3

FOREIGN DOMINATION AND INDEPENDENCE

China and India were not the only empires interested in Vietnam. Western powers of the European Renaissance, eager to trade for pepper, spices, gems, and textiles, likewise made inroads into Vietnam more than five hundred years ago. In the 1400s, bold Portuguese sailors established a settlement at what is now Danang. The Portuguese merchants, however, like the Dutch and English who followed, failed to flourish there because the Vietnamese were not at all receptive to foreign contact.

But Catholic Jesuit priests arrived along with the merchants, and where commerce failed, religion made lasting inroads. Vietnamese peasants welcomed Christianity's focus on individual importance and salvation, and, consequently, Vietnamese Catholic priests often became village leaders.

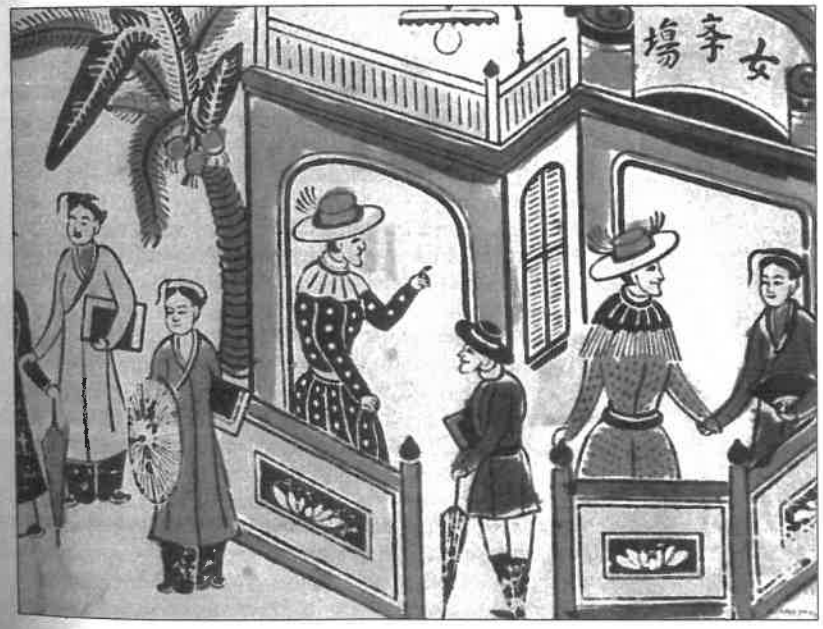
In 1627, Alexandre de Rhodes, a linguist and French Jesuit priest, developed quoc ngu, a script that used the Roman alphabet for written Vietnamese. Because the Roman alphabet was much simpler than Chinese script, its broad use made the Christian Gospel more accessible to the people.

The upper-class mandarins, who held their high public administrative positions through the authority of the rigid Chinese Confucian system, feared that Western religious thought, with its emphasis on the individual, might weaken their power. The Vietnamese emperors showed less concern. Although wary of Westerners, they included Jesuit scholars in their courts for their knowledge of Western medicine, astronomy, and mathematics, as well as for their connections to European arms suppliers.

In the eighteenth century, internal unrest surged in Vietnam, due partly to peasants' resentment against unfair taxation. The powerful Nguyen family was deposed during the Tay Son Rebellion of 1772, started by three wealthy

brothers who found popular support among peasants tired of repressive treatment at the hands of mandarins. Three years later, the insurgents captured Saigon (present-day Ho Chi Minh City), killing 10,000 Chinese residents in the process. The Tay Son then moved north, finally unifying Vietnam.

In response, the deposed Nguyen Anh took the first steps that ultimately made Vietnam vulnerable to French takeover. He sent his four-year-old son, Canh, along with a French bishop, to the court of Louis XVI to petition the king to intercede on Nguyen Anh's behalf so that he could regain the throne. The beautiful Asian child and his exotic entourage caused a sensation at the fashion-conscious court. Although Louis XVI backed out of an agreement to mobilize French troops to fight in Vietnam, French merchants privately funded French fighters who fought with Nguyen soldiers to defeat the Tay Son in 1799. The winning army's leader was Canh, now grown.



French influence in Vietnam began during the eighteenth century when Louis XVI sent troops to quash the Tay Son Rebellion.

In 1802 the victorious Nguyen Anh, self-crowned emperor, adopted the title of Gia Long, and built his capital at Hue. There he constructed the famed Citadel, his castle-fortress. He rebuilt his war-torn country's roads and bridges, but in the process burdened his people with heavy taxes and used peasants as forced labor, which naturally created popular resentment.

Trouble was compounded by the next Nguyen emperor, who distrusted Westerners, thinking them barbaric. After ascending the throne, Gia Long's son, Ming Mang, ordered the execution of several priests and many Vietnamese Catholics. Then his successor imprisoned and deported foreign missionaries. This angered France, which then established a fleet in Asian waters to protect French missionaries as well as business interests.

FRENCH OCCUPATION

France's move for control of Vietnam began in 1858, when a French armada of fourteen vessels and twenty-five hundred men launched a campaign to take the port of Tourane. They reasoned that Vietnam should give up Tourane to compensate France for the bad treatment of French missionaries. In terms of defense, what the Vietnamese could not do alone, heat, humidity, and disease did for them. Typhoid, malaria, dysentery, and tuberculosis, as well as cholera and unknown fevers, ravaged the French, who waited in vain for support from Vietnamese Catholics as the troops languished and grew weaker on their ships. Many more soldiers died from disease than battle. Before giving up and leaving in the face of increasingly aggressive Vietnamese opposition, the French commander Rigault de Genouilly wrote, "Everything here tends toward ruin."[8]

But the French returned, and successfully took Saigon in 1861. Beset, the Vietnamese emperor Tu Duc doubted his ability to beat back French aggression, and to save his monarchy, decreed southern Vietnam to be a French protectorate. As a protectorate, southern Vietnam would fall under the partial control of France. An annual tribute, trade rights, and French occupation of Saigon and surrounding provinces were part of the bargain.

France described its actions as a *mission civilisatrice*, which meant the French would bring their culture and religion to the Vietnamese, whom they perceived as unfortunate heathens. To further its colonial rule, France launched naval expeditions on the Mekong and Red Rivers.

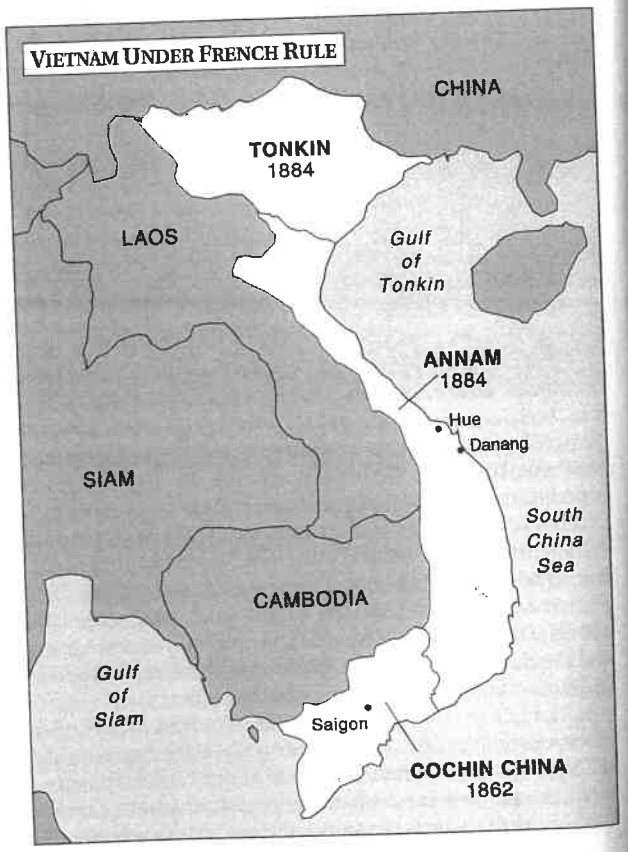
When Saigon (shown here) was captured by the French in 1861, the Vietnamese emperor admitted defeat and declared South Vietnam a French protectorate.

Although they met with resistance, by 1874 the French had sufficiently overpowered the Vietnamese that Emperor Tu Duc agreed to French entry into the northern regions. The French had long been hungry to mine rich anthracite coal deposits there. Mineral resources, as well as lucrative trade and the development of tea, coffee, and rubber plantations had fueled France's keen interest in Vietnam.

While labeled a protectorate, Vietnam had actually become a French possession, or colony. By 1883, France ruled all three regions of Vietnam. Instead of one nation known as Vietnam, the French established three administrative zones: Tonkin, in the North; Annam, in the Central region, and

Cochinchina, in the South. All Vietnamese were now called Annamites.

Like the harsh dynasties before them, the French imposed heavy taxes. Only a small population of wealthy Vietnamese kept large tracts of land. Most Vietnamese peasants lost their lands and became sharecroppers or indentured workers. At times, peasants were allowed to keep only one bag of rice for every eleven harvested, which meant that some people were literally taxed to death by starvation. When renters failed to pay, landlords could turn the renters out, beat, or even kill them.



Out of necessity, indentured servants often agreed to work on large tea, rubber, or coffee plantations; as laborers on railroads; or in the anthracite, tungsten, coal, tin, or zinc mines for subsistence wages. Thousands died of disease and malnutrition.

When the French colonized Vietnam, the literacy rate stood at 80 percent. Seventy years later, only 5 percent of Vietnamese could read. Schools were not provided for the impoverished peasants, although some taught their children to write with bamboo slivers on the backs of banana leaves, the veins serving as guidelines. Upper-class Vietnamese children did receive an education in French-run schools and were sometimes sent to Paris to complete their studies. Often, though, they returned to Vietnam to find that their training exceeded professional opportunities available to natives.

One of the most destructive French innovations in Vietnam was a quick-burning type of opium, a highly addictive drug derived from poppies. The sale of opium in Asian and European markets proved highly profitable for the French. It was devastating for the Vietnamese, however, many of whom resorted to opium as a way to numb the pain of poverty, hunger, and despair.

THE RESISTANCE

Throughout the colonial period, Vietnamese resistance to the French continued. From 1859 until the French were beaten in 1954, guerrilla fighters hid in swamps and marshes like the Plain of Reeds, using hit-and-run tactics: appearing—disappearing—confusing and frustrating the French troops. Aristocrats and peasants alike sacrificed their lives willingly for a Vietnam free of foreign domination.

The French responded to this resistance by beheading rebels on the guillotine, torturing prisoners, burning any villages that provided cover for dissidents, and killing the leaders of such villages. Major unsuccessful Vietnamese uprisings in 1930 and again in 1940 brought harsh reprisals from the French.

It was during this time that Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam's revolutionary leader, began his life's work. At first, Minh's focus was on nationhood for a unified Vietnam. But when no democratic Western country showed interest in his cause, he sought allies in communist countries and adopted the communist

HO CHI MINH

Ho Chi Minh is revered by most Vietnamese as the father of their nation, unified and independent at last. He was born Nguyen Sinh Cung in 1890 in Hue, where his father was a government official and teacher. Like many Vietnamese, Ho grew up hearing poetry and stories of his people's struggle for independence from foreign domination.

Although educated at a French school in Hue, Ho hated French colonial rule and in 1911 left Vietnam to work his way around the world. He saw Boston and San Francisco and worked in the navy yards of Brooklyn and a restaurant kitchen in New York. He was an assistant pastry chef in London and a portrait photographer in Paris, where he mingled with intellectuals and the many Vietnamese living there.

Then he joined the French Communist Party and wrote leftist articles. Slight and shy, he did not appear to be a political firebrand, but he had an absolute dedication to a free Vietnam. In Paris he took the name Nguyen Ai Quoc, which means Nguyen the Patriot.

For thirty years he traveled, studied, organized communist groups and Vietnamese expatriots, and spent time in and out of prison. He escaped from a prison in Hong Kong, taking many aliases after that. And he wrote. He would write poetry and political tracts all his life.

When World War II brought Japanese forces to Vietnam, Ho slipped back into the country even though he suffered the debilitating effects of tuberculosis and malaria. He joined the resistance and took his final alias, Ho Chi Minh, Bringer of Light. His fellow revolutionaries called him Bac Ho, Uncle Ho.

When elected president of North Vietnam in 1945, he declined to live in the presidential palace in Hanoi. Instead, he lived in a simple house behind it.

He died of heart failure on September 2, 1969. Although he did not live to see a unified Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh inspired people during his life and after his death to make his dream a reality.

Ho Chi Minh, the father of Vietnam.

philosophy. To him, the idea of a classless society, with collective ownership of property under the firm control of a one-party government, seemed the answer to Vietnam's problems.

WORLD WAR II

World War II disrupted Vietnam's struggle for independence from France, and brought new suffering to the nation. The French drafted Vietnamese to be soldiers, and when France fell to Nazi Germany, Japanese troops, allies of the Nazis, occupied Vietnam. At first, the Vietnamese welcomed the Japanese, but the Japanese took nearly all the rice crops and forced the Vietnamese to grow inedible crops, such as jute, to provide rope for Japan's war efforts. Terrible poverty and famine resulted, and by 1945, one person in six had died of starvation or disease.

During the war, the Vietnamese were without matches, lamp oil, or even cloth. In her book *After Sorrow*, American author Lady Borton quotes a Vietnamese friend who remembers:

> It was embarrassing to have no cloth. Imagine! We made clothes out of leaves and stitched them with banana thread! A husband and wife might own a single pair of shorts. When the wife wore the shorts outside the house, the husband hid inside.[9]

While WWII was raging, Ho Chi Minh established the League for the Independence of Vietnam, later to be known as the Vietminh. The league comprised Vietnamese of all ages and social classes who resisted Japanese occupation. Led by communists, many of the Vietminh hid in the mountains and helped to rescue American fighter pilots downed by the Japanese during missions to deliver supplies to China. In turn, for the league's help, Ho Chi Minh received weapons and aid from both America and China. By the war's end, the Vietminh controlled North Vietnam.

HO CHI MINH DECLARES INDEPENDENCE

On August 16, 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared himself president of a provisional government of Vietnam known as the National Liberation Committee. Emperor Bao Dai resigned, handing power over to the Vietminh. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh publicly declared the formation of the independent

Ho Chi Minh (shown here) brought communism to Southeast Asia.

nation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. His words included passages drawn from America's own Declaration of Independence: "We hold the truth that all men are created equal . . . endowed with certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."[10]

Ho Chi Minh hoped for American support against French efforts to maintain colonial rule, but that support did not materialize. Ho Chi Minh wrote letter after letter to President Harry S. Truman asking that America recognize Vietnam as an independent nation. Mindful of how strong an ally France had been during WWII, Truman never replied.

A nonviolent coexistence between Vietminh troops and France endured until 1946, when the French fired on Vietminh in the port of Haiphong in festering disputes over collection of customs duties. The war with France had begun.

WAR WITH FRANCE

On one side were the French and some of the upper-class Vietnamese, mainly Catholic, who shared religious and anticommunist sympathies with France. On the other side were the Vietminh and some of the country's noncommunist nationals.

The major world powers sided with their ideological allies. Communist China and the Soviet Union supported the Vietminh cause. The United States committed itself to providing aid to France.

Despite eight years of fighting and $2.5 billion in aid from America, France could not defeat the Vietminh. When the French lost the fifty-seven-day battle known as the siege of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the war ended.

Meeting in Switzerland two and a half months later, in late July, the French and Vietnamese reached an agreement known as the Geneva Accords. Vietnam was partitioned for a second time at the 17th parallel, dividing it into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (the North) and the Republic of Vietnam (the South). The Vietminh stayed or regrouped in the North, claiming Hanoi as their capital. The French and pro-French Vietnamese stayed in, or moved to, the South,

The Vietnamese war with France ended in 1954 with the fall of Dien Bien Phu.

whose capital was Saigon. The agreement provided for only a temporary division of Vietnam with national elections scheduled for 1956.

A Nation Divided

After Vietnam's division, life in both the North and the South demanded that the people adapt to very different governments. Likewise, the leaders of these new governments faced different challenges.

Leadership in the South went to Ngo Dinh Diem, a strong anticommunist from a Catholic family of Central Vietnam. The United States, whose goal was to establish a democratic Vietnam, supplied Diem with both money and military advisers.

General Delteil of France signed a peace accord officially ending the war between France and Vietnam.

The Strategic Hamlets Program

South Vietnamese peasants found themselves facing new cruelties when Ngo Dinh, Diem's younger brother, ran the secret police and the strategic hamlets program, a counterinsurgency plan supported by President John F. Kennedy. By the strategic hamlets program, peasants were forced to leave their homes and live in barbed-wire compounds, supposedly to keep them safe from, but in reality to stop them from helping the NLF. This program and later programs that relocated villagers into cities were public relations disasters. Peasants were uprooted from their ancient home villages and from the graves of their revered ancestors, inciting many outraged Vietnamese to join, or at least support, the Viet Cong.

Diem was a staunch Catholic and some 900,000 Catholic refugees fleeing the North strengthened his position in the largely Buddhist South. A bachelor, Diem made his brother's Catholic wife, Madame Nhu, first lady of Vietnam. Although she tried to identify herself as the reincarnation of the Trung sisters, her hatred of the Buddhists, who did not support Diem, and her encouragement of repressive measures against them made her unpopular.

Buddhist activists began a series of public protests following an incident in Hue in 1963 when police opened fire on a peaceful gathering intended to celebrate the birthday of Buddha. Diem imposed martial law, the use of military troops to enforce order.

Realizing that he could not win a national election over the more popular Ho Chi Minh, Diem refused to allow the planned nationwide elections to take place. Instead, he declared himself president of South Vietnam and his regime was recognized internationally by many anticommunist nations.

Diem's refusal to honor the Geneva Accords infuriated many Vietnamese. His favoritism for Catholics, promoting them to positions in government and the military, and his failure to continue land reform programs accomplished by the Vietminh, who had given back sections of land to the peasants, led to increasing guerrilla insurgency. Buddhist monks and nuns burned themselves alive in public demonstrations. University

students protested against Diem. Anti-Diem forces including gangsters, Buddhist leaders, and communists hid out in the Mekong Delta.

Diem was ultimately overthrown in a military coup; he was assassinated on November 2, 1963. His successors, President Nguyen Van Thieu and Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky proved equally unpopular. During their time in power, government corruption and inefficiency continued.

As repressive as Diem's policies were, life in the North was at times even harsher. Ho Chi Minh's communist government resorted to brutality in its efforts to impose control. Landowners, even those with very small plots, were killed by teams of cadres, or communist leaders, appointed to agricultural reform tribunals. Quotas were established for the execution of alleged French sympathizers, former landowners, and people deemed insufficiently enthusiastic in their support of the Vietminh. Thousands of people were put to death or imprisoned in the early years of Ho Chi Minh's regime.

Buddhist monks and nuns burned themselves alive in public demonstrations protesting Diem's staunch Catholic government.

President Thieu (shown here) succeeded Diem and proved to be equally unpopular.

In 1960 the government in Hanoi announced formation of the National Liberation Front in the South. The NLF called for the solidification of various factions in Vietnam, for withdrawal of all foreign troops, and for reunification. The NLF were dubbed Viet Cong by South Vietnam's government, a slang term for Vietnamese communist.

THE VIETNAM WAR

By this time, American involvement in Vietnam had grown well beyond contributing to France's effort to maintain colonial control over Vietnam. About fifteen thousand American military personnel were in Vietnam. The United States was providing expertise, training, and equipment to the South Vietnamese army, and had given $500 million in aid to South Vietnam in 1963.

America's increased presence in Vietnam resulted largely from fear that communism, once established in Vietnam, would take hold in other countries throughout Southeast Asia. American leaders believed this would threaten America's long-term financial interests in the region as well as hurt

THE TUNNELS OF CU CHI

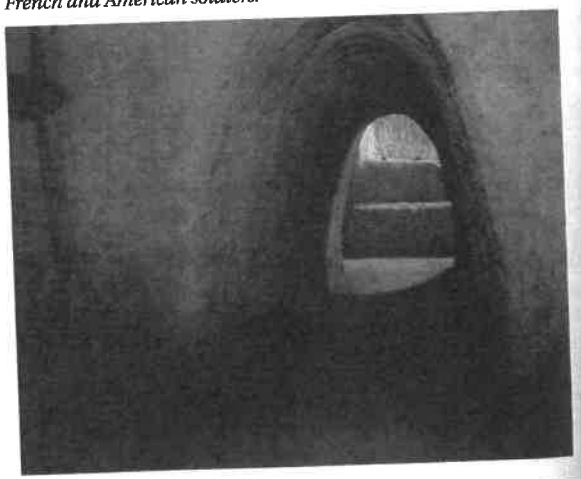
Poorly equipped Vietnamese guerrillas began using tunnels with openings disguised or protected by foliage to protect themselves from enemy bombs and heavy artillery during their war with France in the late 1940s.

The hard red dirt of the Cu Chi district, now part of Ho Chi Minh City, allowed for an elaborate tunnel system more than two hundred miles long at its completion in the 1960s. Viet Cong dug some tunnels several stories deep, with large rooms designated for soldiers' rest and recreation, hospitals, warehouses, weapons factories, and kitchens.

The Viet Cong developed secure communication systems via the tunnels and a relatively safe means of slipping into Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital. They could execute surprise attacks from the tunnels and vanish back into them without a trace. The surprise attacks on Saigon during the 1968 Tet Offensive originated from the tunnels of Cu Chi. Sections of the Cu Chi tunnel system even ran beneath an American army base.

When ground attacks against the tunnels resulted in heavy casualties, Americans dropped bombs and defoliants on Cu Chi. Still, the labyrinthine tunnels stayed useful to the Viet Cong.

Vietnamese guerrillas used tunnels (like these in Saigon) to elude French and American soldiers.



chances for building new alliances with other democratically run governments.

On August 4, 1964, a U.S. destroyer conducting surveillance in the Gulf of Tonkin, the *Maddox*, clashed with North Vietnamese patrol boats. North Vietnam claimed the *Maddox* was inside the limits of international waters, which meant it was unlawfully invading North Vietnamese–controlled seas. President Lyndon Johnson, frustrated by the fact that American military were only allowed to act in an advisory capacity to South Vietnamese troops, saw the incident as an opportunity to justify escalation of American military activity in the area.

When the *Maddox* and another U.S. ship returned to the scene, radar picked up what may have been torpedoes launched against them. Johnson asked Congress to pass a resolution giving him the power to "take all necessary measures to repel attacks against the U.S." and "prevent further aggression" as well as to "determine when peace and security in the area had been attained."[11]

When the resolution passed, Johnson sent the first U.S. military combat troops to join the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN. U.S. Marines disembarked at Danang in Central Vietnam in March 1965. The first major battle of the Vietnam War took place that year near Laos in the jungle-covered La Drang Valley.

The ensuing civil war was long and costly. By the time the last American troops departed from Vietnam in 1973 the death toll on all sides was enormous. At war's end, 440,000 communists, 223,748 ARVN, 4,000,000 civilians, and 58,183 Americans had died. The extent of psychological and physical wounds is impossible to gauge.

Financial losses, however, easily reached into the billions. The financial cost to the United States alone was $150 billion. However it is figured, the war devastated both North and South Vietnam. Mountainous and plains areas were ravaged. The infrastructure in the North lay in ruins, with major cities bombed nearly to rubble. The South was also bombed and suffered the most damage to its farmland because of the application of millions of gallons of defoliants such as Agent Orange. Some sixteen hundred irrigation systems were damaged. Of South Vietnamese villages, some were rebuilt only to be bombed again; in all, nine thousand of fifteen thousand were destroyed.

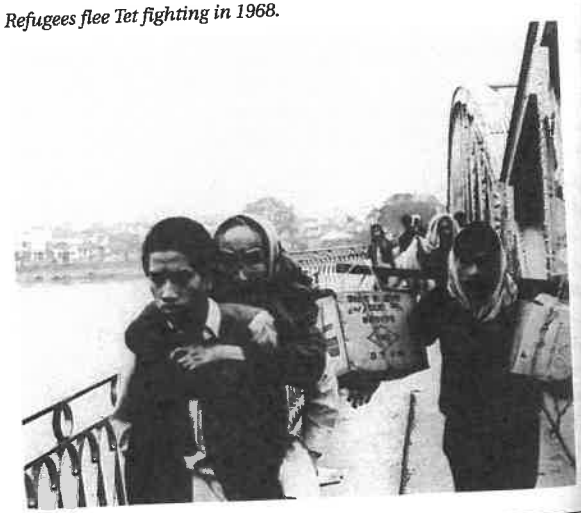
THE SEIGE OF KHE SANH AND THE TET OFFENSIVE

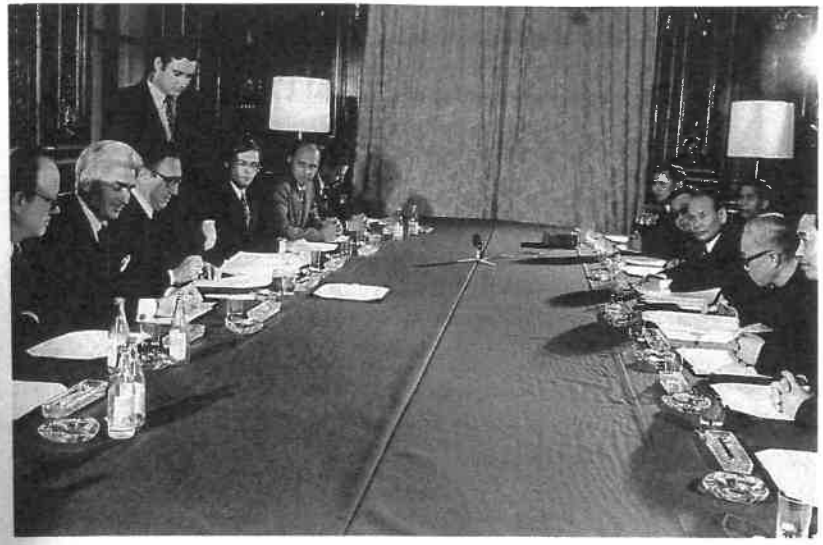
With U.S. military strength and technology unable to defeat the Viet Cong's nationalism and guerrilla tactics, the Vietnam War had no foreseeable end. However, in January 1968, two offensive actions, the siege of Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive, changed the course of war.

The seige of Khe Sanh, a U.S. Marine base, lasted 77 days. The marines held the position but suffered eighteen hundred casualties; the communists lost ten thousand. Then, on January 30, 1968, nearly seventy thousand communist troops entered more than one hundred cities and towns including Saigon, where they captured, and for a few hours held, the U.S. embassy. The Tet Offensive, which lasted until February 25, was a military disaster for the communists, who sustained heavy casualties and failed to realize expected support from the people.

President Lyndon Johnson halted American bombing in responce to public antiwar sentiment following televised coverage of U.S. bombing of cities such as Hue in South Vietnam during the Tet Offensive. Public support for American involvement in Vietnam decreased from that point on.

Refugees flee Tet fighting in 1968.





The signing of the Paris Peace Agreement ended the Vietnam War.

AMERICAN WITHDRAWAL

The Vietnam War ended on January 27, 1973, with the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement. Two years later, on April 29, 1975, the last Americans departed from Saigon. Thousands of South Vietnamese who had sided with the Americans, now fearing the takeover by the communists of the North, hysterically fought to be included on buses and helicopters evacuating the area. On April 30, 1975, communist forces entered Saigon.

After decades of struggle, Vietnam was a unified nation free of foreign domination or intervention. The price paid in lives lost and disrupted, and an urban and rural landscape despoiled by warfare, was high. The surviving people of Vietnam stood poised on the brink of a new epoch in their nation's turbulent history.