

# Why Did We Fight?

## Three Interpretations of the War

Was America's war in Vietnam a noble struggle against Communist aggression, a tragic intervention in a civil conflict, or an imperialist counterrevolution to crush a movement of national liberation? These competing interpretations of the war ignited fiery debates in the 1960s and remain unresolved today.

### Anti-Communism

During the war years, America's leaders insisted that military force was necessary to defend a sovereign nation — South Vietnam — from external Communist aggression. As President Lyndon B. Johnson put it in 1965, "The first reality is that North Vietnam has attacked the independent nation of South Vietnam. Its object is total conquest."

Johnson's statement firmly adhered to the view articulated by his predecessors, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy, namely that the Communists in Vietnam were supported and directed by the Soviet Union and China as part of a worldwide campaign to spread Communism. It followed, therefore, that the war in South Vietnam was not an isolated, local conflict, irrelevant to American national security, but instead one that was inseparable from the nation's highest priority — the Cold War struggle to contain Communism around the globe. Further raising the stakes, policymakers warned that if South Vietnam fell to Communism, neighboring countries would inevitably fall in turn, one after another, like a row of dominoes.

As the Vietnam War ground on, the idea that North Vietnam's efforts to conquer South Vietnam posed a threat to America was increasingly discredited. The Sino-Soviet conflict and the existence of a maverick Communist Yugoslavia argued against the idea of monolithic Communism enterprise, a concept policymakers began to view as simplistic and naive. Yet, despite its dismissal by western thought leaders, the unified nature of global Communism was an essential article of faith for Communist North Vietnam. For example, North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap, the victor at Dien Bien Phu and architect of the Tet Offensive, wrote in 1966:

The South Vietnamese revolution is an integral part of the global revolution. . . . .

A world socialist system has come into being and is developing, comprising thirteen countries with a population of over a billion, covering a quarter of the world's area. The socialist system accounts for over 38 percent of the world's industrial output, has powerful defense forces, and occupies first place in many essential branches of technology. Despite internal difficulties resulting from rapid growth, the socialist system, on account of the excellence of the socialist regime, the great vitality of Marxist-Leninism, has been growing in strength, continuously and in every aspect; it is the bastion of world revolution, the mainstay of the national liberation movement and of the movement for defense of world peace.

Its birth and development have changed the balance of forces in the world, and it has become the decisive factor in the development of human history. The socialist countries are unanimous in supporting our people in the two zones. The considerable aid they have given us constitutes an extremely important factor for the triumph of our people's revolutionary struggle.

"The Liberation War in South Vietnam: Its Essential Characteristics" reproduced in *The Military Art of People's War*, pp. 248-249, Vo Nguyen Giap (1970).

But whether or not Communism was still thought to be monolithic, by the early 1970s, the goal of repulsing Communism and protecting the independence of South Vietnam as a sovereign nation had disappeared from America's stated purpose for prosecuting the war. President Nixon's historic 1972 trips to Beijing and Moscow made the argument that the war was necessary to contain Communism difficult to maintain as Americans wondered how Nixon could offer toasts of peace to Mao Zedong and Leonid Brezhnev while still waging an "anti-communist" war in Vietnam. As the journalist Jonathan Schell put it, "If these great powers were not, after all, the true foe," then the war in Vietnam "really was a civil war in a small country, as its opponents had always said, and the United States had no business taking part in it." Under Nixon, the strategic, ideological goal of the Vietnam War - - to defeat the global spread of Communism in Vietnam - - was replaced by the more modest tactical objective of procuring the release and return of American P.O.W.s.

### Civil War

Critics of the war pointed out that after World War II the United States made a clear choice to support the French effort to re-establish its colonial rule in Indochina, and eventually assumed the bulk of France's cost for the first Indochina War. It should have been no surprise, therefore, that Vietnamese revolutionaries perceived the United States as a neocolonial power when it committed its own military forces in the next war.

Moreover, critics argued, the primary sources of opposition to the American-backed government in Saigon were indigenous and deep rooted, not just in North Vietnam, but throughout the South.

Indeed, from the late 1950s through the mid-1960s the bulk of Communist-led fighting was carried out by southern guerrillas of the National Liberation Front, dubbed by its enemies the "Vietcong". Only after the war was well underway did large units from North Vietnam arrive on the southern front. Antiwar opponents also challenged the claim that South Vietnam was an "independent nation" established by the Geneva Accords of 1954. Those agreements called for a temporary partition of Vietnam to be shortly followed by a nationwide election to choose a single leader for a unified Vietnam. When it became clear to both Saigon and Washington that the Communist leader Ho Chi Minh would be the victor, the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem, with American support, canceled the election.

Thus began a two-decade failed effort to build a permanent country called South Vietnam. Although the government in Saigon was never a mere malleable puppet of the United States, it was nonetheless wholly dependent on American military and economic support to survive against its enemies, including many non-Communist parties and factions in the South.

In recent decades, a number of historians — particularly younger scholars fluent in Vietnamese — have developed various versions of the civil war interpretation. Some of them view the period after the French defeat in 1954 as “post-colonial,” a time in which long-brewing internal conflicts between competing versions of Vietnamese nationalism came to a head. As the historian Jessica Chapman of Williams College puts it, “The Vietnam War was, at its core, a civil war greatly exacerbated by foreign intervention.” Others have described it as a civil war that became “internationalized.”

### Counterrevolution

But alongside the “civil war” interpretation, a more radical critique developed — the view that America’s enemy in Vietnam was engaged in a long-term war for national liberation and independence, first from the French and then the United States. According to this position, the war was best understood not as a Cold War struggle between East and West, or a Vietnamese civil war, but as an anticolonial struggle, similar to dozens of others that erupted throughout the Third World in the wake of World War II. When the French, despite enormous American support, were defeated by Vietnamese revolutionaries, the United States stepped in directly to wage a counterrevolutionary war against an enemy determined to achieve full and final independence from foreign control.

This interpretation was shared by many on the antiwar left, including Daniel Ellsberg, the once-hawkish defense analyst who turned so strongly against the war that he was willing to sabotage his career by making public 7,000 pages of classified documents about the history of the Vietnam War, the so-called Pentagon Papers. Ellsberg made his argument most succinctly in the 1974 documentary “Hearts and Minds.”

The name for a conflict in which you are opposing a revolution is counterrevolution,” he said. “A war in which one side is entirely financed and equipped and supported by foreigners is not a civil war.” The question used to be, he added, “might it be possible that we were on the wrong side in the Vietnamese war. We weren’t on the wrong side; we are the wrong side.

In the decades since 1975, all three major interpretations have persisted. Some writers and historians have embraced President Ronald Reagan’s view that the war was a “noble cause” that might have been won. That position has failed to persuade most specialists in the field, in large part because it greatly exaggerates the military and political virtues and success of the United States and the government of South Vietnam. It also falls short because it depends on counterfactual claims that victory would have been achieved if only the United States had extended its support for Diem (instead of greenlighting his overthrow), or tried a different military strategy, or done a better job

winning hearts and minds. However, the war as it was actually conducted ended disastrously for the United States and its allies.

Of course, choosing one of three discrete theories to describe the purpose of the war is a dubious undertaking, since the American rationale for entering the fight can be seen as encompassing all three.

Certainly, the impetus for our initial and increasing involvement in Vietnam was unvarnished anti-Communism. Where the French had fought to hold onto a valuable piece of their empire, the United States spent blood and treasure, not for any discernable economic advantage, but to prevent South Vietnam from “falling into the hands” of the Communists.

There was a substantial number of nationalist, anti-colonialists in South Vietnam who were also anti-Communist and fought against the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong (their counterparts in North Vietnam had either fled south or been eliminated). They were not “lackeys” or “running dogs” of the “imperialist” Americans, but instead sought to establish an independent, democratic, non-Communist South Vietnam. As the United States inexorably took over the role of fighting the Communist forces and arranged for a succession of generals to lead the Saigon government, these southern nationalists were increasingly marginalized. Yet as late as 1968, jolted by the shock of the Tet offensive, millions of these fervent but factionalized anti-Communists, mostly concentrated in urban centers and provincial capitals, rallied in a rare display of solidarity. Even the An Quang Buddhists, whose 1963 and 1966 rebellions had brought the state to its knees, now cast their lot with the constitutional system. Since these nationalists were democratic as well as anti-Communist, they sought to make the South Vietnamese government more responsive to the people. Unfortunately for them, their efforts to reform the government were ignored by the United States and rebuffed by the U.S.-approved leaders in Saigon. The fact that these democrats existed in large numbers and were consistently anti-Communist does support the characterization of the conflict as a civil war.

Finally, the war as waged by America can also be described as “counterrevolutionary” in the simplistic sense that the Communists were revolutionaries and the U.S. fought against them. But it’s difficult to imagine the U.S. waging a war in far off Vietnam if the revolutionaries had not been Communists. Consequently, attempting to separate the anti-Communist basis for U.S. intervention from a counterrevolutionary (pro-colonial?) basis is a difficult, if not ultimately fruitless, exercise.

Although the desire to accurately identify America’s motives for waging the Vietnam War is understandable, such an inquiry will amount to little more than an academic exercise unless it serves to answer two fundamental questions:

Was the war worth fighting?

Has the U.S. learned anything from it?