



# *Coming to Terms*

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Indochina,  
the United States,  
and the War

edited by Douglas Allen and Ngô Vĩnh Long

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# COMING TO TERMS

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and the War

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and Ngô Vĩnh Long

University of Maine

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# Preface

This book had its roots in a special project for the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*. When the editorial board of the *Bulletin* sought a theme for its twentieth anniversary issue, we proposed a comprehensive and widely accessible overview of Indochina, the United States, and the war. This was published as a triple-sized issue of the *Bulletin* in December 1989.

*Coming to Terms* is significantly different from the special issue of the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, however. This book has been designed as a text, to be used by a much broader and more varied readership than the general readers and area specialists who read the *Bulletin*. As a result, most of the original articles have been revised, and entirely new articles on postwar Vietnam and U.S. veterans have been added as well as chronologies and a selected bibliography. Not included are the anniversary issue's material about BCAS, interview with Daniel Ellsberg, course syllabi, and article on how to teach about the war.

We appreciate the efforts of our authors, most of whom had to be more flexible and more understanding and had to devote much more time and effort than they anticipated when they agreed to do a chapter for this volume. Rather than soliciting manuscripts from Indochina scholars in terms of their current research interests, we usually asked authors to formulate entirely new manuscripts consistent with the rationale of this book as formulated in our Introduction. Individual authors, both because of their own concerns and their commitment to this project, devoted a tremendous amount of time and energy to their manuscripts.

Special thanks must be given to Bill Doub, Nancy Doub, and Jay Dillon, without whose dedication the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* could not survive, much less flourish. They worked tirelessly with us on the anniversary issue of the *Bulletin* and have provided invaluable assistance in working on this book. We are indebted to John Spragens and others who donated their photographs for this book. We also thank other editors of the *Bulletin* and other colleagues and friends, too many to name, who have encouraged us and have given us valuable input while we worked on the book project. Finally, we deeply appreciate the contributions of editor Susan McEachern at Westview

Press. Her conscientious review of material, constructive and insightful suggestions, and cooperative attitude in working with us have formed what for us has been an ideal authors-editor relationship.

*Douglas Allen*  
*Ngô Vĩnh Long*

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# Abbreviations

AAS	Association for Asian Studies
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCAS	Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CMEA	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (USSR)
COINTELPRO	(a U.S. program of infiltration and subversion of antiwar movement organizations by FBI agents and informants)
Comecon	(see CMEA)
CPK	Communist Party of Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge)
CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
DK	Democratic Kampuchea
DMZ	demarcation zone
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
EC	European Community
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GDP	gross domestic product
GNP	gross national product
GVN	Government of Vietnam
ICP	Indochinese Communist Party
IDA	Institute for Defense Analysis (U.S.)
IRC	Indochina Resource Center
IVS	International Voluntary Services (U.S.)
KPNLF	Khmer People's National Liberation Front
KPRP	Khmer People's Revolutionary Party
LPDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LPF	Lao Patriotic Front (Neo Lao Hak Sat)
LPLA	Lao People's Liberation Army
LPP	Lao People's Party
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (U.S.)
MIA	missing in action
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MSUGV	Michigan State University Group in Vietnam
NEZs	New Economic Zones



NLF	National Liberation Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (Viet Cong)
NLHS	Neo Lao Hak Sat (Lao Patriotic Front [LPF])
NPCC	National Political Consultative Council (Laos)
NSA	National Student Association
NSC	National Security Council (U.S.)
OSS	Office of Strategic Services (U.S.)
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
PDPE	Party Department of Propaganda and Education (Vietnam)
PGNU	Provisional Government of National Union (Laos)
PL	Pathet Lao
POW	prisoner of war
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder
RLG	Royal Lao Government
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
SANE	Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy (U.S.)
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society (U.S.)
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SIU	Southern Illinois University
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (U.S.)
SPU	Student Peace Union (U.S.)
SRC	Southeast Asia Resource Center (U.S.)
SRV	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
UN	United Nations
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USOM	U.S. Operations Mission (in Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia)
VA	Veterans Administration (U.S.)
VBI	Vietnamese Bureau of Investigation
VC	Viet Cong (Vietnamese Communists or NLF)
VVAW	Vietnam Veterans Against the War (U.S.)

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# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	ix

Introduction, <i>Douglas Allen and Ngô Vĩnh Long</i>	1
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## **PART ONE** **Indochina and Its Struggle for Independence**

1 Vietnam, <i>Ngô Vĩnh Long</i>	9
2 Postwar Vietnam: Political Economy, <i>Ngô Vĩnh Hai</i>	65
3 Cambodia, <i>Michael Vickery</i>	89
4 Laos, <i>W. Randall Ireson and Carol J. Ireson</i>	129

## **PART TWO** **The United States and the War**

5 The United States and Indochina: Far from an Aberration, <i>Noam Chomsky</i>	161
6 The Vietnam Antiwar Movement, <i>George R. Vickers</i>	189
7 Scholars of Asia and the War, <i>Douglas Allen</i>	211
8 U.S. Veterans: The War and the Long Road Home, <i>Kevin Bowen</i>	250



**PART THREE**

**Films and Scholarly Literature on Vietnam**

9	Framing Vietnam, <i>Jenefer Shute</i>	267
10	<i>Rambo's</i> Rewriting of the Vietnam War, <i>Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser</i>	275
11	Against Cartesianism: Three Generations of Vietnam Scholarship, <i>Marvin E. Gettleman</i>	289
	<i>Chronology</i>	303
	<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	321
	<i>About the Book and Editors</i>	327
	<i>Index</i>	329

Douglas  
Allen  
&  
Ngô Vĩnh  
Long

## Introduction

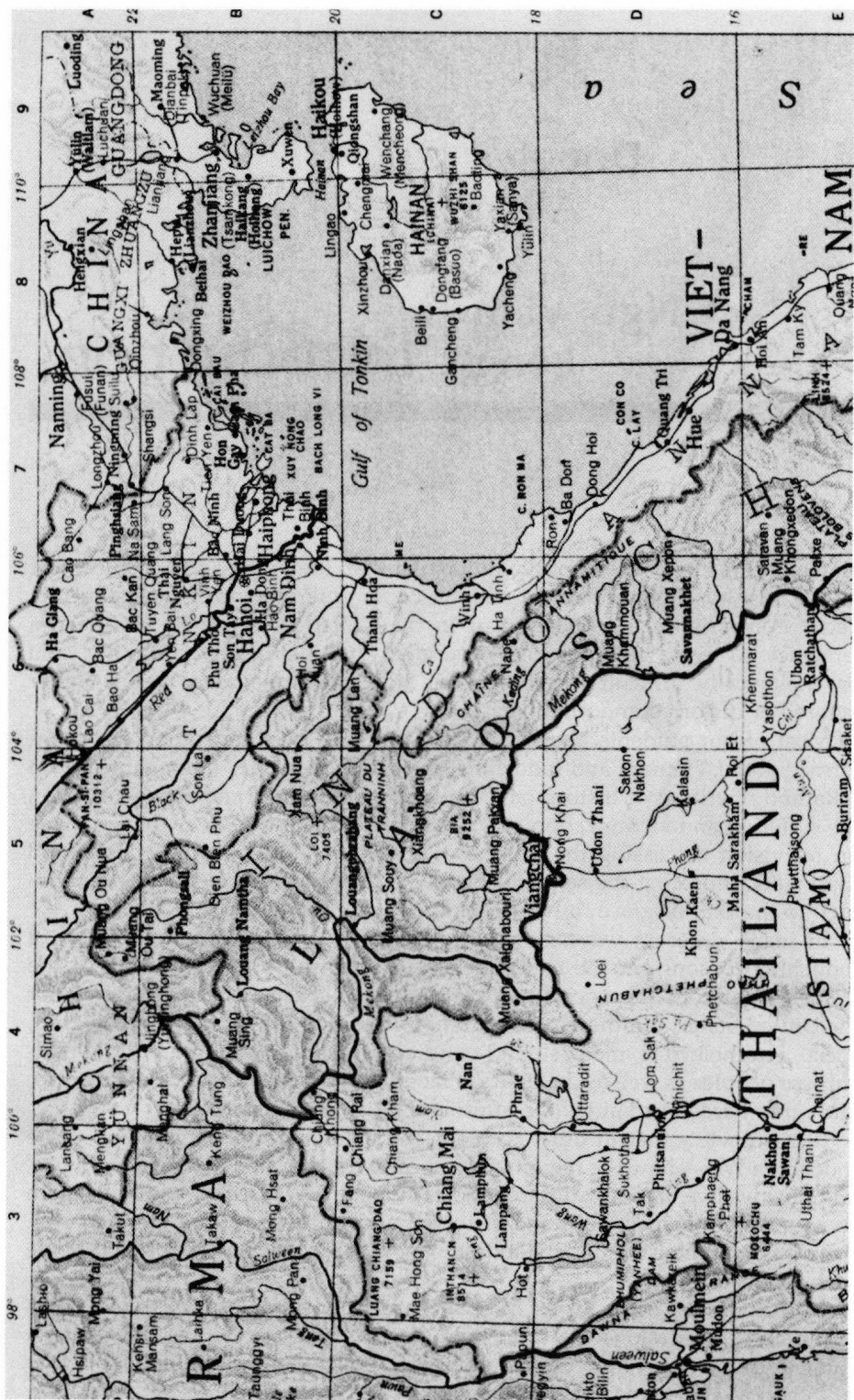
Sixteen years after the end of the Indochina War, the longest and costliest war in U.S. history, there remains a need to come to terms with that historically decisive experience. For those of us in the United States, there has been a tendency to avoid learning the invaluable, but politically, culturally, and psychologically difficult lessons of the war. The Indochina War is either ignored or distorted and mythologized.

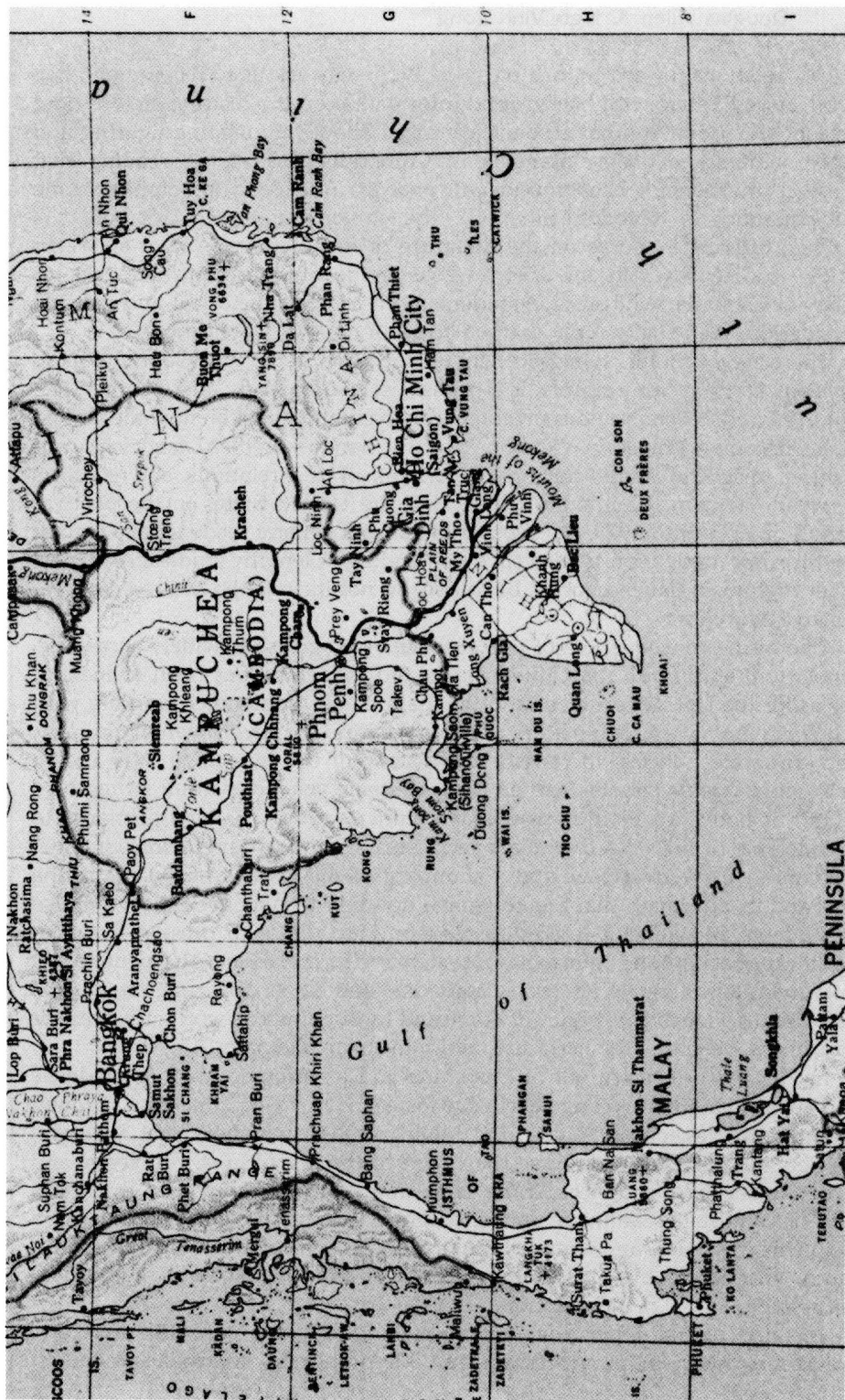
Most of our students and other Americans of their generation are uninformed about Vietnam and Indochina, their limited images often gained from a Rambo rewriting of history or more recent Hollywood movies focusing on the suffering and victimization of U.S. soldiers. The few persons they may see on television discussing the lessons of the war tend to be the Nixons and Kissingers, repeating the same falsehoods and self-justifications that contributed to the U.S. disgrace in Indochina in the 1960s and early 1970s.

In many different ways, it has been equally difficult for the peoples of Indochina to confront the consequences of the war. One can speak of the tremendous economic, social, and psychological consequences of the war for the United States. But these pale in comparison with the economic, ecological, social, psychological, medical, and cultural devastation inflicted on the Indochinese peoples as well as the political factionalism, wars, economic embargos, and other hardships largely the aftermath of the Indochina War.

It is our view that in order to grasp the meaning and significance of the Indochina War—how the region was radically transformed by that experience, and how we live in a very different post-Indochina War world—we must gain some general perspective, some historical and cultural overview of that war. Such a comprehensive understanding is now rare. This book tries to provide such an overview.

In this regard, many of us have repeatedly noticed a serious void when examining publications on Indochina, the United States, and the war. A student, uninformed but curious about U.S. policy during the Indochina War





Map of Kampuchea (Cambodia), Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia. Source: from the Cosmopolitan World Atlas, copyright © 1991 by Rand McNally, R.L. 91-S-23. Reprinted with permission.

or U.S. relations toward Indochina since 1975, may ask us to recommend one good survey article with background information on the history, lessons, and present situation. Another student, confused about the ongoing fighting and other contemporary developments in Cambodia, asks for a reading that presents the general background and analysis necessary for gaining some understanding of Norodom Sihanouk, the Khmer Rouge, and U.S. policy. A teacher, offering a course on the literature of the Vietnam War or an Asian studies course in which one or two weeks are devoted to Indochina, asks for a few articles that will provide students with a broad historical and cultural foundation. We usually reply that we know of no such publications.

There are, of course, some excellent publications on the war. Gabriel Kolko's *Anatomy of a War*, for example, is a brilliant scholarly work, and George McT. Kahin's *Intervention* provides invaluable analysis and detail on how the United States became involved in Vietnam. Nayan Chanda's *Brother Enemy* is a well-written insightful study tracing the origins of the relations and conflicts between Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and the United States in the postwar period of 1975 until 1979. But most students and general readers have neither the time nor motivation to read such demanding or lengthy studies. And most other highly specialized books, of course, do not include the desired comprehensive overview.

One of the consequences of this absence of progressive, widely accessible, scholarly literature on the United States and Indochina has been to make it easier for the U.S. government and the mass media, sometimes working with scholars who have a long history of complicity in U.S. governmental, military, and corporate policies, to rewrite the history of the Indochina War and to undo the valuable lessons learned through many years of painful struggle.

In this book, we avoid narrow and technical studies directed primarily to a readership of specialized scholars and instead include a general introduction, a comprehensive overview, and a summary of the lessons of the Indochina War and its aftermath that are accessible not only to Asia specialists but also to students and general interested readers. Our aim is to present the most significant background information, systematic formulations, and penetrating interpretations about Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, the relation of U.S. Indochina policy to U.S. policy at home and throughout the world, the antiwar movement, veterans, the literature, and movies on Vietnam.

In Part 1 we focus on all of Indochina and its struggle for independence and avoid a common Western exclusive focus on "the Vietnam War." Through separate articles, chronologies, and bibliographies, we show that Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos each have their own histories, cultures, problems, and struggles for independence. At the same time, readers will realize that these societies and states cannot be understood in isolation. They have had common problems, histories, and complex interactions as part of an Indochina significantly shaped by the shared experiences of French colonialism, Japanese occupation, and U.S. intervention.

We also placed Indochina first because of our concern with a typical Western exclusivism, provincialism, and ethnocentrism, often reflecting racist

and imperialist attitudes toward the rest of the world. Westerners rarely attempt to look at the war from the perspectives of the Indochinese people or to examine the devastating consequences of the war on postwar Indochina. Instead, when the Indochina War is not totally evaded in Western literature and discussion, there is usually a total U.S. focus: whether or not Washington was justified in its policies and actions, the effects of the war on the United States, the need for the United States to overcome "the Vietnam syndrome," concern for the plight of U.S. veterans, and so forth.

The authors of this book provide more balance so that many Indochinese voices can be heard. We consider the first four chapters, under the Indochina heading, along with the fifth chapter (by Noam Chomsky), to be the indispensable foundation of our book in presenting a comprehensive overview of Indochina, the United States, and the war. The first two chapters on Vietnam are by Vietnamese; the chapters on Cambodia and Laos are by Americans who have lived for many years in Cambodia and Laos, empathize with Indochinese perspectives, and are very critical of Western ethnocentrism and imperialism.

Ngo Vinh Long, Vietnamese historian and leading antiwar critic, formulates what may be the only comprehensive essay on Vietnam that exists. He documents and analyzes the Vietnamese struggles for independence from the earliest stages of French colonialism in the 1850s, through U.S. interventionism beginning in 1946, and through the postwar years from 1975 up to the present.

Ngo Vinh Hai, an economic journalist in Vietnam during the war and postwar period, analyzes different stages of economic development and problems in Vietnam from 1975 to the present, providing us with insights largely absent from the official Vietnamese press and Western writings.

Michael Vickery, author of two books on contemporary Cambodia, offers a broad and inclusive overview of Cambodia's historical development. His chapter sheds considerable light on the origins of contradictions within Cambodia and the outside forces that perpetuate the tragedy that has befallen the Cambodian people.

Randall and Carol Ireson, who first worked in Laos from 1967 to 1969 and returned in the 1980s, present a general picture of early Laotian history continuing through the colonial and postwar struggles for independence. They conclude by focusing on contemporary issues and problems, especially those that affect village life.

Part 2 includes four chapters on the United States and the Indochina War. Noam Chomsky, the world's most influential linguist and a leading critic of U.S. foreign policy, contributes a bold and penetrating interpretation of U.S. policy in Indochina and argues that it was far from an aberration. He traces the roots of U.S. actions in Indochina to earlier domestic and foreign policies and shows the consistency of the Indochina experience with postwar U.S. policies throughout the world.

George Vickers, sociologist and a leader in the antiwar movement, debunks many of the contemporary myths about the U.S. antiwar movement, formulates a comprehensive history of its origins and development, and concludes by

delineating some of the major "lessons" of the Indochina War for the United States.

Douglas Allen, professor of philosophy and antiwar activist, explores many of the relations between scholars of Asia and the Indochina War. He shows how Asia scholars were both an integral part of and active opponents of the U.S. war effort and how the war affected the lives and careers of those scholars, many of whom now do research and teach courses on the Indochina War.

Kevin Bowen, a Vietnam War veteran and codirector of the Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences, provides both a personal and historical account of the experience of the war from the perspective of U.S. veterans. He also presents the postwar history of changing images, personal struggles, and attempts at healing and reconciliation by U.S. veterans.

Part 3, "Films and Scholarly Literature on Vietnam," shows that the Hollywood films and most of the books are not so much about Indochina as about the United States and the U.S. experience of Indochina. Indochinese voices are rarely heard.

Jenefer Shute, professor of modern literature and film, analyzes recent so-called antiwar films. She shows that these tremendously popular films focus our attention on the victimization of U.S. soldiers; they present complex and subtle messages, hardly antiwar, and obscure the basic issues and lessons of the Indochina War.

Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser, professors of film studies, focus on the more right-wing Rambo phenomenon, providing much-needed psychological, cultural, and historical analysis of its incredible popularity. They show how the Rambo-type symbolic and mythic rewriting of history fulfills deep psychological needs and contributes to the evasion of the lessons of the war.

Marvin Gettleman, historian and editor of probably the best-selling book on Vietnam during the war, formulates a broad essay on three generations of English-language Vietnam literature from the 1950s to the present. In a creative rewording of "Cartesianism," he directs our attention to the past historical truth of "I invade you, therefore you exist" and the need to overcome such a limited and distorted imperialist perspective.

It is our hope that this book will serve as a catalyst for our students and others to think more critically than most of our generation did when the United States was first getting into and then escalating its involvement in the Indochina War; that the book will burst open some of the closed parameters of debate and reflection that prevent us from exploring the meaning and lessons of the Indochina War; and that it will move the peoples of the United States and Indochina toward finally coming to terms with the war in ways that allow for greater understanding, healing, and reconciliation and for more equitable and just relations.



## **PART ONE**

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# **Indochina and Its Struggle for Independence**

