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The Opinion Pages

## *The 30-Years War in Vietnam*

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CHRISTOPHER GOSCHA VIETNAM '67 FEB. 7, 2017

It should go without saying that the Vietnam War is remembered by different people in very different ways. Most Americans remember it as a war fought between 1965 and 1975 that bogged down their military in a struggle to prevent the Communists from marching into Southeast Asia, deeply dividing Americans as it did. The French remember their loss there as a decade-long conflict, fought from 1945 to 1954, when they tried to hold on to the Asian pearl of their colonial empire until losing it in a place called Dien Bien Phu.

The Vietnamese, in contrast, see the war as a national liberation struggle, or as a civil conflict, depending on which side they were on, ending in victory in 1975 for one side and tragedy for the other. For the Vietnamese, it was above all a 30-year conflict transforming direct and indirect forms of fighting into a brutal conflagration, one that would end up claiming over three million Vietnamese lives.

The point is not that one perspective is better or more accurate than the other. What's important, rather, is to understand how the colonial war, the civil war and the Cold War intertwined to produce such a deadly conflagration by 1967.

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## COLONIAL WAR

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Without World War II, the struggle in Vietnam might have played out very differently.

The Japanese had occupied French Indochina (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) in 1940, and they left the fascist Vichy French government, allied with Tokyo's German partner after the fall of France in 1940, in charge of day-to-day affairs. This collaboration ended in early 1945, as the Allies terminated the German hold on Europe and prepared to defeat the Japanese in Asia. In March, worried that Vichy troops would turn on them, the Japanese overthrew the French, ending 80 years of colonialism. A few months later, the Japanese capitulated, creating a power vacuum in Vietnam.

Ho Chi Minh and his Communist-led Viet Minh nationalist front seized the opportunity. On Sept. 2, 1945, Ho proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Taking power, however, was one thing; holding onto it was another. Within days, Allied troops landed to disarm Japanese forces. The British debarked in southern Indochina below the 16th parallel, while Chinese nationalist troops occupied the north. In the wings, the leader of a newly liberated France, Charles de Gaulle, ordered his men to re-establish colonial rule. Unable to maintain order, three weeks later the British allowed the French to dislodge the Viet Minh from Saigon, triggering war below the 16th parallel.

Accompanying the Chinese troops in the north were Vietnamese nationalists long opposed to Ho and his Communist Party. Local Chinese commanders preferred, however, to keep Ho's Vietnam in place in order to avoid the chaos occurring in the south. They imposed a coalition government on Ho, but did little more. This uneasy truce between Vietnamese Communist and anti-Communist nationalists broke down when the Chinese withdrew in mid-1946, leaving their allies at the mercy of the Communists, who swiftly defeated them before focusing on the French. Despite Ho's sincere efforts to negotiate decolonization peacefully, the French wanted Indochina back. Full-scale war broke out in December 1946.

The French refusal to decolonize enabled the Communists to monopolize the nationalist mantle as they bogged the French down in a guerrilla war. Nationalists working with the French begged them to decolonize before it was too late. But even when the French finally created the State of Vietnam in 1949, led by the ex-emperor Bao Dai, they refused to grant it full independence.

The arrival of the Cold War in Asia following the Chinese Communist victory in 1949, and the start of the Korean War a year later, strengthened the French hand. By casting themselves as the Asian front line of the free world's struggle against global communism, the French persuaded the Americans to abandon their anticolonialism in favor of supporting France in Indochina.

This strategy came with a price, though. The French may have used the Americans, but the Americans used the French — their army, their administration, their State of Vietnam and its troops — to indirectly fight the Communists in Indochina. The United States created a Military Assistance Advisory Group in 1950, funded counterinsurgency programs and stepped up C.I.A. operations. By 1954, the Americans were paying for more than 70 percent of the French war — because it was their war, too. Chinese Communists pushed back, directly in Korea by sending in troops, and indirectly in Vietnam by sending their own advisers and arming a new regular army for Ho, the People's Army of Vietnam, or P.A.V.N. All of this transformed Vietnam into the deadliest war of decolonization of the 20th century.

By 1954, Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap commanded a divisional army and was ready to engage the French in a series of set-piece battles. This army carefully organized an epic siege of the fortified French camp at Dien Bien Phu, carrying artillery across mountainous terrain to destroy the air base supplying colonial troops. When the guns fell silent on May 7, 1954, the French Army had suffered its greatest colonial defeat since losing Quebec in 1759, and the Vietnamese Communists had proved they could fight conventional battles — and win. No other 20th-century war of decolonization produced a Dien Bien Phu.

But fighting big battles came at a cost, for this type of war required the enormous mobilization of people. In 1953, Ho's party initiated a land reform program to encourage peasants to support the war. It also harshly overturned the

landed and commercial classes as part of the communization of the state. The problem was that this dual military and social revolution exhausted the population. When the Chinese joined the French to reach a cease-fire, Ho agreed that he could push his people no further. The Communists had won a battle at Dien Bien Phu, but not the war. And behind the French, Ho knew, stood the Americans. On July 21, 1954, the Communists accepted a cease-fire at Geneva that separated the country in half at the 17th parallel, with elections to follow in two years.

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#### CIVIL AND COLD WARS RESUME

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Something else happened as the French looked to exit Indochina at Geneva. One of the few non-Communist nationalists to have refused to collaborate with both the colonialists and the Communists stepped off the fence: Ngo Dinh Diem. Bao Dai had named him prime minister in June 1954, in a last-minute bid to prevent the French from handing over Vietnam to the adversary. The Americans feared the same thing and began rapidly pivoting their support to him.

When France and China agreed at Geneva to hold elections to unite the two Vietnams, Diem and his newly enthusiastic supporter, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, took note but signed nothing. Geneva may have ended the French war, but it did not end America's indirect one. Instead the Americans replaced their reliance on the French colonial state to contain Communism in favor of working through an independent, non-Communist Vietnamese state led by their "miracle man." As long as Washington did not tread on this new nation's sovereignty and Diem did not endanger the decade-old American strategic investment in Vietnam, indirect containment could continue.

After Geneva, Communists and anti-Communists focused on taking over their respective states, consolidating their political power and promoting economic development with their allies. The Communists completed land reform in 1956 as part of plans to collectivize the economy along Soviet lines. Dissent was crushed as Ho's party extended its Communist state to all the north. Diem ordered the French Army out and pushed Bao Dai aside as he created a republic in 1955 under his family's authoritarian control. He neutralized religious and political groups before

going after remaining Communists and anyone else who opposed him. Diem welcomed American aid and advisers, but he rejected direct military intervention.

This is where Le Duan, the veteran Communist who had run the party's war in the south against the French, enters the picture. Since Geneva, he had painted a dire picture of what was happening below the 17th parallel: Not only had Diem and the Americans rejected the idea of holding elections, but Diem's repression was also destroying what little remained of the party's southern network. Although Hanoi's leaders balked at resuming war outright, unsure of Sino-Soviet support and worried that the Americans would send in troops, in 1959 Le Duan persuaded the party to intervene indirectly in the south or risk losing it forever.

This new strategy reactivated the Ho Chi Minh Trail to bring southward thousands of administrators (most of whom were native southerners sent north after Geneva). They formed a competing southern proto-state in the form of the National Liberation Front, created in 1960, and protected by the People's Liberation Armed Forces — what came to be known, to its enemies, as the Viet Cong. That same year, Le Duan assumed the party's leadership. He reactivated the Central Office of South Vietnam to run this indirect civil war to bring down Diem's state and unify the country on Hanoi's terms before the Americans could intervene.

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#### PARALLEL, DIRECT WARS

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Diem did fall, but not his state. In 1963, the Kennedy administration watched in shock as the N.L.F. greatly expanded its hold over the countryside. Diem's half-baked counterinsurgency projects forcing millions of peasants into strategic hamlets, as well as his relentless attacks on non-Communist opponents, created the red-hot discontent on which the insurgency thrived. In June 1963, a Buddhist monk immolated himself in downtown Saigon in a sign of protest. Worried that Diem's policies were playing into Communist hands, South Vietnamese generals sought American support for a plan to overthrow their president. The Kennedy White House approved, and on Nov. 2 and 3, 1963, a military coup ousted Diem, killing him in the process.

The question now was whether Washington or Hanoi would intervene directly. Starting in 1963, Le Duan pushed for gradual, direct military intervention, meaning the dispatch of P.A.V.N. troops southward. The hope was that, together with the N.L.F./P.L.A.F., Hanoi could take the south before the Americans could escalate.

Not everyone in the party agreed, however. Some, including Vo Nguyen Giap, advised caution, pointing out the dangers of provoking the Americans into the conflict head on especially when the Soviets were advocating superpower détente. Le Duan, however, knew that he could count on China's Mao Zedong, who was highly critical of the Soviets and their lack of revolutionary backbone. In early 1964, the party approved direct intervention in the south.

Lyndon B. Johnson also had to choose. Would the new president continue America's indirect war? Would he cut his country's losses and get out? Or would he send in American troops to save the South? Like Le Duan, Johnson chose war.

Following an attack on an American helicopter base at Pleiku in early 1965, Johnson opened a sustained air war against Vietnamese targets above and below the 17th parallel, and authorized troops to land in the south in March. A few months later, American and P.A.V.N. troops clashed in the highland valley of Ia Drang, the first of many big battles to come. It was in the same area where P.A.V.N. regiments had decimated French mobile groups a decade earlier.

By 1967, almost 500,000 American troops were in Vietnam, as Hanoi sent its own boys southward. The second half of the 30-Years War for Vietnam was now underway, with a vengeance.

Christopher Goscha is an associate professor of international relations at the University of Quebec at Montreal and the author of "Vietnam: A New History."

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