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KEY POLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE WAR IN  
VIETNAM

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7 December 1970

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# STUDENT ESSAY

7 DECEMBER 1970



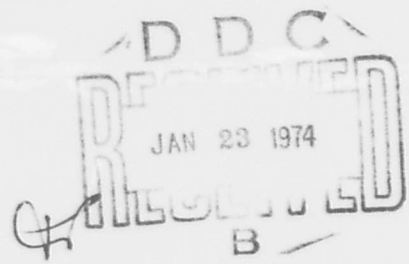
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## KEY POLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE WAR IN VIETNAM

BY

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USAWC RESEARCH PAPER

KEY POLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE WAR IN VIETNAM

AN ESSAY

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Mr. Thomas F. Conlon  
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US Army War College  
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# ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Thomas F. Conlon, USFS  
TITLE: Key Political Aspects of the War in Vietnam  
FORMAT: Essay for eventual publication in Army magazine

Although the war in Vietnam has been more or less continuously before the public since 1960, the very volume of reporting on this conflict has tended to obscure public understanding of key aspects of the struggle. In particular, substantial misunderstandings are widespread in the United States concerning the nature of American involvement in the conflict, the nature and significance of the Communist attack on South Viet Nam, the situation and prospects of the Government of Vietnam, and the nature and significance of the Geneva Accords of 1954, as they bear on American commitments in Vietnam.

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## Key Political Aspects of the War in Vietnam

The war in Vietnam has dominated the information media almost without interruption since 1960. Paradoxically, the most basic elements of the struggle remain a matter of continuing and sometimes sharp controversy. Oddly enough, the very volume of information on the war in Vietnam has become a substantial obstacle to understanding of the underlying realities and the essence of the conflict. No other conflict in human history has been described, reported, and analyzed in the prolific terms which the media revolution has made possible. Moreover, Vietnam is a country which few Americans had occasion to know in any detail prior to 1960, since its history and complex language and culture are not commonly studied in American universities. Consequently, the quality of the reporting on the war has often been well below average.

The commitment of major American combat units to Vietnam began in 1965, and the emergence of the struggle in that country as a world issue, in its present phase, can be said to have begun in 1960. However, the struggle over Vietnam did not begin with 1965 or even with 1960. Rather, as the late Bernard Fall used to say, the United States is engaged in the Second Indo-China War, whose first phase, from 1945 to 1954, ended with the French defeat by Communist forces at Dien Bien Phu and the subsequent, confused series of agreements reached at Geneva in July 1954.

The writer has had occasion to speak to more than one hundred college, high school, professional, and club group audiences on

various aspects of the war in Vietnam over the past seven years. While the questions have varied over this period of time, one inquiry frequently raised is: "Isn't there one book somewhere that I could read that would explain all the significant aspects of the war?" To this question, the sad but inevitable answer has to be, "No, there is no single book, article, or speech which could meet such a need." We are talking about more than 25 years of human history, interwoven into all the other developments in the world in the past quarter century. No single book or article could possibly contain all that is important to say on this issue. Nevertheless, following this article is a list of several books which cast light on one or another aspect of this many-faceted international problem, which would be worth consulting.

The contrast between the plethora of information available and the widely-expressed lack of understanding of many aspects of the war is itself the principal explanation for the continued existence of substantial misunderstanding among the public, in particular, concerning the nature of American involvement in the conflict; the nature and significance of the Communist attack on South Viet-Nam; and the situation and prospects of the Government of Vietnam. Moreover, as we go further into the negotiations which we hope will lead to a settlement of this prolonged and bloody conflict, the misunderstandings regarding the nature and meaning of the Geneva Accords of 1954 continue to bedevil both appreciation of the past and the future action to be taken to end the hostilities.

### Vietnam: Why Are We Involved There?

Though Vietnam is almost as far from the United States as any of the major conflicts in which we have been involved, Vietnam and Indo-China are names that run like red threads through the history of United States relations with the Far East during the past 30 years. The Japanese seizure of air and naval bases and stationing of troops in North Vietnam in June, 1940, following on the fall of France to German armies, heavily prejudiced the ongoing efforts then being made to adjust differences between the United States and Japan short of war. The subsequent Japanese seizure of additional air and naval facilities in South Vietnam in July, 1941, led directly to the freezing of Japanese assets in the United States and to the decision of Japan's leaders to attack Pearl Harbor and Southeast Asia.

The ongoing struggle between the French and their Vietnamese allies, on one side, and the Communist Vietnamese, on the other, was a significant influence on the decision made by President Truman to oppose Communist aggression in Korea in June, 1950. The Communist seizure of North Vietnam following the Geneva settlement in July, 1954, led directly to the negotiation of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty in September, 1954, and to the establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. The resumption of Communist aggression in South Vietnam in the fall of 1959 challenged the commitments made to South Vietnam under



the SEATO Treaty and set the stage for the massive American involvement in the struggle that has dominated events for the past 10 years.

The decisions which produced this involvement were not the work of a gang of plotters hidden somewhere in the recesses of the government. Rather, they involved action taken by Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon in the discharge of their constitutional responsibilities as commanders in chief of our armed forces and as the architects and implementers of our foreign policy. Moreover, they were supported throughout this period by Congress and by the American people who elected their representatives. These Presidents, and the members of Congress and the people who supported their decisions, clearly took the actions they did, in the conviction that the measures undertaken served the fundamental and vital interests of the United States in an area of the world where already more than half of humanity lives and where two-thirds of mankind will live by the year 2000.

In this context, it is worth recalling the tawdry taunts of the recent past, that the war in Vietnam was successively "McNamara's War", "Rusk's War", "Johnson's War", or, more lately, "Nixon's War". It would be hard to imagine a more varied group of American Presidents, both in terms of their personal as well as their political outlook, than the line from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Richard M. Nixon. That they joined in the successive decisions which involved

America in major hostilities in Vietnam is additional evidence that the war in Vietnam is not attributable to a single President or cabinet officer but is "America's War", fought to defend American interests as these Presidents and the American people have seen them during the past 30 years.

#### What Is the Struggle About?

Initially, the struggle in Viet-Nam was a part of the struggle to free Indo-China from French colonial rule as a consequence of French defeat in 1940 and as a part of the general move for colonial independence following World War II. On August 19, 1945, a group of Vietnamese nationalists, including both Communists and non-Communists, but under the leadership of a veteran Communist, Ho chi Minh, proclaimed the independence of Viet-Nam from France. The Communists always held the upper hand in this coalition, and the relationship in any case did not last long, as the Communists were determined to achieve a monopoly of political power. By November 8, 1946, the date of a vote on the new Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, only two non-Communist oppositionists remained in their seats out of 70 elected to the National Assembly in January, 1946. The other 68 had "disappeared" or been arrested "for common law crimes" never explained and never later presented for judgment to a court.

The Vietnamese nationalist movement which had initially sought independence from the French thus split. One faction under

Communist control sought independence through armed struggle. The non-Communist nationalists who escaped liquidation by the Communists followed varying fortunes, many of them supporting Emperor Bao Dai in seeking independence through agreement with the French.

It should be emphasized that the struggle within the Vietnamese nationalist movement was not merely a contest for political power between factions interested solely in enhancement of personal positions. It was a struggle between Vietnamese Communists who worshipped power as an end in itself and who were prepared to inflict endless suffering, death, and destruction to achieve it, and a group of Vietnamese nationalists who sought to bring their country into the modern world by moving in the general direction of establishing a democratic regime of freedom and prosperity. The Communist involvement in this struggle posed general questions of international order to the United States, already engaged in a state of cold war with the Communist world and under increasing threat by Communist states outside of Viet-Nam.

The liquidation of non-Communist oppositionists in North Viet-Nam in 1946, the later elimination of between 50,000 and 100,000 people in the Communist-led "land reform" program in North Viet-Nam against South Viet-Nam--all are evidence of the threat to the peace which North Viet-Nam has posed since the Communist leaders joined in establishing the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam in 1945. It is hardly to be wondered at that non-Communist Vietnamese

nationalists and the mass of the Vietnamese people in South Vietnam have continued to oppose the Communists ever since.

It is instructive to reflect that there has been no significant effort made to go back on the basic split between Communists and non-Communists which occurred in 1945-46. The Communist leaders of 1945-46 (and in some cases their sons) continue to lead the struggle to bring all of Viet-Nam under Communist control. The non-Communist nationalists (and their sons and supporters) continue to lead and support the Republic of Vietnam in its defense of South Vietnam. One should also remember that both President Nguyen van Thieu and Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky were among the first groups of Vietnamese officers to be trained by the French for the Vietnamese Army being raised under Emperor Bao Dai. After defeat by Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem in the referendum of 1955, Bao Dai disappeared from the political scene in Vietnam and resumed his residence in France. However, the effort of non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists to defend and support an alternative to the brutal and murderous Communist regime in North Vietnam has continued with unrelenting determination and with growing success and confidence.

#### The Geneva Accords of 1954

The Geneva Accords of 1954, which brought an end to the Indo-China War, were simply a phase in the continuing effort of the Communists in North Vietnam to gain control of all of Vietnam

and paramount influence over all of the former Indo-China. Nonetheless, since they marked at least a temporary halt in hostilities, they are worth examining in detail, both for the light they cast on possible ways to resolve the struggle peacefully and because of the significant misunderstanding which exists as to what they provided for and what they did not provide for.

The Accords consisted of an "Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities" in Vietnam, or essentially a limited, armistice agreement, signed by representatives of the French High Command and of the "People's Army of Vietnam", i.e., the Viet Minh or Vietnamese Communists, as they had come to be. Since there were no other parties to the conflict in 1954, no other countries signed the Accord on Vietnam or the other, similar Agreements on Cessation of Hostilities in Cambodia and Laos. There were no other agreements signed at Geneva in 1954.

A "Final Declaration" of the Geneva Conference, signed by no one, was issued on July 21, 1954. It contained the outline of a possible political settlement of the hostilities, including general elections, worked out by Sir Anthony Eden, head of the British Delegation to the Conference and one of its Co-Chairmen. However, as Eden makes clear in his volume of memoirs, Full Circle, pp. 159-60:

...I had already been warned by Bedell Smith (acting head of the United States Delegation) that the United States Government could not associate themselves with the final declaration. . . . I thought I had better have this out with Mototov before the meeting (i. e., the final plenary session, July 21, 1954). I went to see him and we eventually agreed that, in order to eliminate the problem of signature, the declaration should have

a heading in which all the participating countries would be listed....

The "Final Declaration" was thus duly issued, unsigned, with full knowledge that neither the United States nor the non-Communist Vietnamese representing the State of Vietnam (of which the present Republic of Vietnam is the successor) considered themselves bound by its provisions.

The delegations of the US and of the State of Vietnam issued separate declarations on July 21, making it clear that they did not commit themselves to the elections provisions of the Final Declaration. The US statement voiced support for "free elections supervised by the United Nations to insure that they are conducted fairly," rather than the loose supervisory arrangements alluded to in the Final Declaration. The Vietnamese delegation denounced the French attempt to enter into accords of an essentially political character without the agreement of the State of Vietnam.

The "Final Declaration", among other things, sought to set out a time table looking towards "free general elections by secret ballot", to be held in both North and South Vietnam within two years of the signature of the Agreement on Cessation of hostilities. As no "free general elections by secret ballot" have ever been held in any Communist country, including North Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam in the south declined to permit the holding of such elections, to which its delegation had never agreed, until such time as genuinely free elections could be held in North Vietnam as well. The United States supported the Republic of

Vietnam in this position, consistent with similar positions on support for free elections elsewhere in the world.

In justice to Sir Anthony Eden, it should be noted that in the same passage of Full Circle he noted that the Chinese Communist Delegation had warned him that, unless the "Final Declaration" was signed, they would not agree to the signing of the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities. Acting in the traditional diplomatic role of honest broker, Eden sought to give the Communists the appearance of the "Final Declaration" (though unsigned) in order to get an end to the fighting, which was his main concern. None of the parties principally concerned had any illusions about the prospects of elections. In a debate in the French National Assembly in April, 1956, the French Foreign Minister, M. Christian Pineau, acknowledged that the Republic of Vietnam was not bound to hold elections in 1956, since it had never agreed to do so. It should be equally clear that the United States, which did not sign any of the instruments of the Geneva Accords of 1954, cannot be considered to have been bound to compel South Vietnam to hold elections in 1956, to which South Vietnam had never agreed.

#### The Calm Before the Storm

Peace of a kind returned to South Vietnam during the period 1954-59, when much of the damage of nine years' fighting was made good; a completely Vietnamese civil administration, police force, and National Army were established; a land reform program distributed thousands of hectares of land to the peasants, and the export of rice

was resumed. The Communist leaders of North Vietnam had never renounced their goal of a Vietnam wholly under Communist control, however, and to this end left behind in South Vietnam between 5000 and 10,000 political and military cadres against the day when the struggle to "complete the August Revolution" of 1945 would be resumed.

This was evidenced by continuing acts of terror committed against South Vietnamese military and civilian officials during this period of comparative calm. During the period from 1957 to March, 1959, alone, the Government of Viet-Nam reported to the International Control Commission, created by the Geneva Accords, that 174 soldiers, police and government officials had been murdered by Communist terror squads. In addition, from September, 1954, to March, 1959, the Government of Viet-Nam also reported to the International Control Commission the discovery of 3561 arms and munitions dumps throughout the territory south of the seventeenth parallel which, from the manner of their packing, were obviously intended to be used at a later date.

We now know that the decision to resume the struggle overtly in South Viet-Nam was taken with the adoption of Resolution 15 of the Lao Dong (Communist) Party in North Viet-Nam in January, 1959, an action which was overtly confirmed at the Third Congress of the Lao Cong Party in Hanoi in September, 1960, and followed with the formation of the National Front for the Liberation of South Viet-Nam at an undisclosed location in South Viet-Nam in December, 1960. A flood of some 60,000 Communist South Vietnamese soldiers, originally



sent to North Viet-Nam under terms of the Geneva Accords in 1954-55, was sent back to South Viet-Nam by the Communist leaders during the period 1960-64, followed by tens of thousands of ethnic North Vietnamese, many of them members of the regular "People's Army of Viet-Nam" in North Viet-Nam, and the murderous struggle was resumed.

#### What Is the Attitude of the People of South Vietnam?

Like ordinary people elsewhere in the world, the people of South Vietnam long for peace and an end to the killing and destruction that have scarred their lives for the past quarter of a century. With only limited opportunity for education in the past, the South Vietnamese people do not display a high level of political interest and awareness beyond the immediate concerns of their families and communities. However, they know a great deal about the Communists, with whom they have had continuing and frequently unpleasant contact since 1945. They have made clear that, given a choice, they want nothing to do with the Communists. In election after election in South Vietnam, beginning with the Constituent Assembly elections in September, 1966, continuing through the village council elections in April-May, 1967, and the National Assembly and Presidential elections in September-October, 1967, and through the elections of August 30, 1970, to choose a third of the membership of the Vietnamese Senate, between 65% and 80% of the registered voters have participated.

The Vietnamese Communists denounced the Constituent Assembly, village council, National Assembly, and Presidential elections in violent terms and threatened death to voters seeking to cast their ballots. The people turned out massively, anyway. More recently, the Communists ignored the partial Senate elections of August, 1970, evidently concluding they could not stop them and would merely look ridiculous by prohibiting something they could not affect.

President Thieu's four-year term is due to expire in October, 1971, as does the term of the lower house of the Vietnamese National Assembly. Presidential and Assembly elections will be held once again next year, demonstrating again the will of the Vietnamese people to select their leaders through the ballot box.

Though not by an election in the literal sense, the people of South Vietnam demonstrated their attitude by their conduct during the great Communist offensive launched during the lunar New Year's holidays at Tet, 1968. Attacking 39 of the 44 provincial capitals, five of the six major cities, 50 of the 250 district capitals, and a multitude of military and police posts elsewhere in the country, the Communists evidently thought that, with substantial help from North Vietnamese regular soldiers and by exploiting the truce period proclaimed for Tet, they could overwhelm the Vietnamese armed forces and police, isolate American and other Free World forces, and trigger a massive popular uprising by the people that would bring them victory. The assault was a tremendous shock, and there was widespread destruction of property, as well as a heavy loss of life.

Nowhere in South Vietnam did the people respond to the Communists, many of whom expressed bitter resentment at the refusal of ordinary people to join in supporting the attack on Vietnamese Government and allied forces.

Why did the people so generally decline to support the Communists during the Tet offensive? The reasons are varied but understandable. No family in South Vietnam has been unaffected by the Communist campaign of terror and subversion, and most have had relatives killed or wounded by the Communists. A majority of South Vietnamese (between 55% and 60%, by most estimates) live in the towns and cities by choice, both to enjoy more secure conditions than those existing in the countryside as well as to benefit from the effects of modernization (better jobs, education for children, better health facilities, more diversions). The Communists were seen as destroying the security and livelihood of the people--pointlessly, moreover, as the Communists were unable to hold onto their gains but were driven from most of the cities they attacked within a few days. They held on in Hue for three weeks before retreating and, in the wake of their retreat, left the mass graves of some 3000 Vietnamese civilians who had been executed by "People's Courts" set up by the Communists. The murders in Hue confirmed the revolting aspect of Communist terrorism and made it all the more likely that the Communists would never be able to mobilize significant mass support in South Vietnam.

### Is the South Vietnamese Government Worthy of Support?

The Republic of Vietnam is one of the 100 or so developing countries of the world which are, in their several ways and under the conditions that apply specifically to each of them, in the process of transforming or replacing their traditional political, economic, and social institutions with new forms more appropriate to their peoples in the modern world. Like the other countries, South Vietnam must contend with a still too-low literacy rate, with the problems of a rapidly-growing population, with the difficulties resulting from rapid urbanization, with an economy growing at an inadequate rate, and with the problems of economic and fiscal stabilization. Inflation, plus an inadequately-trained civil service, results in extensive corruption, as it does elsewhere in the developing world.

However, South Vietnam must also contend with the consequences of a prolonged war which has been destructive not only in terms of lives and property but has also drained off a million of its best young men, in the prime of life, who are currently serving in the armed forces and the police in the struggle against the Communists. Much of the budget must go for defense purposes, instead of into investment in the "green revolution" of modern agriculture, which would quickly transform the Vietnamese countryside, once a modest amount of security has been re-established.

The most significant outcome of the prolonged struggle that

has taken place since 1959 is that the Government of Vietnam, beset by problems though it is, continues to exist, supported by armed forces and a civil administration that have improved steadily in quantity and quality in the last several years. As a consequence of the Communist failure in the Tet offensive and a vigorous projection of government programs into the countryside, more than 93% of the population of South Vietnam now lives in areas substantially under government control. This figure will improve steadily during 1971, both in terms of numbers of people involved and in terms of the quality and intensity of Government operation.

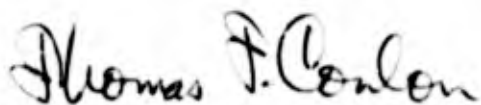
A vigorous political life has emerged in South Vietnam, with substantial, though not complete freedom of speech and of the press, a rare case in an underdeveloped country fighting for its life against a powerful and merciless aggressor. We have only to recall the suspension by President Lincoln of a significant portion of our Bill of Rights during our own Civil War to realize then when a determined enemy is at the gate, political life cannot be as full and free as it can be when a country is not under attack.

The Government of Vietnam deserves comprehension and support as it struggles to deal with the problems of under-development, with inflation, and corruption--spawned by a war it did not seek but was imposed on it by the Communist aggressors--and with administrative inefficiency and lethargy--the heritage of colonial oppression. The Government of Vietnam has displayed growing confidence that its armed forces and civil administration are now

able and will be even more capable in the future of assuming many of the functions now performed by American military and civilian units and individuals.

Through elections at the local, provincial, and national levels, the foundations of representative, democratic government have been laid, and a vigorous political life is taking shape. This is not yet full democracy, and the South Vietnamese do not claim that it is. A beginning has been made, however, and this is a real achievement in the midst of a devastating war. Our continuing support for the Government of Vietnam, as the war slowly but steadily winds down, is a fitting climax to the continuing display of devotion, courage, and imagination which the American people and Government have displayed during this long and terrible conflict.

It is sometimes forgotten that the War in Korea, 1950-53, was one of the most unpopular conflicts the United States had engaged in up to that time. Nonetheless, most Americans, in looking back on that struggle and looking today at the vigorous and self-confident Republic of Korea, now agree that the struggle in Korea was worth engaging in. In historical perspective, the War in Vietnam will appear in a similar light--an episode in the long struggle to halt Communist aggression and subversion. The American people can be proud of their participation in the War in Vietnam.



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