

Lingering Controversy after 30 Years:

American War or Vietnam War?

by Le Xuan Khoa

The 1945–1954 war between the French colonialists and the resistance movements for independence of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos is generally called the Indochina War. For each country, this war had different names, such as, in the case of Vietnam, the War for Independence, the War against French Colonialism or, more simply, the Vietnam-France War. All these appellations are correct and may be used interchangeably. When the war happened in Indochina again from 1955 to 1975, it was called the Second Indochina War, which is also correct but the situation was more complicated since the involved parties and the length of war in each nation were no longer the same. The United States replaced France in Indochina but only took a major role in Vietnam from 1965 to 1972¹ and merely supported the anti-Communist forces in Laos and Cambodia. The U.S. bombing raids in these two nations were intended mainly to prevent North Vietnam from using its neighboring countries as supply bases for communist soldiers in the South.²

The first Indochina war was officially resolved by the Geneva Accords in 1954, with Vietnam as its center piece. The second Indochina war was ended by three different treaties at three different times: the 1962 Geneva Accords for Laos,³ the 1973 Paris Accords for Vietnam and the 1991 Paris Accords for Cambodia. Despite these differences, the term “Indochina War” is still appropriate in terms of the general battlefield.

For Vietnam, the naming of the war that took place after the 1954 Geneva Agreement remains controversial thirty years after the war and a consensus has not yet been reached. Many names have been used by opposing parties: Anti-Communist War, War against America and American Puppets, Civil War, American War, Vietnam War, and Proxy War. Since the first two terms were appropriate only during the time of war, they are not included for discussion in this article.

The 1955–1975 War in Vietnam is called a civil war because after the partition of the country, North Vietnam left cadres behind, hid weapons and secretly organized the rebellion in the South while Ngo Dinh Diem’s government launched violent anti-communist campaigns, arresting and killing a great number of communist cadres. The Communist Party resorted to terrorist acts and assassinated many southern government officials. Early in 1959, North Vietnam started to send troops and weapons to the South through the Ho Chi Minh Trail and launched the armed revolt with the “Dong Khoi” (Uprising) movement. In 1960, the National Front of Liberation of the South (NFL) was founded and supported by the North, combining political struggle with armed revolt in many Southern provinces. In 1963, after the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem, the political and military situation in the South deteriorated rapidly, leading to the American decision to send troops to Vietnam in 1965, supposedly to support the army of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) but in reality, to take the situation in hand. This was the period of “Americanization” of the war, which lasted until 1969, when the Nixon Administration returned to the “Vietnamization program” and started to withdraw its troops. The war

between nationalists and communists continued until the Southern government collapsed in April 1975.

The civil war, caused by opposing political ideologies, had its roots in the late 1920s when the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNP) led by Nguyen Thai Hoc was founded in 1927 and the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) was founded in Hong Kong by Nguyen Ai Quoc in 1930.⁴ The ideological differences between the two parties did not become an open conflict (but not yet to the point of killing each other) until after the failure of the VNP's Yen Bai revolution in 1930 and the disintegration of the VCP's Xo Viet-Nghe Tinh movement in 1931. Pursued by the French authorities, the survivors of both parties had to flee and seek refuge in China. Under the control of Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist government, all VCP members had to go underground while the non-communist leaders could work openly with the help of the Chinese Nationalist Party. Some of these leaders were trained in the Whampoa Military Academy in Guangzhou and became generals in the Chinese military hierarchy.

The nationalist parties had several weaknesses: they were not well organized, their strategy was not clearly defined, and they depended totally on the support of the Chinese Nationalist Party to fight against the French. While it was true that the Chinese disliked the French, China and France were supporting each other in the war against the Japanese in Indochina. In addition, the Vietnamese nationalist leaders were not united and did not have any noteworthy activities inside Vietnam. This situation continued until the Chinese became so disappointed with all the nationalist factions that they chose Ho Chi Minh as a representative of the nationalist "Viet Nam Cach Menh Dong Minh Hoi" (the Alliance of Vietnamese Revolutionaries) and helped him return to Vietnam in 1944 to organize anti-Japanese activities. Ho Chi Minh took the opportunity to reinforce the Viet Minh Front which was founded in 1941. In 1946, the conflict between the Nationalists and the Viet Minh burst into violence, and the nationalists were almost eliminated before the war against France broke out nationwide later that year.⁵ The Viet Minh took complete control of the anti-French resistance movement, and the nationalist-communist conflict did not resume in large scale until after the partition of the country and the Republic of Vietnam was founded in the South.

Although this 20-year conflict between the communists and the non-communists was clearly a civil war originated from earlier years, this name has not been accepted by Northern leaders. The Communist government prefers to call it "War against America for the Rescue of the Nation" or "War against America and its Puppets." After the war, in view of the need for normalization of relations with the U.S., this war was simply called the American War, which still implies the U.S. as the aggressor. The name "Vietnam War" as referred to by the U.S. was not accepted.

In a recent online discussion among international scholars, including Americans and Vietnamese Americans, one scholar contended that the term "American War" applies to both Indochina wars because even in the Vietnam-France war, the U.S. was the major source of aid to the French throughout the 1945-1954 period. However, if a war is to be named after supporting countries, this first war should also be called The Soviet Union or Chinese War because these two nations also provided important military and economic aid to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).⁶ Similarly, the second war should be

called the War of America and its allies including Australia, Korea, the Philippines and Thailand. For these reasons, supporting nations should not be used in the naming of a conflict, although the term “American war” applies rightly to the 1965-1972 period of Americanization of the war. It should be noted that the U.S. started to withdraw its troops in 1969, and “Vietnam War” only means the war which happens in Vietnam, not the same as “Vietnamese War” which means the war initiated by Vietnam.

It is also noteworthy that the majority of political organizations among the overseas Vietnamese do not approve of calling the 1955–1975 War a “civil war,” asserting that it was a war waged by the Vietnamese people against communism and its authoritarian regime. Similar to the way that the Communists called this war the “People’s War against the Puppet Government and Army,” this kind of naming reflects the political stand proclaimed as legitimate by each side, which makes sense only during the time of war.

Lastly, the war is called the “Proxy War”. This name reveals an objective truth, but no participating nation wants to accept it so as not to be soiled with bad reputation. It is called “proxy” due to the fact the two Vietnamese sides were used as a tool in the Cold War race to world leadership between the two competing blocks of Capitalism and Communism. The U.S. used the Vietnam battlefield to test new weapons, including Agent Orange, while the USSR and China enthusiastically supported and encouraged North Vietnam to sacrifice themselves in a protracted war. International observers had a very appropriate comment about the Chinese intention in aiding Vietnam: “China fight against America until the last Vietnamese dies.”

The ending of the first Indochina War was arranged beforehand among the big powers who then forced their Vietnamese allies, Communist or Nationalist, to accept. This is confirmed with bitterness by Hanoi diplomats in a series of U.S.-Vietnam post-war meetings from 1995 to 1998 as well as in Vietnamese history documents. The former foreign minister of South Vietnam, Tran Van Do, also complained that at the Geneva conference in 1954, the French did not let the nationalist delegation know the discussion among big nations on the partition of Vietnam. He was invited by Pham Van Dong to a private meeting to try to find a Vietnamese solution to the conflict but they never had the chance to proceed.⁷ Thanks to the USSR–China disagreement, the massive anti-war demonstrations in the U.S. and the unexpected decision of President Johnson not to run again in the 1968 elections, Communist Vietnam could avoid the imposition of “friendly nations” during the five-year peace negotiations between the “two sides, four delegations” in Paris (1968–1973).

Thus, in view of the origin of the internal conflict and the intervention of world powers, the 1955-1975 war was a civil war and at the same time a proxy war. Almost all Vietnamese families have relatives, distant or close, on opposing sides who killed one another for different ideals in a war they had no decision over the result. The total number of Vietnamese who lost their lives in this war, both soldiers and civilians on both sides, was estimated at nearly four million.⁸ There are still 300,000 communist soldiers missing in action. The country itself, and the properties of both Northerners and Southerners, were the worst destroyed in history. To this day, many Vietnamese are still victims of unexploded bombs and landmines as well as the harmful effects of dioxin, a defoliant more popularly known as agent orange.

In the proxy war, the nationalist Vietnamese had to stand the pressure of their American ally until the last days of the Paris conference. The U.S. led the war completely from 1965 to 1969 when it began the “Vietnamization” program, but still controlled the distribution of war materiel and equipment, not necessarily to the need of Vietnamese military leaders. After the Paris Accords in 1973, the U.S. drastically cut back economic and military aid, thus making South Vietnam collapse more quickly than expected even by Hanoi strategists. Meanwhile, in spite of their skilful maneuver between the USSR and China in order to get the most support from both nations, North Vietnam could not avoid the pressure from its allies, especially the control of China over Vietnam’s attempts to end the war through diplomatic channels. Finally, Hanoi sided with the USSR and signed the Cooperation and Friendship agreement with Aleksei Kosygin in November 1978 and became almost totally dependent on the aid of the USSR until Mikhail Gorbachev and succeeding governments had lost their strategic interest in Vietnam and South East Asia.

Both Vietnamese communists and non-communists have had enough experience with their respective allies to realize that a nation would only support its friend as long as that support is in line with its national interest, not necessarily because they share the same ideal. After the war, this lesson could have motivated the winning party to mobilize all the people’s potentials for post-war reconstruction and development. But the mistakes of northern leaders in their treatment of the Southerners effectively prevented the important contributions of half of the country’s population for over a decade until major policy changes took place in the early 1990’s.

With regard to the overseas Vietnamese community, the country’s policy makers have realized the immense potential contributions of the expatriates to the economic recovery as well as the process of industrialization and modernization of Vietnam. The government’s attitude towards these former refugees changed completely, from condemning them as “betrayers” to recognizing them as “vast resources to the development of the country”. However, while calling overseas Vietnamese to leave the past behind and to work together for the future of the country, still the government has only made small decisions to provide some material benefits but has not sincerely demonstrated its willingness to reconcile with the expatriate community. Therefore, the contribution of overseas Vietnamese in terms of intellectual and professional expertise has been limited and anti-government activities are still rampant among the overseas community.

The history of Vietnam is the history of a brave people who, generation after generation, have fought valiantly against foreign invaders to preserve national independence. In the early years of the 20th century, thanks to Western influences, many political parties were formed but they all fought against French imperialism to regain independence and freedom. Countless revolutionaries, communists or non-communists, intellectuals or laborers, were arrested, imprisoned or killed by the French. Only when they competed for ruling power in 1945 did the nationalists and the communists started killing one another and were used by big nations in a proxy war. The Communists eventually defeated the Nationalists, claiming legitimacy that only the communists are patriotic and that their opponents are all betrayers or reactionaries. Over the years, this myth of communist

patriotism has lost its attractiveness and has had to yield ground to more serious and truthful assessment. Recently, a Hanoi historian discussed the case of non-communist patriots like Phan Chu Trinh, Huynh Thuc Khang, and observed rightfully: “Although patriotic ideologies are different, everybody loves one’s country . . . Human beings are complicated, historical situations are even more puzzling. If we do not judge patriotism properly, we would misunderstand, we would monopolize patriotism.”⁹ This statement reminds us of a remark by Ho Chi Minh who, in response to a question about his opponent Ngo Dinh Diem, commented that Diem is “a patriot in his own way.”¹⁰

It is the right time now, thirty years after the war, for the Vietnamese government and the overseas community to acknowledge the true nature of the war, review the lessons of the past, and recognize each other as equal partners in a collaborative relationship in order to build a wealthy, strong and democratic Vietnam. We should be able to integrate successfully into the international community and to preserve the sovereignty of the nation in the face of a powerful and threatening neighbor. To achieve this goal, concrete actions should be initiated first by the Vietnamese government. Once the government's good will has been demonstrated, the overseas Vietnamese community should respond positively and constructively.

Back to the issue of naming the war in Vietnam from 1955 to 1975, all parties involved should get over the negative obsession of the past and put an end to a lingering controversy animated by subjective arguments. Thus, this war should be simply called "The Vietnam War", which denotes an objective and plain truth that it is a war that happened in Vietnam. Its more complicated content will be written judiciously by the historians.

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¹ The “Americanization of the war” is generally considered to take place between the deployment of U.S. troops in Vietnam in 1965 and the signing of the Paris agreement in 1973. In reality, the withdrawal of U.S. troops began in July 1969, continued and completed in August 1972.

² Except for a brief intrusion by 32,000 U.S. troops over the Vietnam-Cambodia borders in June 1970 in order to support the RVN army to destroy the logistics bases of the North Vietnamese and the NLF forces.

³ The neutral coalition government of Laos established by this agreement suffered from continuous crises until the country was taken over by the Communist Pathet Lao in December 1975. At this time, the Kingdom of Laos was replaced by the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and King Savang Vatthana was appointed to be the president's adviser before being sent to the re-education camp, where he died with his queen and his oldest son in 1978.

⁴ The Vietnamese Communist Party, founded in 1930, is a combination of the Indochinese Communist Party, the Annamese Communist Party and the Indochinese Communist Alliance, all of which were born in the same year of 1929 in China.

⁵ For more information about the Vietnamese political parties' activities in China during the Second World War and the contest for political power in 1945 which led to the bloody massacre in 1946, see *Viet Nam 1945-1955: Chien tranh, Ti nan, va Bai hoc Lich su* (Vietnam 1945-1995: Wars, Refugees and Lessons of History) by Le Xuan Khoa, Tien Rong Publishing House, 2004, Chapter 1.

⁶ The more the war intensified, the more military aid the Soviet Union gave to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam “until it amounted to 80 percent of all supplies reaching the DRV”. (Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, page 415).

⁷ On the way to the Geneva Conference on Indochinese refugees in July 1989, I visited Paris and was told by Professor Vu Quoc Thuc that Former Foreign Minister Tran Van Do wanted to see me. When Professor Thuc and I met with Dr. Do at his home, he told me about his meeting with Pham Van Dong in Geneva and urged me to meet with the Hanoi delegation leader in Geneva in order to seek an appropriate solution to the Vietnamese refugee crisis instead of the one to be imposed by the US and other big countries. Knowing that I was reluctant to meet with communist representatives, the former Foreign Minister suggested, “If somebody criticizes you because of this meeting, tell him that I urged you to do this.” At the conference, I asked Eric Schwartz, Director of Asian Affairs of the National Security Council and a member of the US delegation, to arrange for me a meeting with the Vietnamese delegation led by Nguyen Co Thach, but at that time, Mr. Thach refused to see me.

⁸ Spencer C. Tucker, ed., op. cit, p. 64.

⁹ Duong Trung Quoc, chief editor of the historical magazine *Xua va Nay* (Past and Present), is a member of the National Assembly but not a member of the Communist Party. This statement was recorded in an “Online Round Table” discussion on *VietnamNet* (www.vnn.vn) on February 3, 2004.

¹⁰ According to Ramchundur Goburdhun, Chairman of the International Commission of Control on the Cease Fire, who served as the secret intermediary between Northern and Southern leaders in 1963, after his meeting with Ho Chi Minh. The latter added that “Ngo Dinh Diem, with his independent character, would have a hard time dealing with the Americans who like to control everything.” Ho also said to Goburdhun: “Shake hands with him (Diem) for me if you see him”. (Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November*, New York, E.P. Dutton, 1987, p.222).