It is ironic that Vietnam and the United States engaged in such a long and bitter war. They had collaborated during World War II, and US officials listened as Ho Chi Minh quoted Thomas Jefferson in the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence. Vietnam looked to the United States for moral and material aid as it sought liberation from French colonialism. In the end, however, the growing Cold War made it virtually impossible for American policy-makers to see beyond the communist doctrine espoused by the Vietnamese nationalists’ most influential leaders. Americans viewed the struggle in Vietnam as part of a new global conflict against communism, while the Vietnamese saw the war against the United States as the latest phase of a long fight for independence.

THE RISE OF VIETNAMESE NATIONALISM

Vietnam’s intense nationalism developed through centuries of resisting foreign intrusion. As a kingdom in Southeast Asia’s Red River Valley, Vietnam was conquered by the Chinese in 111 BC. Although they borrowed important aspects of Chinese culture, the Vietnamese retained a fierce sense of their own identity. After numerous unsuccessful rebellions, the Vietnamese finally ended 1,000 years of Chinese domination in 939 AD. Except for a brief return to Chinese rule from 1407 to 1428, they successfully resisted invasions from the Chinese and Mongol empires in the north and from Champa and Cambodia in the south. The Vietnamese themselves expanded southward, conquering Champa by 1471 and finally taking the Mekong River delta from the crumbling Cambodian empire during the early 1700s. Although divided by the competing Trinh and Nguyen families in 1620, Vietnam was reunified within its modern boundaries in 1802.

European expansion provided the next threat to Vietnamese independence. Portuguese contact with Vietnam dates from 1516, and the French followed in 1615. Establishing a military presence in 1858 to support economic exploitation and missionary activity, France ultimately gained control
of the entire country by 1883, dividing it into three regions: Cochinchina (south), Annam (central), and Tonkin (north). Annexing neighboring Cambodia and Laos as well, by 1893 France established the Indochinese Union governed from Hanoi. Although a minority of Vietnam’s traditional mandarin ruling class allied its interests to the French presence, the majority of the population suffered economically and politically under French rule.

Resistance to French colonialism began almost immediately. French political and economic policies prevented the emergence of a strong middle class or liberal political parties, which drove most nationalist movements toward revolutionary activity. While the earliest revolts planned to return power to the mandarin class, twentieth-century rebellions shifted their ideology toward modern Western institutions and technology. The most influential of these early nationalists was Phan Boi Chau, whose Modernization Society fought the French with propaganda, demonstrations, and violence, but declined after World War I. The Constitutionalist Party of the 1920s pursued reforms through collaboration, but its failures encouraged further clandestine efforts. The Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNQDD) formed in 1927 around upper- and middle-class intellectuals. Although they infiltrated native garrisons, a planned military revolt in February 1930 was quickly suppressed. The resulting French reprisals decimated the VNQDD’s leadership and drove its remnants into China.

Ultimately the Indochinese Communist Party developed into the most successful nationalist organization. Ho Chi Minh, born Nguyen Tat Thanh and previously known as Nguyen Ai Quoc, emerged as the most revered leader in Vietnam. As a seaman Ho left Vietnam in 1911 and would not return until 30 years later. He traveled the world before moving to Paris at the end of World War I, where he became active in the sizeable Vietnamese community. His appeal to the postwar Versailles peace conference for national self-determination was ignored by the major powers, but earned him a leading role in the Vietnamese nationalist movement. Disappointed at the West’s response and influenced by the writings of Vladimir Lenin, Ho joined the French Communist Party as a means of working toward Vietnam’s eventual independence. He moved to Moscow in 1923 for study, then proceeded to China the following year to build a revolutionary movement for Indochina. In February 1930, Ho was among the founders of the Vietnamese Communist Party, later renamed the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). The party supported peasant revolts in the fall of 1930, but the French again suppressed the rebellion by the following spring. The ICP suffered serious losses and its surviving leaders scattered beyond Vietnam’s borders. By the mid-1930s, however, the ICP regained its position as an important nationalist organization, and attempted to participate in a broad national front against the French.

The events of World War II had a dramatic impact on the course of Vietnamese history. France, having already surrendered to Germany in June
1940, conceded control over Indochina to Japanese expansion later that year, though Japan permitted the French political administration to remain in place. Communist efforts to exploit the situation through an uprising in southern Vietnam failed, and the French executed several key leaders. ICP leaders in the north withdrew to the mountains in the face of Japanese advances. From southern China, Ho Chi Minh helped establish a united front organization in which the ICP played the dominant, though secret, role. The Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh, more commonly called the *Vietminh, formed in May 1941 and appealed to both moderates and radicals through its emphasis on both national independence and social reform.

Fearing that France, now liberated from German control, might undermine their position, the Japanese overthrew the French colonial structure in March 1945 and established a collaborative Vietnamese government under Emperor Bao Dai. The collapse of the French system resulted in a vacuum of authority, especially in rural areas, which allowed the Vietminh to establish control of six northern provinces. A devastating famine further eroded government authority, and when the Japanese suddenly surrendered in August, the Vietminh called for a general uprising to create an independent state. During this August Revolution, the Vietminh met little opposition in taking power throughout much of the northern and central provinces, and forced Bao Dai to abdicate from his palace in Hue. Having prevailed in much of the country, on 2 September before a Hanoi crowd of a half-million people, Ho Chi Minh called for allied recognition of the newly proclaimed Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) [Doc. 4].

Although the Vietminh had made impressive gains, they faced challenges to their legitimacy. Effective competition from other nationalist organizations and the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects limited their influence in Cochinchina. Just as importantly, the allies designated China and Great Britain to accept the Japanese surrender in northern and southern Indochina respectively, and to occupy the region until stable government had been restored. Their arrival, combined with their governments’ recognition of French claims, undermined Vietminh authority. When British troops arrived in Saigon that September, they joined with French forces to drive armed Vietnamese out of the city. As the broadly based Committee of the South opened a guerrilla war against the French in the south, France prepared to reassert its authority in the north as well.

The United States responded to Vietnamese efforts inconsistently. President Franklin Roosevelt initially opposed France’s reassertion of control after the war, preferring a trusteeship followed by independence. During 1945, the Vietminh provided intelligence to the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and received both weapons and training in return. Ho sought US support for his political goals, but Washington ignored his appeals. By the end of the war President Harry Truman and other American officials were
more concerned with restoring French power as an ally against the Soviet Union and opposed Ho’s communist beliefs.

THE FIRST INDOCHINA WAR

Faced with a rising tide of Vietnamese nationalism, France’s leading representative in Vietnam, Admiral Georges Thierry d’Argenlieu, initiated a military campaign against the Vietminh in October 1945. By February 1946 he re-established control of southern Vietnam, while at the same time negotiating political differences with the Vietnamese.

In the face of French military actions, Ho Chi Minh remained flexible in pursuing his political goals. Though criticized by Vietminh militants, in 1946 he dissolved the ICP and integrated smaller nationalist parties into a National Assembly governing the north. French–Vietminh negotiations in Hanoi produced a preliminary agreement on 6 March 1946 that recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a free state within the French Union, and called for referendums in Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin to resolve their permanent political status. Negotiations continued while Ho traveled to Paris to discuss implementing the March Agreement, but on 1 June d’Argenlieu unilaterally declared Cochinchina an autonomous republic. As events in Vietnam moved forward without official sanction from the French government, Ho’s negotiations in Paris ended with political issues left unresolved. He returned to Hanoi in October where, despite continued criticism from militants, the National Assembly elected him president of the DRV.

Without strong direction from Paris, France’s Indochina policy fell largely to officials in Vietnam and drifted toward war. Skirmishing in the North erupted into war when a French ship bombarded Haiphong in November, killing nearly 6,000 Vietnamese. Fighting spread, and by the end of the year French forces controlled Hanoi. The United States offered mediation, but viewed the communist-dominated Vietminh as an unacceptable replacement for French colonialism. The State Department’s inability to see beyond the Cold War was evident in a 1948 report that concluded ‘we cannot afford to assume that Ho is anything but Moscow-directed’ (Hess, 1987: 317).

Concerns about the costs and length of an Indochina war led France to search for an alternative solution. Although the French controlled the major cities, the Vietminh held much of rural northern and central Vietnam, and their influence was increasing. Hoping to end the war and undermine the Vietminh, French officials tried to entice Bao Dai to return as head of a nationalist government that could allow continued French control. Bao Dai ultimately accepted the Elysée Agreements on 8 March 1949, which recognized Vietnamese unification and granted limited independence within the French Union. By accepting what was essentially the French position, Bao Dai drew criticism from the Vietminh and other nationalists.
American interest in Vietnam increased as the Cold War intensified. By 1947 US leaders perceived that the Soviets presented a global threat to national security. Their response was the “containment policy, initially applied to Europe, but later expanded to other parts of the world. The growing conflict in Vietnam, with its communist component, made it part of the Cold War struggle. Although publicly supporting France’s war to block the Vietminh and communist expansion, knowledgeable Americans privately remained doubtful about the chances of France or Bao Dai to undermine support for Ho Chi Minh’s government.

The United States nevertheless escalated its commitment to the French in Vietnam. The 1949 communist victory in China’s civil war heightened American fears of the Vietminh. The United States applied less pressure to the French for Vietnamese independence and formally recognized Bao Dai’s government in February 1950 as the only alternative to Ho Chi Minh. The outbreak of the Korean War in August further hardened America’s Cold War position. These events led to a significant commitment to military spending for Indochina and provided greater urgency for military involvement in Vietnam. They also solidified American policy-makers’ perceptions of the French–Vietminh war as part of a communist effort to grab the entire region. Some officials applied the term “domino theory to the view that South Vietnam’s fall would quickly lead to communist domination of all Southeast Asia. The possibility of that outcome in Vietnam outweighed US concerns about supporting French colonialism.

During 1950 the fighting in Vietnam intensified, and Vietminh forces scored several key victories in northern Vietnam. The following year French prospects improved with the arrival of American aid and General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny. The Vietminh likewise benefited from aid and training from China, though Chinese troops did not enter the war in Vietnam as they had in Korea. De Lattre’s aggressive campaign stopped a Vietminh offensive in Tonkin, but his death in January 1952 drained much of France’s remaining enthusiasm for the war. The French sought greater contributions from the British and the Americans, but the latter insisted they would not contribute ground troops to another Asian land war.

The new French military commander, General Henri Navarre, hoped to draw the Vietminh into a large conventional battle and win a decisive victory. Dienbienphu in northwestern Vietnam became the site of that battle. The French occupied the area to prevent Vietnamese infiltration into Laos, and established an airfield and strong defensive positions. General Vo Nguyen Giap, the Vietminh’s leading military strategist, surrounded the 13,000 French troops with 50,000 men. Just as important, he shocked the French by hauling heavy artillery up the surrounding mountains. The assault began on 13 March. As the French position grew more precarious, US officials debated France’s request to provide air attacks. Despite agreement on Indochina’s importance
to American interests, there was no consensus on the appropriate action. On 4 April President Dwight Eisenhower agreed to intervention only if certain preconditions were met: action by an international coalition, French consent to Vietnamese independence, and congressional approval. When these conditions did not materialize, Eisenhower refused to act, and France’s requests for outside help went unfulfilled. Dienbienphu fell to the Vietminh on 7 May 1954.

The significance of the Vietminh victory at Dienbienphu was magnified by the simultaneous negotiations at the Conference on Far Eastern Problems, which opened in Geneva, Switzerland, on 26 April. The Geneva Conference drew participants from Great Britain, the Soviet Union, France, China, the DRV, Cambodia, and Laos. The United States and representatives from Bao Dai’s State of Vietnam attended primarily as observers. Designed to find a solution to the political situation in Indochina, participants turned to Indochinese issues on 8 May, and each had their own objectives and expectations. The DRV assumed its victory at Dienbienphu would confer control over all Vietnam, but its representatives achieved significantly less than they expected. America’s detached yet menacing presence at Geneva subtly hinted that, should the Vietminh emerge in control, it might intervene militarily, an outcome that none of the other major powers wanted. Anticipating France’s withdrawal, the United States had already begun planning to defend those parts of Indochina not controlled by the Vietminh from communist expansion. The French used the possibility of US involvement as diplomatic leverage, hoping to retain some influence after their military departure. The Soviet Union had little interest in Indochina at the time and, because the Soviets hoped France would reject a common European defense force, supported limited French goals. Along with the Soviets, the British also favored a political solution. The Chinese, already drained by the Korean War, worried that French war weariness and impatience with Bao Dai’s continued demands for independence might persuade them to turn Indochina over to the United States. China feared escalation in Vietnam, but especially any that involved the United States. Having exhausted themselves in the effort at Dienbienphu, the Vietminh felt unable to improve their position without support and were unwilling to risk American intervention. With its communist allies more concerned with their own interests, the DRV felt pressured to temporarily abandon Laos and Cambodia, and to accept the provisional separation of their country.

Participants signed a series of agreements on 21 July that established a cease-fire and temporarily divided Vietnam with a demilitarized zone (DMZ) along the seventeenth parallel. French forces would withdraw into the South while the Vietminh regrouped in the North. An international commission would monitor the accords and supervise national elections to reunify the country in 1956 [Doc. S]. DRV leaders were frustrated by their less than
complete success, but the Chinese and Soviets were more interested in improved relations with the Western powers than in pressing Vietnamese communist goals. The United States did not sign these Geneva Accords to avoid formally recognizing the Chinese government, but agreed to respect them.

THE UNITED STATES AND NGO DINH DIEM

Following the Geneva Conference, American leaders moved to replace France as the dominant foreign power in Indochina. Concerned that unifying elections would bring Ho Chi Minh to power throughout Vietnam, the United States sought to bypass the Geneva Accords by encouraging a permanent political division that would create a non-communist state in southern Vietnam. The United States also established the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) combining Asian and European allies to counter communist influence in the region, though Vietnam itself was not a member. To direct US assistance in Vietnam the Americans created a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG). The French still hoped to preserve some influence in the South despite their withdrawal, and often clashed with the Americans over policy as long as they retained authority there. Ho Chi Minh established a temporary government in the North, and Bao Dai appointed Ngo Dinh Diem as Prime Minister of the State of Vietnam in June 1954. Nearly one million Vietnamese, largely Catholic, migrated from North to South during the cease-fire, ten times the number moving North. The DRV’s influence remained strong in the Mekong delta, however, despite the temporary retrenchment of forces.

Diem faced serious problems in establishing a stable government in the South. After Geneva, the communists focused on building a new government in the North, but they retained control over several southern regions. Diem also faced competition from the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, religious sects which operated in the Saigon region. Each exercised local political control and possessed armed forces numbering in the thousands. The Binh Xuyen criminal organization, with a militia of 2,500, controlled vice in the Cholon district of Saigon. Moreover, Diem, a Catholic in a predominantly Buddhist society, headed a narrowly-based government which featured several members of his own family and ignored representatives from the sects. Noting this limited support and animosity from the French, who still retained 160,000 troops in southern Vietnam, some American officials were skeptical of Diem’s chances. As the US government debated withdrawing its support for Diem, he moved against the sects in May 1955 and within days held the upper hand. The United States renewed its commitment to Diem, but despite the growing amount of aid he became even more stubborn in resisting American demands for reform.

Diem’s victory over the sects and the departure of the last French troops in 1955 doomed the national elections promised at Geneva. Diem further
consolidated his power through a rigged referendum in October 1955 that allowed him to replace Bao Dai as head of state and formally dismantle the monarchy with the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). Diem was not interested in an election against Ho Chi Minh, and prominent Americans encouraged him to avoid such a contest.

The Hanoi government soon recognized that its hopes of peaceful reunification would be delayed. Even its benefactor, the Soviet Union, generated little enthusiasm for pressing the Geneva Accords. Hanoi’s Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong, prophetically told one visitor, ‘You know as well as I do that there won’t be elections’ (Duiker, 1981: 172).

Between mid-1954 and the end of 1960, the United States increased its efforts to limit communist influence in Vietnam. American officials hoped to create a viable and permanently separate non-communist state in the South. In a process it called ‘nation building,’ the United States expanded its aid to Diem’s government, encouraged economic development, urged social and political reform, and sent advisors for projects such as training a police force. Despite reservations, the United States pinned its hopes on Diem as a nationalist alternative to Ho.

To solidify his power, Diem used armed forces to uproot the Vietminh remnants in the South, launching a ‘Denounce the Communists’ campaign in 1954. His aggressive actions threatened Ho Chi Minh’s plans for reunification. Ho had hoped to avoid war and establish a political option to Diem in the South while consolidating his power in the North. Southern communists, supported in Hanoi’s Politburo by Le Duan, advocated military action against Diem as early as 1956, but the party leadership in Hanoi favored maintaining a political emphasis. Anxious over Diem’s growing strength, however, the southerners organized more aggressively against the Saigon regime. Fighting between Saigon’s Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and southern insurgents broke out in 1957 when Diem sent troops into communist strongholds. Southern party membership dropped from 5,000 to 1,700 that year, as ARVN killed 2,000 and arrested 65,000 suspected communists by the end of 1957.

Weakened by these attacks, the communist insurgents, now referred to by Diem as the Viet Cong, retaliated with assassinations, killing several hundred local officials of the Saigon government. Skirmishes between small armed units took place in 1958. Le Duan urged a combination of military and political struggle in 1959, and though Ho Chi Minh still hoped Diem’s government might fall without force, party leaders in Hanoi accepted the southerners’ need to defend themselves more aggressively. The first organized shipments of personnel and supplies from North to South began in 1959. Having failed to reach a political solution, Diem’s actions had stimulated a civil war. Casualties mounted into thousands on both sides and by 1960 the insurgency threatened Diem’s government.
Recognizing the need to deprive the insurgents of access to the resources of the general population, Diem tried to create allegiance through building "agrovilles. These villages, fortified against infiltration, moved hundreds of families from their ancestral homes to rural areas more isolated from communist influence. Peasants generally disliked the program and Diem suspended it in late 1960. Policies like this, combined with Diem’s tight family-controlled government, increasingly alienated much of the population. An attempted coup took place in November 1960, but Diem quickly re-established control. American advisors’ counsel for political and economic reform went largely unheeded.

On 20 December 1960 communists joined with other disaffected groups in forming the National Liberation Front (NLF) to coordinate political matters in the South. Though dominated by communists, the NLF reflected broad support and emphasized national independence over social revolution. Its implementation of land reforms attracted rural support, and while social pressures and fear pushed some into service, most NLF members joined voluntarily. Hanoi directed the NLF and was now clearly committed to reuniting the country by force if necessary. The war for independence and unification had been delayed by the Geneva Conference, but not ended. As the military component of the struggle, the southern insurgents organized themselves into the People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) early in 1961.

The new American president, John Kennedy, expanded the US commitment to Vietnam, viewing the conflict, as did Eisenhower, as communist aggression within the context of the Cold War. A victory by the Vietnamese communists would only encourage, they believed, revolutionary movements elsewhere in the world, and meant an advantage for the Soviets and Chinese. Kennedy’s initial Indochina crisis, however, occurred in Laos, where competing factions had lapsed into civil war by 1959. The United States and Soviet Union supplied the opposing forces, but Kennedy temporarily solved his inherited problem when another Geneva meeting re-established a neutral regime in Laos.

In Vietnam, American commitment to Diem increased even as his popular support declined. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reports and a Kennedy task force in 1961 both indicated that Diem’s political position was deteriorating. With the situation in Saigon reaching a crisis, Kennedy responded by reaffirming US goals of preventing communist victory in Vietnam. Despite public optimism on the part of some American officials, British, French, and Canadian diplomats found American confidence of an early military victory and popular support for Diem misplaced. Despite its reservations, however, the Kennedy administration found the potential alternative of a communist victory intolerable.

Kennedy shifted emphasis toward counterinsurgency. Army Special Forces, called Green Berets, trained the ARVN in guerrilla warfare, while the
CIA created a local defense program called the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDGs). Most CIDGs were recruited from mountain tribes, known collectively as *montagnards, to provide security and surveillance in the highlands. The United States also developed *strategic hamlets, villages surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by military forces, to isolate NLF guerrillas from potential recruits and other resources. Similar to the earlier agrovilles, the strategic hamlet program began in 1962 and produced nearly 3,000 fortified villages by the end of the year. American officials argued over the best strategy to defeat the guerrillas, but agreed that without more help from the United States the communists would seize control of the South.

On 15 October 1961 Kennedy sent General Maxwell Taylor to Vietnam to evaluate the potential impact of sending US combat troops into Vietnam. Taylor reported that a crisis existed, but one that could be turned around by increasing American military advisors rather than sending ground troops. Kennedy’s leading advisors endorsed Taylor’s recommendations, but there was no consensus on whether Diem could implement the social and political reforms that they felt were essential to achieve US goals. On 22 November Kennedy promised an increased effort to block Saigon’s fall, agreeing to provide aircraft, intelligence equipment, and further training for ARVN, as well as additional economic aid.

Diem’s refusal to delegate authority and broaden his support by opening up the government to other political factions had long frustrated his American advisors. With family members holding several influential positions, and as part of a Catholic minority, Diem failed to achieve a mass following. Especially troublesome was Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, who headed South Vietnam’s secret police and acted as Diem’s closest advisor. The additional US aid in 1961 and the arrival in February 1962 of General Paul Harkins as head of the newly formed Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) did nothing to change things. MACV coordinated all US military activity in Vietnam and displaced the older Military Assistance Advisory Group. ARVN’s hesitancy in attacking the PLAF hindered US war planners, as Diem continued to resist military efforts that might produce significant casualties. One controversial American recommendation was to use herbicides in several areas of the South to remove the cover and food available in the jungle to the PLAF. Several high-ranking Americans claimed progress by the fall of 1962, though advisors like Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann believed Saigon’s position continued to erode. United States officials in Saigon estimated in September that Diem’s government controlled 49 percent of the South, with the NLF holding nine percent and the rest still being contested. Several Americans doubted the success of the strategic hamlet program. The number of hamlets had expanded more rapidly than ARVN’s ability to protect them; they faced NLF infiltration, peasants disliked the control of their lives, and they suffered from Saigon’s inefficiency and corruption.
The southern insurgency grew out of local conditions, but Hanoi provided much of its direction. The Hanoi government viewed Vietnam as a single country and one people temporarily divided by foreign intrusion. Although military confrontations became more frequent, both Hanoi and the NLF continued to emphasize the political struggle for several reasons. They wanted to maintain a low-level conflict to prevent direct US intervention, they still believed that the Saigon government would collapse on its own, and both the Chinese and Soviets wanted to avoid a major military conflict in Southeast Asia.

The Saigon government’s military situation worsened during 1963. American officials intensified their efforts to have Diem make changes they believed would strengthen his forces, but with no more success than before as popular discontent with Diem continued. One of the first major battles of the war took place on 2 January at Ap Bac, 35 miles from Saigon. Though heavily outnumbered and lacking the artillery and air power of Diem’s troops, a PLAF battalion mauled Saigon’s forces. ARVN again refused to take the battle’s initiative and the regional commander refused to send reinforcements. American newspaper reports of this defeat refuted the optimistic stories that typically came from the Saigon government and American military officials. John Paul Vann’s battle report savaged ARVN’s performance, but Saigon commanders filed their own versions and claimed victory.

President Kennedy sent Army Chief of Staff General Earle Wheeler and Marine Major General Victor Krulak to investigate. They criticized the press, complimented Diem’s efforts, and returned with a very positive outlook. Other US officials, however, believed that only a strongly nationalistic, non-communist government that could invigorate the rural Buddhist population had a chance to overcome the NLF. They no longer believed that Diem would ever become that leader. Hanoi was gaining the political edge, though Saigon still held a military advantage. Of 3,700 strategic hamlets, the NLF had destroyed 2,600, and by mid-1963 they controlled a significant portion of South Vietnam’s villages and population. By the end of the year the NLF was preparing for an anticipated general offensive and uprising.

Diem’s relations with the Buddhist majority in southern Vietnam had been contentious for years, and the conflict finally broke out in open revolt in the summer of 1963. On 8 May government troops in Hue attacked Buddhist demonstrators and killed several people. Buddhist leaders demanded that the government end its repressive measures against them, but Diem refused to acknowledge the crisis even as demonstrations continued. On 11 June Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc created an international sensation when he burned himself to death in protest at a Saigon intersection. Press coverage spread photos of the man in flames around the world, and others followed his example. The situation grew worse when Diem’s sister-in-law castigated the tragedy as Buddhist ‘barbecues.’ Diem imposed martial law on 21 August, and raids on
Buddhist pagodas by Nhu’s police forces resulted in numerous arrests and several deaths. The Buddhist crisis ended American hopes that Diem would ever establish the political stability essential for success against the NLF.

When Henry Cabot Lodge took over as US ambassador to Vietnam on 22 August, ARVN generals informed him of a planned coup against Diem. Though they later backed off, the threat remained. By the end of August Washington officials were looking for a government in Saigon that would aggressively pursue the war. Kennedy made several public pronouncements indicating his dissatisfaction with Diem and Nhu. Rumors surfaced that they were willing to make a deal with North Vietnam in order to retain power. A delegation headed by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Maxwell Taylor returned in early October with optimism about military possibilities, but with a negative assessment of Diem’s political stability. Their evaluation was perceptive as ARVN generals initiated a coup on 1 November and executed both Diem and Nhu the following morning. The Americans had approved of the coup, but were shocked by the murders, and struggled to adapt to the new situation.

Diem’s removal also brought renewed debate in Hanoi over how to proceed. Ideological divisions were apparent as challenges from General Secretary Le Duan, General Nguyen Chi Thanh, and Le Duc Tho often prevailed against entrenched decision-makers Vo Nguyen Giap, Pham Van Dong, and Ho Chi Minh. The Vietnamese communist leadership decided that southerners should escalate their military and political activity, even though this could antagonize both their Soviet allies and the United States. Ho had often provided the moderate voice in deliberations, but his political rivals no longer felt it necessary to defer to him. During the last decade of his life Ho Chi Minh remained the international face of the Vietnamese revolution, continued as Party chairman, and acted as the nation’s senior diplomat and foreign policy advisor. His dominance in Party counsels, however, was over, and his role grew increasingly ceremonial until his death in 1969.

Americans soon encountered an unexpected tragedy that made the challenges of Vietnam even more complicated. President Kennedy was himself the victim of assassination on 22 November 1963. He left to Lyndon Johnson a US military force in Vietnam of 16,000 and a commitment to the growing Vietnamese war that was not going well. He avoided, as had Eisenhower before him, making the ultimate decision to leave or commit combat troops. Johnson would not have that luxury.

JOHNSON’S DECISIONS FOR WAR

United States leaders remained committed to Vietnam as a battle in the Cold War. Maintaining their faith in the domino theory, they believed the loss of South Vietnam would threaten other states in the region and endanger
America’s standing in the world. President Johnson, as had Kennedy before him, also felt that failure in Vietnam would have serious political repercussions from Republicans who had used Democratic presidents in the past as scapegoats for communist advances in Asia. Though Johnson remained committed to Kennedy’s policy, he found it necessary to increase US involvement in order to preserve the Saigon regime. He came to realize that there were no easy options. As historian Robert Schulzinger indicates, ‘doing more, doing less, or doing the same all entailed enormous risks’ (Schulzinger, 1997: 125).

General Duong Van Minh served as the new South Vietnamese chief of state, but he proved ineffective in stabilizing the government or fighting the communists. By the end of 1963, Saigon held a substantial edge in manpower and weaponry. The ARVN contained 215,000 troops, plus 83,000 in the civil guard and more than 200,000 irregular forces. The CIA estimated PLAF strength at below 25,000, plus 60–80,000 irregulars. Despite this advantage and control of the air, Saigon had not made appreciable gains against the guerrillas. The PLAF increased their attacks and extended their control of areas around Saigon, damaging roads, blocking communication, and collecting taxes. Conditions in the Mekong delta region in particular deteriorated after the coup. US officials noted a decline in military efforts and programs like the strategic hamlets.

Johnson received conflicting reports about the state of the South Vietnamese government. Few Washington officials felt confident about the new regime. Secretary McNamara and CIA Director John McCone both issued pessimistic assessments by the end of the year, with McNamara reporting that without a dramatic change in Saigon’s actions, the United States might face a communist victory within three months. Senator Mike Mansfield was among the rare presidential advisors to suggest a change of policy, recommending that a neutral government in Vietnam offered the best hope of avoiding a potentially massive United States commitment. National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and McNamara all rejected that view. By January 1964 Johnson’s leading military advisors believed that the deteriorated conditions in South Vietnam required a major American effort against North Vietnam.

While US officials discussed how they might influence events, the Vietnamese were making changes themselves. One of Saigon’s politically ambitious corps commanders, General Nguyen Khanh, led a coup against the government on 29 January 1964. Reactions in both South Vietnam and the United States were mixed, but Washington had already become disenchanted with Minh’s weak efforts and hoped Khanh would pursue the war with greater energy. With the proliferation of coups, however, each new regime had to protect itself against political rivals, which drained resources away from fighting the communists.
Despite its early optimism that Khanh would prosecute the war more aggressively, American intelligence indicated continued progress for communist insurgents. At American urging, Khanh had established a two-stage plan for winning the war, first to expand his secure areas near Saigon and into the southern delta, then to attack and destroy enemy bases. For a conclusive victory, however, US officials, including President Johnson, believed America had to apply military pressure directly against North Vietnam. When the president ordered plans for possible action against the North, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) recommended covert US attacks against North Vietnamese targets from the air and pressing Saigon to conduct cross-border attacks. Johnson felt that political realities during an election campaign made such moves impractical. The CIA doubted that attacks on the North would improve the situation and could produce serious negative repercussions.

South Vietnam’s situation had declined since Diem’s death. The National Liberation Front now controlled between 30 and 40 percent of the South and the legitimacy of the Saigon regime had severely eroded. The strategic hamlet program was in disarray, Khanh lacked political skills and failed to take charge of the military. McNamara’s visit to Vietnam in March persuaded him that South Vietnam faced a potential collapse. He recommended maintaining an advisory role while expanding the present policy. The United States should build up southern morale by demonstrating its long-term commitment, provide training and equipment so that South Vietnam could increase its armed forces by 50,000 troops, and use American air patrols to block infiltration from Cambodia and Laos. Having rejected withdrawal, neutralization, and attacks against the North, Johnson adopted McNamara’s suggestion for its flexibility and because it allowed further delay before having to make more decisive decisions.

The Vietnam debate continued throughout the spring and summer of 1964. Communist military strength had reached the point where they could stand against Saigon forces rather than rely exclusively on guerrilla tactics, but they could not yet hold areas indefinitely against ARVN pressure. US officials debated the effectiveness of air attacks against North Vietnam without reaching a consensus. Johnson’s options were not attractive. His advisors wanted escalation but could not guarantee success, while Congress wanted victory at a low cost. ‘Even with increased U.S. aid,’ Johnson remarked, ‘the prospect in South Vietnam is not bright’ (Schulzinger, 1997: 144). A May 1964 CIA report reaffirmed Saigon’s precarious hold on the population, with the NLF’s presence undercutting southern morale. It predicted that if the erosion of Saigon’s position did not stop by the end of 1964, ‘the anti-Communist position in South Vietnam is likely to become untenable’ (Schulzinger, 1997: 144). Johnson wanted to avoid communist victory, yet feared a dramatic US escalation would also bring a domestic backlash. The failure of Khanh and his predecessors to fight the war more aggressively
produced anger and frustration among some American advisors. The paradox of Americans becoming more influential in Vietnamese life for the purpose of creating an independent state was apparent. They wanted greater control, but believed that for appearances it would be better if Saigon invited them to take over.

For several months the Johnson administration considered asking Congress for a resolution giving the president authority to use military force in Vietnam. Johnson worried about the timing, not wanting to disrupt his domestic legislative agenda or draw attention to the war during the election campaign. He also faced critics who opposed military escalation. Finding alternatives to attacking the North as a means of improving Saigon’s situation proved difficult. At a 10 June meeting, advisors argued that a resolution would boost South Vietnamese morale and indicate to both northerners and southerners America’s commitment to preserving southern independence. A divided congressional vote would be politically dangerous, so they agreed to wait until North Vietnamese action against the South was clear.

The opportunity for action came within a matter of weeks. American naval vessels had been conducting *DeSoto missions, electronic intelligence-gathering patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin off North Vietnam. These often took place in conjunction with covert raids by South Vietnamese commandos into North Vietnam, known as *OPLAN 34A actions. On 2 August North Vietnamese boats attacked the American destroyer *Maddox, and two days later both the *Maddox and the *C. Turner Joy reported being under attack during a night-time storm. Later evidence indicates that this second attack probably did not occur. After hearing reports of the alleged 4 August encounter, Johnson ordered US air strikes against North Vietnamese patrol boat bases and an oil storage facility. This encounter provided the desired provocation for introducing a resolution to Congress. McNamara’s misleading testimony to the legislators and Rusk’s briefing of congressional leaders in the White House persuaded Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on 7 August [Doc. 6]. Only two Senators voted against it.

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution effectively blunted criticism of Johnson’s Vietnam policy during the presidential election campaign. Barry Goldwater, his conservative Republican opponent, had earlier advocated military escalation, and Johnson managed to portray himself as the candidate of restraint. ‘We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home,’ he told audiences, ‘to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves’ (Public Papers, 1965: 155). Having shown his willingness to use force if provoked, Johnson indicated his desire to limit the American commitment. These actions, however, did little to improve the situation for Khanh’s government, and despite his best efforts Johnson had not solved the basic problem left to him by Eisenhower and Kennedy.