

The Vietnam War: A National Dilemma

A Unit of Study for Grades 10–12

D. ANTONIO CANTU

SANDY CANTU

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INCLUDING THE COMPLETE FIRST LESSON

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INTRODUCTION

I. Approach and Rationale

This teaching unit, *The Vietnam War: A National Dilemma*, is one of several such units co-published by the Organization of American Historians (OAH) and the National Center for History in the Schools (NCHS). The fruits of collaboration between history professors and experienced teachers of American history, the units represent specific issues and dramatic episodes in history from which you and your students can pause to delve into the deeper meanings of these selected landmark events and explore their wider context in the great historical narrative. By studying a crucial turning point in history the student becomes aware that choices had to be made by real human beings, that those decisions were the result of specific factors, and that they set in motion a series of historical consequences. We have selected issues and dramatic episodes that bring alive that decision-making process. We hope that through this approach, your students will realize that history is an ongoing, open-ended process, and that the decisions they make today create the conditions of tomorrow's history.

Our teaching units are based on primary sources, taken from government documents, artifacts, magazines, newspapers, films, private correspondence, literature, contemporary photographs, and paintings from the period under study. What we hope you achieve using primary source documents in these lessons is to have your students connect more intimately with the past. In this way we hope to recreate for your students a sense of being there, a sense of seeing history through the eyes of the very people who were making decisions. This will help your students develop historical empathy, to realize that history is not an impersonal process divorced from real people like themselves. At the same time, by analyzing primary sources, students will actually practice the historian's craft, discovering for themselves how to analyze evidence, establish a valid interpretation and construct a coherent narrative in which all the relevant factors play a part.

II. Content and Organization

Within this unit, you will find: Teaching Background Materials, including Unit Overview, Unit Context, Correlation to the National Standards for History, Unit Objectives, and Historical Background; a Dramatic Moment; and Lesson Plans with Documents. This unit, as we have said above, focuses on certain key moments in time and should be used as a supplement to your customary course materials. Although these lessons are recommended for grades 10–12, they can be adapted for other grade levels.

The Historical Background section should provide you with a good overview of the entire unit and with the historical information and context necessary to link the specific Dramatic Moment to the larger historical narrative. You may consult it for your own use, and you may choose to share it with students if they are of a sufficient grade level to understand the materials.

The Lesson Plans include a variety of ideas and approaches for the teacher, which can be elaborated upon or cut as you see the need. These lesson plans contain student resources that accompany each lesson. The resources consist of primary source documents, any handouts or student background materials, and a bibliography.

In our series of teaching units, each unit can be taught in several ways. You can teach all of the lessons offered on any given topic, or you can select and adapt the ones that best support your

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particular course needs. We have not attempted to be comprehensive or prescriptive in our offerings, but rather to give you an array of enticing possibilities for in-depth study, at varying grade levels. We hope that you will find the lesson plans exciting and stimulating for your classes. We also hope that your students will never again see history as a boring sweep of facts and meaningless dates but rather as an endless treasure of real life stories, and an exercise in analysis and reconstruction.



Source: PFC Paul Epley, photographer, “Soldiers from 4th Battalion, 503rd Infantry, 173rd Airborne Brigade, Await Helicopter to Evacuate the Body of a Slain Comrade” (College Park, MD: Still Picture Branch, National Archives at College Park, 1966).

TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. Unit Overview

This teaching unit, *The Vietnam War: A National Dilemma*, introduces students to the key individuals and events, through the use of primary source documents, that played a role in America's entry into, escalation of, and final withdrawal from the war in Vietnam. Using the presidencies of Harry S. Truman through Gerald R. Ford as its historical and conceptual framework, the unit attempts to impress upon students the continuous and escalating investment each of these chief executives made in Vietnam, the aggregate of which resulted in the death of over 58,000 Americans, as well as the physical and emotional wounding of hundreds of thousands more. The history of American involvement in Vietnam is traced through the following five lesson plans, each of which not only examine the individuals and events germane to each of these specific presidencies, but also illustrate one of five different lesson plan frameworks representing both brain-based and sequential curricular models.

Lesson One traces the roots of French colonialism in Indochina, illustrates the mistreatment of the Vietnamese people at the hands of the French, and examines the role this played in the rise of the nationalist movement, Communist party, and Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam. The reaction of President Harry S. Truman to developments in Vietnam and the rise of Ho Chi Minh is examined as well. This lesson is designed using Robert Sternberg's theory of triarchic intelligence as its conceptual framework.

Lesson Two examines President Dwight D. Eisenhower's role in laying the political groundwork for American involvement in Vietnam, in particular his support for Ngo Dinh Diem and promulgation of the "Domino Theory." Madeline Hunter's mastery learning model provides the foundation for the lesson's curricular design.

Lesson Three analyzes the role President John F. Kennedy played in laying the military groundwork for American involvement in Vietnam. The subject of analysis also includes the shifting current of both public opinion and JFK regarding American involvement in Vietnam as well as support for the Diem government. The curricular framework for this lesson is based on Benjamin Bloom's mastery learning model.

Lesson Four explores the escalation of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam under the presidential watch of Lyndon B. Johnson, from the passage of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1964 to LBJ's withdrawal from the presidential race in 1968. The 5-E instructional approach provides the basis for the design of this lesson plan.

Lesson Five examines the events and developments, including implementation of the Vietnamization policy, signing of the Paris Accords, and fall of Saigon, that led to America's withdrawal from and eventual end of the war in Vietnam, all of which took place during the presidency of Richard M. Nixon and, upon his resignation, Gerald R. Ford. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences serves as the guiding curricular force in the design of this lesson.

II. Unit Context

The Vietnam War: A National Dilemma may be placed in the United States history curriculum in a number of logical places within the existing scope and sequence, ranging from the post-World War II or "Origins of the Cold War" period to the 1960s and 1970s. Regardless of where this unit is placed in the curriculum, a review of late nineteenth-century imperialism

as well as the key events and lessons learned from the Korean War are both strongly recommended to assist in the study and understanding of the Vietnam War. In its entirety, this unit is designed for a two to three week period of time. However, it can be adapted to focus student attention on a specific document or set of documents, allowing teachers to integrate individual lessons or activities into the existing curriculum with little modification. Another option available to teachers, to conserve class time, is to assign individual activities to different groups, who are then responsible for examining the primary documents and reporting their findings to the entire class.

III. Correlation to National History Standards

The Vietnam War: A National Dilemma provides documentary materials and learning activities relating to the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 9, Standard 2C**: *The student understands the foreign and domestic consequences of U.S. involvement in Vietnam*, to include each of the following elaborated standards: Assess the Vietnam policy of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations and the shifts of public opinion about the war; Explain the composition of the American forces recruited to fight the war; Evaluate how Vietnamese and Americans experienced the war and how the war continued to affect postwar politics and culture; Explain the provisions of the Paris Accord of 1973 and evaluate the role of the Nixon administration; and Analyze the constitutional issues involved in the war and explore the legacy of the Vietnam war. In addition, the unit also addresses each of the five Historical Thinking Standards outlined in Part 1, Chapter 2 of the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition*. Each lesson provides primary source materials that challenge students to think chronologically, comprehend a variety of historical sources, engage in historical analysis and interpretation, conduct historical research, and engage in historical issues-analysis and decision-making.

IV. Unit Objectives

1. To examine primary documents that trace French colonial involvement in Indochina from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, to help understand the political and military situation that existed in Vietnam.
2. To identify the role and contribution of Ho Chi Minh in achieving independence for Vietnam through analysis of his writings.
3. To compare, contrast, and evaluate the role the following presidents played in America's involvement in Vietnam: Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, and Gerald R. Ford.
4. To identify, examine, and evaluate the events, issues, policies, and decisions, revealed through a variety of historical sources, that led to the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam.
5. To trace the evolution of public support for American involvement in Vietnam and determine those factors that played a role in shaping it.
6. To identify, examine, and evaluate the events, issues, policies, and decisions, revealed through a variety of historical sources, that led to America's withdrawal from, and eventual end of, the war in Vietnam.

V. Historical Background

Vietnam traces its origins to the clans of Viet peoples who dwelled in the region extending from present-day Shanghai down the Red River Delta to the Mekong River Delta. The history of the Vietnamese people traces back over 2,200 years, with the first record of the Viet people found in the writings of Chinese historians. It is not until 1858, however, that France, which was exploring new trade routes to China, laid claim to Indochina. Within a short period of time, Vietnam became one of France's most profitable colonies of the late nineteenth century. French economic success in Indochina, however, came at a large cost to the Vietnamese people who were subjected to harsh and exploitive treatment at the hands of their French rulers. It is in this setting that the national independence movement took hold in Vietnam, in particular with the rise of Ho Chi Minh.

Ho Chi Minh, born Nguyen Tat Thanh in 1890 and later known as Nguyen Ai Quoc, quickly became one of the leading Vietnamese nationalist figures of the early twentieth century. After joining the French Communist Party in Paris in 1920, Ho Chi Minh organized the Indochinese Communist Party a decade later. This was followed in 1941 with the founding of the Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi, or Vietnamese Independence League (Viet Minh).

During World War II, Ho and the Viet Minh gained invaluable military and political support for their campaign to oust Japanese and Vichy French forces who had assumed control of Vietnam. They were so successful in their efforts that by the time of the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the Viet Minh represented the strongest political force in Vietnam. The next month, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam's independence, establishing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. France, however, was not about to relinquish its nearly century long colonial hold on Vietnam, and within a year a war between French and Viet Minh forces ensued. The First Indochina War, as it became known, would last for eight years. It came to a rather abrupt end in 1954 following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, a remote outpost in northwest Vietnam, and the signing of the Geneva Peace Accords later that summer.

By 1954, the United States was assuming 75 percent of the French cost for the First Indochina War in Vietnam. Therefore, when delegates from nine nations, to include Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, France, Laos, the People's Republic of China, the State of Vietnam, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Kingdom, and the United States, met in Geneva during the summer of 1954 to discuss ending the conflict in Indochina, Americans were deeply vested in the outcome.

An awkward peace treaty at best, the Geneva Peace Accords called for the temporary partition of Vietnam at the 17th parallel. In addition, national elections were to be held two years later, for the purpose of reunification. Beginning in 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower pledged his support to Ngo Dinh Diem, Prime Minister (and later President) of the Republic of Vietnam, who had a fragile power base consisting of Catholics, French-trained urban elites, and landlords. From the beginning, Diem proved to be a controversial figure. A Catholic leader of a Buddhist country, Diem found his authority challenged from the start. He faced serious opposition not only from various religious sects within South Vietnam, but also from the Binh Xuyen, which controlled Saigon's crime syndicate. In addition, many within the military, especially among the officers' corps, also posed a threat to the stability of the new Diem government. Diem paid little attention to the countryside. He became more and more isolated from the people and preferred to rely on his family as his closest advisors. As a result, this discontent in the countryside was organized first by remnants of the Viet Minh, then in December 1960 by a new revolutionary organization, the National Liberation Front or Viet Cong.

Despite these potential obstacles, Diem continued to secure his power base in South Vietnam, first by winning a controversial election for President in 1955, and then by establishing the Republic of Vietnam as an independent nation that same year. The following year, with the support of the United States, Diem refused to hold nationwide elections in Vietnam as called for in the Geneva Accords. Instead, Diem continued to build upon his political base of power while at the same time increasing his attacks on political opponents, including the Viet Minh.

Through it all, President Eisenhower, the architect of the “Domino Theory,” remained supportive of Diem, pouring nearly \$200 million in military aid into South Vietnam during his tenure in office. By the end of his term, Eisenhower had solidly laid the political groundwork for American involvement in Vietnam.

John F. Kennedy’s election in 1960 represented yet another shift in twentieth-century American foreign policy. Perhaps the most critical pendulum swing in regard to U.S. policy in Vietnam was the amount and type of support Washington provided to Ngo Dinh Diem. As part of JFK’s “flexible response” approach to confronting international crises, the president quickly sought to increase military and economic aid to South Vietnam. Included in the young president’s plan was a marked increase in the number of American advisors being sent to South Vietnam. These advisors included U.S. Army troops who became involved in both conventional and unconventional operations. The most elite of these military forces was the Green Berets, an Army Special Forces unit that was commissioned by the president to provide both military and medical assistance to the people of South Vietnam.

Despite President Kennedy’s efforts to bolster Diem’s position in South Vietnam, the situation deteriorated. Diem’s government had increasingly become a family-based, authoritarian regime without any legitimacy in the countryside, which represented 80 percent of the total population. By 1963, Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, had become controversial figures, having raided South Vietnamese Buddhist pagodas and used military troops to suppress demonstrators in Saigon. As a result, Americans witnessed on the evening news a number of Buddhist riots and self-immolations. The sight of a monk engulfed in flames was a symbol for the corruption and inefficacy that became synonymous with the Diem regime. Although his advisors were deeply divided over the issue, it became clear to Kennedy that serious changes were in order; in particular, the overthrow of the Diem government began to emerge as the only option available to achieve their objectives in South Vietnam.

Therefore, President Kennedy pledged that while the United States would not take an active role in any coup, it would do nothing to prevent such an event from taking place. As a result, on November 1, 1963, a group of South Vietnamese military leaders successfully overthrew the Diem government, assassinating both Diem and his brother Nhu. Three weeks later, Kennedy would face an assassin’s bullet as well, but not before the shift in America’s Vietnam strategy had been solidified. By the time JFK’s fate was sealed in Dallas, there were a total of sixteen thousand American military advisors stationed in the jungles of Vietnam.

Following the assassination of President Kennedy, Lyndon Baines Johnson continued to increase America’s commitment in Vietnam. The political situation in South Vietnam, however, required serious modification of the strategy Johnson had inherited from JFK. It became clear that the generals who succeeded Diem were even less effective than he in ruling the nation. In addition, the Viet Cong—with North Vietnamese assistance—was becoming so powerful that Johnson either had to send in ground combat troops or pull out of Vietnam. Without American intervention, the Viet Cong would have won the war by early 1966. The catalyst, therefore, that allowed LBJ to redefine America’s foreign policy in Vietnam occurred in early August

1964, when the American vessel USS *Maddox*, on patrol in international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin, was attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. This was followed by another highly disputed report of a subsequent attack days later against the *Maddox* and its escort ship, the *C. Turner Joy*. In response, President Johnson successfully petitioned Congress to pass what has become known as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which bestowed upon the President expansive war powers.

Shortly thereafter, Johnson ordered the sustained bombing of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troop targets, following an assault against two U.S. military installations in South Vietnam in which eight U.S. troops died. This 1965 bombing campaign became known as Operation Rolling Thunder and even included military targets within North Vietnam. Coupled with the intense bombing campaign was the introduction of the first U.S. combat troops in Vietnam, sent to Da Nang on March 7, 1965. Within three months, the government confirmed that U.S. troops were engaged in combat missions of their own, not of a supporting or advisory nature.

At the same time, LBJ was still attempting to win the support of the Vietnamese people by initiating yet another pacification campaign reportedly designed to rebuild the rural economy of South Vietnam while also undercutting the political strength of the Viet Cong in the countryside. In 1965, President Johnson was also busily attempting to initiate peace talks with North Vietnam, with an offer of economic aid to both North and South Vietnam. Although his initial attempts would prove unsuccessful, Johnson did open the dialogue with North Vietnam that would years later lead to the Paris peace talks.

However, President Johnson's "prolonged limited war" in Vietnam continued on. Opting for a middle ground approach, LBJ began the gradual escalation of the war in Vietnam in 1965 by authorizing an increase in U.S. troop strength in South Vietnam by an unprecedented 100,000. The increase in troop levels would continue throughout the remainder of Johnson's presidency, so that by the end of his tenure in office over a half a million American troops were serving in South Vietnam.

Despite President Johnson's planning and calculating, the events of 1968 could not have been anticipated. In January, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces launched an offensive during Tet, the Lunar New Year, in which over 80,000 troops attacked nearly all major cities in South Vietnam. Even the U.S. embassy in Saigon came under attack. Although it was a major military defeat for the Communist forces, which lost half of their attacking force and greatly weakened the Viet Cong's insurgent base, the Tet Offensive ironically was a great psychological victory. Within days, America public support for involvement in Vietnam—which was already waning—plummeted even further; while at the same time the anti-war movement and public criticism of the government reached new levels. It is in this climate that President Johnson, after declining General Westmoreland's request for 200,000 additional troops, finally succeeded in initiating peace talks between the United States and North Vietnam, which commenced on May 3, 1968. Perhaps the greatest surprise event of 1968 was LBJ's announcement that he would not seek reelection, instead committing himself to bringing about an end to the war in Vietnam.

In addition to handing over a war in Vietnam that had escalated to unprecedented levels, President Lyndon Baines Johnson also provided his successor, Richard M. Nixon, with two key elements that Nixon would use to bring about an end to America's longest war. First, Johnson had initiated secret peace talks with North Vietnam in Paris during the spring of 1968. In June of that year, LBJ and Nguyen Van Thieu, South Vietnam's President, also implemented the initial stages of a new program that would mobilize more South Vietnamese troops to assume a greater combat role in the war.

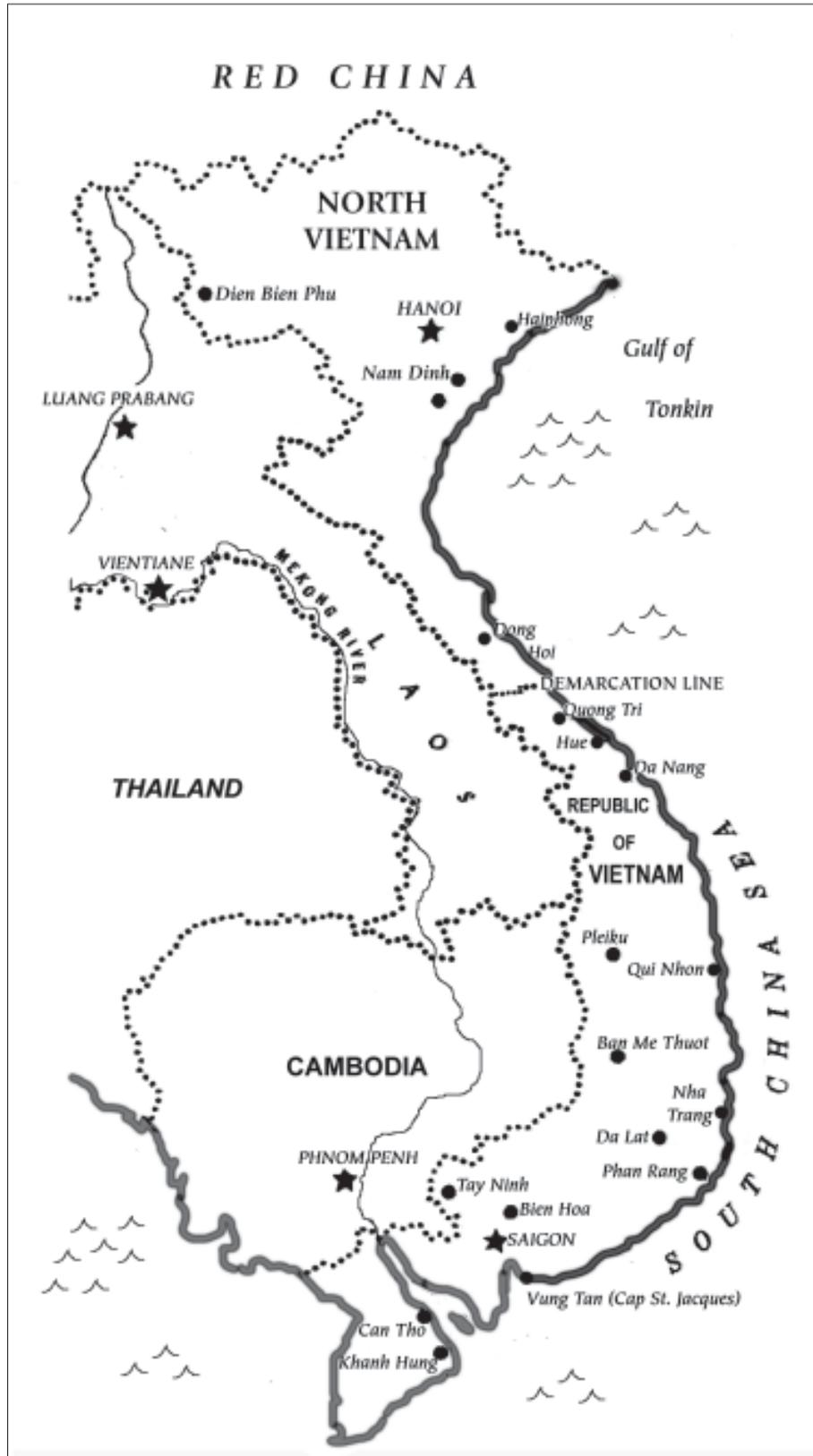
Nixon would bring both of these developments to fruition. He embarked on this mission by authorizing the first troop withdrawal, twenty five thousand total, in the history of the Vietnam War, following a meeting at Midway with President Thieu in June 1969. Troop reductions would continue throughout Nixon's presidency, with former American bases and military equipment being transferred to South Vietnamese control. Although he implemented the program months earlier, in November 1969 Nixon publicly unveiled the specifics of his new strategy in Vietnam, which he referred to as "Vietnamization." Nixon expedited the transfer of combat operations from American to South Vietnamese troops that was initiated under LBJ, with overall American troop levels in Vietnam dropping from over half a million in 1969 to 156,000 just two years later. The equipment turned over was vast, including one million M-16 rifles and five hundred aircraft, making the Republic of Vietnam's air force the fourth largest in the world.

The transition, however, was plagued by problems and controversies. First, the U.S. Army was confronted with a series of problems, including racial tensions, drug abuse, low troop morale, and a growing anxiety on the part of many troops not to be the last soldier killed in Vietnam, known as the "last-casualty" syndrome. In addition, many questioned the purpose of certain battles, such as "Hamburger Hill" in May of 1969, in which the U.S. military suffered a number of casualties in its victory over a North Vietnamese Regiment that previously occupied the hill, only to abandon it shortly thereafter. The military missions conducted by American and South Vietnamese troops in Cambodia in April of 1970 in order to disrupt Communist supply routes into South Vietnam and buy time for Vietnamization, however, became the most controversial event of Nixon's first term. Public protest over this military excursion eventually led to a confrontation between student protesters and National Guard troops at Kent State University in Ohio, in which four students were killed on May 4, 1970. United States military involvement in Cambodia also led Congress to repeal the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution as well as to bar any further military operation in Cambodia.

Renewed bombings of North Vietnam as well as the mining of Haiphong Harbor marked the beginning of 1972 followed by a North Vietnamese assault, known as the "Easter Offensive," in March. By fall of that year, however, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and North Vietnamese representatives Xuan Thuy and Le Duc Tho were hurriedly finishing the preliminary draft of a peace treaty. When negotiations broke down, Nixon ordered the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong, raids which became known as the "Christmas Bombings," as a means of bringing Hanoi back to the negotiating table.

Finally, eight years after the first combat troops were sent to Da Nang, the United States and North Vietnam signed the Paris Peace Agreement on January 27, 1973. Although the Paris Accords did not end the conflict in Vietnam, it did result in the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Vietnam as well as the return of American prisoners of war by April of that year. Despite the continued funneling of money to the Thieu government (\$7 billion was sent between 1973 and 1975) the South Vietnamese military suffered from too many military mistakes and setbacks as well as from critical shortages of fuel, spare parts to repair military equipment, and ammunition. Many South Vietnamese believed they had been abandoned by the United States. At the same time, the North Vietnamese military also increased the intensity of their offensive. The end came with the resignation of President Thieu on April 21, 1975, followed by the evacuation of U.S. personnel from South Vietnam, and the fall of Saigon to Communist troops on April 30, 1975, officially ending the Second Indochina War.

Map of Vietnam 1966



DRAMATIC MOMENT

A Navy veteran of the Vietnam War, John Kerry became a leading spokesperson for the organization known as the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). The following testimony Kerry provided to a Senate committee on 22 April 1971 serves to illustrate the swing of the pendulum that was taking place in the United States regarding public support for American involvement in Vietnam. Kerry's non-militant and articulate testimony had a much greater impact on the antiwar movement than did the more confrontational demonstrations Americans viewed on television, helping to swing the pendulum with even greater velocity.

John Kerry's Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 1971

Thank you very much, Senator Fulbright, Senator Javits, Senator Symington, Senator Pell. I would like to say for the record, and also for the men behind me who are also wearing the uniform and their medals, that my sitting here is really symbolic. I am not here as John Kerry. I am here as one member of the group of 1,000 which is a small representation of a very much larger group of veterans.

In 1970 at West Point Vice President Agnew said "some glamorize the criminal misfits of society while our best men die in Asian rice paddies to preserve the freedom which most of those misfits abuse," and this was used as a rallying point for our efforts in Vietnam.

But for us, as boys in Asia whom the country was supposed to support, his statement is a terrible distortion from which we can only draw a very deep sense of revulsion, and hence the anger of some of the men who are here in Washington today. It is a distortion because we in no way consider ourselves the best men of this country; because those he calls misfits were standing up for us in a way that nobody else in this country dared to; because so many who have died would have returned to this country to join the misfits in their efforts to ask for an immediate withdrawal from South Vietnam; because so many of those best have returned as quadriplegics and amputees—and they lie forgotten in Veterans Administration Hospitals in this country which fly the flag which so many have chosen as their own personal symbol—and we cannot consider ourselves America's best men when we are ashamed of and hated for what we were called on to do in Southeast Asia.

In our opinion, and from our experience, there is nothing in South Vietnam which could happen that realistically threatens the United States of America. And to attempt to justify the loss of one American life in Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos by linking such loss to the preservation of freedom, which those misfits supposedly abuse, is to us the height of criminal hypocrisy, and it is that kind of hypocrisy which we feel has torn this country apart. . . .

We are also here to ask, and we are here to ask vehemently, where are the leaders of our country? Where is the leadership? We are here to ask where are McNamara, Rostow, Bundy, Gilpatric and so many others? Where are they now that we, the men whom they sent off to war, have returned? These are commanders who have deserted their troops, and there is no more serious crime in the laws of war. The Army says they never leave their wounded. The Marines say they never leave their dead. These men have left all the casualties and retreated behind a pious shield of public rectitude. They have left the real stuff of their reputations bleaching behind them in the sun in this country.

Finally, this administration has done us the ultimate dishonor. They have attempted to disown us and the sacrifices we made for this country. In their blindness and fear they have tried to deny that we are

veterans or that we served in Nam. We do not need their testimony. Our own scars and stumps of limbs are witness enough for others and for ourselves.

We wish that a merciful God could wipe away our own memories of that service as easily as this administration has wiped away their memories of us. But all that they have done and all that they can do by this denial is to make more clear than ever our own determination to undertake one last mission—to search out and destroy the last vestige of this barbaric war, to pacify our own hearts, to conquer the hate and fear that have driven this country these last ten years and more, so when thirty years from now our brothers go down the street without a leg, without an arm, or a face, and small boys ask why, we will be able to say “Vietnam” and not mean a desert, not a filthy obscene memory, but mean instead the place where America finally turned and where soldiers like us helped in the turning.

Thank you.

Source: John Kerry, “Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,” April 22, 1971, *Congressional Record*, Vol. 117:57.



Members of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War leaving the Statue of Liberty, which they had occupied for two days.

Source: Photograph Collection of the American Museum of Immigration, Liberty Island
U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service (December 28, 1971)

LESSON ONE

COLONIZATION: FRENCH INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM

A. Objectives

- ◆ To identify the role nineteenth- and twentieth-century French imperialism in Indochina played in providing the foundation for the events that would transpire during the Vietnam War.
- ◆ To compare and contrast the Vietnamese attempt for independence with that of the United States.
- ◆ To outline and discuss the goals and objectives of Ho Chi Minh during the 1940s and 1950s and evaluate President Truman's response to events in Vietnam during this period.

B. Background Information

The written history of Vietnam, in particular the Viet people, dates back over 2,200 years to the writings of Chinese historians. Twentieth-century Vietnam history, however, would be shaped by events that occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, in particular French colonization of Indochina, which began in 1858. As a result of French exploitation of Vietnam, a national independence movement took hold in Vietnam during the early twentieth century and experienced unprecedented growth under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. Among his accomplishments, Ho Chi Minh organized the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930, and, a little over a decade later, founded the Vietnamese Independence League, or Viet Minh. Following Japanese and Vichy French occupation of Vietnam during World War II, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam's independence and established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Unwilling to passively watch its former colony slip from its clutches, France took up arms against Viet Minh forces in what became known as the First Indochina War, a bloody conflict that would go on for the next eight years.

C. Lesson Activities

Sternberg's Triarchic Intelligence

Analytical

Begin by having the students brainstorm about Vietnam, using a concept map to list what they already know about Vietnam. The following major categories/items should be listed on the first level or tier of the concept map: historical, political, environmental, economic, and social; while specific examples of each should be identified on the next level or tier.

Distribute copies of Nguyen Thuong Hien's 1914 account of French colonial rule and mistreatment (**Document 1**). Have students read the excerpt and answer each of the analytical questions. After the students have finished, have them read Ho Chi Minh's 1941 account of the impact French imperialism has had on Vietnam and the Vietnamese people (**Document 2**), answering the questions that follow.

Then have the students complete a concept map for the concept of colonialism. Use the maps and conflicting viewpoints expressed in the two documents as the basis for a classroom discussion that examines the impact French colonialism had on Vietnam in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

Practical

Following the analytical steps in this lesson, distribute copies of “Vietnamese Declaration of Independence” (**Document 3**) and have students refer to the text of the United States of America Declaration of Independence included in their history textbook. Have students respond to the questions that following the document. Then facilitate a classroom discussion comparing and contrasting these two documents, using a large Venn diagram drawn on the chalkboard or white board to outline similarities and differences to organize student responses.

Creative

Assign students the role of President Harry S. Truman’s personal secretary. Have students write a draft response to Ho Chi Minh’s 1946 telegram to the President (**Document 4**). Then have students respond to the questions at the end of the document.

Next, have students read the excerpt from the minutes of the 1951 meeting between President Truman and French Prime Minister Plevin (**Document 5**) concerning the current status of events in Indochina. Have students assume the role of a foreign policy advisor for President Truman. Students should prepare an official response to the situation presented by Prime Minister Plevin. Students should conclude the activity by completing the questions that follow this document.

D. Extension Activities

1. Develop a timeline tracing the events that led to French colonial rule in Indochina during the nineteenth century and another one outlining those events that led to the emergence of Ho Chi Minh as a political voice for the Vietnamese people during the 1940s.
2. Compare the late nineteenth-century era map of Indochina (p. 15) with a current map of Southeast Asia in order to identify and discuss the political changes that have occurred in that region over the past century.
3. Research other nations official declarations of independence from those colonial powers that once staked a claim to their land/country. Compare and contrast the principles and ideals posited in those documents with those found in the “Vietnamese Declaration of Independence” (**Document 3**). Discuss how the background and experiences of the authors of those documents differed from those of Ho Chi Minh.
4. Research the writings and official statements of Franklin D. Roosevelt on French rule in Indochina and compare and contrast his position with that of his successor, Harry S. Truman.

Map of Indochina
1886



Source: Based on: *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 1856. Reprinted by University of Texas Library Online, Perry-Castañeda Map Collection, <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/indo_china_1886.jpg>.

**Vietnamese Account of Mistreatment
at the Hands of French Colonial Officials, 1914**
Nguyen Thuong Hien

The mistreatment of Vietnamese at the hands of the French is vividly captured in this 1914 account by Vietnamese poet Nguyen Thuong Hien of the fate of villagers who pleaded with French colonial officials for lower taxes. This represents but one of many similar accounts by Vietnamese of the mistreatment and indignities they endured during French colonial rule.

In Quang Nam, a province south of our capital, the inhabitants were so heavily taxed that they came to the Resident's Headquarters to ask him to exempt them from the new tax increase. The Resident did not listen to them, but instead ordered his soldiers to charge against them. Among those driven back into the river, three drowned.

The inhabitants' anger was aroused, so they brought the three corpses before the Resident's Headquarters, and for a whole week several thousand people dressed in mourning garments sat on the ground surrounding the three corpses, shouting and wailing continuously.

The Resident reported the matter to the Resident General, who came and inquired of the inhabitants: "Why are you people rebelling?" The inhabitants replied: "We do not have a single stick of iron in our hands, why do you say that we are rebelling? It is only because the taxes are too high and we are not able to pay them that we must voice our opinion together."

The Resident General then said: "If you people are so poor that you cannot pay taxes to the government, then you might as well all be dead." When he finished saying this, the Resident General ordered his French soldiers to fire into the crowd. Only after several hundred persons had been killed, shedding their blood in puddles, did the crowd disperse.

Source: Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants Under the French*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 71-72.

Understanding the Document

1. What factors led to the initial confrontation between the Vietnamese peasants at Quang Nam and French colonial officer—the Resident?
2. How did the Resident respond to the concerns of the Vietnamese peasants?
3. What did the peasants do in response to the actions taken by the Resident?
4. In the end, why does the Resident General elect to use violence to resolve the situation that had developed in Quang Nam? Evaluate whether the actions taken by the French at Quang Nam appear to be common practice or not.

Call for the Revolutionary League for the Independence of Vietnam (Viet Minh) 1941 *Ho Chi Minh*

In response to Japanese occupation of French Indochina and establishment of a puppet French government in Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, founder of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1930, issued the following call to fellow Vietnamese to join his new organization, the Vietnam Independence League, or Viet Minh.

Elders! Prominent personalities! Intellectuals, peasants, workers, traders, and soldiers! Dear compatriots! Since the French were defeated by the Germans, their forces have been completely disintegrated. However, with regard to our people, they continue to plunder us pitilessly, suck all our blood, and carry out a barbarous policy of all-out terrorism and massacre. Concerning their foreign policy, they bow their heads and kneel down, shamelessly cutting our land for Siam; without a single word of protest, they heartlessly offer our interests to Japan. As a result, our people suffer under a double yoke: they serve not only as buffaloes and horses to the French invaders but also as slaves to the Japanese plunderers. Alas! What sin have our people committed to be doomed to such a wretched plight!

Now, the opportunity has come for our liberation. France itself is unable to dominate our country. As to the Japanese, on the one hand they are bogged in China, on the other, they are hamstrung by the British and American forces, and certainly cannot use all their forces to contend with us. If our entire people are united and single-minded, we are certainly able to smash the picked French and Japanese armies.

Some hundreds of years ago, when our country was endangered by the Mongolian invasion, our elders under the Tran dynasty rose up indignantly and called on their sons and daughters throughout the country to rise as one in order to kill the enemy. Finally they saved their people from danger, and their good name will be carried into posterity for all time. The elders and prominent personalities of our country should follow the example set by our forefathers in the glorious task of national salvation.

Rich people, soldiers, workers, peasants, intellectuals, employees, traders, youth and women who warmly love your country! At the present time national liberation is the most important problem. Let us unite together! As one mind and strength we shall overthrow the Japanese and the French and their jackals in order to save people from the situation between boiling water and burning heat.

Dear compatriots! National salvation is the common cause to the whole of our people. Every Vietnamese must take part in it. He who has money will contribute his money, he who has strength will contribute his strength, he who has talent will contribute his talent. I pledge to use all my modest abilities to follow you, and am ready for the last sacrifice.

Revolutionary fighters! The hour has struck! Raise aloft the insurrectionary banner and guide the people throughout the country to overthrow the Japanese and French. The sacred call of the fatherland is resounding in your ears; the blood of our heroic predecessors who sacrificed their lives is stirring in your hearts! The fighting spirit of the people is displayed everywhere before you! Let us rise up quickly! Compatriots throughout the country, rise up quickly! Unite with each other, unify your action to overthrow the Japanese and the French. Victory to Vietnam's Revolution! Victory to the World's Revolution!

Source: Ho Chi Minh, "Call for the Revolutionary League for the Independence of Vietnam," *Ho Chi Minh: Selected Works* (Hanoi: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1960), pp. 151–54.

Understanding the Document

1. According to Ho Chi Minh, what is the “double yoke” which the Vietnamese “suffer under”?
2. What events or circumstances cause Ho Chi Minh to claim that the opportunity for liberation had now arrived?
3. How does Ho Chi Minh use history to support his call for liberation? How effective is this strategy? Explain.
4. Why does Ho Chi Minh, in his call for liberation, include such an extensive list of individuals from various walks of life (e.g., intellectuals, peasants, workers, traders, rich people, youth, women, soldiers)?



Ho Chi Minh, accompanied by Pham Van Dong, arriving in Paris, 1946
New York Times Collection, Paris; National Archives

Vietnamese Declaration of Independence 1945 *Ho Chi Minh*

Following the defeat of Japan in 1945, France attempted to reclaim its former colonies in Indochina. But France faced opposition, which it had been able to suppress prior to the war, from a nationalist political party. Believing he would win the support of the United States and other Western leaders due to the efforts of his Viet Minh forces, who fought a guerilla war against the Japanese and the Vichy French forces, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on 2 September 1945. On that date, Ho Chi Minh unveiled the following document, which borrowed heavily from America's Declaration of Independence. The document was first released at a public gathering of thousands in Hanoi.

“All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

This immortal statement was made in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In a broader sense, this means: All the peoples on the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, to be happy and free.

The Declaration of the French Revolution made in 1791 on the Rights of Man and the Citizen also states: “All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights.”

Those are undeniable truths.

Nevertheless, for more than eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, have violated our Fatherland and oppressed our fellow citizens. They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice.

In the field of politics, they have deprived our people of every democratic liberty.

They have enforced inhuman laws; they have set up three distinct political regimes in the North, the Center, and the South of Vietnam in order to wreck our national unity and prevent our people from being united.

They have built more prisons than schools. They have mercilessly slain our patriots; they have drowned our uprisings in rivers of blood.

They have fettered public opinion; they have practiced obscurantism against our people.

To weaken our race they have forced us to use opium and alcohol.

In the field of economics, they have fleeced us to the backbone, impoverished our people, and devastated our land.

They have robbed us of our rice fields, our mines, our forests, and our raw materials. They have monopolized the issuing of bank-notes and the export trade.

They have invented numerous unjustifiable taxes and reduced our people, especially our peasantry, to a state of extreme poverty.

They have hampered the prospering of our national bourgeoisie; they have mercilessly exploited our workers.

In the autumn of 1940, when the Japanese Fascists violated Indochina's territory to establish new bases in their fight against the Allies, the French imperialists went down on their bended knees and handed over our country to them.

Thus, from that date, our people were subjected to the double yoke of the French and the Japanese. Their sufferings and miseries increased. The result was that from the end of last year to the beginning of this year, from Quang Tri province to the North of Vietnam, more than two million of our fellow citizens died from starvation. On March 9, the French troops were disarmed by the Japanese. The French colonialists either fled or surrendered showing that not only were they incapable of "protecting" us, but that, in the span of five years, they had twice sold our country to the Japanese.

On several occasions before March 9, the Vietminh League urged the French to ally themselves with it against the Japanese. Instead of agreeing to this proposal, the French colonialists so intensified their terrorist activities against the Vietminh members that before fleeing they massacred a great number of our political prisoners detained at Yen Bay and Caobang.

Notwithstanding all this, our fellow-citizens have always manifested toward the French a tolerant and humane attitude. Even after the Japanese putsch of March 1945, the Vietminh League helped many Frenchmen to cross the frontier, rescued some of them from Japanese jails, and protected French lives and property.

From the autumn of 1940, our country had in fact ceased to be a French colony and had become a Japanese possession.

After the Japanese had surrendered to the Allies, our whole people rose to regain our national sovereignty and to found the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

The truth is that we have wrested our independence from the Japanese and not from the French.

The French have fled, the Japanese have capitulated, Emperor Bao Dai has abdicated.

Our people have broken the chains which for nearly a century have fettered them and have won independence for the Fatherland. Our people at the same time have overthrown the monarchic regime that has reigned supreme for dozens of centuries. In its place has been established the present Democratic Republic.

For these reasons, we, members of the Provisional Government, representing the whole Vietnamese people, declare that from now on we break off all relations of a colonial character with France; we repeal all the international obligation that France has so far subscribed to on behalf of Vietnam and we abolish all the special rights the French have unlawfully acquired in our Fatherland.

The whole Vietnamese people, animated by a common purpose, are determined to fight to the bitter end against any attempt by the French colonialists to reconquer their country.

We are convinced that the Allied nations, which at Tehran and San Francisco have acknowledged the principles of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam.

A people who have courageously opposed French domination for more than eight years, a people who have fought side by side with the Allies against the Fascists during these last years, such a people must be free and independent.

For these reasons, we, members of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, solemnly declare to the world that Vietnam has the right to be a free and independent country—and in fact is so already. The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their independence and liberty.

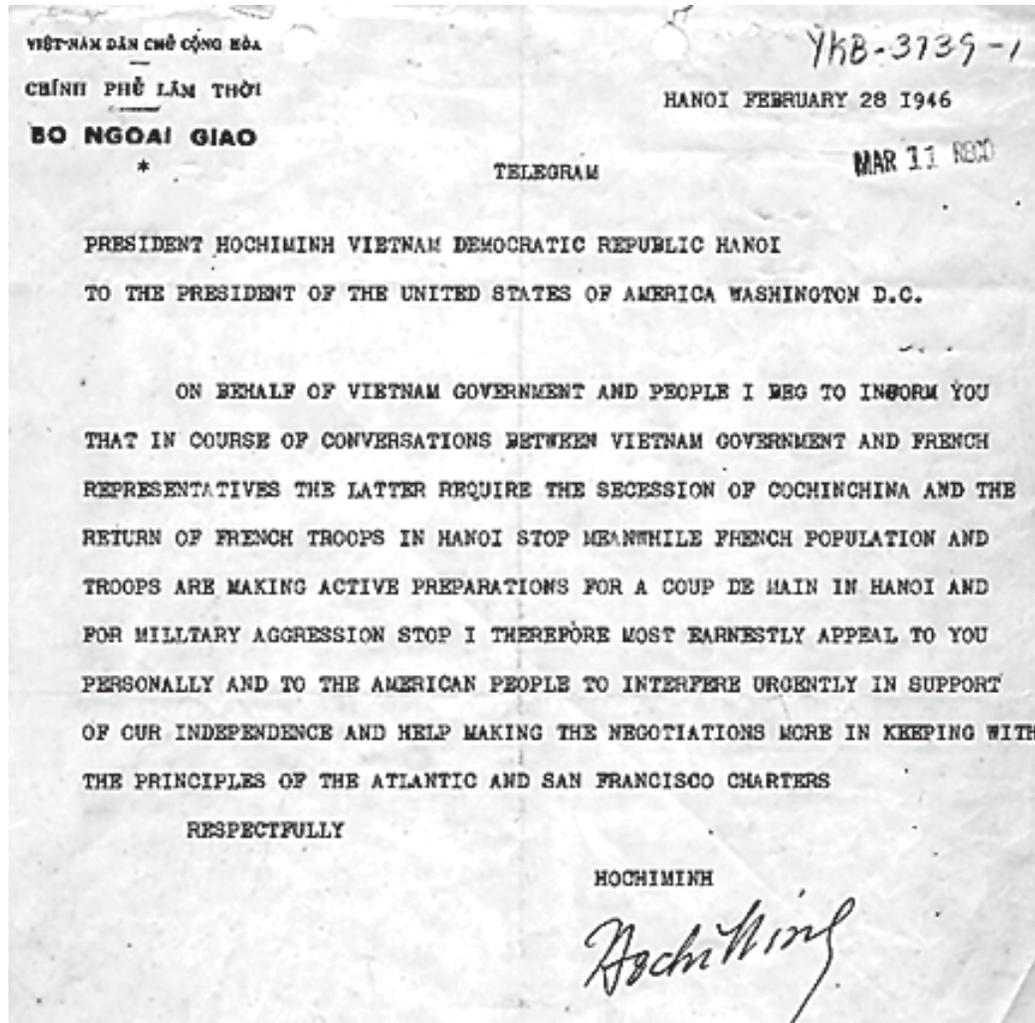
Source: Ho Chi Minh, “Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, September 2, 1945” in *Breaking Our Chains: Documents on the Vietnamese Revolution of August 1945* (Hanoi: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1960), pp. 94–97, and in *Selected Writings* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977), pp. 53–56.

Understanding the Document

1. Why do you believe Ho Chi Minh prefaces the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence with a reference to the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America?
2. Identify and evaluate the specific grievances Ho Chi Minh lodges against the French in the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence.
3. What was the French response to the Vietminh League’s offer to ally with them against the Japanese invaders during World War II? Why do you believe the French responded in this manner?
4. Why does Ho Chi Minh claim that the Vietnamese people have “wrested our independence from the Japanese and not from the French”?
5. In the United States Declaration of Independence it is stated that governments must derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed.” Did the French ever have the consent of the Vietnamese people to establish local governing bodies? Explain.
6. Identify the grievances lodged against the British in the United States Declaration of Independence. Compare and contrast this list of grievances with that found in the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence.
7. Discuss how relevant the following attack against the British, outlined in the United States Declaration of Independence, is to the 1945 situation in Vietnam that served as the backdrop for Ho Chi Minh’s penning of the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence: “They have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.”
8. Did the Vietnamese people have the same “full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do” as the United States claimed in its Declaration of Independence? Explain.

Telegram from Ho Chi Minh to President Harry S. Truman

The following is a telegram from Ho Chi Minh to President Harry S. Truman, dated February 28, 1946, requesting U.S. support for Vietnamese independence.



Source: Office of Strategic Services, "Letter from Ho Chi Minh to President Harry S. Truman" (College Park, MD: National Archives Modern Military Records, February 28, 1946).

Understanding the Document

1. Why does Ho Chi Minh appeal to President Harry S. Truman in this 1946 telegram?
2. What is the nature of the problem in Vietnam as defined by Ho Chi Minh in this telegram?
3. Ho Chi Minh calls on the American people to "interfere urgently" in support of Vietnamese independence. What was the probability that United States government officials would respond favorably? Explain. What could the United States have done, had they wanted to intervene?
4. What is meant by Ho Chi Minh's reference to the Atlantic and San Francisco Charters? Evaluate how well these Charters support Ho Chi Minh's appeal to President Truman.

Minutes of the First Meeting Between President Truman and Prime Minister Plevén 1951

The following is an excerpt from the minutes of the first meeting between President Truman and French Prime Minister René Plevén, in the Cabinet Room of the White House, January 28, 1951, 2:30–5:00 p.m, in which the issue of Indochina served as the major focus for discussion.

The Prime Minister then reviewed briefly recent French history in Indochina. He said that the French had been there for 100 years but that during the past five years they had been having a very difficult time. He pointed out that the French had adopted a policy of complete emancipation of the three Indochinese countries and that this policy had been adopted without any mental reservations. They had been transferring power to local Indochinese authorities as fast as they could. This transfer could have been accomplished peacefully had it not been for the communist-directed revolutionary movement which had been fighting the French since 1946. He made it clear that this war was inspired by the men who now rule in China and Russia. He stressed the fact that the financial cost of this war was great and was constantly increasing. There were 162,000 soldiers in regular formations fighting in Indochina. Of this number, sixty thousand men were from France and the balance largely from North Africa and Indochina. He stressed the high casualty rate in this fighting, citing as an example the recent loss of eight thousand men and officers. He pointed out that the war in Indochina was a real war against communist forces supplied with arms by China rather than military action against guerrillas. France had put at the service of the United Command in Korea fewer troops than it would have liked to have sent there because it was so heavily committed in Indochina. . . .

[Prime Minister Plevén] said that the present situation was an improvement over that of a few months ago. He cited both moral and physical successes and noted that losses in men were large and were very difficult to replace. One way to do this would be to send more troops from France, more equipment, especially planes and to create additional Vietnamese troops. As regards arms, he said that French supplies were inadequate to meet either the needs of French troops in Indochina or the needs of the Vietnamese troops. The financial cost was very heavy and one-third of the present French military budget is now spent in the effort in Indochina. He said that France will be unable to pay for the maintenance of the Vietnamese troops. The question arises, he continued, as to whether additional troops should be sent from metropolitan France if, in five or six months from now, the French position in Indochina would still be about the same. The alternative would be to use these forces and funds to build up the French military position at home. . . .

The Prime Minister pointed out that there was a parallel between Korea and Indochina. The French did not wish to abandon the Indochinese just as we did not wish to abandon the Koreans. He noted that the Vietnamese troops fight ably and well against the Viet Minh troops. . . . He said that like the United States, France did not want to stretch its forces so thin as to create a danger to the military situation in Europe. The only chance to defeat the Viet Minh is to build up the active Indochinese forces.

Source: U.S. Congress, House, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers, 1951*, 82nd Congress, 2nd session, House Document No. 570, Vol. IV (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985), pp. 304–313.

Understanding the Document

1. Evaluate Prime Minister Pleven's claim that France had adopted a policy of complete emancipation of Indochina.
2. According to Prime Minister Pleven, what has been the cost of French involvement in Indochina? What does he identify as the opportunity cost?
3. Why does Prime Minister Pleven claim "the present situation was an improvement over that of a few months ago"? How accurate is his assessment of the situation? Explain.
4. Discuss whether Prime Minister Pleven's comparison of the French situation in Vietnam to that the United States faced in Korea is valid.



President Truman in the Oval Office with the Prime Minister of France, René Pleven, as Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall look on. (01/29/1951)

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Questions?

National Center for History in the Schools, UCLA

Marian McKenna Olivas, Coordinator

Gary B. Nash, Director

6265 Bunche Hall

Los Angeles, CA 90095-1473

(310) 825-4702

FAX: (310) 267-2103

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