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Encountering Vietnam

The Vietnamese revolution started as a revolt against colonial oppression and ended as a set of wars deeply enmeshed with the global Cold War. Its origins were in the French colonization of Indochina in the nineteenth century, or perhaps even further back in Vietnam's long years of Chinese domination. At the core of the enterprise was a group of Vietnamese nationalist revolutionaries who in their youth became committed Marxists and admirers of the Soviet experience. For these young men and women, nationalism and Marxism were one. They believed that only by developing their movement, their nation, and their state according to Marxist laws of evolution could Vietnam truly succeed in the modern world. Their program was long-term, expansive, and utopian, but its implementation was dependent on first achieving independence and national unity. And it was for these latter aims that almost three million Vietnamese fought and died during the twentieth century.

Although policy-makers worldwide did not see it at the time, Vietnam was in many ways different from the rest of Asia. It was the only place where Communism became a dominant outlet for nationalism almost from the beginning. Even in countries where the Communist movement grew very big, such as in China, Korea, or Indonesia, this was a much more gradual phenomenon and the rivals for power were stronger. But in Vietnam, the Communists' opponents were tainted by their collaboration with the French, and Ho Chi Minh could present his Viet Minh movement as authentically Vietnamese both culturally and politically. Irrespective of his long service as a Comintern agent, Ho reinvented himself after 1945 as the symbol of national independence and as an elder of his people who deserved respect, almost veneration, by all Vietnamese.

The US war in Vietnam was therefore folly from the beginning. Not because there were no anti-Communist Vietnamese who were willing to fight for their cause, but because they were a minority and were bound to lose out in any contest for nationalist authenticity. The Vietnamese Communists could also count on the assistance of the Communist Chinese next door and on Soviet help. But successive American Administrations believed that the United States had to act to avoid a Communist victory in Indochina. The domino theory, first invented for China, was moved to Vietnam. To them, the Cold War was a zero-sum game, in which a loss for one side was a gain for the other. And the Soviet Union, or, even worse, China, was seen as controlling Vietnamese Communism and standing to gain through its success.

INSIDE VIETNAM THINGS looked rather different. For Ho Chi Minh and those who had worked with him in the Communist movement of Vietnam since the 1920s, the 1954 Geneva Conference had been a disaster. Instead of getting the united, socialist Vietnam that they had fought for—and believed they had gained through their prowess on the battlefield—they received only half a country, and uncertain prospects of reunification anytime soon. And even worse: Moscow and Beijing, their two main foreign sponsors, had together forced them to accept this division. Although Hanoi was told that this was a

temporary “consolidation” of revolutionary gains, no Vietnamese Communist was in any doubt that their country’s unity had been sacrificed on the altar of Great Power politics. But the leaders also knew that they stood no chance of fighting on their own against the new regime in the south and its American backers. Ho Chi Minh was convinced that reunification would take time. First, Communist North Vietnam had to build a state, refine its army, and build strong links with its Communist allies. Ho was under strong pressure from younger leaders, and especially those who themselves came from the south, for a more activist policy. He was a symbol rather than a state-builder; his power receded, and impatience grew, as North Vietnam developed in the late 1950s.

The North Vietnamese state, called the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, was Communist from the very beginning. In 1951 Ho Chi Minh had set up the Vietnam Workers’ Party (VWP) to act as a Communist core within the Viet Minh front. From the Geneva Accords of 1954 on, the VWP was in charge of building the state, and the state it built north of the seventeenth parallel was a copy of the Soviet model as implemented in China after 1949. It controlled the army, the police, and had a large network of informers and political enforcers all over the country (including in large parts of the south). It imprisoned its opponents in labor camps of the Stalin type. Around fifteen thousand were executed, most of them during a hastily carried out land reform campaign patterned on China’s. At least a million people fled to the south. **Even the Soviets and the Chinese criticized the North Vietnamese for having gone too far too fast.**

But the trouble the Vietnamese Communists put themselves in was overcome through cloaking it in a mantle of nationalism. All that was done, Ho declared, was done for the best of the nation, to make it rich, strong, and unified. Communist propaganda, both in the north and the south, hammered in the nationalist credentials of the Hanoi government and, equally importantly, the southern government’s lack of them. Leaders in Hanoi remained convinced, probably correctly, that they would “win” an all-Vietnam election if one were to be held, which was the reason why the Eisenhower Administration opposed such elections, in spite of the Geneva Accords. By 1957 it was clear that national elections were an unlikely prospect, and that both the Soviets and the Americans easily accepted the status quo for Vietnam and the rest of Indochina. With his peace offensive underway, the last thing Khrushchev wanted was another Asian war.

The Americans, however, did have the problem of what to do with southern Vietnam. The French were gone, relieved to depart after their military humiliation. The former emperor, Bao Dai, was tainted by collaboration both with the French and the Japanese. Jointly, the emperor and his US advisers settled on Ngo Dinh Diem as prime minister. Diem was a Vietnamese nationalist who opposed the Viet Minh and who had been in exile, mostly in the United States, since 1950. **His politics were nativist, Catholic, and conservative:** Diem believed that in order to make Vietnam into the great power it deserved to be, it had to return to its traditional roots in a new and invigorated Catholic form. His new Vietnam was to be modern, along the patterns set by the West, but would also make use of the unique abilities the Vietnamese had to create a just and stable society. Soon Diem had pushed the emperor aside and set up a Republic of Vietnam in the south with himself as president. The United States began pouring significant aid into the new South Vietnamese state, but the reforms Diem had promised were slow in coming. His main aim was to solidify his own regime against all comers, including the Communists who remained in the south.

Irrespective of the advice from their international partners, the Vietnamese Communists slowly began to extend their campaigns against Diem's regime in the south. In 1956, encouraged by Khrushchev's de-Stalinization and insistence that each party had to find its own road to socialism, the southern Vietnamese Communist Le Duan composed a masterful manifesto of doublespeak. In it, he insisted on the correctness of the Soviet view that "all conflicts in the world at present can be resolved by peaceful means." But he also warned that, in the south, a "people's revolutionary movement definitely will rise up." In other words, the Communist party had to support the spontaneous mass movement in the south, shape it, and lead it. By 1957, in response to Diem's attempts at wiping out Communism in the south, the party began a campaign of assassinations and bombings. Le Duan was made head of the party, gradually replacing Ho Chi Minh as the real center of power. In January 1959 the VWP approved of a "people's war" in the south and began infiltrating cadres into the south through Laos, along what became known as the "Ho Chi Minh trail." In July 1959 the southern Communists killed two US military advisers just outside the southern capital of Saigon. They were the first Americans to die in the new war in Vietnam.

The reason why Hanoi in 1960 could organize a general rebellion against Diem's government was the Sino-Soviet split. The Vietnamese skillfully began playing their two sponsors against each other in order to get the support they needed. There is little doubt that Le Duan and his leadership group were considerably closer to the Chinese than to the Soviets in terms of ideology, and that Mao's increasing radicalism inspired them to act forcefully. But Khrushchev was not just brought along by competition and circumstance. Because of Cuba, Algeria, and Congo, by 1960 the Soviets were much more alert to the potential for gains through "wars of national liberation" than they had been only a few years earlier. Hanoi's timing of a rebellion in the south was therefore close to perfect, even though neither Le Duan nor his foreign sponsors at this point expected anything but a long, drawn-out struggle with an uncertain outcome.

John Kennedy inherited his Vietnam quandary from President Eisenhower, and he never had time or occasion to concentrate on it to the extent of finding a firm strategy. Instead, Kennedy's Vietnam policy became a gradual slide toward greater US involvement, even though JFK resisted sending regular US troops to Indochina. He participated in negotiations for a neutralization of Laos, which gave some semblance of stability to the region. But Kennedy's greatest entanglement, in line with his overall approach to the Third World, was through attempts at reforming the South Vietnamese state and improving the fighting capacity of its army and air force. By 1963 the United States had sixteen thousand advisers in South Vietnam, up from six hundred when Kennedy took over. All main Vietnamese military units had US officers attached to them, and although the US advisers were not supposed to participate directly in fighting against Hanoi or the Communist-controlled National Liberation Front (NLF) in the south, they became increasingly indispensable to the South Vietnamese war effort. US aircraft and helicopters transported Vietnamese troops, including on raids into North Vietnam. The Americans also started using herbicides for crop destruction in order to starve the South Vietnamese rebels and their supporters, and began setting up "strategic villages" to which peasants "rescued" from NLF control could be relocated.

In spite of the increasing US support, by 1963 it was clear that the Diem regime was in serious trouble. Not only did the NLF expand its operations, especially in areas around the southern capital, Saigon. But the South Vietnamese president also clashed with the non-Communist political opposition, Buddhist groups, and student organizations. His relationship with his US sponsors also deteriorated; Diem insisted

that South Vietnam was a sovereign country, and that he was ultimately in control of civilian and military planning. A number of Buddhist monks self-immolated on the streets of Saigon in protest against the regime, and their burning bodies were shown on US television news, making many Americans wonder about the success of the US involvement in Vietnam. In desperation, the Kennedy Administration quietly encouraged South Vietnamese generals to carry out a coup against Diem. On 1 November 1963 the South Vietnamese president was kidnapped and murdered by his own officers. Three weeks later Kennedy was shot in Dallas.

Kennedy's biggest mistake on Vietnam was always to view the south and the north as two different countries. From this followed that the northern military involvement in the south was an invasion, and that the Communist great powers—and China especially—were behind the aggression. This line of thinking, which the new president, Lyndon B. Johnson, took over from Kennedy, linked the Vietnam War directly to the Cold War. It also drew connections back to Korea, the Chinese civil war, and ultimately World War II. The lesson was supposed to be that if the United States did not stand up to Communist aggression, then its resolve would be doubted and its positions, including its ideological positions, eroded. But both Kennedy and Johnson believed that US Administrations, and especially Democratic Administrations, that were not seen to stand up to Communist aggression were punished by opinion-makers and voters. Both Kennedy and Johnson, in very different ways, had a great fear of weakness. Quoting friends from his home state of Texas, Johnson liked to say that Americans “will forgive you for anything except being weak.”

In domestic terms, Lyndon Johnson was one of the best prepared presidents the United States has ever had. He had been in Congress since 1937 and was known as the master of the Senate, where he as majority leader had championed progressive causes in the FDR mold. As Kennedy's vice president he had served unhappily at the margins of power. With the president's assassination, he was thrown into the top seat of American politics, and he had a set of reforms that he wanted to carry out almost from the beginning. Some were plans that had been developed in the Kennedy Administration. But most were Johnson's own causes, and he had the experience, the toughness, and the wherewithal to push them through. Perhaps the most successful president in legislative terms in US history, Johnson saw through major initiatives on poverty reduction, civil rights, and health care, as well as immigration and education reform, dealing with thorny issues that had eluded his predecessor (or, for that matter, his successors). In the 1964 presidential elections, he crushed his Republican opponent and was reelected with the highest percentage of the popular vote ever.

But a solution to the escalating war in Vietnam seemed to elude Johnson, too. Although his political instincts told him to find a way out as fast as possible, he feared the consequences. His priorities were his domestic reforms, but he felt he would be unable to carry those out fully if he did not have a clean sheet on foreign policy. Discussing how to present the war to the American people, Johnson confided to an old buddy in the Senate:

I think that I've got to say that I didn't get you in here, but we're in here by treaty [with South Vietnam] and our national honor's at stake. And if this treaty is no good, none of 'em are any good. Therefore we're there. And being there, we've got to conduct ourselves like men. That's number one. Number two, in our own revolution, we wanted freedom and we naturally look with sympathy with other people who want freedom and if you leave 'em alone and give 'em freedom, we'll get out tomorrow.

During 1964 the Johnson Administration became increasingly convinced that the United States faced an all-out challenge from the Communist camp in Vietnam. The coup against Diem had led to little but increased instability. The rebellion in the Republic of Vietnam continued to spread. The evidence of the north supplying and directing that rebellion continued to mount. And behind Hanoi stood Beijing and Moscow, more or less in that order. Against plentiful evidence of a growing Sino-Soviet split, Johnson kept focusing on Vietnam as a Communist bloc problem. The difference between the Communist great powers, according to the Johnson Administration, was that the Soviets were practical and rational, while the Chinese were unreasonable and increasingly irrational. **It is not difficult to see racial stereotypes behind this kind of thinking:** the Soviets, after all, were at least led by Europeans, while the Chinese were Orientals who did not understand—or did not want to engage in—the normal give and take among powers. It was this irrationality more than anything, Johnson’s secretary of defense Robert McNamara believed, that kept the war going.

By mid-1964, the president had become convinced that the only way to win the war in Vietnam was by showing an on the ground military willingness to do so. If the United States proved to Hanoi and to Moscow that they had nothing to gain by further aggression, they would come to the negotiating table, irrespective of howls of protest from the Chinese. McNamara and McGeorge Bundy, the president’s national security adviser, both pushed for the bombing of North Vietnam, the deployment of US ground forces, and the widening of US participation in the war alongside South Vietnamese troops. In a draft presidential speech, Bundy argued that the United States was not “bound to give the aggressors any guarantee against joint and necessary reprisal for their repeated acts of war against free men in South Vietnam. What has been ordered from outside South Vietnam can be punished outside South Vietnam, by all the laws of nations, and by the elemental rule that men are answerable for what is done at their command. The aggressor in Hanoi knows his guilt, and the world knows it too.” Even Secretary of State Dean Rusk, a relative dove on foreign affairs, prodded the president. “The matter of war and peace lay in the Pacific,” he told Johnson. “If we appeared to falter before the Soviet Union and Communist China this would be interpreted as a reward for the track they have been following, and this would increase the chance of war. If we were to make a move that would signal to Peiping [Beijing] that we are weakening, this would increase our danger.”

In August 1964 Johnson used inaccurate reports of North Vietnamese vessels firing on a US naval ship in international waters as an excuse to get Congressional authority for widening the war. The so-called Gulf of Tonkin resolution authorized the president “to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” In 1965 the US Air Force started bombing raids into North Vietnam, and the number of US troops increased to almost two hundred thousand. By the end of the year almost two thousand Americans had died in the fighting, and it was becoming clear to most people at home that this was a real war and not the kind of proxy conflict that the United States had engaged in globally over the past decade.

We know today that many of the US assumptions about the political and military calculus on the North Vietnamese, Soviet, and Chinese sides in the Vietnam War were mistaken. The North Vietnamese leaders viewed the war as a national struggle for liberation. They were aiming for a military victory, which they realized could only come about after a US disengagement. The Soviets realized that the war in Vietnam was to the US detriment in the global Cold War struggle, since it alienated Third World countries and movements, and made the Soviet Union seem a country that stood for peace and assistance to little Vietnam fighting the American Goliath. **By almost every measure, the stakes in**

Vietnam were extremely low for the USSR and increasingly high for the United States. But Moscow was always wary of the war spreading elsewhere in southeast Asia, thereby forcing the Soviets to take a more active and visible role in defense of local revolutions. As things were, Khrushchev's successors were happy to condemn US aggression and provide limited aid to North Vietnam (in part to attempt to pry it away from its alliance with China), while privately telling Johnson that Moscow was trying to moderate Hanoi's behavior. The not-too-subtle Soviet message to the Americans was that Vietnam could be settled only if Washington was willing to work with Moscow on other Cold War issues.

It was the Chinese role in Vietnam that changed the most, in line with Beijing's topsy-turvy policies during the 1960s. In the first part of the decade, and especially after 1962, Mao Zedong increasingly used the war in Vietnam as a weapon against the Soviets. The Chinese Communists, Mao proclaimed, gave full support to Hanoi's attempts at fast-tracking its road to Communism and to liberating the south. The Chairman's message was that where Moscow prevaricated, Beijing acted. Chinese aid to North Vietnam increased significantly year on year, as Hanoi ideologically sided with China in its quarrels with the Soviets. But as the US engagement widened in 1964, Mao was keen to avoid a direct conflict with the Americans, as had happened in Korea. Beijing signaled to Washington that it would not get involved with its own forces unless the Americans invaded the north. In spite of his increasingly revolutionary stance domestically and internationally, Mao had a healthy respect for American power. Besides, with his confrontation with the Soviets worsening—mostly, it should be said, by his own actions—Mao Zedong had little appetite for an all-out war in Indochina. Therefore, China's policy came to consist of aiding the North Vietnamese and the NLF in the south, while egging them on to fight "relentlessly" against the Americans and eschew all negotiations. But Beijing had also learned from Korea not to take any chances. By 1967 China had 170,000 of its own troops stationed in Vietnam to help the North Vietnamese with their defense, while being prepared to fight in case the Americans crossed the dividing line between North and South Vietnam. "My fundamental idea," Chinese premier Zhou Enlai told the North Vietnamese, "is that we should be patient. Patience means victory. Patience can cause you more hardship, more sufferings. Yet, the sky will not collapse, the earth will not slide, and the people cannot be totally exterminated. So patience can be rewarded with victory thus causing historic changes, encouraging the Asian, African, and Latin American countries, and playing down the American imperialists."

The Johnson Administration also saw the war in Vietnam in international terms. Through 1965 and '66, the president was convinced that weakness in Vietnam would translate into setbacks elsewhere in the Third World and possibly in Europe, too. Johnson principally saw this in alliance terms: if the word of the United States did not stand in southeast Asia, what would allies and potential enemies elsewhere think? But he also sensed—much encouraged by his advisers—that things might be about to turn to the benefit of the United States in some important regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. What was important, Johnson thought, was to hold the fort in Vietnam while other new countries—helped and encouraged by US assistance programs—turned away from radicalism and toward freedom and economic growth. Recognizing that foreign assistance was not popular among the general public or in Congress, the president issued a special message that was vintage LBJ both in form and content. "To those nations which do commit themselves to progress under freedom, help from us and from others can provide the margin of difference between failure and success," Johnson said. "This is the heart of the matter.... We will be laying up a harvest of woe for us and our children if we shrink from the task of grappling in the world community with poverty and ignorance. These are the grim recruiting sergeants of Communism.

They flourish wherever we falter. If we default on our obligations, Communism will expand its ambitions. That is the stern equation which dominates our age, and from which there can be no escape in logic or in honor.”

The Administration was right in seeing the mid-1960s as a turning point in the Third World, even if they were wrong about the long-term effects of that turning for Vietnam and the rest of Indochina. In Algeria, long the tribune of Third World revolution, the army turned on President Ben Bella in June 1965 and ousted him in a coup. There was little resistance. The majority of Algerians felt that Ben Bella had been rich in rhetoric but poor in the execution of his plans. They wanted a more practical and pragmatic approach to economic development, which delivered tangible results for those had fought for so long for a state of their own. It was not so much the contents of the Algerian National Liberation Front’s (FLN’s) program that people objected to, as its poor execution and the increasing self-centeredness of the new revolutionary elite. Army head Houari Boumedienne, whose forces took over the Algerian capital under cover of acting as extras in the filming of the Gillo Pontecorvo film *The Battle of Algiers*, promised fewer speeches and more action, which is also what Algerians got over the years that followed. In its foreign policy and in much of its economic planning Algeria drew closer to the Soviet Union and away from Third World idealism.

In Ghana similar events took place. Kwame Nkrumah, for almost a decade the unchallenged leader of his country and a key Third World spokesman, was overthrown in a military coup in 1966. Nkrumah had lost much popular support because his economic policies were slow in bringing results and he was becoming increasingly dictatorial. In 1962 he sacked the chief justice. Two years later he banned all opposition parties and made Ghana a one-party state and himself president for life. The coup came when Nkrumah was on his way to China and North Vietnam, and the military officers who took over claimed that one of their purposes was to save Ghana from impending Communist control. In his book *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*, published six months before his overthrow, Nkrumah accused his domestic opponents of being engulfed by “a flood of anti-liberation propaganda [that] emanates from the capital cities of the West, directed against China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Algeria, Ghana and all countries which hack out their own independent path to freedom.... Wherever there is armed struggle against the forces of reaction, the nationalists are referred to as rebels, terrorists, or frequently ‘communist terrorists!’”

The coups in Algeria and Ghana were windfalls for the Johnson Administration. Though there is no evidence that the CIA was directly involved in either event, the US government had encouraged and made clear its support for such action by the military. While the outcome in Ghana was a military dictatorship with close ties to the United States, the Algerian result was more murky from a US perspective. Boumedienne was no pushover in international affairs, and his affinity for Soviet-style planning was well known to the Americans. Even so, Washington much preferred him over the Thirdworldist Ben Bella. In its review of the coup, the CIA commented that “in many areas of Algeria the army has probably already provided sounder leadership and administration than Ben Bella’s government or the FLN party.”¹¹ Thinking like the Soviets had become less of a challenge to the Johnson Administration outside of Europe than anti-imperialist revolutionaries and assorted friends of the Chinese or the Cubans. In spite of the Cold War continuing, Moscow had become a sort of “normal” enemy—European, straight-laced, and rather predictable—whereas the Third World was chaotic and given to excess. At the core of US fears lay the suspicion that future opposition to American global predominance might look more Chinese or Cuban than Soviet.

If any set of events should have given Washington pause in this kind of thinking, it was the defeats of the Left in Indonesia and Congo in 1965. Both still signaled that the future, at least in terms of a Communist challenge, might not lay with Beijing and Havana. They also, in different ways, indicated the beginning of the end of the Third World as a global political opposition. To Washington, counterrevolutions in Indonesia and Congo—and later in Bolivia—confirmed that US campaigns against Third World projects could work, if there were strong local allies, who fought against the radicals for their own reasons. It was the kind of lesson that conceptually could not be applied to Vietnam because such allies did not exist there and because an aggressive China was right next door. But the logical conclusion from this discrepancy, that the United States should withdraw its troops from Vietnam, was equally impossible to carry out because of the fear of being perceived as weak, irresolute, and defeatist in Cold War terms.

Ever since Lumumba's murder in 1960, Congo had seen sporadic fighting by Left-wing or separatist groups against a weak central government supported by the Americans, the Belgians, and European companies keen on exploiting the country's vast mineral wealth. By 1964 a full-scale rebellion had broken out in eastern Congo, headed by radicals who took over Kisangani (then called Leopoldville) and declared a People's Republic. As Congolese troops, aided by European and South African mercenaries and US advisers, approached Kisangani, the rebels took European hostages and threatened to execute them if the offensive continued. Prime Minister Moïse Tshombe, who had been responsible for the killing of Lumumba, appealed for Western intervention. In November 1964 President Johnson decided to have US planes airlift Belgian troops into eastern Congo to evacuate the hostages. "We couldn't just let the cannibals kill a lot of people," the president observed from his ranch in Texas.¹² While more than a thousand hostages were rescued, another two hundred were killed, alongside thousands of Congolese. Helped by a large CIA-led foreign operation, the Congolese government gradually took control of rebel territory and exacted its brutal revenge.

The US involvement in Congo led to angry reactions from the rest of Africa, not so much because of any love for the Congolese rebels, who were generally seen as a disorganized and mindless lot, but because of its association with the former Belgian colonial masters. The remaining Simbas (lions), as the survivors of the People's Republic called themselves, got help from the Egyptians and the Algerians, but also from the Cubans, who sent Che Guevara with a task force of more than one hundred to fight with them in April 1965. Che spent seven fruitless months in the eastern Congolese jungles, increasingly frustrated by the rebels' lack of coordination and their leaders' propensity for high living in Cairo rather than dire fighting in Congo. By the end of 1965 the rebellion had been defeated. The United States has been "licking [the] Congo rebellion," Johnson's deputy national security adviser, Robert Komer, told his bosses. "We and the Belgians have been practically calling the signals for Tshombe and providing him with everything he thought he needed—money, arms, advisors."

A world away from Congo, Indonesia was even higher up the US list of international trouble spots. The Indonesian nationalists, led by the mercurial Sukarno, had achieved their independence from the Netherlands in 1949 with the United States as a facilitator for liberation. Part of the reason why Washington had decided to push the Dutch toward granting full independence to their former colony was that Sukarno seemed a staunch anti-Communist. In 1948 his forces had fought a brief civil war against the powerful Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and won a decisive victory. But as Sukarno began to take more of an interest in anticolonial struggles globally and radicalized his economic policies at home, Indonesia fell out of American good graces. In Washington, the Bandung Conference, at which Sukarno as host played the lead role, was seen as a challenge to American foreign policy, and Sukarno

became another *bête noir* of the Eisenhower Administration. As the Indonesian president turned toward a higher degree of centralization and cooperation with the resurrected Communist Party in 1957, US patience was running low. With the British and Dutch in tow, the Eisenhower Administration carried out a covert program to help anti-Sukarno Islamic rebels in Sumatra. “We must prevent Indonesia going over to the Communists,” Dulles told his British counterparts. “If Java becomes Communist-dominated, the best thing to do was to undermine their system by building up the independence of the outer islands, beginning with Sumatra.”

The CIA’s campaign against Sukarno failed, but, understandably, left the Indonesian leader with an awareness that the Americans were out to get him. In the 1960s his policies became even more intent on building a strong central state for all Indonesians, which in his view should include all of Borneo, New Guinea, and even peninsular Malaya. He sought to formalize the coalition that kept him in power, declaring his government to be based on Nasakom: nationalism, religion, and Communism. When Malaysia became independent in 1963, Sukarno predictably denounced the new country as a neocolonialist British puppet state and started a three-year-long low-grade war against it, which Malay-speakers called *konfrontasi*, the confrontation. With Indonesian forces confronting British and Australian forces in Borneo, and the Communist Party gaining ground politically in Indonesia, the United States was desperately searching for a policy. The Johnson Administration vacillated. The president wanted to withdraw all aid to the country, but the Pentagon and the CIA recommended continuing contacts with the military, hoping that its officers would act against Sukarno.

But Washington was not the only power that hedged in its relations with the Third World firebrand. The Soviets resented being criticized by Sukarno for being old, white, and sluggish, and by the PKI, whose criticism was similar to the Chinese, for being revisionist. Still, the USSR was by far the largest supplier of weapons. Like the Americans, Moscow kept its lines open to officers in the Indonesian military but had little direct political influence. The Chinese, on the other hand, seemed close both to Sukarno and the Indonesian Communists. By the early 1960s, with the Sino-Soviet split visible, the Indonesian president imagined that he could pull Beijing over onto a Third World anti-imperialist and anti-Cold War platform. In speeches and writings he extolled China’s significance. But Mao Zedong was not equally convinced about the relationship. As the Chairman moved further to the Left in the mid-1960s, Sukarno and his regime seemed less and less trustworthy, simply because it was a “bourgeois” and not a truly socialist government.

As tension mounted in Indonesia, Sukarno seemed to thrive on the anxious political situation. He dubbed 1965 “the year of living dangerously,” and stepped up his commitment to political and economic change. His recklessness proved his undoing. In the summer of 1965, senior officers were unnerved by the president’s proposal to create an armed people’s militia to parallel the conventional military. The Communists, meanwhile, feared for Sukarno’s health, based on information from his Chinese doctors. They assumed that with him gone, the generals would turn on them again. The PKI struck first, by sanctioning a coup attempt by Communist junior officers on 30 September 1965, in which six generals were murdered. But the remaining generals, led by Suharto, struck back and took control of Jakarta, “protecting” Sukarno and outlawing the Indonesian Communist Party.

The coup in Jakarta was followed by some of the worst killing of civilians during all of the Cold War. Right-wing nationalists in the military and some Muslim religious leaders fanned out and organized massacres of Communists who seem to have been mostly unprepared for the ferocity of the attacks.

Minorities suspected, often without any reason, of having collaborated with the Communists were also set upon. The Chinese community was especially badly hit. In all, at least half a million people were killed, mostly by being beheaded or having their throats slit. "Like lightning," one eyewitness said, the executioner's "machete cut through the neck of his victim, the one-eyed, powerless bicycle repairman. His head went into the sack. Then his hands were untied, so that it looked as though he died without first being bound. At first, his headless body disappeared beneath the surface of the water, then eventually it floated up. The next person killed was a woman; I don't know who she was." In one part of the country, the rivers were so thick with bodies that it prevented the water from flowing. The US embassy contributed to the killings by providing the military with lists of Communists.

Internationally, all sides seemed relieved that Sukarno was gone. The Americans had the most reason to be relieved. "We may at last have Sukarno on the run," Robert Komer wrote to President Johnson. "It is hard to overestimate the potential significance of the army's apparent victory over Sukarno. Indonesia... was well on the way to becoming another expansionist Communist state, which would have critically menaced the rear of the whole Western position in mainland Southeast Asia. Now... this trend has been sharply reversed." The Soviets licked their wounds but blamed Sukarno and the PKI for the disaster. The Chinese, from their parochial Maoist perspective, were also unperturbed. "I think it will be a good thing if Sukarno is overthrown," Foreign Minister Chen Yi said. "Sukarno could mediate between the right and the left. But the future of Indonesia depends on the armed struggle of the PKI. This is the most important thing." Chen Yi's fantasies were soon dispelled. The most powerful Communist Party outside of the Soviet bloc was crushed forever, and Indonesia entered its thirty years of Right-wing dictatorial rule.

THE OVERTHROW OF so many Third World leaders in the mid-1960s meant a crisis for the movement as a whole. Tellingly, the Afro-Asian conference planned for Algiers in the autumn of 1965 never took place. The fiasco of the cancelled meeting was, said one of the delegates, "the tombstone of the Afro-Asian world."¹⁹ More countries in the Afro-Asian group, such as Egypt, Algeria, Syria, Iraq, and India, began orienting themselves toward the Soviet Union, at least as far as assistance and models for development were concerned. The Cubans and the Yugoslavs, declared Communists although of very different ilks, also increased their influence. Other Third World countries began emphasizing their own economic interests more, usually connected to the export of resources such as oil. For the Americans this was an undoubted relief. But these victories had to be built on. "In expressing your pleasure to Sec[retary of] State and others over the Indonesia and Ghana coups," Robert Komer advised President Johnson, "you make clear that we ought to exploit such successes as quickly and as skillfully as possible."

The turning away from Third World ideals in Asia and Africa hardened US approaches to Vietnam and Indochina. In hindsight it is easy to see that the Johnson Administration drew the wrong lessons from the mid-1960s turnaround. They thought that American resolve in Vietnam had contributed significantly to defections from radicalism elsewhere, though even the CIA found no evidence for that being the case. The lack of imagination in US policy on Vietnam from the mid-1960s on is striking. Faced with continued political instability in South Vietnam, Secretary of State Dean Rusk concluded in April 1966 that "vis-a-vis the threatened nations of Asia, we must ask ourselves whether failure in Viet-Nam because of clearly visible political difficulties not under our control would be any less serious than failure without this factor":

The question comes down, as it always has, to whether there is any tenable line of defense in Southeast Asia if Viet-Nam falls. Here we must recognize that the anti-Communist regime in Indonesia has been a tremendous “break” for us.... But for the next year or two any chance of holding the rest of Southeast Asia hinges on the same factors assessed a year ago, whether Thailand and Laos in the first instance and Malaysia, Singapore, and Burma close behind, would—in the face of a US failure for any reason in Viet-Nam—have any significant remaining will to resist the Chinese Communist pressures that would probably then be applied.... Thailand simply could not be held in these circumstances, and that the rest of Southeast Asia would probably follow in due course. In other words, the strategic stakes in Southeast Asia are fundamentally unchanged by the political nature of the causes for failure in Viet-Nam. The same is almost certainly true of the shockwaves that would arise against other free nations—Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines—in the wider area of East Asia.

The United States therefore fought on in Vietnam, even if victory seemed elusive. On the advice of the Pentagon, the Johnson Administration poured more manpower and resources into the country, building airports, deepwater ports, bases, and hospitals, plus civilian assistance to the South Vietnamese government, which seemed more and more given to in-fighting and less and less capable of defending itself. The US air campaign was widened, employing B-52 bombers against targets inside North Vietnam. The strategy—if it can be called such—was to deploy US troops to fight at the perimeter of the South Vietnamese defenses to inflict maximum damage on NLF and North Vietnamese units. The South Vietnamese army would then be able to handle the NLF fighters within the core parts of South Vietnam. As Communist casualties increased, the theory went, a point would be reached when Hanoi would have no choice but to come to the negotiating table on US terms.

None of the elements of this strategy worked. US troops under General William Westmoreland inflicted massive damage on the Communist forces. Eight hundred thousand North Vietnamese and NLF soldiers died during the war, against a total of fifty-eight thousand US troops. But the American battlefield victories could not be translated into the holding of territory. As soon as the Americans moved on, Communist units moved back in. There were whole areas that were held by the South Vietnamese and Americans by day, and by the NLF at night. The loyalty of the local population to the Saigon government was dubious all over the country. Although most peasants simply wanted to get away from the fighting, a substantial number of young men and women volunteered to fight for the Communists. To overcome their problems of control, the Americans and South Vietnamese started moving peasants into “strategic hamlets,” where—ostensibly—they would benefit from better housing and education. In reality it was to keep the peasants from contact with the NLF. But the results of such wartime social engineering were often the opposite of what was desired, as South Vietnamese resented being moved from their ancestral farms and villages.

As in all Cold War conflicts, the civilian population suffered greatly. About fifty thousand North Vietnamese died in US bombing raids. The United States dropped more bombs on the north than it did on Japan during all of World War II. More than two hundred thousand died in Communist political campaigns, north and south. Hundreds of thousands became refugees in their own country, and tens of thousands were injured as a result of US napalm bombing or use of Agent Orange. The Vietnam War was one of the most tragic manifestations of the Cold War, fought, it now seems, with massive casualties and for no good purpose.

One key reason why US strategy did not work was support for North Vietnam from China and the Soviet Union. Le Duan negotiated his alliances skillfully. Although Moscow and Beijing were at odds during all of the American war in Vietnam, Hanoi continued to receive support from both, even after China and the Soviet Union nearly went to war against each other in 1969. Hanoi achieved this in part by making support for North Vietnam the litmus test of internationalist dedication to the cause and in part by playing the two Communist great powers against each other in terms of assistance. Up to 1965 Chinese military and civilian support for North Vietnam had been more significant than what arrived from the Soviet Union. Beijing and Hanoi had also been much closer politically, with Vietnamese Communist leaders supporting Chinese accusations against the Soviets for “revisionism” and “right-deviationism.” But Mao’s Cultural Revolution radicalism changed the relationship. The North Vietnamese resented being constantly reminded of how they should behave politically at home and how they should avoid “insulting” China by mentioning both Soviet and Chinese aid. Red Guards made up of Chinese advisers rallied in Hanoi and Haiphong to exhort the Vietnamese to condemn revisionism and learn from Chairman Mao. Meanwhile, the Maoists held back Soviet military supplies arriving through China. In Beijing, the Chairman still insisted that he be the ultimate judge of how the Vietnamese should fight their war. Meeting with North Vietnamese premier Pham Van Dong and General Vo Nguyen Giap in 1967, Mao told them that “fighting a war of attrition is like having meals: [it is best] not to have too big a bite. In fighting the US troops, you can have a bite the size of a platoon, a company, or a battalion. With regard to troops of the puppet regime, you can have a regiment-size bite. It means that fighting is similar to having meals, you should have one bite after another. After all, fighting is not too difficult an undertaking. The way of conducting it is just similar to the way you eat.”

Not surprisingly, the political leaders in Hanoi were left with the impression that China was willing to fight the war to the last Vietnamese. They therefore turned increasingly to the Soviet Union. And the Soviets were willing to reciprocate. They saw an opportunity to humiliate the Americans and chasten the Chinese. Soviet assistance to North Vietnam mounted dramatically in 1967, both on the military and the civilian side.²³ But at the same time Moscow advised Le Duan and his colleagues to negotiate if the opportunity arose. The Soviet aim was to ensure that the US war in Vietnam went badly, while holding out Moscow’s role as a potential facilitator of talks. The North Vietnamese, understandably, made the decision to attempt to achieve substantial and sudden victories on the battlefield in order to empower them both in relation to their sponsors and vis-à-vis the South Vietnamese and the Americans. Such gains, Le Duan thought, would be important if negotiations were to begin. But he also hoped for the collapse of the South Vietnamese regime and outright victory.

The North Vietnamese and NLF Tet offensive began in January 1968. Hanoi ordered a sweeping military assault and a general uprising in the south. Even though it never came close to meeting its maximum objectives, the offensive shook the South Vietnamese power structure and called into further doubt the efficiency of the US commitment to the regime in Saigon. Communist units attacked across the country, including in downtown areas of the capital. There they got inside the US embassy, took over the main radio station, and fought around the presidential palace. These operations, and similar “spectaculars” across South Vietnam, were de facto suicide missions, where the Communist fighters mainly were killed within a few hours. The reinforcements from larger units never arrived, and the general uprising failed to materialize. But the fighting in Saigon and other cities was shown on prime-time American television, where some news anchors were now starting to question the effectiveness of the war. CBS’s Walter Cronkite, just returned from Vietnam, told his viewers that “we have been too often disappointed by the

optimism of the American leaders, both in Vietnam and Washington, to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds.... For it seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate.... It is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could.”

One thousand five hundred US soldiers died and seven thousand were wounded in the Tet offensive. Although the Communists may have lost twenty times as many, the impression that the war was unwinnable started to spread in the United States and among its allies. Since 1967 there had been large-scale demonstrations against the war all over the United States, organized by student organizations or by independent activist groups. Coming at the same time as the increased militancy of the African-American movement, many Americans started feeling that the country had lost its direction and that chaos was threatening. To most protesters, the resistance against the war in Vietnam and racial oppression at home was one and the same. “Shoot them for what? They never called me nigger,” the heavyweight boxing champion of the world, Muhammad Ali, told those who were trying to draft him. Even Martin Luther King Jr., a moderate civil rights leader, declared in April 1967 that “a time comes when silence is betrayal”:

That time has come for us in relation to Vietnam.... We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem.... I have tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action. But they asked, and rightly so, “What about Vietnam?” They asked if our own nation wasn’t using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government.

The war in Vietnam destroyed Lyndon Johnson’s presidency and made him decide not to seek reelection in 1968. It was, in many ways, a tragedy: an Administration that had such high aspirations for a domestic transformation of the United States, and had accomplished so much, was destroyed by a foreign war that it fought out of ignorance and Cold War conventions. But there may be more consistency in Lyndon Johnson’s approach to the world than he has usually been credited with. For him, as for Kennedy, domestic reform and fighting the Cold War went hand in hand. The United States could not fully succeed in one unless it succeeded in the other. The real tragedy of Vietnam in America was how it became the catalyst for failure on both scores. Johnson left his country more disoriented in terms of what could be achieved at home and feeling less secure in terms of how it could impact events abroad than it had ever been during the twentieth century.

The real tragedy of Vietnam is of course Vietnam’s tragedy. As with Korea, Vietnam was torn apart by the Cold War, both through the Communist Party’s brutality and failed development plans, and through American occupation and bombing. The difference with Korea was that the Vietnamese Communists had almost a monopoly on nationalist activism, and that the South Vietnamese leaders never were able to establish a credible government of their own. Could this have been different if South Vietnam had had more time to establish itself? There is no evidence for that. On the contrary, the United States spent

more money and effort on Vietnam than on any other intervention during the Cold War. That it did not succeed was not because of a lack of endeavor. It was probably because Vietnam was the wrong place to intervene.

As the Vietnam War moved slowly toward real negotiations, it was clear that the American intervention there had meant a dramatic drop in support for the US role globally. It is an irony that just when much of Africa and Asia began to turn away from the Third World project and the Cubans failed to revolutionize Latin America, the United States got stuck in one of the few conflicts it could not win. Perceptually, it paid a high price for its folly. Many of America's European allies called for an unconditional end to the US bombing of North Vietnam. France's de Gaulle, with characteristic smugness after France's own disasters in Indochina, referred to the war as a Vietnamese "national resistance" against the United States, and US escalations as "illusions" that provoked China and the Soviet Union and were "condemned by a large number of the peoples of Europe, Africa, Latin America and is more and more threatening to world peace."

In terms of the global Cold War, the US involvement in Indochina provided opportunities for the Soviet Union to reassert itself as the universal alternative to American domination and capitalist exploitation. From the Hungarian uprising to the Berlin Wall and the Congo crises, the Soviet Union seemed to fall behind. Challenged by US power, as well as by dissatisfaction in eastern Europe, the break with China, and the creation of the Third World, the Soviets and their system appeared to be out of tune with the way the world was turning. Vietnam gave them a chance to gain strength. That this reassertion happened less through their own gain than through the failures of others is of less relevance to the story at this point. If one thinks in bipolar terms, as many people did during the Cold War, it comes out as being more or less the same thing. America's loss was perceived as the Soviets' gain.

Even though the focus on Vietnam did not substantially divert US attention from Europe, where NATO remained strong in spite of challenges by de Gaulle and others, it arguably did prevent the Johnson Administration from fully engaging with other emerging crises. One such was the Palestinian refugee problem in the Middle East, where tension was again rising. Johnson had increased US support for Israel, which he saw as a Western-style island of stability in a chaotic region. The Israelis received more civilian assistance, as well as access to military hardware such as bombers and tanks. Johnson also deliberately turned a blind eye to the Israeli nuclear weapon program. In 1965 the president told one of his Jewish Cabinet members, Abraham Ribicoff, how much he appreciated working with the Israelis. "I had a long wire from [Israel prime minister Levi] Eshkol yesterday—a real good one—on my birthday. I have really saved him, and gone to bat with his equipment and stuff. I've done it quietly, and, I think, quite effectively." The Palestinians simply did not figure in the equation.

Another omission was developments in southern Africa, where the Portuguese clung to their dilapidated empire and white supremacist regimes were developing in South Africa and Rhodesia. Southern Africa was the last great decolonization issue, and Johnson skirted it as best he could. While there is no doubt about his distaste for the South African apartheid regime—Johnson was, after all, the greatest civil rights president in US history—he felt that he needed both the South Africans and the Portuguese onboard in Cold War terms. Robert Komer put Johnson's dilemma to him succinctly: the Azores base, which the United States leased from Portugal, "makes it hard to be anti-Portuguese, while the UK's economic stake in Rhodesia and South Africa makes us reluctant to push them too hard.... To the extent that we can stay

slightly ahead on these issues instead of being reluctantly dragged towards the inevitable, we can keep our African affairs in reasonably good repair.”

But events in southern Africa did not wait for the slow pace of change that the United States was trying to set out for matters of decolonization and racial equality. By 1968 liberation movements had taken up arms against the Portuguese in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau. In South Africa the main anti-apartheid movement, the ANC, had committed itself to an armed struggle against the regime in Pretoria. Instead of showing solidarity with the oppressed, the Johnson Administration worried about Soviet and Chinese influence on the liberation movements. Like African-Americans, Africans should be grateful for what the president was trying to do for them, Johnson thought. As his presidency went down in flames over black and student unrest at home, coupled with an unwinnable war in Vietnam, Johnson lamented his fate. “I asked so little in return,” he told his advisers. “Just a little thanks. Just a little appreciation. That’s all. But look at what I got instead. Riots in 175 cities. Looting. Burning. Shooting. It ruined everything.”³⁰ And as Johnson wondered why American cities burned, the Cold War looked set to take new turns abroad.