

# VICTNAM AND THE UNITED STATES

ORIGINS AND  
LEGACY OF WAR

**GARY R. HESS**

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Origins and Legacy of War

Gary R. Hess

Bowling Green State University

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To the memory of  
a friend and colleague  
Chuck DeBenedetti  
whose life and scholarship  
were devoted to advancing  
the cause of peace

## FOREWORD

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Twayne's International History Series seeks to publish reliable and readable accounts of post-World War II international affairs. Today, nearly fifty years after the end of the war, the time seems opportune for a critical assessment of world affairs in the second half of the twentieth century. What themes and trends have characterized international relations since 1945? How have they evolved and changed? What connections have developed between international and domestic affairs? How have states and peoples defined and pursued their objectives, and what have they contributed to the world at large? How have conceptions of warfare and visions of peace changed?

These questions must be addressed if one is to arrive at an understanding of the contemporary world that is international—with an awareness of the linkages among different parts of the world—as well as historical—with a keen sense of what the immediate past has brought to civilization. Hence Twayne's *International History Series*. It is hoped that the volumes in this series will help the reader to explore important events and decisions since 1945 and to develop the global awareness and historical sensitivity required for confronting today's problems.

The first volumes in the series examine the United States' relations with other countries, groups of countries, or regions. The focus on the United States is justified in part because of the nation's predominant position in postwar international relations, and also because far more extensive documentation is available on American foreign affairs than is the case with other countries. The series addresses not only those interested in international relations, but also those studying America's and other countries' histories, who will find here useful guides and fresh insights into the recent past. Now

more than ever, it is imperative to understand the linkages between national history and international history.

This volume offers an up-to-date and comprehensive history of U.S.-Vietnamese relations. The long and tragic war, of course, occupies center stage, but it is preceded by a discussion of the historical circumstances leading to the conflict and followed by a careful discussion of events since the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam in 1975. Such a comprehensive account helps us understand how the war affected both American and Vietnamese history. Gary R. Hess is a specialist on the history of American foreign relations who has written extensively on America's involvement in South and Southeast Asia. He brings to the volume years of archival research, a personal knowledge of the region, and a sense of balance that has distinguished his other works. This book offers insights into the ways in which the destinies of two peoples in seemingly distant parts of the world become intertwined. And this story is not limited to the United States and Vietnam: it is a main theme of contemporary history.

AKIRA IRIYE  
*Series Editor*

## PREFACE

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Prior to the 1960s, few Americans had any real awareness of Vietnam. Then during that decade, as the U.S. military became increasingly involved there, Vietnam became an overriding concern and ultimately a political and military issue that deeply divided Americans. The popular and scholarly literature of the 1960s is filled with efforts to “understand” the Vietnamese and to “explain” U.S. involvement. With the ending of the American military role and the subsequent collapse of the U.S.-supported government of South Vietnam, the country itself faded from the consciousness of Americans, although the American war there remains a subject of intense interest. Indeed, Americans seem destined to persistent reconsideration of that tragic event in our history; the war that was fought by one generation will be debated and, in a sense, fought again by later generations.

This book is an effort to look at the U.S.-Vietnam relationship within a broad historical context. It is essential to understand Vietnamese history and culture in order to appreciate the American role in that country. The kinds of attitudes and assumptions that were reflected in U.S. policy and in the actions of individuals also need to be underscored. America went to Vietnam with certain cultural blinders and biases that grew out of the American way of approaching Asia and world problems generally. During the period of substantial U.S. political and military involvement, Americans only occasionally glimpsed the Vietnamese as a people who, whether in the North or South, were being profoundly influenced by and responding to the overwhelming American presence. This volume attempts to look at political, economic, and social developments in both parts of Vietnam, for the eventual American frustration can be traced to the limitations of the South Vietnamese government, the stresses in the U.S.-South Vietnamese relationship, and the resil-

iciency of the North Vietnamese and their comrades in the South. This is not to argue that defeat in Vietnam was inevitable; the epilogue addresses the continuing debate between the “winnable” and “unwinnable” ways of thinking about the war. In addition, the postwar antagonism between the United States and Vietnam receives attention, for it relates to the continuing tragedies in Indochina, notably the economic plight of Vietnam and the “killing fields” of Cambodia.

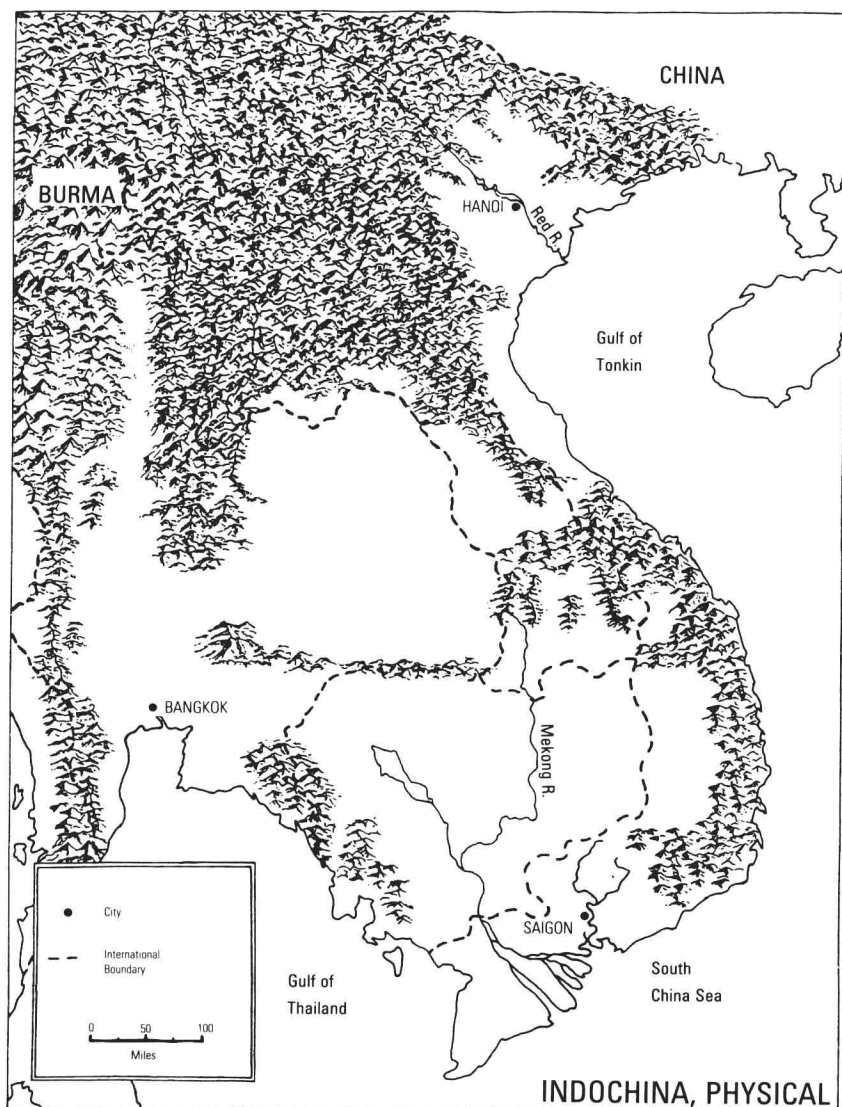
Events in Cambodia and Laos are fundamental to understanding the complete picture of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship. Vietnam’s greater size and population have given it the capacity to dominate its neighbors, and U.S. efforts in Laos and Cambodia since the end of the French empire have been driven by the objective of limiting such influence.

If there is an overall theme to this study, it relates to the American response to the Vietnamese Communist revolution or, more specifically, to the August Revolution, which in 1945 brought Ho Chi Minh and his movement to prominence and power. Throughout the several phases of U.S. involvement—the support of the French war effort, the fostering of an independent South Vietnam, the years of intense warfare, and the postwar hostility—the American opposition to the Vietnamese revolution has been unrelenting. How a Communist revolution in such a relatively obscure and economically backward country came to be perceived as a challenge to U.S. national security can be answered in part, but enough uncertainty remains that it continues to be an intriguing question and one with long-range implications for U.S. foreign policy.

Many persons have been helpful in the completion of this study. I am indebted to my friend Akira Iriye of Harvard University for inviting me to contribute this volume to Twayne’s international history series. Professor William Duiker of Pennsylvania State University read an early draft and provided a thoughtful critique that reflected his vast knowledge of Vietnamese history. Meghan Wander, senior editor of Twayne Publishers, has been both a patient and constructive editor. Patrick J. May, assisted by Patti Ference, prepared the maps with an expert’s eye for detail; they were helped by my colleague, Paul Crawford of the Geography Department at Bowling Green State University. Lastly, I acknowledge the support and encouragement provided by my wife, Rose, and son, Ryan.

The book is dedicated to the memory of Charles DeBenedetti. It was my privilege to know Chuck as a colleague and friend for the nearly two decades that we taught at neighboring universities. His book on the antiwar movement, published posthumously in 1990, brilliantly rekindles the excitement and turmoil of America during the Vietnam era. Chuck’s death in 1987 deprived the historical profession and his countless friends of a man who was indeed a class act.





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## chapter 1

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### TO THE AUGUST REVOLUTION: THE VIETNAMESE NATIONAL TRADITION

The dominant characteristic of the Vietnamese is, in the words of one historian, a “spirit of resistance.” The Vietnamese, another scholar writes, have a tradition of “highly-charged, historically self-conscious resistance to oppressive, degrading foreign rule.”<sup>1</sup> That resistance has combined a capacity to assimilate the ideas and institutions of others with a profound sense of national distinctiveness. The Vietnamese trace their cultural origins to the centuries-long period of Chinese rule, which at the same time inspired their determination to assert independence. Vietnamese history is largely the story of a struggle for national identity. The greater part of that history is of a people, not a distinct geographical area, for it was not until the last three centuries that the Vietnamese people came to control the area known today as Vietnam.

It is through China that ancient Vietnam passes from legend to recorded history. Chinese annals of 208 B.C. tell of warfare against peoples to the south of China, the earliest recorded reference to the area that eventually became known as Vietnam. A century later, in 111 B.C., China conquered the peoples living in the Red River Delta, an act that marked the beginning of one thousand years of Chinese rule. That long era of Chinese control was critical to Vietnamese cultural development, for as they adopted the institutions brought by the Chinese, the peoples of China’s southernmost province (known as Giao Chi) gradually took on their own distinctive characteristics. That process took generations, but eventually led to a Vietnamese national identity.

The Chinese brought numerous innovations and techniques that improved

agricultural production in the fertile lands of the Red River Delta. They built dams, roads, and canals. Although at first the Chinese showed little interest in the peoples of Giao Chi, they eventually sent many officials to the province and sought—as they did throughout their empire—to impose Chinese customs, using force when necessary. Clothing and hair styles were dictated, the Chinese language replaced the native language in official transactions, and Chinese characters became the basis of the written language. The Chinese also instilled among their subjects the great religious and philosophical teachings of Chinese tradition: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

On many occasions the Vietnamese rebelled against Chinese dominance, but without success. The most famous of these abortive revolts—one revered among Vietnamese to this day—was that led by the Trung sisters in A.D. 39. So long as China was ruled by strong dynasties, however, such efforts were doomed. After the fall of the powerful T'ang dynasty in A.D. 907, the Vietnamese renewed their struggle. Finally in 939 they won a decisive victory over a Chinese army, forcing its retreat, an event that ended the millennium of Chinese rule.

## THE VIETNAMESE STATE: SURVIVAL AND EXPANSION

By the time the Chinese left, Vietnamese culture had taken on its distinctive characteristics. The system of government, social structure, and ways of thought reflected the Chinese influence and strengthened the Vietnamese as they struggled over ensuing centuries to retain their independence.

The Vietnamese state was a miniature of the Chinese. The emperor—the “son of heaven”—was seen as the deputy on earth of the natural forces of the universe. As in other Asian societies, the Vietnamese conceived of a close parallel between the natural world and the affairs of state. The emperor's success was determined by whether his rule brought bountiful crops. To the peasants, natural disasters like floods or droughts were evidence of cosmic displeasure with the emperor. As a result, much of the time of the emperor and his court was devoted to enhancing agricultural production.

The emperor's power was limited by the dictates of Confucian tradition. The emperor, above all, had to set a moral example. As a scholar trained in the Confucian classics, the emperor was expected to bring to his court other men of similar training, who in turn expected him as the “son of heaven” to rule wisely. Maintaining prestige was the indispensable quality for effective leadership from the imperial court through the bureaucracy and down to the village chief. An individual emperor could not break significantly from the policies of his predecessor, for that would be considered disrespectful in a society that valued filial loyalty. As a result of these influences, leadership was passive, not bold or innovative.

The effectiveness of the Vietnamese state relied on an extensive bureaucratic system. Government positions carried high status, and bureaucrats

enjoyed many privileges, including exemption from taxes; their sons were assured entry into the national college, which prepared them for the government examinations. Those rigorous examinations, which were based on a thorough knowledge of Confucian writings, produced officials who embodied the Chinese emphasis on the importance of moral example and looking to the past for enlightenment. The Vietnamese built an effective governmental system that, in the words of a leading authority, “was well in advance of any other native administration in Southeast Asia.”<sup>2</sup>

At the center of Vietnamese society was the village, which despite frequent wars retained its self-sufficiency and autonomy. With its huts enclosed for protection from the outside world, the village instilled in its families a strong sense of community. When the government demanded taxes, undertook public works, or needed men for the army, it assessed the entire village, which in turn was responsible for determining how to meet its obligations. These were decisions of the village chief and a council of notables, which governed local affairs. The chief and council reflected the same values as the emperor and his court, a characteristic underlined in the Vietnamese saying, “The village association is a small imperial court.”

The landholding system and custom discouraged social distinctions. Most families held modestly sized parcels of land, and those who acquired larger holdings were obligated to fulfill various social functions for the benefit of the entire village. Prestige was expensive, as parties, banquets, subscriptions, and other devices enabled the community to share in the wealth of the larger landholders. This leveling effect of customs is reflected in a proverb borrowed from China: “No family stays rich for three generations, and no family stays poor for three generations.”

While the overwhelming majority of villages engaged in cultivating rice, some villages specialized in single crafts to the exclusion of agriculture. In such villages, autonomy was jealously guarded. Determined to retain their expertise, such villages refused to divulge their skills and prohibited their young women from marrying outsiders.

Social structure followed the Confucian teachings. The “three principles” guiding life were loyalty to the emperor, a son’s loyalty to his father, and a wife’s loyalty to her husband. Although the emperor theoretically demanded the highest loyalty, in practice familial loyalty transcended that to the state. The government typically yielded its authority to permit individuals to fulfill personal obligations; for instance, officials were permitted prolonged absences from their positions in order to return to their villages on occasions such as the death of parents.

This Vietnamese society developed in a context of political uncertainty and frequent warfare, for the independence gained in 939 was precarious. The country faced the persistent threat of renewed Chinese invasion as well as the challenge of other powerful neighbors: the Champa kingdom to the south and the Cambodian (Khmer) empire to the west. Internally, the state

suffered often from ineffective leaders and the fragmentation of political power. Ngo Quyen, the general who had defeated the Chinese, founded the first Vietnamese dynasty, but he died without having established firm control, and his successors failed to maintain control over the country. Subsequent dynasties, each founded by a strong emperor but undermined by weak successors, led to a century of chronic instability with power often in the hands of feudal lords. Finally, under the leadership of two dynasties—the Ly, which ruled from 1009 to 1224, and the Tran, which followed it and ruled until 1400—Vietnam gained four centuries of generally effective leadership, which brought improvements in transportation, communication, agriculture, and civil administration.

These accomplishments were continually threatened by hostile neighbors. To appease the Chinese, the Vietnamese court paid tribute, but that did not prevent Chinese invasions in 981 and 1057, which the Vietnamese repelled. In addition, the Cambodians and Champa frequently attacked the Vietnamese. The greatest danger, however, was always from the north. When the Mongolian armies of Kublai Khan overran China in the thirteenth century, they continued to the south. A large army of some 500,000 men attacked the Vietnamese in 1284. The Vietnamese rallied to defend their homeland and forced the Mongolians to retreat. Another large Mongolian assault in 1287 met similar resistance and prompted the triumphant Vietnamese general to proclaim that “this ancient land shall live forever.” The hero of the battles against the Mongols, Tran Hung Dao, remains a revered figure.

The victory over the Mongols, however, came at great cost. The country was left devastated and suffered from widespread famine. Renewed and persistent warfare with Champa and numerous internal revolts eventually led to the overthrow of the Tran dynasty. Shortly thereafter, in 1407, a reinvigorated Chinese empire, under the Ming dynasty, invaded and imposed a period of harsh rule. Once more the Vietnamese had to fight and, after a decade of bitter warfare, they forced the Chinese to leave in 1428.

Having again expelled the Chinese, the Vietnamese now turned against their other enemies. Under the Le dynasty which was established by Le Loi in 1428, the Vietnamese began their March to the South. Over the course of 250 years they advanced slowly down the coast, a distance approximately the length of the state of Florida. It was more a militant migration than a march. The Vietnamese eliminated the Champa empire. The Chams and other ethnic groups were bypassed and left isolated mostly in mountainous areas while the Vietnamese took the rich agricultural lands. Entire villages were established in the conquered areas and became links in a chain that took the Vietnamese as far as the Mekong Delta by the early eighteenth century. The March to the South thus ultimately defined the general territorial confines of the modern Vietnamese nation.

This cultural expansion, however, was not accompanied by political unity, as the power of the Le dynasty fragmented. Governing the expanded territory



from Hanoi proved difficult, so the Le rulers delegated administrative responsibilities for the southern territories to the Nguyen family in the city of Hué. Eventually the Le dynasty lost authority not only in the south but in the north as well, where the Trinh family asserted control.

Then in the late eighteenth century a movement leading to national unity developed out of political and social discontent and a renewed invasion by China. For three decades—from 1771 to 1802—Vietnam went through a peasant rebellion initiated by the three Tay-son brothers. The Tay-son revolt ended the moribund Le dynasty, but soon the Tay-son rulers faced massive Chinese invasions in 1788 and 1789. Once again, the Vietnamese resisted the Chinese in a series of battles, the most decisive being that waged at Dong-da, near Hanoi, in 1789. With their resources drained by the warfare with China, the Tay-sons lost their power to the resurgent Nguyen family. At length, the Nguyen dynasty was established in 1802.

That was a moment of historic importance, for it marked the first time that a single ruler governed the region from the Chinese border to the Gulf of Siam—the essential boundaries of the modern Vietnamese nation. Never before had a dynasty controlled both the Red River and Mekong deltas. With the founding of the Nguyen dynasty under Emperor Gia Long, political unification at last paralleled the cultural unification achieved by the March to the South.

This marked the culmination of a process that reflected the extent to which the prolonged pursuit of national identity had given the Vietnamese a sense of patriotism unique among the peoples of Southeast Asia. “Two millennia of struggle for survival against the political and cultural domination of China,” the historian William Duiker notes, “had created in Vietnam a distinctly ‘national’ ethnic spirit, more self-conscious, and more passionate than that found virtually anywhere in Southeast Asia.” Another historian, Huynh Kim Khanh, concurs: “unlike most other European colonies, by the time of the French invasion, Vietnam had developed the social and cultural attributes of a nation—a unified tradition, culture, and language and an effective political and economic system.”<sup>3</sup>

## THE INFLUENCE OF FRENCH RULE

The hope that Vietnam was about to enter a “golden age” under the Nguyen dynasty was threatened by the pressures of European expansion. In the late nineteenth century France established control over Vietnam and its neighbors; in the process, French imperialism challenged traditional society in many ways, but it failed to destroy Vietnamese patriotism.

The French conquest was one phase of the vast expansion of Europe that carried Western ideas and institutions throughout the world. The Western movement into Vietnam was typical of European expansion in Asia. The process was gradual, beginning with traders and missionaries, and eventually