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**VIETNAM**



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# **VIETNAM**

THE (LAST) WAR THE U.S. LOST

**JOE ALLEN**

FOREWORD BY JOHN PILGER



Chicago, Illinois

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*This book is dedicated to all Vietnamese, Cambodians,  
Laotians, and Americans who continue to suffer death and  
deformity as a result of America's use of weapons of mass  
destruction in Southeast Asia from 1960 to 1975.*





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## FOREWORD

BY JOHN PILGER

Hongai is a coal mining and fishing town on the shores of beautiful Ha Long Bay in northern Vietnam. For three days in June 1972, American fighter-bombers flew fifty-two sorties against Hongai, around the clock. People were evacuated to the mines and to caves in the hills while the pilots pulverized their homes, schools, hospitals, churches. The pilots deployed a new type of pellet bomb, the size of a grapefruit, which exploded into millions of minuscule darts. In the rubble of a school I found a note written by a young girl, describing how the fragments had peppered her sister. Designed to move through the body and extremely difficult to detect under X-ray, the darts caused internal injuries from which the victim would die a terrible death. This weapon of mass destruction, the forerunner of the cluster bomb, was first tested on the people of Hongai. This landmark was not reported in the United States. It was as if one of the heaviest and most concentrated aerial assaults in the modern era had never happened.

When I reached Hongai in 1975, most of the town lay in its debris, a Pompeii of war. I stood in St. Mary's Catholic Church, in the saddle of a hill, and all that remained was the altar. The church, which had dominated the town, had taken a direct hit, and its remains had been bombed repeatedly. None of the other churches

stood. A health ministry official, Dr. Luu Van Hoat, told me that 10 percent of the town's children were deaf, and many might never regain their hearing. None of this was reported in the United States.

Apart from a few old Soviet aircraft, the Vietnamese nationalists had no air force. I met local people who had been members of militia and had put up a curtain of small-arms fire as the F-105s and Phantoms came in at 200 feet. Remarkably, they survived. However, further south, at Dong Loc, which had been bombed back to the Stone Age, leaving craters that merged into a swamp, I stood where an all-women anti-aircraft battery had brought down several aircraft. The eldest of them had been nineteen years old, and I stood among their graves. None of this was reported in the United States.

It was a decade later that I happened to read the results of an opinion poll in which people in the United States were asked how much they could remember about the war. More than a third could not say which side the American government had supported and some believed that Ho Chi Minh and his nationalists had been "our allies." This reminded me of something a friend of mine, Bob Muller, a former U.S. Marine officer paralyzed from the waist down as a result of the war, told me. As president of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Bob spoke frequently on college campuses, where he was often asked: "Which side did *you* fight on?"

Today, this "historical amnesia" seems entrenched. This is not accidental, or a comment on the inadequacy of human memory. It merely demonstrates the insidious, enduring power of the dominant propaganda of the Vietnam War. This propaganda described the war as essentially a conflict of Vietnamese against Vietnamese, in which Americans had become "involved," mistakenly yet honorably. This falsehood soon became a presupposition that marked the limits of most "mainstream" debate. It was embraced both by "hawks" and "doves," conservatives and liberals, and at times, seemed to have

a sacred immunity. It permeated the media coverage during the war and has been the overriding theme of numerous scholarly and journalistic retrospectives since the war. In fact, the longest war of the twentieth century was waged by the American government *against* the people of Vietnam, North and South, communist and noncommunist. It was an invasion of their homeland upon which the United States dropped the greatest tonnage of bombs in the history of warfare, pursued a military strategy deliberately designed to force millions to abandon their homes, and used banned chemicals in a manner that profoundly changed the environmental and genetic order, leaving a once bountiful land petrified. Some three million people were killed and at least as many were maimed and otherwise ruined. The American military commander, General William Westmoreland, declared that the object was to cause human devastation “to the point of national disaster for generations to come.” That this was achieved as an epic crime by the Nuremberg standard is hardly known in the United States.

Therefore, it is not surprising that many Americans, especially the young, are confused about Vietnam, if they are called upon to think about it at all.

They may be aware that it was “a mistake” or even “wrong” and that it divided the nation, but their perspective, at best, is more than likely to be from the liberal Hollywood point of view, of angst-ridden “fallen heroes.” They will have little if any notion of the culpability—the lies and the murderous policies and actions that caused and sustained the war, and which have caused and sustained subsequent invasions, notably the invasion of Iraq.

This is why Joe Allen’s book is so needed, and so welcome. Indeed, the following pages amount to a masterpiece in which the author, unrelenting in his research, has reclaimed memory from the organized forgetting that has so bedeviled the very word “Vietnam.”

The Westmoreland quotation above, which I had forgotten, is there, as are references to the splendid work of those like Marilyn Young, who mines illuminating statistics from a long-abandoned coalfield. “Nineteen million gallons of herbicide had been sprayed on the South during the war,” she wrote. How many malformed children have I seen in the Mekong Delta over the years, the victims of “Agent Orange?” And we are reminded that the North was spared in relative terms compared with South Vietnam, said to be America’s “ally.” What I also appreciate about Joe Allen’s work is that he demonstrates as a historian how a rapacious force as seemingly invincible as the United States can be defeated politically, if not militarily. While not claiming a likeness between the invasions of Vietnam and Iraq, he draws many valuable parallels of how they began. Rather than giving us “hope,” he is giving us power: the power of information, meticulous, distilled, coherent, principled. His mighty primer should be on every curriculum. No, it should be in every home.

John Pilger  
March 2008

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE GHOSTS OF VIETNAM

“By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.”  
—President George H. W. Bush, 1991,  
in the aftermath the Persian Gulf War

**T**he war in Vietnam resulted in the greatest military defeat ever suffered by the United States. Ever since, the U.S. ruling class and its intellectual pundits have worked hard to overcome what has become known as the Vietnam Syndrome—the fear on the part of American planners that any large-scale military engagement might become a “quagmire” and provoke mass domestic opposition. Virtually every foreign military intervention that followed Vietnam, from Ronald Reagan’s 1983 invasion of the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada to George H. W. Bush’s 1991 Gulf War and Bill Clinton’s intervention in Bosnia, was presented as a step toward restoring the ability (and moral right) of the United States to engage unilaterally and without limit in overseas military action.

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq (for which Afghanistan was a dress rehearsal) was meant to be a watershed event that would establish Washington’s position as the world’s sole and unassailable superpower. Instead, it has created a domestic and international crisis for the United States not seen since the war in Vietnam.

“There are so many cartoons where people, oppressed people, are saying, ‘Is it Vietnam yet?’—hoping it is and wondering if it is. And it isn’t,” declared former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in the summer of 2003, against critics invoking comparisons between the growing insurgency in Iraq and the war in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> Despite Rums-

feld's assurances, and George Bush's (the first) before him, the comparisons keep on coming. Not a week goes by when a writer or politician isn't making some comparison between Vietnam and Iraq. The Vietnam Syndrome may have been "licked"—only to be replaced by the Iraq Syndrome.

Yet for the generation of Americans who have come of age in the three decades since the last U.S. troops left Vietnam, the history of the war is practically forgotten. The motivation that drove the United States to launch one of the most destructive wars of the twentieth century, and the reasons that millions of ordinary Americans came to actively oppose it, are also largely forgotten or distorted.

President Lyndon Johnson once described Vietnam, in his own particularly racist and vulgar way, as a "raggedy-ass little fourth-rate country."<sup>2</sup> How such a country could defeat the most powerful government in the world had to be hidden from both the oppressed of the world and the American people. That is the job of the popular media, establishment historians, and their friends in Hollywood. It is one of the great ironies of American society that one can watch many of the war in Vietnam-related films produced by Hollywood (with some notable exceptions, of course) and actually know less about the war than before walking into the theater.<sup>3</sup> History, it is said, is written by the victor. In the case of Vietnam, history has been written, or rewritten (at least outside of Vietnam), by the loser that still remains the dominant economic and military power in the world.

This is a very small book that attempts to cover a wide range of issues related to the Vietnam era. It is meant to be an introduction for that generation of Americans that has grown up in the post-Vietnam era, who have become politicized by the war in Iraq, and wonder what it will take to end that war, now approaching its fifth anniversary.

This book is not meant to be a substitute for reading many of the fine books by radical historians or memoirs of soldiers and activists,

which are listed at the end of the book. I have tried my best to provide an overview of the three decades of United States intervention in Vietnam, as well as the profound political ramifications of that intervention at home. Because of limited space, I have concentrated on the key moments of the antiwar movement, a huge subject, so that readers may take away from it the most important political lessons while not getting lost in the minutiae.

An introduction to the Vietnam era is also necessary because even the best histories of the war have serious omissions and sometimes such a narrow focus that a reader is prevented from getting a thorough understanding of the war and the antiwar movement, or of the relationship between the two. For example, some histories begin the war in Vietnam in 1965, even though the U.S. role in Vietnam goes back many years before that. Many histories ignore the importance of the civil rights and Black Power movements in generating opposition to the war, or the rebellion of American soldiers, sailors, and airmen that put the final nail in the coffin of the U.S. war effort.

But the most glaring omission of many war-in-Vietnam histories is the triumphant, three-decade struggle of the Vietnamese people to free their country from foreign domination. Though it was the longest national liberation struggle of the twentieth century, inspiring millions around the world in the 1960s and 1970s, too few people outside of Vietnam understand or appreciate the Vietnamese national liberation movement today. This book attempts to integrate all these issues into one narrative. The lessons of the war in Vietnam are many, and it is up to readers to discover for themselves which of them may provide a guide to bringing an end to the current American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan today.

There are many people who have encouraged me at different points in time to write and complete this book. I would like to thank Sharon Smith and Christian Appy for critically reading the chapter

on the war in Vietnam and the American working class, and Keeanga Taylor and Michael Letwin for their comments on Black America and Vietnam. Joel Geier put aside a lot of time to help me think through the origins of the New Left and the antiwar movement. Historian Mike Gillen sent me a chapter of his unpublished dissertation on the opposition of American merchant marines to transporting French troops to reconquer Vietnam after World War II. I want to thank them both. But above all, I would like to thank my editor, Paul D'Amato, and the Haymarket staff, in particular Dao Tran, without whom I never would have completed this project.

Joe Allen  
Chicago  
March 2008



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## CHAPTER ONE

### FROM THE FRENCH CONQUEST TO THE OVERTHROW OF DIEM

**T**o answer the question “Why did the U.S. get involved in Vietnam?” we need to go back to before the large-scale landing of U.S. troops in 1965 and look at the history of the struggle for Vietnamese independence and the communist movement that led it to victory twice—first over the French, then over the Americans.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE FRENCH CONQUEST

“When France arrived in Indochina, the Annamites  
[Vietnamese] were ripe for servitude.”  
—Paul Doumer, Governor General of Indochina

Vietnam was an independent nation until the French conquered it during the latter half of the nineteenth century. While French missionaries and businessmen had been going to Vietnam since the early 1600s, converting inhabitants to Catholicism and establishing commercial ties with the country, it was in the mid-nineteenth century that the fundamental direction of French policy toward Indochina rapidly changed. The French no longer simply wanted the concessions they had won in the past; they wanted complete control of the whole country. France’s rivals—Britain, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and Portugal—were all engaged in a struggle to

carve up and colonize those parts of the globe that could serve them as sources of raw materials, markets, and profitable investments. As the British consolidated their position in India and China (sidelining French interests there), the French made their move into Indochina in order to reap the potential fortunes to be made there.

The French were aided in their conquest of Indochina by a policy of appeasement pursued by the Vietnamese royal court under the unpopular Emperor Tu Duc (1847–1883) of the ruling Nguyen family. Tu Duc's regime faced a growing revolt of the peasantry, which the royal family perceived as a greater threat to its rule than the French hovering off the coast. This was a serious miscalculation. Tu Duc signed away the country piece by piece to the French, beginning in 1863, when the French captured six Vietnamese provinces around Saigon. In 1874, Tu Duc made more territorial concessions, and finally, in 1882, the French fleet captured Hanoi. The French were now in control of the whole country.<sup>2</sup>

The first thing the French did when they completed their conquest of Vietnam was to abolish Vietnam as a political entity. It was a classic case of divide and conquer. France divided Vietnam into three administrative provinces: Tonkin in the north, Annam in the center, and Cochinchina in the south. Tonkin and Annam were considered "protectorates," where Vietnamese royal power was allegedly still intact, while Cochinchina was ruled directly as a colony. In practice, the difference between a protectorate and a colony was pure fiction—the French ran everything. They chose the emperor, along with a host of advisers, and Frenchmen dominated the colonial bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup>

The Vietnamese economy was reorganized for the benefit of the French and their Vietnamese collaborators. The chief architect of France's policies in Vietnam was Paul Doumer, who was appointed governor general of Indochina and arrived in 1897. His goal from the day he arrived was to make Vietnam a "profitable colony" for France. "Indochina began to serve France in Asia on the day that it

was no longer a poverty-stricken colony,” Doumer claimed. “Its strong organization, its financial and economic structures...are being used for the benefit of French prestige.”<sup>4</sup> Doumer established monopolies for the production and marketing of alcohol, salt, and opium. French businessmen, whose monopolies were interlocked with the powerful Bank of Indochina, became very wealthy.

French colonial policies had their biggest impact on rice farming, the source of livelihood for the vast majority of people. The French and their collaborators stole most of the best land for themselves within a generation of the conquest. Tens of thousands of acres of land were taken away from the Vietnamese and given to the French at dirt-cheap prices. Many of the French owned 3,000- to 7,000-acre estates. Despite this robbery, most Vietnamese still owned something. After 1900, the French theft of land increased. By the 1930s, over half the peasants in Tonkin and Annam were landless, while in Cochinchina, 75 percent were landless and the rest owned next to nothing.<sup>5</sup> Tenant farmers and sharecroppers had to pay anywhere between 50 percent and 70 percent of their crops to landlords and, in addition, provide free gifts and services.

France’s investments in industry and rubber plantations also had an enormous impact on Vietnam, much of it coming after World War I. The bulk of it was in the booming rubber plantations, where one hundred thousand to two hundred thousand Vietnamese were annually tricked or forced to work. The conditions were slave-like. Michelin rubber plantations were called slaughterhouses. “Rubber, the second largest Vietnamese export after rice, was produced by virtually indentured workers so blighted by malaria, dysentery and malnutrition that at one Michelin company plantation, twelve thousand out of forty-five thousand workers died between 1917 and 1944.”<sup>6</sup> Similar conditions were also found in the mines, which were called death valleys. Miners as well as rubber workers had to pay for the shacks that they lived in and for their tools. Punishment was se-

vere for the smallest of infractions and those who attempted to escape were subjected to torture and hunger.<sup>7</sup>

How much were Vietnamese workers paid for their hard labor? According to French colonial statistics, a fully employed worker had an average annual income of forty-eight piasters in the late 1920s, which was barely enough for a person to buy enough rice to live on for a year. Or, as Vietnamese historian Ngo Vinh Long put it graphically: “Even a dog belonging to a colonial household cost an average of 150 piasters a year to feed.” In addition, many workers were cheated out of their wages by their bosses, and often paid in rice and vegetables (sometimes rotten) from the company store. By 1929, before the worldwide depression hit, there were nearly two hundred twenty thousand workers in the industrial and commercial sectors of the economy.<sup>8</sup>

The French not only brought economic exploitation to Vietnam; they also brought their *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission), a mixture of paternalism and racism aimed at molding the Vietnamese in the image of the French. As one enthusiastic supporter of French imperialism put it, it was the duty of France to bring “into light and into liberty the races and peoples still enslaved by ignorance and despotism.”<sup>9</sup> This mission of delivering people into “light” really meant fostering cultural repression, directed particularly at the Vietnamese peoples’ language, and political repression, directed against any organized dissent.

Before the French conquest, 80 percent of the Vietnamese population was functionally literate in the Chinese ideographs used for written Vietnamese. The French banned the Chinese characters and introduced either French or *quoc ngu*, the Latin alphabet, for the Vietnamese language. This proved to be a disaster. On the eve of the Second World War, less than one fifth of school-age Vietnamese boys were attending school. “The Vietnamese can speak their tongue

but neither read nor write it. We have been manufacturing illiterates,” commented one former governor general.<sup>10</sup>

Political repression was the rule in Vietnam. Any form of organized dissent against the colonial authorities was ruthlessly repressed. The handful of wealthy Vietnamese who sent their children to school in France had a rude awakening upon their return to Vietnam. Rights and privileges that they enjoyed in France ended in Vietnam. The colonial police confiscated books and newspapers deemed “subversive.” One student was so enraged by his treatment upon his return to Vietnam that he told a judge at his trial that French injustice “turned me into a revolutionary.”<sup>11</sup> The French *sûreté* (colonial police) hunted dissidents, tortured them, and imprisoned them at the notorious island fortress of Poulo Cordone with its infamous “tiger cages.”

### **NATIONALISM AND COMMUNISM**

“At first, patriotism, not yet communism, led me to have confidence in Lenin, in the Third International.”  
—Ho Chi Minh

By the beginning of the twentieth century, France was the master of all of Indochina. However, as historian James Gibson points out, “In attempting to grind colonial rule so deeply into Vietnamese culture, the French aroused resistance. Colonialism ruled Vietnam, but at the same time it created contradictions that weakened it.”<sup>12</sup> Modern Vietnamese nationalism appeared in the first decade of the new century out of a dissident section of the mandarin class.

While the bulk of mandarins served the puppet emperors of the French, some began to question their role in colonial Vietnam. “Who lost Vietnam?” first arose as a burning question among the disaffected mandarins, who looked to the past for inspiration, while simultaneously looking to the modern West for knowledge to create a resistance movement. Two strains of thought emerged. Phan Boi

Chau, who believed that a strong emperor backed by the Chinese and Japanese could defeat the French, represented the first. His thinking was essentially feudal in outlook and aimed at restoring the power of the emperor, supported by his mandarins, in an independent Vietnam. He had almost nothing to say about the vast economic and social changes brought by French imperialism. Constantly hounded by the French *sûreté*, he lived in exile until he was arrested in 1925 at the age of fifty-eight. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese followed his trial and were angered by the death sentence that was handed down by French judges. It was later commuted. Phan Boi Chau died under house arrest in 1940.

Phan Chu Trinh represented a second current of emerging Vietnamese nationalism. He was the son of a rich landowner. Early in his life, he rallied to the side of dissident Emperor Ham Nghi. Later, he accompanied Phan Boi Chau to Japan, where he broke with him over the question of Japan's real intentions toward Indochina. Phan Chu Trinh returned to Vietnam and opened a modern school to teach children of both sexes, and he railed at the French for their hypocrisy. While he attacked the French, Phan Chu Trinh also believed that with the help of the French bureaucracy Vietnam could become a modern society. In 1908, the French closed his schools, arrested him, and sentenced him to death, but his death sentence was commuted to life in prison in Poulo Cordone. Released from prison after three years, Phan Chu Trinh symbolized resistance to the French for many educated Vietnamese. When he died in 1926, sixty thousand people marched in his funeral procession.<sup>13</sup>

While Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh inspired many people who would later come to be involved in nationalist politics, their political movements remained small. The main reason for this was that their politics appealed to a very thin layer of educated middle-class Vietnamese. The end of both of their political lives in the 1920s co-

incided with a major turning point in the consciousness of the Vietnamese people. According to historian David Marr, “The twentieth-century history of Vietnam must be understood within the context of fundamental changes in political and social consciousness among a significant segment of the Vietnamese populace in the period of 1920–1945.”<sup>14</sup> The major beneficiary of this would be the Communist Party (CP), led by Ho Chi Minh, which built up a mass base by linking the Vietnamese national struggle with the economic and social concerns of the peasantry, the intellectuals, and, to a lesser degree, the small working class.

Ho Chi Minh grew up in a nationalist household with a father who was also a disaffected mandarin. Ho’s father hated both the French and the mandarin system. In 1908, when he was fifteen years old, Ho participated in demonstrations against the French. The savage repression that followed began to radicalize him and he started to attract the attention of the French police. Fearing arrest, he decided to leave the country in 1911. He got a job aboard a French ocean liner and headed for France. He would not return to Vietnam for thirty years. In 1917, he moved to Paris. By then the patriotic euphoria that gripped the European countries at the beginning of the First World War had been replaced by widespread antiwar sentiment. The revolutionary left began to revive and the impact of the Russian Revolution was just beginning to be felt. The very large Vietnamese community in France—numbering one hundred thousand people—was alive with political debate. Ho was at the right place at the right time. (He was then known as Nguyen Ai Quoc or Nguyen “the patriot.”) Drawn to activists in the French Socialist Party, Ho very quickly became the leading Vietnamese activist in France.

In 1919, the Versailles peace conference met to discuss the settlement at the end of the First World War. Ho Chi Minh went there to petition for the rights of Vietnam. He was drawn to U.S. president

Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points program, which included the right of nations to self-determination. Ho stopped short of calling for independence for Vietnam, but in his appeal to the Versailles conference, he called for more democratic rights for the Vietnamese people, along with the release of all political prisoners. Ho tried to meet with the American delegation, but was turned away. Ho Chi Minh learned, like many colonial nationalists, that Wilson's call for self-determination was meant for European countries, not colonial peoples. Yet Ho Chi Minh's advocacy for the Vietnamese people at Versailles gained him enormous prestige that would last for decades.<sup>15</sup>

A year later, Ho was the Indochinese delegate to the French Socialist Party conference in Tours. The party was about to split between a majority who wanted to affiliate to the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow and a minority that did not. While at the conference, Ho got a copy of Lenin's "Thesis on the National and Colonial Question." It had an enormous impact on him, primarily because, unlike the national chauvinist Second International, the thesis supported the right of oppressed nations to self-determination. "At first, patriotism, not yet Communism, led me to have confidence in Lenin, in the Third International. Step by step, along the struggle, by studying Marxism-Leninism parallel with participation in practical activities, I gradually came upon the fact that only socialism and communism can liberate oppressed nations," he told an interviewer in 1960. Ho joined the new French Communist Party and, after several more years of political activity in France, he left for Moscow in 1924.<sup>16</sup>

When Ho Chi Minh arrived in Moscow, the Comintern had been gradually degenerating into an arm of the emerging Stalinist bureaucracy's foreign policy. Stalin's new theory of "socialism in one country," the political expression of the rising bureaucracy, transformed socialism from one of working-class internationalism to one of nationalist state-led development. These changes had their



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