The Second Indochina War, 1954-1975, grew out of the long conflict between France and Vietnam. In July 1954, after one hundred years of colonial rule, France was forced to leave Vietnam. Communist forces under the direction of General Vo Nguyen Giap defeated the allied French troops at Dien Bien Phu, a remote mountain outpost in the northwest corner of Vietnam. This decisive battle convinced the French that they could no longer maintain their Indochinese colonies and Paris quickly sued for peace. As the two sides came together to discuss the terms of the peace in Geneva, Switzerland, international events were already shaping the future of Indochina.

**The Geneva Peace Accords**

The Geneva Peace Accords, signed by France and Viet Nam in the summer of 1954, reflected the strains of the international Cold War. Drawn up in the shadow of the Korean War, the Geneva agreement was an awkward peace for all sides. Because of outside pressures brought to bear by the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, Vietnam’s delegates to the Geneva conference agreed to the temporary partition of their nation at the seventeenth parallel. The Communist superpowers feared that a provocatively powerful peace would anger France and its powerful ally, the United States. Moscow and Peking did not want to risk another confrontation with the West so soon after Korea. Furthermore, the Communists believed they were better organized to take southern Vietnam by political action alone, a prediction that did not come to pass.

According to the terms of the Geneva Accords, Vietnam would hold national elections in 1956 to reunify the country. The division at the seventeenth parallel would vanish with the elections. The United States and many anti-Communists did not support the Accords. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles thought that the political protocols of the Accords gave too much power to the Vietnamese Communists. He was not going to allow the Communists to take southern Vietnam without a fight. Instead, Dulles and President Dwight D. Eisenhower supported the creation of a counter-revolutionary alternative south of the seventeenth parallel. The United States supported this effort at nation-building through a series of multi-lateral agreements that created the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).

**South Viet Nam Under Ngo Dinh Diem**

The SEATO Treaty provided for the mutual defense of all signatories, including the newly-created and U.S.-supported, Government of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN), or South Vietnam. In 1956, Ngo Dinh Diem, a staunchly anti-Communist figure from the South, won a controversial election that made him president of South Vietnam. From his first days in power, Diem faced stiff opposition from his opponents. He urged the United States to support his counter-revolutionary alternative, claiming that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), or North Vietnam, wanted to take South Vietnam by force. In late 1957, with American aid, Diem began to counterattack. He used the help of the American Central Intelligence Agency to identify those who sought to bring his government down and arrested thousands. In 1959, Diem passed a series of acts known as Law 10/59 that made it legal to hold someone in jail if they were a suspected Communist without bringing formal charges.

From the moment he took power, Diem faced enormous difficulties. Students, intellectuals,
Buddhists and others joined the Communists in opposition to Diem’s rule. The more these forces attacked Diem’s troops and secret police, the more he tried to control their protests. The president maintained that South Vietnam was a peace-loving democracy and that the Communists were out to destroy his new country.

The Kennedy administration seemed split on how peaceful or democratic the Diem regime really was. Some Kennedy advisers believed Diem had not instituted enough social and economic reforms to remain a viable leader in South Vietnam. Others argued that Diem was the “best of a bad lot.” As the White House met to decide the future of its Vietnam policy, a change in strategy took place at the highest levels of the Communist Party.

From 1956-1960, the Communist Party of Vietnam desired to reunify the country through political means alone. Accepting the Soviet Union’s model of political struggle, the Communist Party tried unsuccessfully to cause Diem’s collapse by exerting tremendous internal political pressure. After Diem’s success against Communist cells in the South, however, southern Communists convinced the Party to adopt more violent tactics to guarantee Diem’s downfall. At the Fifteenth Plenum in January 1959, the Communist Party finally approved the use of revolutionary violence to overthrow Ngo Dinh Diem’s government. In May 1959, and again in September 1960, the Party confirmed its use of revolutionary violence and the combination of the political and armed struggle movements. The result was the creation of a broad-based united front to help mobilize southerners in opposition to the Saigon government.

The National Liberation Front

The united front had long and historic roots in Vietnam. Used earlier in the century by the Communists to mobilize anti-French forces, the united front brought together Communists and non-Communists in an umbrella organization that had limited, but important goals. On December 20, 1960, the Party’s new united front, the National Liberation Front (NLF), was born. Anyone could join this front as long as they opposed Ngo Dinh Diem. Many non-Communists who did join the Front may not have realized that the Party would ultimately dissolve the NLF and limit non-Communist representation in a unified government.

The character of the NLF and its relationship to the Communists in Hanoi has caused considerable debate among scholars, anti-war activists, and policy makers. From the birth of the NLF in 1960, government officials in Washington claimed that Hanoi directed the NLF’s violent attacks against the Saigon government. In a series of government “white papers,” Washington insiders denounced the NLF, claiming that it was merely a puppet of Hanoi. The NLF, in contrast, argued that it was autonomous and independent of the Communists in Hanoi and that it was made up mostly of non-Communists. Many anti-war activists supported the NLF’s claims. Washington continued to discredit the NLF, however, calling it the “Viet Cong,” a derogatory and slang term meaning Vietnamese Communist.

December 1961 White Paper

In 1961, President Kennedy sent a team to Vietnam to report on conditions in South Vietnam and to assess future American aid requirements. The report, now known as the "December 1961 White Paper," argued for an increase in military, technical, and economic aid, and the introduction of large-scale American advisers to help stabilize Diem's government and crush the NLF. As Kennedy weighed the merits of these recommendations, some of his other advisers urged the president to withdraw from Vietnam altogether, claiming that it was a "dead-end alley."

In typical Kennedy fashion, the president chose a middle route. Instead of a large-scale
military buildup as the white paper had called for or an immediate withdrawal, Kennedy sought a limited partnership with Diem. The United States would increase the level of its military involvement in South Vietnam through more machinery and advisers, but would not intervene whole-scale with troops. This arrangement was problematic from the start, and soon reports from Vietnam indicated that the NLF was increasing its control in the countryside. To counteract the NLF’s success, Washington and Saigon launched an ambitious and deadly military effort in the rural areas. Called the Strategic Hamlet Program, the new counterinsurgency plan rounded up villagers and placed them in hamlets constructed by South Vietnamese soldiers. The idea was to isolate the NLF from villagers, its base of support. This plan was based on the British experience in Malaya, but conditions in South Vietnam were distinct, and the strategic hamlet concept produced limited results. According to interviews conducted by U.S. advisers in the field, the strategic hamlet program had a negative impact on relations between peasants and the Saigon government. In the past, many rural Vietnamese viewed Diem as a distant annoyance, but the strategic hamlet program brought government policies to the countryside. Many villagers resented being forced off of their ancestral farm land, and some have suggested that the failure of the strategic hamlet concept actually increased cadre ranks in the NLF.

Military Coup

By the summer of 1963, because of NLF successes and its own failures, it was clear that Diem’s government was on the verge of political collapse. Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, had raided the Buddhist pagodas of South Vietnam, claiming that they had harbored the Communists that were creating the political instability. The result was a massive protest on the streets of Saigon that led one Buddhist monk to self-immolation. The picture of the monk engulfed in flames made world headlines and caused considerable consternation in Washington. By late September, the Buddhist protest had created such dislocation in the South that the Kennedy administration supported a general’s coup. In 1963, some of Diem’s own generals in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) approached the American Embassy in Saigon with plans to overthrow Diem. With Washington’s tacit approval, on November 1, 1963, Diem and his brother were captured and later assassinated. Three weeks later, President Kennedy was murdered on the streets of Dallas.

At the time of the Kennedy and Diem assassinations, there were 16,000 American military advisers in Vietnam. The Kennedy administration had managed to run the war from Washington without the large-scale introduction of combat troops. The continuing political problems in Saigon, however, convinced the new president, Lyndon Baines Johnson, that more aggressive action was needed. Perhaps Johnson was more prone to military intervention or maybe events in Vietnam had forced the president’s hand to more direct action. In any event, after suspected Communist attacks on two U.S. ships in the Gulf of Tonkin, the Johnson administration argued for expansive war powers for the president.

Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

On August 2, 1964, in response to American and South Vietnamese espionage along its coast, North Vietnam launched a local and controlled attack against an American ship on call in the Gulf of Tonkin. A second attack was supposed to have taken place on August 4, although Vo Nguyen Giap the DRV’s leading military figure at the time and Johnson’s Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara have recently concluded that no second attack ever took place. In any event, the Johnson administration used the August 4 attack to secure a Congressional resolution that gave the president broad war powers. The resolution, now known as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed both the House and Senate with only two dissenting votes (Senators Morse of Oregon and Gruening of Alaska). The Resolution was followed
by limited reprisal air attacks against North Vietnam. Throughout the fall and into the winter of 1964, the Johnson administration debated the correct strategy in Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs of Staff wanted to expand the air war over the DRV quickly to help stabilize the new Saigon government. The civilians in the Pentagon wanted to apply gradual pressure with limited and selective bombings. Only Undersecretary of State George Ball dissented, claiming that Johnson’s Vietnam policy was too provocative for its limited expected results. In early 1965, the NLF attacked NLF attacked two U.S. army installations in South Vietnam, and as a result, Johnson ordered the sustained bombing missions over North Vietnam that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had long advocated.

The bombing missions, known as OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER, and the introduction of American combat troops in March 1965, caused the Communist Party to reassess its own war strategy. From 1960 through late 1964, the Party believed it could win a military victory in the South “in a relative short period of time.” This overly optimistic prediction was based on a limited war scenario in South Vietnam, and not on the introduction of U.S. combat troops. With the new American military commitment, however, the Party moved to a protracted war strategy. The idea was to get the United States bogged down in a war that it could not win militarily and create unfavorable conditions for political victory. The Communist Party believed that it would prevail in a protracted war because the United States had no clearly defined strategy, and therefore, the country would eventually tire of the war and demand a negotiated settlement. By late 1965, Hanoi’s more realistic predictions were based on a military stalemate and a protracted war strategy.

The War In America

One of the greatest ironies in a war rich in ironies was that Washington had also moved toward a limited war in Vietnam. The Johnson administration wanted to fight this war in “cold blood.” Cold blood. This meant that America would go to war in Vietnam with the precision of a surgeon with little noticeable impact on domestic culture. A limited war called for confined mobilization of resources, material and human, and caused little disruption in everyday life in America. With the advent of the Cold War and an increase in nuclear weapons, a limited war made sense to many strategic thinkers in and out of Washington. Of course, these goals were never met. The Vietnam War did have a major impact on everyday life in America and the Johnson administration was forced to consider the domestic consequences of its decisions everyday. Eventually, there simply were not enough volunteers to continue to fight a protracted war and the government instituted a draft. As the deaths mounted and Americans continued to leave for Southeast Asia, the Johnson administration was met with the full weight of American anti-war sentiments. Protests erupted on college campuses and in major cities at first, but by 1968 every corner of the country seemed to have felt the war’s impact. Perhaps one of the most famous incidents in the anti-war movement was the police riot in Chicago during the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Hundreds of thousands of people came to Chicago in August 1968 to protest American intervention in Vietnam and the leaders of the Democratic Party who continued to prosecute the war.

The Tet Offensive

By 1968, things had gone from bad to worse for the Johnson administration. In late January, the DRV and the NLF launched coordinated attacks against the major southern cities. These attacks, known in the west as the Tet Offensive, were designed to “break the aggressive will” of the Johnson administration and force Washington to the bargaining table. The Communist Party believed that the American people were growing war-weary and that Hanoi could humiliate Johnson and force a peace upon him. Most of Hanoi’s predictions about the Tet Offensive proved elusive. Communist forces suffered tremendous casualties in the South and the massacre of thousands of non-Communists in Hue during the Tet.

http://vietnam.vassar.edu/overview.html
Offensive created ill-will among many of Hanoi’s supporters. Furthermore, several leading southern Generals thought the plans for the Tet Offensive were too risky and this created a strain in relations between northern and southern Communists. In any event, in late March 1968, a disgraced Lyndon Johnson announced that he would not seek the Democratic Party’s re-nomination for president and hinted that he would go to the bargaining table with the Communists to end the war.

The Nixon Years

Johnson engaged the Vietnamese in secret negotiations in the spring of 1968 in Paris and soon it was made public that Americans and Vietnamese were meeting to discuss an end to the long and costly war. Despite the progress in Paris, the Democratic Party could not rescue the presidency from Republican challenger Richard Nixon who claimed he had a secret plan to end the war.

Nixon’s secret plan, it turned out, was borrowing from a strategic move from Lyndon Johnson’s last year in office. The new president continued a process called “Vietnamization” an awful term that implied that Vietnamese were not fighting and dying in the jungles of Southeast Asia. This strategy brought American troops home while increasing the air war over North Vietnam and relying more on the ARVN for ground attacks. The Nixon years also saw the expansion of the war into neighboring Laos and Cambodia, as the White House tried desperately to route out Communist sanctuaries and supply routes. The intense bombing campaigns and intervention in Cambodia in late April 1970 sparked intense campus protests all across America. At Kent State in Ohio, four students were killed by National Guardsmen who were called out to preserve order on campus after days of anti-Nixon protest. Shock waves crossed the nation as students at Jackson State in Mississippi were also shot and killed for political reasons, prompting one mother to cry, “they are killing our babies in Vietnam and in our own backyard.”

The expanded air war did not deter the Communist Party, however, and it continued to make hard demands in Paris. Nixon’s Vietnamization plan temporarily quieted domestic critics, but his continued reliance on an expanded air war to provide cover for an American retreat angered U.S. citizens. By the early fall 1972, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and DRV representatives Xuan Thuy and Le Duc Tho had hammered out a preliminary peace draft. Washington and Hanoi assumed that its southern allies would naturally accept any agreement drawn up in Paris, but this was not to pass. The new leaders in Saigon, especially president Nguyen van Thieu and vice president Nguyen Cao Ky rejected the Kissinger-Tho peace draft, demanding that no concessions be made. The NLF too rejected many of the provisions of the draft. The conflict intensified in December 1972, when the Nixon administration unleashed a series of deadly bombing raids against targets in North Vietnam’s largest cities, Hanoi and Haiphong. These attacks, now known as the Christmas bombings, brought immediate condemnation from the international community and forced the Nixon administration to reconsider its tactics and negotiation strategy.

The Paris Peace Agreement

In early January 1973, the Nixon White House convinced the Thieu-Ky regime in Saigon that they would not abandon South Vietnam if they signed onto the peace accord. Likewise, Hanoi convinced leaders of the NLF that all southern political prisoners would be released shortly after the peace accord was signed. On January 23, therefore, the final draft was initialed, ending open hostilities between the United States and the DRV. The The Paris Peace Agreement did not end the conflict in Vietnam, however, as the Thieu-Ky regime continued to battle Communist forces. From March 1973 until the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, ARVN forces tried desperately to save South Vietnam from political and military collapse. The end finally came, however, as DRV tanks rolled south along National Highway One. On the morning of April 30, Communist forces captured the presidential palace in Saigon, ending the Second Indochina War.