

Warriors and Fools

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Preface

This book is about the Vietnam War. Its focus is on the American statesmen and soldiers who made some terrible, tragic mistakes and choices that led to the loss of that war; and over 58,000 American and unknown millions of Vietnamese lives.

As a young infantry officer, just a few years out of West Point, I led a platoon of thirty men and then a company of over one hundred soldiers in Vietnam. My unit lost several men killed and scores wounded. My West Point Class of 1967 lost twenty-nine killed in action - one of the highest tolls of the West Point classes that fought there.

When I returned from Vietnam, after two tours of duty training men to go to the battleground that I had left, the war ended for America. Then, while in graduate school preparing for a teaching assignment at West Point, Saigon fell to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam or Communist North Vietnam.

I wondered why this happened. After all, for over two decades Presidents had committed the US to a cause that was supposed to be right and just for both America and the Vietnamese. We also had spent much treasure in dead and wounded. I determined to find out the answers.

The story that unfolds in the pages ahead is what I discovered about the why and how we lost that war. It is also an account of my journey of over fifty years to uncover the reasons, motives, and lessons of this great tragedy.

Introduction

This book is a story, not a history.

I wanted to write this as a ‘story’ of a war that I fought in – an event that has played a large part in my life - because I knew that I could not be impartial. I wanted to compose a book that I could let out my feelings and passions. I could not do that and call it a history.

I have tried, however, to be as faithful to the history as I could. Therefore, I have included views that I do not agree with and accounts that I feel missed the point or tried to make one. I have also tried to be fair to those who had lived it – that is, to remember that the men who made recommendations, choices, and decisions for the Vietnam War were without foresight of what we now know.

I went into this project with a set notion of what went wrong and why. Some of that has survived in this story. Some of my preconceived notions have changed.

The essential points of this story are twofold. First, both US civilian and military leaders charged with making decisions and executing them during the Vietnam War failed America and its soldiers. Second, they also failed others, particularly the South Vietnamese, who depended on the US to keep its commitment to an independent South Vietnam free of communist subjugation.

Leader misjudgments and miscalculations were not the only reasons for this failure, as some have claimed. Rather, this narrative will show how they were more a result of personal faults and a lack of trust, honesty, and understanding among and between American civilian leaders and their military counterparts.

The enemy also had a great deal to do with it. Often overlooked in American histories of the conflict, North Vietnamese leaders persistently and decidedly pursued their goals. They also developed effective approaches to winning their war of unification. Their soldiers courageously and resolutely fought for its achievement. Yet, US leaders and advisors either ignored their enemy, or just did not understand them.

Thus, the purpose of this story is to understand and describe how and why the breakdown in US decision-making occurred, and why they did not consider their enemy properly. This account will also offer remedies for how to prevent similar circumstances in the future.

Background

When I entered West Point in July 1963, I had not even heard of Vietnam. In fact, the first I had become aware of Vietnam was sometime a year later. There was some talk of the war and our participation in it as advisors after graduation. I also remember reading an article or two in *Life Magazine* about the US military advisory operations.

In the summer of my sophomore year, the Academy assigned me to go on Army Orientation Training to the 25th Infantry Division in Hawaii. I got there in late June 1965. Some US combat units had already deployed to South Vietnam by then and had fought the Vietcong (the name usually used at that time for the Vietnamese Communists who were fighting the South Vietnamese Government).

A classmate and I ran into some infantry Lieutenants not much older than us at a small officers' club on Waikiki beach. They were on their way to Vietnam. They were eager to get there and experience combat; not knowing what it was all about yet. After several 'Singapore Slings,' we wondered how long the war would last and whether we would get there when we graduated in two years.

I trained with an infantry company in the 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment for the next month. Some of the soldiers in that battalion had just returned from Vietnam. They had volunteered to serve as door gunners for the US helicopters supporting the South Vietnamese Army. A few had shot their machine guns at elusive targets. No one that I know of had gotten wounded or hurt. Their stories of their experiences were usually about the strangeness of the country and its people, and how hot and wet it could be all at the same time.

The training in my company was intense. That was because the 25th Infantry Division – the parent unit of the battalion I was assigned to - knew that it would deploy to Vietnam sometime in the fall. It was the best experience a young cadet who wanted to join the infantry could get short of war.

After returning to West Point, I read sometime in the early winter a *New York Times* article about a unit in the 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry getting overrun in the 'Iron Triangle' (a Vietcong base area) outside of Saigon. It was the company I had trained with that summer. They had lost all their officers and most of their non-commissioned ones either killed or wounded. Suddenly, the war became very personal.

As graduation approached in the summer of 1967, we listened to press conferences and read articles about how well the war was going for us. We all became worried it would be over before we could get into it.

At the time the Army had a rule that recent graduates could not go directly to Vietnam. Instead, they would have an assignment with some Army unit not yet in Vietnam before going there. Upon graduation, I chose the infantry, got married, and left with my new wife to go to an airborne unit in Germany.

Optimism that the war would end proved folly. After a little more than a year I went to a battalion in the 101st Airborne Division in a place in Vietnam that I could not at first pronounce. By then already 19 of my classmates had been killed in action. I was fortunate. I returned home after my share of combat. In the year I was there, the war took another ten classmates.

Several years after my return I was a graduate student at the University of North Carolina. Studying history for a return to West Point as an instructor in the History Department, I had an

opportunity to study the war – at least the materials that were then available. Several months after I began my studies, in April 1975 Saigon fell. That incident incited me to find out why we lost the war.

One day, I was reading some of the infamous *Pentagon Papers* – a top secret study that Robert McNamara had ordered while he was Secretary of Defense. One of the study's authors, a Daniel Ellsberg, had leaked it to the *New York Times*. I came across a memo that floored me.

An Assistant Secretary of Defense had written and sent it to McNamara on 24 March 1965. That date had been just sixteen days after the first American ground combat units landed in South Vietnam. The memo's title was 'Plan of Action for South Vietnam.' The first paragraph of that plan listed 'US aims' as: "70% to avoid a humiliating US defeat (to our reputation as guarantor); 20% to keep SVN (and then adjacent) territory from Chinese hands; 10% to permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life."

I was amazed, angry, and disgusted. So, this is what our government policy-makers had determined were the reasons for the employment of hundreds of thousands of American soldiers, marines, airmen, and sailors to Vietnam. Most hideously, I thought, these were the reasons that tens of thousands of them had already died there. I could not believe what I had just read.

I continued to read all four volumes of the Gavel Edition of the *Papers*. What I read further enraged me. I just could not believe the callous tone of the papers, and the lack of understanding of the nature of war as I had studied and experienced it.

I shared these findings in some of the papers I wrote for my graduate degree. Though I found my advisors and professors understanding of and sympathetic to my feelings, I was there to get a degree, not to draft any formal accusation or finding on the war. I harbored these feelings and kept them inside while I continued to read and study whatever I could get my hands on in the years that followed on how and why we got engaged in Vietnam.

In my last three years on active duty, I was a professor at the National War College. There I designed and taught a course of the 'History of the Vietnam War.' As far as I had known none of the professional military war colleges then had yet taught such a course. I thought by then, 1995, it was worthy of study.

That opportunity gave me several terrific insights on the war. First, there had finally been some release of papers, mostly captured, of North Vietnamese documents that gave some understanding of their views and decisions on the course of the war. Several scholars wrote books offering their opinions on them. These presented interesting and valuable understandings of the consequences of US decisions on the war's conduct. Second, discussions with students at the time, mostly Lieutenant Colonels and Colonels, convinced me of the need and worthiness of further study of the war by senior officers – particularly of the decision-making issues and relationships between the senior military and civilian leaders involved in them.

The above journey of discovery led me to further study of the war, and eventually to the writing of this book and the telling of the story ahead.

What is Ahead?

What lies ahead are some of the thoughts and understandings I have gained through studying and teaching about the Vietnam War while in the Service, and my studies since my retirement. In my attempt to discover these insights, I have relied in part on the wisdom of an ancient Greek historian named Thucydides, whose work, *The Peloponnesian War*, I read at the Naval War College in the late seventies. While difficult to read, inside I found all kinds of historical ‘analytical nuggets’ on how nations, particularly democratic ones, wage war; the factors that one often considers in doing so; and the relationships between civilian leaders and soldiers in strategic formulation.

In Thucydides’ examination of the decision- making, strategies and operations of the two primary antagonists of the Peloponnesian War – Athens and Sparta – he found five main factors that were important to understanding the outcomes of the war. They were: the personalities and abilities of the leaders; the geopolitical and historical settings of the two opponents and their allies; the major strategic decisions of the war and the underlying reasons for them.

Most importantly, Thucydides - like another theorist of war after him called Clausewitz – also stressed the difficulties in making these choices due to the many unknowns and uncertainties that people face in waging war. These war theorists further emphasized that war is a two-party affair between antagonists who have different views of war and how they go about waging it. To ignore the latter is to invite peril in one’s decisions on how to conduct it.

I have organized my story around these main factors. Accordingly, the first chapter explains the situation and setting of the post-World War Two period, focusing on the US. It tries to place the overall climate of the later Vietnam crisis and issues in the context of American experiences and attitudes after the Second World War and during the first decade of the Cold War.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the personalities and expertise of the American decision makers, and the major decisions and policies that they made during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. Here I targeted the relationships of the civilian and military people who were struggling with the Vietnam situation to address it as a war of national liberation and communist expansion, and how to counter it.

Chapter 4 describes the domestic environment that JFK and LBJ faced in making their major policy decisions toward Vietnam described in the two earlier chapters. The focus of this chapter is on the roles that the civil rights and antiwar movements, the Press, Public Opinion, and the Congress played in affecting how JFK and LBJ made their decisions on Vietnam.

Chapter 5 then returns to US policy-making over the war during the Nixon Administration. Here the story concentrates on Nixon’s efforts to end the war favorably and ‘honorably’ for the US. The narrative attempts to show how his decisions and the factors affecting them led to the ultimate defeat of the original US policy aims, and the fall of the South Vietnamese government to Northern aggression.

Chapters 6 and 7 shift the view toward the North Vietnamese leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. These Chapters present their aims for the war, and how they conducted military and diplomatic actions toward the attainment of them. My purpose here was to show that the North Vietnamese had a substantial role in the American failure. I also wanted to show how US policy-makers misjudged or outright ignored their enemy's motives and actions to their peril.

Collectively, Chapters 8, 9, and 10 again change the viewpoint. This time the focus is on American military leaders and the strategies and operational concepts they employed to obtain their civilian leaders' political aims, as they knew and understood them. In these chapters I describe the numerous difficulties American leaders faced in waging a new kind of war in an unfamiliar environment, how they attempted to adapt to it, and the problems they tried to overcome.

In the first two of these chapters, I discuss General Westmoreland's Strategy of Attrition and compare it to what the North Vietnamese were trying to do. The narrative concentrates on the development of his theater military strategy and the critiques of it; both then and now. Chapter 9 also examines the TET offensive as a turning point in the war, both militarily and politically. Chapter 10 then discusses the change in the American command in Vietnam following the TET offensive. It assesses General Abrams' military strategic view and compares it to the one Westmoreland pursued. It also explains the US military's attempts to execute the Nixon policy of Vietnamization.

Chapter 11 summarizes and reviews the US policies toward Vietnam presented in Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 5 with the military strategies explained in Chapters 8, 9, and 10. It seeks to gain insights on the interfaces and integration of civilian policy making with military strategy formulation to determine the effectiveness of policy direction and military execution for the Vietnam War.

Chapter 12 examines the post-war reaction to Vietnam, the evolution of lessons learned, and how these lessons were applied to post-war events in the Carter, Reagan, and H.W. Bush Administrations. It concludes with a set of the Vietnam War's lessons learned that the author feels is most appropriate to explain why the US lost the war.

Chapter 13 is a logical follow-on to Chapter 12. It looks at what has occurred most recently in American national decision making during the "Global War on Terror" and the conflicts in the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama Administrations. It concludes the overall story by showing how the lessons of the Vietnam War still matter. The chapter proposes how the use of these lessons today can improve relations between American senior civilian and military leaders and enhance the formulation and execution of our national security strategy.

The principal view expressed here - and the overall theme of the story that follows - concentrates on a quote often misattributed to the Greek historian Thucydides. "A nation that makes a great distinction between its scholars and warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools." I believe that phrase, however misquoted or attributed, offers significant insights on the nature of the relationship of the US decision-makers, both civilian and military, that had a profound influence on the bad decisions made and their resultant failures in the Vietnam War.

As the reader will see ahead, the interrelationship between American civilian and military government leaders and advisors was extraordinarily divisive and dysfunctional. So much so that it resulted in flawed, timid policies and foolish strategies that led to defeat. Moreover, that troublesome interrelationship was a result of mistrusts, misunderstandings, and misperceptions on their roles, responsibilities, and what they thought would lead to a positive end to the war.

A significant conclusion is that these same poor relationships and their causes still exist in US national security institutions today. Moreover, they have resulted in the inability of the US to bring a favorable end to the current, endless 'Global War on Terror.' Therefore, the study of the lessons of the Vietnam War – notably what caused and resulted from the flawed relationships of American civilian and military leaders and their advisors – could result in a much-improved relationship, and more effective strategic formulation today.

Chapter 1: The Best of Times; The Worst of Times

On August 14, 1945, President Harry Truman announced the end of World War Two. From New York to San Francisco, people embraced and danced in the streets. There was much to rejoice and be proud of in America. The United States had unconditionally defeated the indomitable Nazis in Europe and a fanatic Japanese foe in the Pacific. The US now stood as the strongest military power on earth. It owned the most powerful weapon known to mankind. America also had been the arsenal of democracy. Now many thought its industrial might and wealth would lead to peace and prosperity in the aftermath of the war.

However, there were causes for concern and uncertainty on the horizon. As the war ended, our 'Grand Alliance' Soviet ally showed that it did not share the vision that America had for the post-war world. Domestically, there were people who had seen the potential of new horizons during their war service and sought better lives in America. While most were highly optimistic, some had concerns about a postwar recession, as there had been following the First World War. These changes, expectations, concerns, and uncertainties - and how they would come to influence the Vietnam War - are the subjects of this chapter.

Section 1.1 - The Story's Main Characters: Where They Were on V-J Day

As people throughout America and elsewhere rejoiced the end of the war, the prominent figures in the story that follows were in various locations in Europe, Asia, and the US. Some took part in the festivities or celebrated in their way. Others were too occupied with official or personal issues and could not take time out to rejoice. Regardless of their thoughts, feelings, or circumstances at the time, all wondered what was in store for them now that the war was over.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was in London, England. He had just completed his latest assignment working as a news correspondent for the Hearst news corporation. The 28-year-old Kennedy was drafting a story on his observations of the Potsdam Conference, which he had just attended in Germany. The focus of that conference had been what to do about the defeated Axis powers and forming a new post-war world.

JFK was unable to celebrate Truman's victory announcement. He had entered the US Navy's dispensary in London for severe 'abdominal discomfort' and a recurrence of back spasms. Both ailments may have been a result of the injuries he attained when a Japanese destroyer in the Pacific had cut in half his patrol boat two years prior.

Treated and released after several weeks from the Navy's London dispensary, John Kennedy would go on to become a Senator from Massachusetts and later the 35th President of the United States. Ironically, some of the Potsdam Conference agreements, such as the division of Vietnam into occupation zones that would result in a permanent partition of that country, would have a decisive effect on his future presidency and this story.

In Washington, DC, **Lyndon Baines Johnson** was a serving representative from Texas in the US Congress. He was still mourning the death of his beloved Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had played a role in his election to Congress before the war. LBJ had lost a bid for the Senate a few years ago and remained quite uncertain of his political future with Roosevelt gone. After hearing of the end of the war, he decided that with his uncertain political career, he did not have much cause for celebration.

As then Representative Johnson contemplated his situation, he was counting on his war service to have a positive effect on his political future. As a naval reserve officer visiting the Southwest Pacific on an inspection tour in 1942, he had been on board a US Navy aircraft in an air battle with some Japanese 'Zeros.' His later stories to his congressional colleagues of his heroics became increasingly vivid, even incredulous, as time passed. To show his wartime bravery, he proudly displayed on his lapel the Silver Star that General MacArthur had awarded him. He would make his war service a prominent part of his future campaigns. He was successful and eventually elected a Senator, a Vice President, and the 36th President of the US.

Paradoxically, when LBJ succeeded Kennedy after the latter's assassination, he did not want to become a wartime president. Nor, as we will see, would he have the where with all to become an effective one.

Richard Mulhouse Nixon was celebrating with the crowd in Times Square. He was still in the Navy, working on contract terminations. He and his wife, Pat, were expecting their first child. After their 'celebration' over the end of the war, they began to discuss their future.

A month after V-J Day, an old family friend and Republican Party leader sent him a letter. The family friend wanted to know if Nixon wanted to run for office. This letter settled his future in politics. He ran for Congress in 1946 and became a representative for California's 12th district. This episode began his career in politics, in which he later served as a US Senator, Vice President to Eisenhower, and 37th President of the United States.

Nixon's strong anti-communist rhetoric and actions would characterize his political career. He won an election in 1949 to the Senate, after smearing his opponent as soft on communism. As Vice President in 1959, he would debate Soviet Premier Khrushchev over the benefits of capitalism over communism. After losing in 1960 his first bid for the President to JFK, he would badger first Kennedy and then Johnson over their policies and actions toward Communist North Vietnam. After gaining the Presidency, as this narrative will show, he would eventually be the one who lost America's war against communism in Vietnam.

Robert Strange McNamara was in the Army Air Corps Regional Hospital in Dayton, Ohio. The hospital had admitted him and his wife for polio. McNamara, an officer in the Army Air Corps, had been serving overseas as a statistical control officer. His polio was mild. Doctors released him about two months later. However, his wife Marg, had a more severe attack. The future Secretary of Defense arranged for his wife's transfer to one of the top orthopedic clinics in the US in Baltimore. Doctors cured her polio. However, the medical bills were expensive.

McNamara had hoped to move back to Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts where he had gotten a degree in business before the war. The medical bills and his former boss in the Army Air Corps convinced him to join several of his wartime associates to form a team for industry to measure business cost effectiveness. Ford Motor Company hired them. In their work there, they became known as the 'Whiz Kids' for their abilities to create huge profits for the company. Eventually, McNamara became President of Ford. In that position, he made enough money to pay off his wife's medical bills, own a beautiful home in Michigan, and live comfortably.

Nearly fifteen years after the war ended, JFK would ask him to join his Administration. The new President wanted him to use the same techniques he had at Ford to reform the Department of Defense. McNamara would be a highly successful reformer of the Department's budget and programs. But, he would be a disastrous war advisor for the two Presidents he served. He would resign in 1968, having lost the confidence of LBJ.

In August 1945 Sergeant **Henry Alfred Kissinger** oversaw finding and rounding up ex-Nazis in Bensheim, Germany as part of the American occupation forces. He had fought in the Battle of the Bulge just last December. He was now, along with a small number of other GIs, the virtual ruler of this small town. Kissinger lived in a small villa untouched by the war. He usually got around town in his confiscated Mercedes. The Army had given him a sense of purpose for which he would ever be indebted.

Returning home to New York City at the age of twenty-four in 1947, he entered Harvard under the GI Bill to eventually study and later teach history and international relations there. In the 1950s, he gained a reputation as a brilliant professor of international politics and strategic affairs; having written several books on the matter that became bestsellers. Nelson Rockefeller – a prominent Republican politician – sought him as an advisor. After Rockefeller failed to get the nomination as a Presidential candidate in 1960, Kissinger went to work as a consultant for the Kennedy Administration.

In 1968 Nixon asked him to be his National Security Advisor. In that capacity, Kissinger was a faithful servant. He was a major actor in the President's desires to change relations with the Soviet Union and Communist China. Later he was also instrumental in obtaining a seriously flawed peace treaty with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1973 to end the US military involvement in the war. For that work, he received the Noble Peace Prize. A few years later, North Vietnam defeated the South Vietnam Army and unified all of Vietnam.

When he heard of the end of the war, **Maxwell Davenport Taylor** was traveling through France visiting several former battlefields and conversing in fluent French with local villagers. In 1945 he was a Major General who had commanded one of the most renowned divisions of the war against the Nazis – the 101st Airborne Division. This is an outfit that had parachuted into Normandy in June 1944. Taylor had been one of the first to descend and land in Nazi-held Europe. Soon after he heard of the end of the war, the Army sent him orders to return to the US to take over as Superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point. Taylor would go on to be the Chief of Staff of the US Army during the Eisenhower Administration. Later he would serve first as a military advisor and then as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for President Kennedy.

General Taylor would critically influence the conduct of military operations in Vietnam in several ways. First, his writings in the fifties on the use of military force would convince President Kennedy on the utility of the employment of US troops in limited wars, to include counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam in the early sixties. Second, he would influence the assignment of many of those whom he knew in the Army to serve in positions of command in the Vietnam War. Two of these 'Taylor Men,' Paul Harkins and William Westmoreland, became commanders of the US Military Command in Vietnam. Moreover, many of the subordinates he commanded in the 101st who were in their thirties during the war would become senior division commanders in their fifties in Vietnam.

Finally, as an Ambassador to South Vietnam for President Johnson, Taylor would make recommendations on the US policies and actions there from 1963 to 1968. These would eventually influence the decisions and outcomes of the war.

In August 1945 **William Childs Westmoreland** was a Colonel commanding an infantry regiment as part of the US occupation force in Germany when he heard of the Japanese surrender. He had commanded artillery units during the war; serving with distinction in North Africa, Sicily, and France. At the war's end in Europe, he had met the Russian soldiers invading Germany from the East. The ordinarily tacit Westmoreland reported to his superiors that "Vodka

flowed like water; it was difficult to imbibe moderately and walk out under your own power. I succeeded. At the last party, we were served by female soldiers wearing boots and pistols. After the meal, they became our dancing partners and were very graceful dancers.”

In a letter to his father a month after Truman’s announcement, ‘Westy,’ as some colleagues would sometimes call him, lamented: “The deployment of troops [back to the United States] is progressing rapidly due to pressure from home.” He worried that the effect of all of this would be an ineffective army which would result in “merely a group of more or less random troops.” He indicated that he thought he did not want to be part of the resultant peacetime Army. He did not think he could endure such an ordinary life with soldiers who were difficult to motivate.

Nevertheless, he decided to remain in the Army. With Taylor’s support, whom he had met in Sicily during the war, he steadily rose through the ranks. He commanded a prestigious airborne brigade in the Korean War. He then made general officer and followed in Taylor’s footsteps as Superintendent of West Point and commander of the 101st Airborne Division. Taylor later recommended him as commander of US forces in Vietnam. Subsequently, Westmoreland worked with Taylor on responding to the crises of 1965 in South Vietnam that resulted in the employment of significant US ground combat forces there.

He continued to perform as LBJ’s commander in the manner that had gotten him promoted throughout his career. He was a loyal supporter of his Commander-in-Chief regardless of the costs. He would not argue his views if he knew they were contrary to his superiors’ opinions. The consequences for the American conduct of the Vietnam War would be catastrophic.

Creighton Williams Abrams was on the island of Leyte in the Philippines when he got word of the surrender. He was watching fireworks celebrating the news. ‘Abe’ - his Army given nickname - had just arrived with a group of fellow officers assigned to survey possible postwar base sites for future use by the American military in the Pacific.

He had come to the Philippines from Europe, where at the end of the war there, as a Colonel, he had commanded an armored task force in the 4th Armored Division. His outfit had led the way in the counterattack against the Nazis to relieve the American forces surrounded at Bastogne. Later, ‘Abe’ led the furthest thrust east of any American force to meet with the advancing Russians. He had been one of the most decorated soldiers of the war in Europe – winning the Distinguished Service Cross and two Silver Stars. General Patton, when asked about his combat skills, is purported to have said, "I'm supposed to be the best tank commander in the Army, but I have one peer — Abe Abrams. He's the world champion."

After the war and his return from the Philippines, Abrams served in a variety of assignments, leading to his command of a division, a corps, and other high ranking general officer positions in the Pentagon and elsewhere. He would serve as his West Point Classmate General Westmoreland’s Deputy Commander in South Vietnam until taking over that position in May 1968. Then, as Commander MACV, he oversaw the implementation of Nixon’s Vietnamization program and the withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam from 1969 to 1972.

His relationship deteriorated with Nixon, who would blame him for the poor South Vietnamese Army performance in its offensive in Laos in 1971, and its near failure to stop a major North Vietnamese offensive in 1972. It would be one of the greatest ironies of the Vietnam War that a man considered one of the greatest offensive tacticians and leaders in World War Two, would oversee the most humiliating withdrawal of US forces in history.

Over 8000 air miles west of Washington, DC, people in Vietnam could not listen to Truman's 14 August announcement of the end of the war. However, a few did hear Emperor Hirohito's announcement of Japan's surrender on 15 August. Two Vietnamese nationalists, **Ho Chi Minh** and **Vo Nguyen Giap**, were in a remote mountain area in northern Vietnam near the Chinese border when they heard the Emperor's announcement. Besides being nationalists, they were members of the Vietnamese Communist Party. They were also the political and military leaders of a growing political and guerrilla movement called the Viet-Minh. This organization had been fighting against the Japanese occupying their homeland. They had also resisted the French colonial forces to gain Vietnamese independence before the Japanese had taken control of French Indochina during the war.

Ho had been listening to events marking the end of the war on a small radio that an element of the United States Office of Strategic Services or OSS had provided. These Americans had parachuted into the Viet-Minh base area months ago to help train Giap's forces in their fight against the Japanese. The 54-year-old Ho, who had contracted tuberculosis in a Chinese prison a few years prior, had fallen ill recently from his overall weakened state. An American medic treated him, and perhaps had saved his life.

With the news of the Japanese surrender, a rejuvenated Ho called for a meeting of his communist colleagues. They were now gathering in the base area. He convinced them that now was the time to conduct their planned revolution and declare an independent Vietnam. Subsequent actions to achieve this would become known as the August Revolution. It would result in the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

Giap would soon march his troops into Hanoi to affect this relatively bloodless revolution and set up a government there. Meanwhile, Ho drafted a declaration of independence. He showed it to the American OSS team leader for a critique. The opening phrase read, "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Ho would carry this declaration with him into Hanoi. Before a crowd of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, after reading this passage, he announced the founding of a Vietnamese nation.

Despite Ho and Giap's attempts to peacefully establish an independent Vietnam state, they would have to fight to get one. First, they fought the French; then the Americans. Almost eight years after Ho's death in 1969, communist forces would finally establish a unified Vietnamese state through force of arms in 1975.

As Ho and Giap listened to the Japanese surrender on 15 August over an American OSS team radio, over 700 miles to the south another Communist Viet-Minh leader by the name of **Le Duan** had just gotten out of a French prison. He had spent almost the entire war there. Now free, his

previous work in organizing resistance in the southern part of Vietnam against the French did not go unnoticed by the Viet-Minh leadership.

Several months later Ho's Vietnamese Communist Party appointed Le Duan as head of the Southern Territorial Committee. He located his headquarters in a small town in My Tho Province in the Mekong Delta southwest of Saigon. He would now oversee directing efforts in the south to set up a southern branch of a unified Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Soon it would become evident to Le Duan that the British occupation forces would be reestablishing French rule in that part of Vietnam. He would go into hiding and organize the Viet-Minh resistance during the coming war against the French.

Le Duan would be a key leader for Ho Chi Minh and Giap during the Viet-Minh's struggle for independence. After the victory against the French, he stayed in the South for a time to continue to organize and oversee communist political cells in preparation for unification. When that did not happen peacefully, he prepared and for a time led the southern communists in their struggle against the US-sponsored South Vietnamese government. As we will see in the narrative ahead, he would move to Hanoi to further lead and conduct the war against American forces, eventually gaining the unification of Vietnam.

Also in the southern part of Vietnam, word of the Japanese surrender and the end of the world war had reached another Vietnamese national by the name of **Ngo Dinh Diem**. Diem had been a member of the French puppet Vietnamese Government before the Japanese had taken over. After their occupation, he had refused to serve the Japanese for fear of being cast as a collaborator. At the time of the Emperor's announcement, Diem was hiding around the Saigon area. Now, hearing of the surrender, he tried to go north to prevent the current Vietnamese ruler from recognizing a communist-dominated government under Ho Chi Minh.

Diem was a staunch catholic and anti-communist. Before World War Two, he had served as a French administrator of a province, where he had suppressed a communist inspired uprising. Consequently, the Viet-Minh knew him well. On the way north after the end of the war, Viet-Minh communist elements captured and imprisoned him. A month later, Ho Chi Minh called for his release. The Vietnamese Communist leader then met with Diem and asked him to join the new government. Diem refused and left the country.

He would return after the Viet-Minh defeated the French in 1954. He would take over the newly formed Republic of South Vietnam set up to prevent the spread of communism. Diem's assassination in 1963, just days before JFK's, would be a significant factor in the future commitment of US ground combat forces in the war.