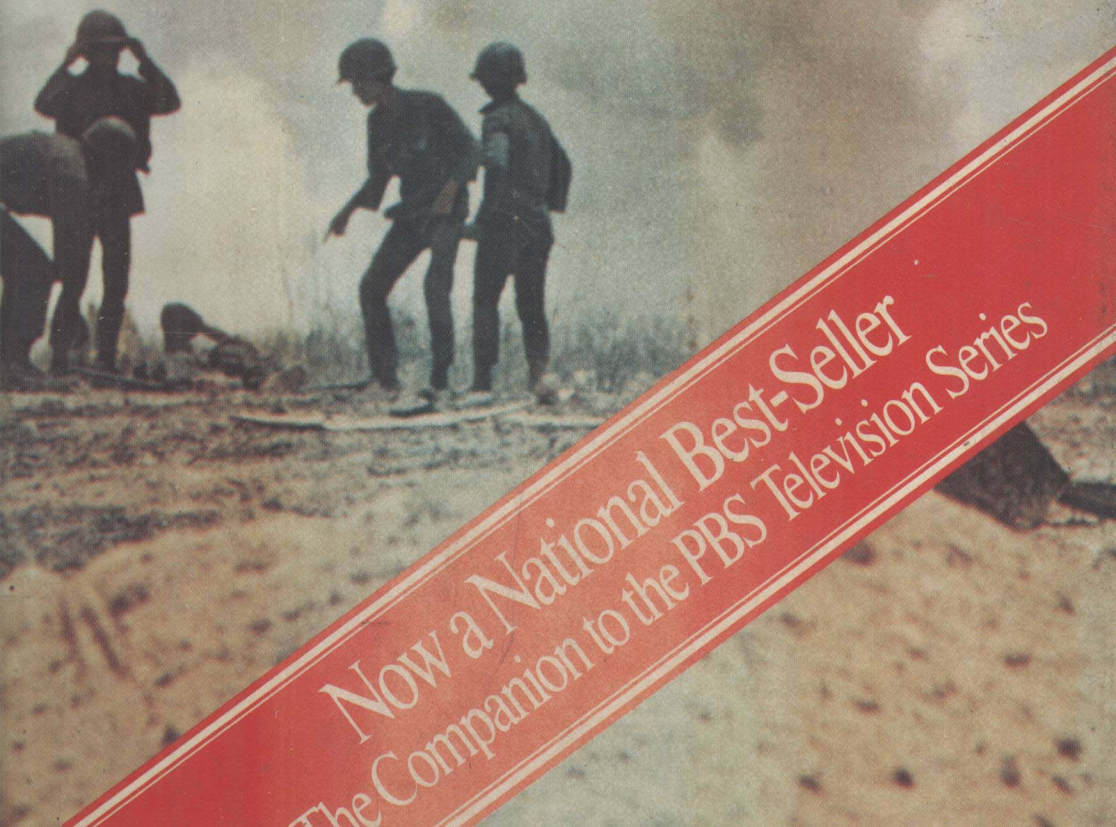


Stanley Karnow

# VIETNAM

## A History

The First Complete Account  
of Vietnam at War



Now a National Best-Seller  
The Companion to the PBS Television Series

# Vietnam

A History

Stanley Karnow



The Viking Press      New York

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For Annette, who was there at the beginning.

*They made a wasteland and called it peace.*

—Tacitus

# Preface

**T**he roots of this book reach back to the early 1950s in Paris, where I began my professional career as a journalist. France, supported by the United States, was then fighting to retain its hold in Indochina against the Vietminh, the Communist-led nationalist movement there. As I reported on the French end of the war, I soon became acquainted with the names and places of Vietnam from a distance, but I scarcely imagined that they were to be part of my own experience. Then, in 1959, I was assigned to cover eastern Asia; the region that included Vietnam became my beat for more than two decades thereafter. I visited Vietnam most recently in 1981 for seven weeks, the longest period permitted an American correspondent since the Communists gained control of the entire country in 1975.

Many excellent books have been written on Vietnam, most of them focusing on specific episodes of the American war there or spans of time in its recent history. Given my own background, I considered that I might possess the perspective to produce a panoramic account that, while concentrating primarily on the American intervention, also describes and analyzes at some length the origins of the contemporary conflict. For history is a seamless series of causes and effects, the past, present, and future inexorable. The involvement of the United States in its longest—and undeclared—war did not start when the first American combat battalions splashed ashore at Danang in March 1965. Nor did the Vietnamese struggle against foreign intrusion start with the resistance against French colonial domination. The Southeast Asian peninsula, which the French labeled Indochina, and which encompasses Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, has been a battlefield for centuries—as it still is today.

A journalist looking back learns—or ought to learn—that his dispatches from the field were temporal and limited, as befits the nature of his occupation. That is not to say, however, that his observations were necessarily superficial. The Vietnam war was a human tragedy, and I

cannot minimize the impact on my mind of having witnessed the ordeal of soldiers and civilians, whatever their allegiance, who lived and died in the conflict. But the role of the historian is to paint a broader canvas, one which also depicts and explains the motives and debates that go into the formulation of policies. It was difficult during the war to penetrate the wall of secrecy behind which decisions were made. Within recent years, however, thousands of confidential documents have been declassified. American and South Vietnamese officials who participated in the process have been receptive to interviews. The Communists in Vietnam in 1981, I discovered, are far more candid than they were at the time of their struggle—as are Soviet and Chinese sources. Nevertheless, memories are selective, and I have approached all recollections with caution.

I undertook this book with no cause to plead. In some instances, fresh evidence compelled me to change or modify a point of view I had previously held. In other cases, new facts reinforced my earlier conclusions. My general attitude, to the extent that I can sum it up succinctly, has been one of humility in the face of a vast and complicated subject.

The book has been linked from its initial conception with “Vietnam: A Television History,” a documentary series for television on which I served as chief correspondent. The book and the television series, as different media, parallel each other. The printed word is no match for the intensity of such dramatic film as came out of Vietnam, but on the other hand, the complexities of Vietnam cannot be adequately elucidated on a screen.

The idea for the series, which has been produced under the auspices of WGBH, the public television station in Boston, was originally proposed to me in 1978 by Lawrence Grossman, president of the Public Broadcasting Service. Richard Ellison, an independent producer, had been simultaneously contemplating such a project. It seemed logical for us to collaborate. With the help of Elizabeth Deane of WGBH, we began the arduous task of organizing the enterprise and raising funds. I had not, as a writer, anticipated the intricacies inherent in producing films—especially on a topic so immense in its scope as the Vietnam war. My thanks to Mr. Grossman for introducing me to the field. I am particularly grateful to Mr. Ellison, executive producer of the series, for his patience toward a novice in our cooperative television endeavor.

I am indebted to numerous associates, consultants, and others, whose names are listed in the acknowledgments that follow the text. My special gratitude to Karen Johnson, director of publications at WGBH, and to her deputy, Carol Hills. Elise Katz, photo researcher at WGBH, is responsible for the photographic sections. I depended heavily on Law-

rence Lichty of the University of Maryland, director of media research for the television project, who generously put his encyclopedic knowledge at my disposal. Jane Schorall furnished important historical research, for which I am thankful. I cannot sufficiently express my obligation to Gail Lewin, my editorial assistant, for her friendship and aid.

Elisabeth Sifton, editor in chief of The Viking Press, again demonstrated her erudition and skill, providing me with invaluable guidance.

Finally, I relied more than they realize on my wife, Annette, and our children, Curtis Edward, Catherine Anne, and Michael Franklin, for their comments, forbearance, and unflagging encouragement.

S.K.

Potomac, Maryland  
May 1983



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# Vietnam

# I The War Nobody Won



*The town of Langson, near the border of China, was partly destroyed when Chinese forces invaded Vietnam in early 1979. The Vietnamese preserve the ruins as testimony to what they call Chinese aggression.*



*The Vietnam memorial in Washington, D.C., a wall of polished black granite bearing the names of 57,939 Americans who died or are missing in action in the Vietnam war, was dedicated in November 1982.*



*Wounded veterans watch a soccer match in Vietnam after the war. Though Vietnamese authorities never published the figures, estimates are that the Communists lost some 600,000 men in the struggle.*



*Thousands of Vietnam veterans and their families appeared in Washington in November 1982 to commemorate the American soldiers who died in the war. They participated in a parade and other ceremonies, including a vigil at the National Cathedral.*



*A few of the more than one million Vietnamese who fled Vietnam after the war. These "boat people" languish aboard a ship in Manila Bay, awaiting authorization by the Philippine government to land. Thousands of refugees are still confined to camps throughout Southeast Asia.*



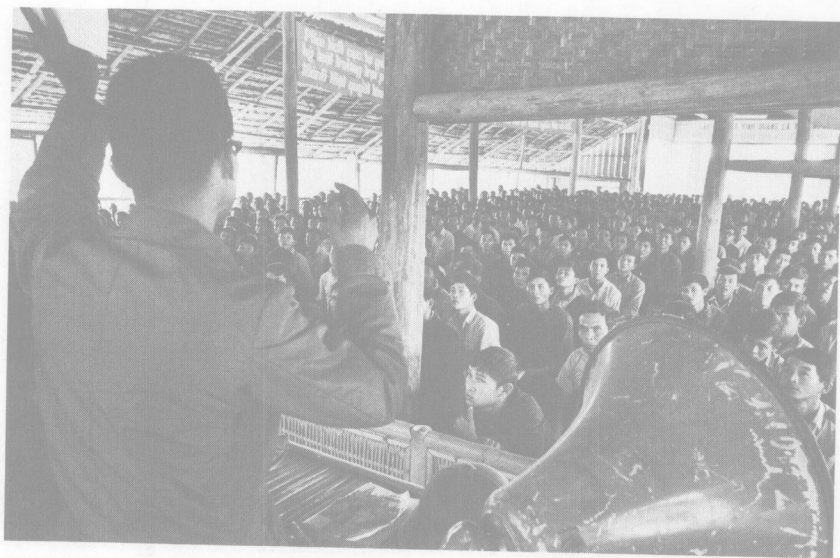
*A Texan with the family of Vietnamese refugees she has adopted. Nearly a half-million Vietnamese immigrated to the United States following Vietnam's conquest by the Communists in April 1975.*



*Peasants in Tay Ninh, a province in the southern part of Vietnam, work in an area defoliated by American herbicides during the war. Many of the 250,000 acres of forest in the area, ruined in 1966 alone, remained barren for years after the war.*



*The mausoleum in Hanoi containing the embalmed body of Ho Chi Minh is one of the few new structures built in the city. The mausoleum, designed by Soviet architects, was modeled on Lenin's tomb in Moscow. Ho died in September 1969.*



*A "re-education" camp in southern Vietnam for former Saigon government officers arrested after the war. More than 50,000 political prisoners remain in such camps, many of them suffering from mistreatment and hunger.*

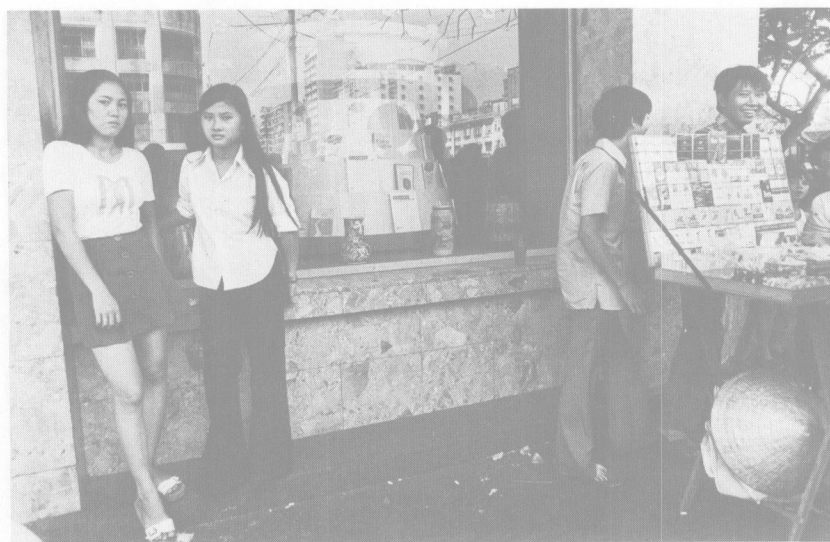


*Peasants at a "cooperative," the government euphemism for a collective farm, in southern Vietnam. The Communist authorities were compelled to reverse the collectivization programs in the years after the war, when peasant opposition reduced food production.*





*Young Vietnamese in Ho Chi Minh City continue to defy "socialist transformation." The T-shirt is either a remnant from the American period or a new copy, and the motor scooters are fueled by black-market gasoline.*



*The manners and mores of the old regime continue in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, despite the Communist takeover. Two young prostitutes ply their trade near youths peddling black-market American cigarettes.*