

## Weapons, Tactics, and Strategies

*Although the United States had an overwhelming superiority in weapons throughout its military involvement in Vietnam, it ultimately lost the war because of its failure to find a strategy suitable for the political and geographical conditions of the conflict.*

As the conclusion of World War II liberated Southeast Asia from Japanese domination, Indochinese Communist Party leader Ho Chi Minh swiftly moved ahead with his political goal of a unified and independent Vietnam, proclaiming a Democratic Republic of Vietnam on September 2, 1945. At the same time, however, France began reasserting its colonial rule in Indochina. Ho, previously allied with the United States—especially through its Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), against the Japanese, looked for support in his goal from the United States.

### **Political Considerations**

With a Cold War developing between the United States and the Soviet Union, U.S. president Harry S. Truman chose not to risk a break with France and adopted a policy of what has been called “guarded neutrality.” The United States accepted France’s return to Indochina but required that aid to France not be used in Vietnam. As war in Korea threatened in 1950, the United States recognized the French-supported government of Emperor Bao Dai, the last emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty, and made available both economic aid and military supplies.

The 1954 Geneva Conference, which ended the war between France and Ho’s Viet Minh, called for a partition of Indochina into four countries—North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—and for an election no later than 1956 to unify the two Vietnams. The United States, however, assumed political control of South Vietnam from the French in 1955, when the American choice for president, Ngo Dinh Diem, replaced Bao Dai. Diem proclaimed the Republic of Vietnam in the south, and both he and the United States refused to be bound by the call for a reunification election, knowing that the North’s popular Ho Chi Minh would win.

North Vietnam, determined to conquer the South, had the political, financial, and technological support of the Soviet Union and China. The South Vietnamese government sought, with the support of the United States, to maintain its rule in the South. The United States government

feared a so-called domino effect; if South Vietnam fell to communism, it reasoned, so would other nations in Asia, including India. Both North and South Vietnam were now markers in the Cold War conflict between the three superpowers—the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. During its long struggle in Vietnam, the United States remained hampered by Cold War concerns and the desire to avoid pushing either of the other superpowers into active engagement in the fighting.

### **Military Achievement**

The crushing defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in northern Vietnam in 1954 essentially brought the First Indochina War (1946-1954) to an end. However, Ho Chi Minh controlled only the northern half of Vietnam, and although the French had been forced out, the Americans had replaced them. Now the North Vietnamese turned their attention to undermining the South Vietnamese government and extracting such a high price for American involvement that the United States would withdraw.

The date often given for the beginning of the Second Indochina War, or what Americans call the Vietnam War, is 1956, the year in which the United States and Diem rejected the Geneva-mandated reunification elections. In 1959, North Vietnam's Central Executive Committee formally changed the country's approach from political to armed struggle. Remnants of the Viet Minh who had stayed in the South (the Viet Cong) were activated by the North Vietnamese Politburo.

The Viet Cong specialized in terrorist warfare against U.S. soldiers and South Vietnamese loyal to the Diem government. Their largest campaign was the Tet Offensive of 1968, which ended in the almost complete destruction of the Viet Cong infrastructure and the end of the Viet Cong as a significant military threat. From that point on, the war to unify the country was carried out primarily by traditionally organized North Vietnamese military forces.

U.S. president Richard M. Nixon, taking office in 1969, implemented the policy of Vietnamization, whereby the war effort would be turned over gradually to the South Vietnamese. The final American fighting forces withdrew from Vietnam in late March, 1973, following a January 27 peace agreement. The South Vietnamese were given some breathing room by many American victories, including the decimation of the Viet Cong forces and the disruption of communist staging areas and transportation routes in Cambodia by means of a 1969 bombing (Operation Menu) and a 1970 invasion. Nonetheless, the fall of Saigon eventually occurred, on April 30, 1975.