

Why the Communists Won

William J. Duiker. Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam. Boston: McGraw Hill, 1995.

This book has concentrated on the Vietnamese side of the war on the premise that the most significant fact about that conflict is not that the United States lost but that the Communists won. Since the end of the war in 1975, one of the main issues raised in the long debate over the "lessons of Vietnam" has been whether that war could have been won at an acceptable risk and cost. Although few would deny that U.S. policymakers made a number of mistakes in the course of the country's long involvement in Vietnam, the view presented here has been that it was not those errors but the actions taken by Washington's adversaries in Hanoi that were decisive in determining the outcome.

Over the years, a variety of factors have been advanced to explain the Communist victory in the Vietnam War. It has been popular to search for single causes. Some have ascribed it primarily to the party's superior organizational ability or to its selective use of terror to intimidate or eliminate opponents. Others have referred to the aura of legitimacy that the Communist Party acquired among the Vietnamese people by virtue of its generation of struggle against the French. Others still point to the extraordinary personality and capability of Ho Chi Minh and contend that, had France or the United States responded to his appeal for support in 1945, the outcome of the revolution might have been far different.¹

An analysis of the record shows that all of these factors played a role in the final outcome. The emphasis here, however, has been

¹ For the above interpretations, see Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967), Paul Mus and John T. McAlister, *The Vietnamese and Their Revolution* (Boston: Harper & Row, 1971), and Archimedes Patti, *Why Vietnam? Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

placed primarily on the Communist Party's program and strategy. The genius of that program was that it was able to combine patriotic and economic themes in an artful way to win the allegiance of a broad spectrum of the Vietnamese population in the party's struggle against its adversaries. The political program of the Vietnam Front in 1941 linked the ICP with the most dynamic forces in Vietnamese society under French colonial rule, the desire for economic and social justice as well as the drive for the restoration of national independence. The alliance between those two forces enabled the Vietnam Front to mobilize a solid popular base for their struggle against the French. That alliance was revived during the war against the United States, when the NLF won widespread support from the rural and urban poor by its promises of social reform and national self-determination while at the same time allaying the fears of urban moderates and foreign observers alike that it would embark on a program of radical social change after the seizure of power in Saigon.

By contrast, rival nationalist parties were consistently unable to formulate a program that could appeal widely to the mass of the Vietnamese population. The ineffectiveness of the nationalist movement forced its political leaders from Bao Dai to Ngo Dinh Diem and Nguyen Van Thieu to rely on outside support for their survival. From the beginning, such individuals and their organizations were compromised in the minds of many Vietnamese by their lack of a coherent program for nation building and by their willingness to collaborate with the French or, later, with the United States. It is not too much to say that the ICP had won the political battle with its rivals by the mid-1940s and, despite massive efforts by the French and the Americans, was able to retain that advantage for the next generation.

A second major factor in Communist success lay in the domain of revolutionary strategy. Here the genius of the party's approach lay in its ability to make optimum use of a combination of political and military struggle. Those who claim that Hanoi's victory was primarily a military one miss the mark. The evidence shows that in the absence of foreign intervention, the party would have easily bested its nationalist rivals in the political arena. That had been the lesson of the August Revolution, and it was reaffirmed during the later struggles against the French and the United States. It was the political superiority of the Communists over their nationalist rivals

that forced Paris, and then Washington, to turn to the military option and thus transform a civil conflict into a revolutionary war.²

It was the introduction of outside armed force that compelled the Communists themselves to adopt a strategy of revolutionary violence. At first they seized on the Maoist model of people's war, which had worked so well in China. But they soon discovered that moving to the Maoist third stage of general offensive was not as easy against a powerful Western adversary as it had been for the CCP against Chiang Kai-shek. The result was the gradual adoption of a more flexible strategy that relied on a combination of political and military techniques in both urban and rural areas with a diplomatic and psychological offensive that undermined public support for the party's rivals, in France and the United States as well as in Vietnam itself. Once the conflict had escalated into a military conflict, Hanoi's ultimate strategic objective was not to win a total victory on the battlefield, but to bring about a psychological triumph over its adversaries, leading to a negotiated settlement under terms favorable to the revolution. Although, as many have pointed out, the final 1975 campaign was a conventional military assault by regular units of the North Vietnamese army, it was the strategy of combined political and military struggle, supplemented by diplomatic and psychological tactics to undermine the strength of the enemy, that had brought the war to that point and enabled the offensive to realize total success.

Because of his ability to grasp the underlying nature of the dynamic forces at work in modern Vietnam and to formulate a program and strategy appropriate to the circumstances, Ho Chi Minh is the central figure in the Vietnamese revolution. Although his compelling personality and his talent for reconciliation were trump cards in his contest with his adversaries, the ace in the hole lay in his ability to conceptualize the fundamental issues at stake in the Vietnamese revolution, and thus to give his movement an aura of legitimacy that was the underlying factor in its victory.

² For the argument that the Vietnam War was above all a conventional military contest, see Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982). To be fair, Summers concedes that political factors were dominant before 1963, but he appears to believe that once the war had escalated in the mid-1960s, the solution was primarily military in nature.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

All of the above theories help to explain the Communist victory in Vietnam, but none of them gets to the heart of the matter. Why were the nationalist parties not as well organized, motivated, and effectively directed as their rivals? Why was it the Communist Party which most effectively donned the mantle of legitimacy in the Vietnamese struggle for national independence, and why did Ho Chi Minh, who was clearly the most talented political figure of his generation in Vietnam, choose Leninism for his model instead of the U.S. Declaration of Independence or the French Declaration of the Rights of Man?

The answer, of course, might simply be a historical accident. But some observers have ascribed the Communist victory to deep-seated historical factors at work in Vietnamese society. It has been argued, for example, that French efforts to eliminate all forms of nationalist opposition in colonial Vietnam discredited the moderate approach to national liberation and inadvertently provided an advantage to clandestine organizations like the ICP. Others have pointed to alleged similarities between Confucianism and Marxist doctrine, characteristics which made it easier for talented and dedicated Vietnamese intellectuals like Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Truong Chinh to embrace the Leninist vision of social revolution than the individualist doctrines of Western capitalism.³

One of the more interesting recent hypotheses has been presented by the historian Gabriel Kolko. In a provocative study entitled *Anatomy of a War*, Kolko explains the Communist victory as a consequence of the weakness of the Vietnamese bourgeoisie under the domination of the French colonial system. In his analysis, that weakness prevented the Vietnamese middle class from taking the lead in waging a capitalist revolution, thus leaving a historical vacuum that was ultimately filled by the small but articulate working class led by its vanguard organization, the Communist Party.⁴

Kolko's argument is persuasive in pointing out that the weak-

ness of the Saigon regime had deep historical roots that transcended the personalities and actions of individual leaders. As he has noted, one of the factors responsible for that weakness lay in the failure of the French to encourage the emergence of a strong and vibrant middle class capable of providing leadership and purpose after the realization of national independence. That fact was never totally grasped by U.S. policymakers, who, while recognizing the endemic weakness of the nationalist forces in Vietnamese society, constantly deluded themselves into believing that the key to a stable South Vietnam was just around the corner.

But Kolko does not adequately explain why similar results did not then occur in other colonial societies in Southeast Asia, where the local middle class faced comparable obstacles from colonial regimes. As Indian and Indonesian nationalist leaders would be quick to point out, the performance of the British and the Dutch was little better than the French in that regard. Nor does he explain why the Vietnamese Communist movement was able not only to fill the consequent vacuum but then to surmount enormous challenges to triumph over the concentrated power first of France and later of the United States.

Perhaps a more persuasive answer for the weakness of the middle class in modern Vietnam was the historic weakness of the commercial sector during the traditional period. Like China, Vietnam had been a predominantly agricultural society, and trade and manufacturing had never realized the influential position that they acquired in Europe or in several other countries of Asia. Confucian official doctrine displayed a distaste for the crass pursuit of wealth allegedly represented by the merchant class and expressed a clear preference for the honest labor of the rice farmer, whose fields produced the food necessary for sustenance of the entire population. Such prejudices undoubtedly affected attitudes and behavioral patterns in colonial Indochina and contributed to the distaste for Western capitalism on the part of many Vietnamese intellectuals.

Historical factors may also help to explain the surprising strength of the Communist movement in Vietnam. As the contemporary Marxist intellectual Nguyen Khac Vien has pointed out, some of the key characteristics of Confucian doctrine predisposed Vietnamese intellectuals to the Marxist, rather than the capitalist, vision of the contemporary world. While in many respects Marxism and Confucianism are strikingly different, key similarities between the

³ Two proponents of these respective points of view are Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, 2 vols. (New York: Praeger, 1967), and Nguyen Khac Vien, "Confucianism and Marxism in Vietnam," in Nguyen Khac Vien, ed., *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam* (Berkeley, Calif.: Indochina Resource Center, 1974), pp. 15-74.

⁴ Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the U.S., and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Random House, 1985).

two doctrines may have facilitated the appeal of Marxist ideology to traditional elites in Vietnam: a common emphasis on collective responsibility versus individual rights; the concept of an educated elite with unique access to a single truth as embodied in classical doctrine; and the stress in both ideologies on personal ethics and service to society. As Nguyen Khac Vien has noted, for centuries Vietnamese Confucianism was closely identified with the concept of selfless devotion to the cause of the fatherland, a tradition that Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues never tired of pointing out. The great Confucian statesman and strategist Nguyen Trai, who assisted Le Loi in driving out Chinese invaders in the fifteenth century, was cited as one of the nation's historic leaders in DRV literature during the Vietnam War. It was probably no accident that a high percentage of the founding members of the Indochinese Communist Party came from families connected with the Confucian ruling elite.⁵

The ideological preferences of intellectuals in colonial Indochina were hardly the decisive factor in the outcome of the Vietnam War, of course. Certainly few U.S. policymakers would have accepted the assumption that such factors decreed the defeat of capitalist forces in Vietnam. Still, the appeal of Marxist ideas among intellectuals and the historical weakness of the entrepreneurial tradition were undoubtedly significant explanations for the unusual popularity and effectiveness of communism in modern Vietnam. While they were probably not conscious of such factors, U.S. officials were well aware of that popularity, but they nonetheless resolved to press on. To some, the stakes were too high to accept a defeat. For others, the prospects of victory were uncertain, but a failed effort was considered better than no effort at all.

If these judgments are valid, it must be asked whether and how the United States could have won the Vietnam War. To some, the answer is obvious. With a massive application of firepower, it could have destroyed the war-making capacity of the DRV and reduced, if not entirely eliminated, the insurgent movement in the south. Such, at any rate, are the views of some recent critics, who maintain

that the U.S. defeat in Vietnam was above all the result of a failure of will or strategic thinking in Washington.⁶

Few would deny that the United States had the capacity to bring about the massive, if not total, destruction of the North Vietnamese regime. But there were serious risks in undertaking such an approach. In the first place, any U.S. military action that threatened the survival of the DRV raised the very real possibility of direct Chinese, if not Soviet, intervention. While Chinese leaders were obviously anxious to avoid a direct military confrontation with the United States, debate over how to deal with the growing U.S. role in the war was intense in Beijing, and a massive intervention by Chinese forces along the lines of the "volunteers" in the Korean War could not be ruled out.

Even if China had not intervened, it seems clear that, short of the total destruction of North Vietnam, any direct U.S. attack on the north would have been a lengthy and exceedingly costly operation. Communist leaders had undoubtedly anticipated the possibility of a massive U.S. invasion of the north and prepared accordingly. While such a strategy might have relieved the immediate threat of a Communist takeover of the south, it would have embarked U.S. forces on a much more difficult conflict with few prospects of quick success. From the evidence presented here, it is clear that North Vietnamese resistance would have been stubborn and protracted in nature. It is hard to imagine the American people according their firm public support for such an enterprise unless the danger to U.S. national security was a clear and present one.

The question then arises: Was the avoidance of a Communist victory in Indochina sufficiently important to justify such risks? For all the rhetoric about falling dominoes in Washington, several U.S. presidents from Truman to Kennedy had tacitly answered that question by refusing to embark on the road to a direct military role in the conflict. Eisenhower and Kennedy had come perilously close, but both had ultimately concluded that it was a Vietnamese war to win or lose. Even Lyndon Johnson, who transformed the Vietnamese

⁶ Summers, *On Strategy*, is the best-known example. Also see General Bruce Palmer Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1984), and Norman B. Hannah, *The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War* (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, 1987).

⁵ Nguyen Khac Vien, "Confucianism and Marxism," pp. 34-41. To distinguish the patriotic component of Vietnamese Confucianism from its more feudal nature, Vien made a clear distinction between the Confucianism of the mandarins and the Confucianism of the people.

civil conflict into an American war, tacitly conceded in his final months in office that there were limits to how far the United States could go in guaranteeing the survival of an independent South Vietnam. Presidents Nixon and Ford put on the final touches by first accepting a compromise settlement and then refusing to take military action to prevent a Communist victory in the spring of 1975. In extremis, a generation of U.S. presidents, by their actions if not by their words, had recognized that Vietnam was not vital to U.S. national security. Whether the consequences of the war have validated that judgment must be dealt with in the final section of this book, as we take a brief look at the events that have taken place in the region since the end of the war.