of genocide. And that was a very powerful force in the society, and the President was fearful that if he engaged in public debate, that that force would prevail. And he was determined -- and as a matter of fact, I was determined -- to avoid the risks that would follow from applying unlimited military force. In addition to a terrible loss of life that would have resulted from that, there was ... a risk of overt confrontation between the U.S. and China and the Soviet Union, overt military confrontation, including the possible use of nuclear weapons. On one or two occasions, the chiefs recommended U.S. military intervention in North Vietnam, and stated that they recognized this might lead to Chinese and/or Soviet military response, in which case, they said, "We might have to consider the use of nuclear weapons." The President was determined to avoid it; I was determined to avoid it. He was fearful that public debate would lead to greater pressure for that, and that's one of the reasons -- not the only reason, but one of the reasons -- he avoided public debate.

In any event, it was a very serious error on the part of the Johnson Administration. We did not fully debate the actions that led to the introduction of 500,000 troops, either with Congress or with the public. And that's one of the major lessons: no president should ever take this nation to war without full public debate in the Congress and/or in the public.

On the decision to introduce ground troops in Vietnam:

The events between January and July [1965] were such that the North Vietnamese were putting additional pressure on South Vietnam. South Vietnam was unable to respond effectively, and it became more and more clear that President Johnson was going to have to choose between losing South Vietnam or trying to save it by introducing U.S. military force and taking over a major part of the combat mission. He chose, rather than lose it, to introduce U.S. combat forces and take over the combat mission. And that was because he feared the dominoes would fall if he didn't do that. And I think the judgment was wrong -- I don't want to say his judgment [alone]: the judgment of all of us who were involved was wrong. But that was the fact at the time; that was what motivated him, it was what motivated us.

McGeorge Bundy and I sent [a memo] to the President, and we said in effect: "Mr President, we're following a course that cannot succeed. We cannot continue solely in providing training and logistical support. We've got to go beyond that, or we have to get out. And we're not certain which of these two alternatives should be pursued. Each should be debated. We're inclined to think we've got to get further in." Unfortunately, the two alternatives were not fully debated, and we slid into further intervention, which

ultimately led to 500,000 troops over a period of two or three years.

On U.S. strategy in Vietnam:

The strategy was one of providing additional support to the South Vietnamese, to the point where it was believed they could prevail over the Viet Cong, which was being supported by North Vietnam at the time in the South; while at the same time, through the bombing of the North, applying sufficient pressure on the North to lead them to feel that they would pay a very heavy price if they continued to support the Viet Cong in the South. And the combination, it was believed ... would lead the North to change their policy. ...

Some of us questioned at the beginning whether [massive bombing] would ever achieve the objective. ... Some believed that the bombing ... would stop, in a sense, the ability of the North to resupply the South. Others believed bombing would not stop that. The record of my testimony before the Congress is clear on that; many of us believed it would be impossible, by bombing, to stop the flow of the small quantity of supplies needed in the South to support the Viet Cong. And I think the record shows the bombing didn't prevent that flow of supplies. Secondly, there were those who believed that the bombing would break the will of the North. Others believed it wouldn't. And it didn't.

On the war in general:

This was much more a civil war than a war of aggression. I'm not arguing that there wasn't an element of aggression in it; I'm not arguing that the Chinese and the Soviets might not have tried to use South Vietnam as a launching pad to knock over the dominoes of Malaysia and Thailand and Indonesia and whatever. But what I am arguing is that the conflict within South Vietnam itself had all of the characteristics of a civil war, and we didn't look upon it as largely a civil war, and we weren't measuring our progress, as one would have in what was largely a civil war. ...

It is said that the military operated with one hand tied behind their backs. To the extent that that refers to a restriction on land invasion by U.S. forces on North Vietnam, that's true. But today, General Westmoreland, who was the commander in Vietnam at the time, says that while at the time he felt he was constrained, he now understands that that was an effort by the president to prevent the U.S. coming into open military conflict with China and the Soviet Union. And Westmoreland says, "Thank God we avoided that. That was a correct policy at the time." Could more military pressure have been applied, in the sense of more bombing of the North? In one sense, no. We dropped two or three times as much bombs in North and South Vietnam as were dropped by all Allied Forces throughout World War II against all enemies. It was a tremendous air effort. But there are certain things bombing can't accomplish. They can't break the will of people under certain circumstances. They didn't break the will of the North Vietnamese. And it cannot stop the movement of the small quantities of supplies that were necessary to support the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese forces in the South. They didn't, and it couldn't; and no additional amount of money [or] bombing could have. ...

As early as December 1965, I reported to the President that I believed there was no more

than a one-in-three chance -- at best a one-in-two chance -- that we could achieve our political objectives, i.e. avoiding the loss of South Vietnam, by military means. And I strongly urged, therefore, [that] we increased our efforts on the political track, that we tried to move to negotiations with the North, to avoid the fall of the dominoes; and that, to stimulate a move toward negotiation, we stop the bombing. This was a very controversial move at the time. And we eventually did: we stopped for a month, in December 1965. It was one of about seven different attempts to move to negotiations, to stop the war to negotiate a solution that would yield a satisfactory outcome for the West, which was simply to avoid the loss of all Southeast Asia.

Those efforts were unsuccessful. I don't know why. I have proposed to Hanoi that ... we engage in examining what I think were missed opportunities for each of us, for them and us, to have avoided the war or to have terminated it earlier, with less loss of life, without any adverse effects on the geopolitical situations of either one of us. I very much hope those discussions will take place. We have much to learn from them that can be applied to the world of today and tomorrow. How to avoid these conflicts is something the human race has to learn. This century will go down as the bloodiest century in all of human history. We'll have lost 160 million people, killed by conflict. Is that what we want in the 21st century? I don't think so. If we want to avoid it, we have to learn from our mistakes in this century. Vietnam was one of those.

Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap is perhaps the most important figure in the early history of communist Vietnam -- with the exception of Ho Chi Minh. At the end of World War II, Ho named Giap commander in chief of the Viet Minh forces fighting French colonial rule. Giap orchestrated the defeat of the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1953 and remained minister of defense of the newly independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam. He was the chief North Vietnamese military leader in the subsequent war against U.S. forces. This interview, which was conducted in May 1996, has been translated from Vietnamese.

On the battle of Dien Bien Phu:

The Dien Bien Phu campaign is a great and first victory of a feudal colonial nation, whose agricultural economy is backward, against the great imperialist capitalist which has a modern industry and a great army. Thus, it means a lot to us, to people all over the world, and to other countries. This is also how Ho Chi Minh saw it.

We see the Dien Bien Phu victory as the victory [over] the French army and [over] the intervention of the Americans --because in the Dien Bien Phu campaign, 80 percent of the war expenditures were spent by the Americans. The Americans had their hands in it. So the Dien Bien Phu defeat was a defeat for both the French and the Americans. But whether the Americans had drawn the lessons from that, I don't think so. That's why the Americans continued in South Vietnam. ...

When we received news of the Dien Bien Phu victory, everyone practically jumped up in the air, they were so happy about it. But Ho Chi Minh said that this is only victory of the

first step: we have yet to fight the Americans. It was very clear then.

On the United States' involvement in Vietnam:

In 1945, some Americans parachuted into our war zone [for a] meeting [with] our late President Ho Chi Minh. ... Back then, President Roosevelt's attitude was that the U.S. did not want to see events like the war with France coming back to Indochina, but later this attitude was changed. After the August Revolution in 1945, the relationship between Vietnam and the U.S. could have been good, and we wished that it had been good.

Then only the intelligent people or those with vision and wisdom, such as Eisenhower, ... saw the impracticality of the [domino] theory. And any mistakes were due to following the domino theory. They thought that if the theory was put into practice here, it would become the pivotal location for [preventing] the spread of communism to the whole Southeast Asia. So Vietnam was made the central location to check the expansion of communism, and this was what President Kennedy believed, and it was mistake. ...

The Americans sent advisers to each and every division in the South Vietnamese [army] before 1965. In 1965, they started to commit big forces. We discussed among ourselves in the Politburo whether at that point it was ... a limited war. We decided that it was already a limited war. We discussed it in the Politburo that with America bringing in gigantic forces was to carry out a new campaign, with the American forces committed, it was not good for America but it would be very hard for us to fight. The struggle would be very fierce but we already concluded that we would win the war. ...

On fighting technologically superior U.S. forces:

When American combat forces were committed, it was a myth that we could not fight and win because they were so powerful. ... [We survived] because of our courage and determination, together with wisdom, tactics and intelligence. During the attacks of B-52s, we shot down a few B-52s and captured documents. One of them was a order by the [U.S.] air command about the targets to be bombed in and around Hanoi and the positions of [our] forces. Some [of the figures] were correct, [but] some were wrong because of our deception [measures]. And our conclusion was that with such anti-air-power measures, the B-52 is not an effective way to fight. ...

We had to resort to different measures, some of which are quite simple, like hiding in man-holes and evacuating to the countryside. And we fought back with all our forces and with every kind of weapon. We fought with anti-aircraft artilleries and with small guns, even though [it was] sometimes solely with the strength of our local force. An 18-year-old girl once said that she followed routes every day and studied the patterns of American flights and when they would attack. I told her that she is a philosopher to understand that, because only philosophers talk about principles. Later she used small gun to shoot down an aircraft from a mountainside. That is an example of the military force of the common people. ... We had ingenuity and the determination to fight to the end.

I appreciated the fact that they had sophisticated weapon systems but I must say that it was the people who made the difference, not the weapons. There was also a human factor involved. [As to] whether they were tempted to use nuclear weapons during the war:

there was a time during the Dien Bien Phu campaign in which the Americans were going to use nuclear weapons, and this is back in 1954 during the Eisenhower era. We were also aware of possible use of nuclear weapons and we were prepared for it. But whether the Americans could really use nuclear weapons was a question of international politics, and it also depended on the American allies. But looking at the intertwined forces, as the situation was, the result [of a nuclear blast] would not be good, and the Americans had to think hard. If nuclear weapons were used on locations where the Vietnamese troops were concentrated, it [would] also [affect] American troops.

On the Ho Chi Minh Trail:

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was a very extensive system; it started with a trail but later became a road. Many roads, actually: the Western road system and the Eastern road systems, criss-crossing here and there. And also there were the extensive systems of gas pipelines and communications lines, and routes on rivers and across the sea. We did everything possible to keep the whole system going. I visited many important points which were subjected to many B-52 bombings 23 out of 24 hours a day; we had many teams working toward maintaining the operation, including a team made up of women who had to use iron rings to defuse the [unexploded] bombs. ...

We made big sacrifices. I visited a dozen girls who maintained the route in Dong Lap of Nghe An Province; they showed me how they invented camouflage to cover the lamps so that those in vehicles can see, but the planes could not see. They urged us to move fast; and they all died during the bombing. There was danger of the trail being cut off, but it never really was cut off. With a long procession of vehicles, and with the bombing from the B-52s, it was very difficult, but we had to use both courage and wisdom. There are some routes that the Americans did not know about, but if they had used a telescope they would have seen the routes quite clearly. But we did not use those routes. We used some secret smaller trails as a detour and we went during the day.

On the Tet Offensive:

The Tet Offensive is a long story. ... It was our policy, drawn up by Ho Chi Minh, to make the Americans quit. Not to exterminate all Americans in Vietnam, [but] to defeat them.

It could be said [Tet] was a surprise attack which brought us a big victory. For a big battle we always figured out the objectives, the targets, so it was the main objective to destroy the forces and to obstruct the Americans from making war. But what was more important was to de-escalate the war -- because at that time the American were escalating the war -- and to start negotiations. So that was the key goal of that campaign. But of course, if we had gained more than that it would be better.

And [after Tet] the Americans had to back down and come to the negotiating table, because the war was not only moving into the cities, to dozens of cities and towns in South Vietnam, but also to the living rooms of Americans back home for some time. And that's why we could claim the achievement of the objective.

On the U.S. leadership during the war:

In general, I must say they were the most intelligent people, with certain talents such as military, political and diplomacy skills. They were intelligent people. That was the first point that I want to say. The second point I want to say is that they knew little about Vietnam and her people. They didn't understand our will to maintain independence and equality between nations even though these are stated in President Jefferson's manifestation. And so they made mistakes. They did not know the limits of power. ... No matter how powerful you are there are certain limits, and they did not understand it well. ...

The people in the White House believed that Americans would definitely win and there is not chance of defeat. There is a saying which goes, "If you know the enemy and you know yourself, you would win every single battle." However, the Americans fought the Vietnamese, but they did not know much about Vietnam or anything at all about the Vietnamese people. Vietnam is an old nation founded in a long history before the birth of Christ. ... The Americans knew nothing about our nation and her people. American generals knew little about our war theories, tactics and patterns of operation. ...

During the war everyone in the country would fight and they [would] do so following the Vietnamese war theory. We have a theory that is different from that of the Russians and that of the Americans. The Americans did not understand that. They did not know or understand our nation; they did not know our war strategies. They could not win. How could they win? As our president said, there was nothing more precious than independence and freedom. We had the spirit that we would govern our own nation; we would rather sacrifice than be slaves.

Now that the normalization between our two countries have been established, we hope for better relations, but it should be based on equality. Otherwise, if America is at advantage simply because she is richer, it will be unacceptable for us. Now we hope that American leaders can understand Vietnam and her people better.

The following white paper from the State Department was written in early 1965 as the United States was stepping up its involvement in Vietnam. Operation Rolling Thunder, a large-scale bombing of North Vietnamese military targets, began on March 2, and on March 8, the first U.S. ground troops had landed.

The paper defended the presence of U.S. troops in Vietnam, explaining that the United States was fighting for the freedom of South Vietnam.

'Aggression from the North'

State Department White Paper on Vietnam
February 27, 1965

South Vietnam is fighting for its life against a brutal campaign of terror and armed attack inspired, directed, supplied, and controlled by the Communist regime in Hanoi. This flagrant aggression has been going on for years, but recently the pace has quickened and the threat has now become acute.

The war in Vietnam is a new kind of war, a fact as yet poorly understood in most parts of the world. Much of the confusion that prevails in the thinking of many people, and even governments, stems from this basic misunderstanding. For in Vietnam a totally new brand of aggression has been loosed against an independent people who want to make their way in peace and freedom.

Vietnam is not another Greece, where indigenous guerrilla forces used friendly neighboring territory as a sanctuary.

Vietnam is not another Malaya, where Communist guerrillas were, for the most part, physically distinguishable from the peaceful majority they sought to control.

Vietnam is not another Philippines, where Communist guerrillas were physically separated from the source of their moral and physical support.

Above all, the war in Vietnam is not a spontaneous and local rebellion against the established government.

There are elements in the Communist program of conquest directed against South Vietnam common to each of the previous areas of aggression and subversion. But there is one fundamental difference. In Vietnam a Communist government has set out deliberately to conquer a sovereign people in a neighboring state. And to achieve its end, it has used every resource of its own government to carry out its carefully planned program of concealed aggression. North Vietnam's commitment to seize control of the South is no less total than was the commitment of the regime in North Korea in 1950. But knowing the consequences of the latter's undisguised attack, the planners in Hanoi have tried desperately to conceal their hand. They have failed and their aggression is as real as that of an invading army.

This report is a summary of the massive evidence of North Vietnamese aggression obtained by the Government of South Vietnam. This evidence has been jointly analyzed by South Vietnamese and American experts.

The evidence shows that the hard core of the Communist forces attacking South Vietnam were trained in the North and ordered into the South by Hanoi. It shows that the key leadership of the Vietcong (VC), the officers and much of the cadre, many of the technicians, political organizers, and propagandists have come from the North and operate under Hanoi's direction. It shows that the training of essential military personnel and their infiltration into the South is directed by the Military High Command in Hanoi. In recent months new types of weapons have been introduced in the VC army, for which all ammunition must come from outside sources. Communist China and other Communist states have been the prime suppliers of these weapons and ammunition, and they have been channeled primarily through North Vietnam.

The directing force behind the effort to conquer South Vietnam is the Communist Party in the North, the Lao Dong (Workers) Party. As in every Communist state, the party is an integral part of the regime itself. North Vietnamese officials have expressed their firm determination to absorb South Vietnam into the Communist world.

Through its Central Committee, which controls the Government of the North, the Lao Dong Party directs the total political and military effort of the Vietcong. The Military High Command in the North trains the military men and sends them into South Vietnam. The Central Research Agency, North Vietnam's central intelligence organization, directs the elaborate espionage and subversion effort...

Under Hanoi's overall direction the Communists have established an extensive machine for carrying on the war within South Vietnam. The focal point is the Central Office for South Vietnam with its political and military subsections and other specialized agencies. A subordinate part of this Central Office is the liberation Front for South Vietnam. The front was formed at Hanoi's order in 1960. Its principle function is to influence opinion abroad and to create the false impression that the aggression in South Vietnam is an indigenous rebellion against the established Government.

For more than 10 years the people and the Government of South Vietnam, exercising the inherent right of self-defense, have fought back against these efforts to extend Communist power south across the 17th parallel. The United States has responded to the appeals of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam for help in this defense of the freedom and independence of its land and its people.

In 1961 the Department of State issued a report called A Threat to the Peace. It described North Vietnam's program to seize South Vietnam. The evidence in that report had been presented by the Government of the Republic of Vietnam to the International Control Commission (ICC). A special report by the ICC in June 1962 upheld the validity of that evidence. The Commission held that there was "sufficient evidence to show beyond reasonable doubt" that North Vietnam had sent arms and men into South Vietnam to carry out subversion with the aim of overthrowing the legal Government there. The ICC found the authorities in Hanoi in specific violation of four provisions of the Geneva Accords of 1954.

Since then, new and even more impressive evidence of Hanoi's aggression has accumulated. The Government of the United States believes that evidence should be presented to its own citizens and to the world. It is important for free men to know what has been happening in Vietnam, and how, and why. That is the purpose of this report...

The record is conclusive. It establishes beyond question that North Vietnam is carrying out a carefully conceived plan of aggression against the South. It shows that North Vietnam has intensified its efforts in the years since it was condemned by the International Control Commission. It proves that Hanoi continues to press its systematic program of armed aggression into South Vietnam. This aggression violates the United Nations Charter. It is directly contrary to the Geneva Accords of 1954 and of 1962 to which North Vietnam is a party. It is a fundamental threat to the freedom and security of South Vietnam.

The people of South Vietnam have chosen to resist this threat. At their request, the United States has taken its place beside them in their defensive struggle.

The United States seeks no territory, no military bases, no favored position. But we have

learned the meaning of aggression elsewhere in the post-war world, and we have met it.

If peace can be restored in South Vietnam, the United States will be ready at once to reduce its military involvement. But it will not abandon friends who want to remain free. It will do what must be done to help them. The choice now between peace and continued and increasingly destructive conflict is one for the authorities in Hanoi to make.

By 1967, President Johnson was working to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict in Vietnam. U.S. forces had been fighting there for three years, and there was little hope for a military victory. The following letter is North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh's response to a message from Johnson seeking to begin negotiations.

In this letter, Ho Chi Minh speaks harshly about U.S. actions in the conflict and states that he will not consider negotiations until the United States ceases its bombing of Vietnam. Although Johnson did order several halts, negotiations failed as bombing resumed.

Letter from Ho Chi Minh

To His Excellency Mr. Lyndon B. Johnson,
President, United States of America

Your Excellency:

On February 10, 1967, I received your message. This is my reply. Vietnam is thousands of miles away from the United States. The Vietnamese people have never done any harm to the United States. But contrary to the pledges made by its representative at the 1954 Geneva conference, the U.S. has ceaselessly intervened in Vietnam, it has unleashed and intensified the war of aggression in North Vietnam with a view to prolonging the partition of Vietnam and turning South Vietnam into a neocolony and a military base of the United States. For over two years now, the U.S. government has, with its air and naval forces, carried the war to the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam, an independent and sovereign country.

The U.S. government has committed war crimes, crimes against peace and against mankind. In South Vietnam, half a million U.S. and satellite troops have resorted to the most inhuman weapons and most barbarous methods of warfare, such as napalm, toxic chemicals and gases, to massacre our compatriots, destroy crops, and raze villages to the ground. In North Vietnam, thousands of U.S. aircraft have dropped hundreds of thousands of tons of bombs, destroying towns, villages, factories, schools. In your message, you apparently deplore the sufferings and destruction in Vietnam. May I ask you: Who has perpetrated these monstrous crimes? It is the United States and satellite troops. The U.S. government is entirely responsible for the extremely serious situation in Vietnam.

The U.S. war of aggression against the Vietnamese people constitutes a challenge to the countries of the socialist camp, a threat to the national independence movement, and a

serious danger to peace in Asia and the world.

The Vietnamese people deeply love independence, freedom and peace. But in the face of U.S. aggression, they have risen up, united as one man, fearless of sacrifices and hardships. They are determined to carry on their resistance until they have won genuine independence and freedom and true peace. Our just cause enjoys strong sympathy and support from the peoples of the whole world, including broad sections of the American people.

The U.S. government has unleashed the war of aggression in Vietnam. It must cease this aggression. This is the only way to restoration of peace. The U.S. government must stop definitely and unconditionally its bombing raids and all other acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, withdraw from South Vietnam all U.S. and satellite troops, recognize the South Vietnam National Front for Liberation, and let the Vietnamese people settle themselves their own affairs. Such is the basis of the five-point stand of the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, which embodies the essential principles and provision of the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Vietnam; it is the basis of a correct political solution to the Vietnam problem.

In your message you suggested direct talks between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the United States. If the U.S. government really wants these talks, it must first of all stop unconditionally its bombing raids and all other acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. It is only after the unconditional cessation of U.S. bombing raids and all other acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the U.S. could enter into talks and discuss questions concerning the two sides.

The Vietnamese people will never submit to force, they will never accept talks under threat of bombs.

Our cause is absolutely just. It is to be hoped that the U.S. government will act in accordance with reason.

Sincerely,

Ho Chi Minh

(February 15, 1967)

A year after he was elected, President Nixon gave the following address on the situation in Vietnam. The war was unpopular and seemed pointless to many. Protests were rampant, so in this speech Nixon defended his decision to keep U.S. forces in Vietnam and explained why negotiations had failed so far.

Nixon's 'Silent Majority' speech

November 3, 1969

Good evening, my fellow Americans.

Tonight I want to talk to you on a subject of deep concern to all Americans and to many people in all parts of the world -- the war in Vietnam.

I believe that one of the reasons for the deep division about Vietnam is that many Americans have lost confidence in what their Government has told them about our policy. The American people cannot and should not be asked to support a policy which involves the overriding issues of war and peace unless they know the truth about that policy.

Tonight, therefore, I would like to answer some of the questions that I know are on the minds of many of you listening to me. How and why did America get involved in Vietnam in the first place? How has this administration changed the policy of the previous administration? What has really happened in the negotiations in Paris and on the battlefront in Vietnam? What choices do we have if we are to end the war? What are the prospects for peace? Now, let me begin by describing the situation I found when I was inaugurated on January 20:

The war had been going on for four years. One thousand Americans had been killed in action. The training program for the South Vietnamese was behind schedule; 540,000 Americans were in Vietnam with no plans to reduce the number. No progress had been made at the negotiations in Paris and the United States had not put forth a comprehensive peace proposal. The war was causing deep division at home and criticism from many of our friends as well as our enemies abroad.

In view of these circumstances there were some who urged that I end the war at once by ordering the immediate withdrawal of all American forces. From a political standpoint this would have been a popular and easy course to follow. After all, we became involved in the war while my predecessor was in office. I could blame the defeat which would be the result of my action on him and come out as the peacemaker. Some put it to me quite bluntly: This was the only way to avoid allowing Johnson's war to become Nixon's war.

But I had a greater obligation than to think only of the years of my administration and of the next election. I had to think of the effect of my decision on the next generation and on the future of peace and freedom in America and in the world.

Let us all understand that the question before us is not whether some Americans are for peace and some Americans are against peace. The question at issue is not whether Johnson's war becomes Nixon's war. The great question is: How can we win America's peace?

Well, let us turn now to the fundamental issue. Why and how did the United States become involved in Vietnam in the first place? Fifteen years ago North Vietnam, with the logistical support of communist China and the Soviet Union, launched a campaign to

impose a communist government on South Vietnam by instigating and supporting a revolution.

In response to the request of the Government of South Vietnam, President Eisenhower sent economic aid and military equipment to assist the people of South Vietnam in their efforts to prevent a communist takeover. Seven years ago, President Kennedy sent 16,000 military personnel to Vietnam as combat advisers. Four years ago, President Johnson sent American combat forces to South Vietnam.

Now, many believe that President Johnson's decision to send American combat forces to South Vietnam was wrong. And many others -- I among them -- have been strongly critical of the way the war has been conducted.

But the question facing us today is: Now that we are in the war, what is the best way to end it?

In January I could only conclude that the precipitate withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam would be a disaster not only for South Vietnam but for the United States and for the cause of peace.

For the South Vietnamese, our precipitate withdrawal would inevitably allow the Communists to repeat the massacres which followed their takeover in the North 15 years before; They then murdered more than 50,000 people and hundreds of thousands more died in slave labor camps.

We saw a prelude of what would happen in South Vietnam when the Communists entered the city of Hue last year. During their brief rule there, there was a bloody reign of terror in which 3,000 civilians were clubbed, shot to death, and buried in mass graves.

With the sudden collapse of our support, these atrocities of Hue would become the nightmare of the entire nation -- and particularly for the million and a half Catholic refugees who fled to South Vietnam when the Communists took over in the North.

For the United States, this first defeat in our nation's history would result in a collapse of confidence in American leadership, not only in Asia but throughout the world.

Three American presidents have recognized the great stakes involved in Vietnam and understood what had to be done.

In 1963, President Kennedy, with his characteristic eloquence and clarity, said:

... we want to see a stable government there, carrying on a struggle to maintain its national independence. We believe strongly in that. We are not going to withdraw from that effort. In my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam, but Southeast Asia. So we are going to stay there.

President Eisenhower and President Johnson expressed the same conclusion during their terms of office.

For the future of peace, precipitate withdrawal would thus be a disaster of immense

magnitude. A nation cannot remain great if it betrays its allies and lets down its friends. Our defeat and humiliation in South Vietnam without question would promote recklessness in the councils of those great powers who have not yet abandoned their goals of world conquest. This would spark violence wherever our commitments help maintain the peace -- in the Middle East, in Berlin, eventually even in the Western Hemisphere. Ultimately, this would cost more lives. It would not bring peace; it would bring more war.

For these reasons, I rejected the recommendation that I should end the war by immediately withdrawing all of our forces. I chose instead to change American policy on both the negotiating front and battlefront. In order to end a war fought on many fronts, I initiated a pursuit for peace on many fronts. In a television speech on May 14, in a speech before the United Nations, and on a number of other occasions I set forth our peace proposals in great detail.

We have offered the complete withdrawal of all outside forces within one year.

We have proposed a cease-fire under international supervision.

We have offered free elections under international supervision with the Communists participating in the organization and conduct of the elections as an organized political force. And the Saigon Government has pledged to accept the result of the elections.

We have not put forth our proposals on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. We have indicated that we are willing to discuss the proposals that have been put forth by the other side. We have declared that anything is negotiable except the right of the people of South Vietnam to determine their own future. At the Paris peace conference, Ambassador Lodge has demonstrated our flexibility and good faith in 40 public meetings.

Hanoi has refused even to discuss our proposals. They demand our unconditional acceptance of their terms, which are that we withdraw all American forces immediately and unconditionally and that we overthrow the Government of South Vietnam as we leave.

We have not limited our peace initiatives to public forums and public statements. I recognized, in January, that a long and bitter war like this usually cannot be settled in a public forum. That is why in addition to the public statements and negotiation I have explored every possible private avenue that might lead to a settlement.

Tonight I am taking the unprecedented step of disclosing to you some of our other initiatives for peace -- initiatives we undertook privately and secretly because we thought we thereby might open a door which publicly would be closed.

I did not wait for my inauguration to begin my quest for peace.

Soon after my election, through an individual who is directly in contact on a personal basis with the leaders of North Vietnam, I made two private offers for a rapid, comprehensive settlement. Hanoi's replies called in effect for our surrender before negotiations.

Since the Soviet Union furnishes most of the military equipment for North Vietnam, Secretary of State Rogers, my Assistant for National Security Affairs, Dr. Kissinger, Ambassador Lodge, and I, personally, have met on a number of occasions with representatives of the Soviet Government to enlist their assistance in getting meaningful negotiations started. In addition, we have had extended discussions directed toward that same end with representatives of other governments which have diplomatic relations with North Vietnam. None of these initiatives have to date produced results.

In mid-July, I became convinced that it was necessary to make a major move to break the deadlock in the Paris talks. I spoke directly in this office, where I am now sitting, with an individual who had known Ho Chi Minh on a personal basis for 25 years. Through him I sent a letter to Ho Chi Minh. I did this outside of the usual diplomatic channels with the hope that with the necessity of making statements for propaganda removed, there might be constructive progress toward bringing the war to an end. Let me read from that letter to you now:

Dear Mr. President:

I realize that it is difficult to communicate meaningfully across the gulf of four years of war. But precisely because of this gulf, I wanted to take this opportunity to reaffirm in all solemnity my desire to work for a just peace. I deeply believe that the war in Vietnam has gone on too long and delay in bringing it to an end can benefit no one -- least of all the people of Vietnam. ... The time has come to move forward at the conference table toward an early resolution of this tragic war. You will find us forthcoming and open-minded in a common effort to bring the blessings of peace to the brave people of Vietnam. Let history record that at this critical juncture, both sides turned their face toward peace rather than toward conflict and war.

I received Ho Chi Minh's reply on August 30, three days before his death. It simply reiterated the public position North Vietnam had taken at Paris and flatly rejected my initiative.

The full text of both letters is being released to the press.

In addition to the public meetings that I have referred to, Ambassador Lodge has met with Vietnam's chief negotiator in Paris in 11 private sessions.

We have taken other significant initiatives which must remain secret to keep open some channels of communication which may still prove to be productive.

But the effect of all the public, private and secret negotiations which have been undertaken since the bombing halt a year ago and since this administration came into office on January 20 can be summed up in one sentence: No progress whatever has been made except agreement on the shape of the bargaining table.

Well now, who is at fault?

It has become clear that the obstacle in negotiating an end to the war is not the President of the United States. It is not the South Vietnamese Government.

The obstacle is the other side's absolute refusal to show the least willingness to join us in seeking a just peace. And it will not do so while it is convinced that all it has to do is to wait for our next concession, and our next concession after that one, until it gets everything it wants.

There can now be no longer any question that progress in negotiation depends only on Hanoi's deciding to negotiate, to negotiate seriously.

I realize that this report on our efforts on the diplomatic front is discouraging to the American people, but the American people are entitled to know the truth -- the bad news as well as the good news -- where the lives of our young men are involved.

Now let me turn, however, to a more encouraging report on another front.

At the time we launched our search for peace I recognized we might not succeed in bringing an end to the war through negotiation. I, therefore, put into effect another plan to bring peace -- a plan which will bring the war to an end regardless of what happens on the negotiating front.

It is in line with a major shift in U.S. foreign policy which I described in my press conference at Guam on July 25. Let me briefly explain what has been described as the Nixon Doctrine -- policy which not only will help end the war in Vietnam, but which is an essential element of our program to prevent future Vietnams.

We Americans are a do-it-yourself people. We are an impatient people. Instead of teaching someone else to do a job, we like to do it ourselves. And this trait has been carried over into our foreign policy. In Korea and again in Vietnam, the United States furnished most of the money, most of the arms, and most of the men to help the people of those countries defend their freedom against Communist aggression.

Before any American troops were committed to Vietnam, a leader of another Asian country expressed this opinion to me when I was traveling in Asia as a private citizen. He said: "When you are trying to assist another nation defend its freedom, U.S. policy should be to help them fight the war but not to fight the war for them."

Well, in accordance with this wise counsel, I laid down in Guam three principles as guidelines for future American policy toward Asia:

First, the United States will keep all of its treaty commitments.

Second, we shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us or of a nation whose survival we consider vital to our security.

Third, in cases involving other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense.

After I announced this policy, I found that the leaders of the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, South Korea, and other nations which might be threatened by Communist

aggression welcomed this new direction in American foreign policy.

The defense of freedom is everybody's business -- not just America's business. And it is particularly the responsibility of the people whose freedom is threatened. In the previous administration, we Americanized the war in Vietnam. In this administration, we are Vietnamizing the search for peace.

The policy of the previous administration not only resulted in our assuming the primary responsibility for fighting the war, but even more significantly did not adequately stress the goal of strengthening the South Vietnamese so that they could defend themselves when we left.

The Vietnamization plan was launched following Secretary Laird's visit to Vietnam in March. Under the plan, I ordered first a substantial increase in the training and equipment of South Vietnamese forces.

In July, on my visit to Vietnam, I changed General Abrams' orders so that they were consistent with the objectives of our new policies. Under the new orders, the primary mission of our troops is to enable the South Vietnamese forces to assume the full responsibility for the security of South Vietnam.

Our air operations have been reduced by over 20 percent.

And now we have begun to see the results of this long overdue change in American policy in Vietnam.

After five years of Americans going into Vietnam, we are finally bringing American men home. By December 15, over 60,000 men will have been withdrawn from South Vietnam, including 20 percent of all of our combat forces.

The South Vietnamese have continued to gain in strength. As a result they have been able to take over combat responsibilities from our American troops.

Two other significant developments have occurred since this administration took office.

Enemy infiltration, infiltration which is essential if they are to launch a major attack, over the last three months is less than 20 percent of what it was over the same period last year. Most important -- United States casualties have declined during the last two months to the lowest point in three years.

Let me now turn to our program for the future.

We have adopted a plan which we have worked out in cooperation with the South Vietnamese for the complete withdrawal of all U.S. combat ground forces, and their replacement by South Vietnamese forces on an orderly scheduled timetable. This withdrawal will be made from strength and not from weakness. As South Vietnamese forces become stronger, the rate of American withdrawal can become greater.

I have not and do not intend to announce the timetable for our program. And there are obvious reasons for this decision which I am sure you will understand. As I have

indicated on several occasions, the rate of withdrawal will depend on developments on three fronts.

One of these is the progress which can be or might be made in a Paris talks. An announcement of a fixed timetable for our withdrawal would completely remove any incentive for the enemy to negotiate an agreement. They would simply wait until our forces had withdrawn and then move in.

The other two factors on which we will base our withdrawal decisions are the level of enemy activity and the progress of the training programs of the South Vietnamese forces. And I am glad to be able to report tonight progress on both of these fronts has been greater than we anticipated when we started the program in June for withdrawal. As a result, our timetable for withdrawal is more optimistic now than when we made our first estimates in June. Now, this clearly demonstrates why it is not wise to be frozen in on a fixed timetable.

We must retain the flexibility to base each withdrawal decision on the situation as it is at that time rather than on estimates that are no longer valid.

Along with this optimistic estimate, I must -- in all candor -- leave one note of caution. If the level of enemy activity significantly increases we might have to adjust our timetable accordingly.

However, I want the record to be completely clear on one point.

At the time of the bombing halt just a year ago, there was some confusion as to whether there was an understanding on the part of the enemy that if we stopped the bombing of North Vietnam they would stop the shelling of cities in South Vietnam. I want to be sure that there is no misunderstanding on the part of the enemy with regard to our withdrawal program.

We have noted the reduced level of infiltration, the reduction of our casualties, and are basing our withdrawal decisions partially on those factors. If the level of infiltration or our casualties increase while we are trying to scale down the fighting, it will be the result of a conscious decision by the enemy.

Hanoi could make no greater mistake than to assume that an increase in violence will be to its advantage. If I conclude that increased enemy action jeopardizes our remaining forces in Vietnam, I shall not hesitate to take strong and effective measures to deal with that situation.

This is not a threat. This is a statement of policy, which as commander in chief of our armed forces, I am making in meeting my responsibility for the protection of American fighting men wherever they may be.

My fellow Americans, I am sure you can recognize from what I have said that we really only have two choices open to us if we want to end this war.

I can order an immediate, precipitate withdrawal of all Americans from Vietnam without

regard to the effects of that action. Or we can persist in our search for a just peace through a negotiated settlement if possible, or through continued implementation of our plan for Vietnamization if necessary, a plan in which we will withdraw all of our forces from Vietnam on a schedule in accordance with our program, as the South Vietnamese become strong enough to defend their own freedom.

I have chosen this second course. It is not the easy way. It is the right way.

It is a plan which will end the war and serve the cause of peace -- not just in Vietnam but in the Pacific and in the world.

In speaking of the consequences of a precipitate withdrawal, I mentioned that our allies would lose confidence in America.

Far more dangerous, we would lose confidence in ourselves. Oh, the immediate reaction would be a sense of relief that our men were coming home. But as we saw the consequences of what we had done, inevitable remorse and divisive recrimination would scar our spirit as a people.

We have faced other crises in our history and have become stronger by rejecting the easy way out and taking the right way in meeting our challenges. Our greatness as a nation has been our capacity to do what had to be done when we knew our course was right.

I recognize that some of my fellow citizens disagree with the plan for peace I have chosen. Honest and patriotic Americans have reached different conclusions as to how peace should be achieved.

In San Francisco a few weeks ago, I saw demonstrators carrying signs reading: "Lose in Vietnam, bring the boys home."

Well, one of the strengths of our free society is that any American has a right to reach that conclusion and to advocate that point of view. But as president of the United States, I would be untrue to my oath of office if I allowed the policy of this nation to be dictated by the minority who hold that point of view and who try to impose it on the nation by mounting demonstrations in the street.

For almost 200 years, the policy of this nation has been made under our Constitution by those leaders in the Congress and the White House elected by all of the people. If a vocal minority, however fervent its cause, prevails over reason and the will of the majority, this nation has no future as a free society.

And now I would like to address a word, if I may, to the young people of this nation who are particularly concerned, and I understand why they are concerned, about this war.

I respect your idealism. I share your concern for peace. I want peace as much as you do. There are powerful personal reasons I want to end this war. This week I will have to sign 83 letters to mothers, fathers, wives and loved ones of men who have given their lives for America in Vietnam. It is very little satisfaction to me that this is only one-third as many letters as I signed the first week in office. There is nothing I want more than to see the

day come when I do not have to write any of those letters.

I want to end the war to save the lives of those brave young men in Vietnam.

But I want to end it in a way which will increase the chance that their younger brothers and their sons will not have to fight in some future Vietnam someplace in the world.

And I want to end the war for another reason. I want to end it so that the energy and dedication of you, our young people, now too often directed into bitter hatred against those responsible for the war, can be turned to the great challenges of peace, a better life for all Americans, a better life for all people on this Earth.

I have chosen a plan for peace. I believe it will succeed. If it does succeed, what the critics say now won't matter. If it does not succeed, anything I say then won't matter.

I know it may not be fashionable to speak of patriotism or national destiny these days. But I feel it is appropriate to do so on this occasion.

Two hundred years ago this nation was weak and poor. But even then, America was the hope of millions in the world. Today we have become the strongest and richest nation in the world. And the wheel of destiny has turned so that any hope the world has for the survival of peace and freedom will be determined by whether the American people have the moral stamina and the courage to meet the challenge of free world leadership.

Let historians not record that when America was the most powerful nation in the world we passed on the other side of the road and allowed the last hopes for peace and freedom of millions of people to be suffocated by the forces of totalitarianism.

And so tonight -- to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans -- I ask for your support.

I pledged in my campaign for the presidency to end the war in a way that we could win the peace. I have initiated a plan of action which will enable me to keep that pledge.

The more support I can have from the American people, the sooner that pledge can be redeemed; for the more divided we are at home, the less likely the enemy is to negotiate at Paris.

Let us be united for peace. Let us also be united against defeat. Because let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.

Fifty years ago, in this room and at this very desk, President Woodrow Wilson spoke words which caught the imagination of a war-weary world. He said: "This is the war to end war." His dream for peace after World War I was shattered on the hard realities of great power politics, and Woodrow Wilson died a broken man.

Tonight I do not tell you that the war in Vietnam is the war to end wars. But I do say this: I have initiated a plan which will end this war in a way that will bring us closer to that great goal to which Woodrow Wilson and every American president in our history has

been dedicated -- the goal of a just and lasting peace.

As president I hold the responsibility for choosing the best path to that goal and then leading the nation along it. I pledge to you tonight that I shall meet this responsibility with all of the strength and wisdom I can command in accordance with our hopes, mindful of your concerns, sustained by your prayers.

Thank you and good night.

Son of a nationalist father, Ho was born on May 19, 1890, in Kimlien, Nghe-An province, in central Vietnam. After receiving his initial education from his father and at a village school, Ho studied at the Lycee Quoc-Hoc in the old imperial capital of Hue. It was a school designed to perpetuate Vietnamese nationalist traditions. In 1912 he went to France, where he worked at many odd jobs and became active in socialist politics and as an advocate of Indochinese independence. During World War I he visited the United States. At the Versailles peace conference, he petitioned the delegates on behalf of Vietnamese self-determination but was ignored. In 1920 Ho became a founding member of the French Communist Party.

He went to Moscow in 1922, joined the Comintern and met with Lenin. In 1925 he went to China to work for the Soviet mission with Chiang Kai-Shek's government. After Chiang turned on the communists in 1927, Ho fled to Moscow. During the 1930s he founded the Indochinese Communist Party, studied in Moscow and fought alongside Mao. In 1940 he returned to Vietnam. He founded the Viet Minh, the League for the Independence of Vietnam.

On September 2, 1945, Ho and his league declared Vietnamese independence. When the French colonial rulers tried to reassert their authority, Ho settled for nominal autonomy as a member of the French Union. The French-Vietnamese truce broke in late 1946, initiating a war that ended in 1954 with the Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu. At the following Geneva conference, Ho allowed his Chinese and Soviet friends to pressure him into a highly unsatisfactory compromise that divided Vietnam in two. From that time Ho's primary goal was the reunification of Vietnam. He pursued this particularly through support of the Viet Cong guerrillas fighting the Southern government. Even though South Vietnam received ever-increasing support from the United States (which after 1964 began to bomb the North), Ho remained confident of victory and rejected negotiations with Washington. Only in 1968, after the U.S. bombardments of North Vietnam stopped in the wake of the Tet Offensive, did his government agree to talks. Shortly after this turning point in the war, Ho died of a heart attack at the age of 79 on September 3, 1969.