

DEFINING MOMENTS
**THE VIETNAM
WAR**



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Chapter Four

TET: THE TURNING POINT



Who won and who lost in the great Tet Offensive against the cities? I'm not sure. The Viet Cong did not win by a knockout, but neither did we. The referees of history may make it a draw.... We have been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders, both in Vietnam and Washington, to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds.

—CBS Journalist Walter Cronkite, February 27, 1968

North Vietnam and its Viet Cong allies launched the pivotal Tet Offensive, the most important military action of the entire Vietnam War, on January 31, 1968. This was the traditional starting date for Tet, the beginning of the lunar new year and a major national holiday of the Vietnamese people. In years past, fighting had lessened dramatically or even ceased altogether during this holiday. South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu thus gave many South Vietnamese (ARVN) troops leave from duty during the holiday so that they could celebrate with their families. But in the early morning hours of January 31, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese (NVA) forces launched a surprise assault on locations all across South Vietnam, including many places that U.S. strategists believed were safe from enemy attack. The invaders struck dozens of provincial capitals, five of South Vietnam's six largest cities, and smaller towns and villages all across the beleaguered country. The major targets of these attacks in most cases were South Vietnamese government installations, military bases, and communications strongholds. The Communists avoided targets with large concentrations of



The Tet Offensive of January 1968 targeted hundreds of towns, villages, and military installations across South Vietnam, as well as these major cities and bases.

U.S. forces except in a few select cases where the symbolic importance of the target was irresistible. In Saigon, for example, Viet Cong soldiers used an underground tunnel to seize control of the U.S. Embassy for several hours before being wiped out by American forces.

The Battle for Hue

For the next 25 days, battles small and large raged across the South as stunned American and South Vietnamese forces tried to repulse the invasion. Perhaps the most important and costly battle was fought in the city of Hue, in the northern part of South Vietnam. Hue held symbolic importance for all Vietnamese people. The seat of the ancient imperial government and home to many historic sites of interest, it was also widely regarded as the most beautiful city in all of Vietnam. The Tet Offensive, though, left the once-lovely city in ruins.

Communist forces stormed the city and seized control of much of it on the very first night of Tet. In one of the most atrocious acts of the war, Viet Cong soldiers then rounded up thousands of people believed to have been sympathetic to the South Vietnamese government—including teachers, priests, soldiers, and civil servants—and shot them, clubbed them to death, or buried them alive. It is believed that at least 3,000 people were murdered in this fashion.

On February 12, U.S. forces launched a grim campaign to retake the city. Departing from their usual strategy, Communist fighters did not quickly give ground and retreat into the countryside: in Hue, they stood and fought. As a result, the struggle for control of Hue turned into a vicious nightmare in which seemingly every street became a battle zone. On March 2, American Marines backed by aerial bombing, heavy artillery, and ARVN troops finally drove the Communists out of Hue. But by this time nearly half the city had been destroyed, turning most of the population of the city into homeless refugees. “When the American marines and ARVN forces finally retook the city,” wrote Robert D. Schulzinger in *A Time for War*, “they found a moonscape of charred remains of wooden buildings, rotting corpses, and starving abandoned animals.”

By February 24 the last of the Communist attacks had been repelled and American and ARVN forces had retaken the territory lost in Tet’s opening days. By virtually any military measure, the Viet Cong and NVA forces had been dealt a major military defeat. In all, it has been estimated that between 37,000 and 45,000 Communist soldiers and guerrillas lost their lives in the offensive (out



President Lyndon B. Johnson (at right, with Secretary of State Dean Rusk) was stunned by the scale of the Tet Offensive, which was a public relations nightmare for his administration.

of a total invasion force of 84,000 men). Meanwhile, the United States suffered approximately 1,100 killed and South Vietnam lost another 2,300 soldiers.

The Viet Cong forces that had led the fighting were decimated and ceased to be a major factor in the South for the remainder of the war. In addition, Hanoi's belief that an invasion would spark a popular revolt against South Vietnam's national government failed to materialize. This reality cast doubt on Communist claims that ordinary South Vietnamese supported their cause. Finally, many ARVN units—which had long experienced troubles as an effective fighting force—acquitted themselves well and gained a measure of respect for their fierce defense of their homes and families.

Interpreting Tet

The fact that Tet was a Communist military defeat did not necessarily mean that it was an American and South Vietnamese victory, however.

Though South Vietnam's army had performed better than expected, the government of President Nguyen Van Thieu still enjoyed little public support or respect. In addition, Tet left the government with a huge refugee problem, as upwards of half a million people (some historians place the figure at more than 800,000) uprooted from their homes by the violence sought food and shelter. Most of these desperate people ended up in crowded urban slums or in awful refugee camps.

The United States' reaction to its "victory" was even more complicated. General William Westmoreland, who commanded U.S. forces in South Vietnam, claimed that Tet proved that American forces were clearly superior to the enemy, and that the United States was truly on the path to victory. Westmoreland and other "hawks" in Washington, D.C. wanted to capitalize on Tet and launch new offensive operations that would completely destroy the Viet Cong—and perhaps even force North Vietnam to concede defeat. To this end, Westmoreland requested another 200,000 U.S. troops for deployment in Vietnam.

Political leaders and the American public did not see Tet in the same light. Americans had wanted to believe Westmoreland's claims, made in the fall of 1967, that victory was near at hand, but the surprise Tet attacks told a different story. Television and newspaper coverage of Tet played up the drama and scope of the surprise attack. One newspaper headline proclaimed "WAR HITS SAIGON," and television film crews captured footage of frantic American soldiers defending the embassy in South Vietnam's capital. When news coverage showed the location of Viet Cong attacks on maps of South Vietnam, Americans were alarmed to see that they occurred from one end of the country to another, making it appear that the country had been overrun.

Some coverage of the war was particularly unsettling to the American public. On February 2, NBC aired shocking footage of a South Vietnamese police chief executing an unarmed Viet Cong prisoner in the streets of Saigon. This footage cast America's South Vietnamese allies in a very unfavorable light. Five days later, an American Air Force Major who had helped carry out a devastating attack on a rural village told a newspaper reporter that "it became necessary to destroy the town to save it." To many Americans, this sort of crazy logic seemed symbolic of the U.S. military's whole approach to Vietnam.

As the Tet Offensive went on, major media outlets increasingly questioned American progress in the war. The *Wall Street Journal*, long a supporter of American military intervention in Vietnam, warned in an editorial that



Televised footage of the Tet Offensive, including this execution of a Viet Cong soldier at the hands of South Vietnamese National Police Chief Nguyen Ngoc Loan on the streets of Saigon, shocked and demoralized many members of the American public.

“the American people should be getting ready to accept, if they haven’t already, the prospect that the whole Vietnam effort may be doomed.” And on February 27, CBS News anchorman Walter Cronkite declared on national television that it seemed “more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate.”

Taking Stock After Tet

Even before Tet, top figures within the Johnson administration had begun to express doubts about the war. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, a chief architect of American strategy in Vietnam throughout the mid-1960s, gradually became convinced that the United States could not win in

Vietnam. But even though he privately urged Johnson to change course through much of 1967, when the carnage and violence in Vietnam was spiraling to new heights, he never publicly disclosed his fears or disillusionment. Later, McNamara wrote in his memoir *In Retrospect* that he and his fellow policymakers “acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decisions in light of those values. Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong.”

In early 1968 Johnson replaced McNamara with long-time advisor Clark Clifford, who had once been a big supporter of the war. By the time he took over the helm at the Defense Department, however, he also had come to harbor doubts about U.S. strategy in Vietnam. Clifford promptly pulled together a task force of Pentagon analysts. He told them to examine every part of the existing U.S. strategy and review the overall status of the war in Vietnam. Clifford’s task force returned with a grim assessment of the war and a series of recommendations aimed at getting the United States out of Vietnam. These recommendations included a halt to new deployments to Vietnam, an end to the air war, and new efforts to initiate peace talks.

This advice was not welcomed by Johnson, who was angry about the Tet Offensive. Part of him wanted to follow the advice of “hawks” and send in more troops. But Johnson came to recognize that neither the Congress nor the American people favored such an approach. This realization was due in no small part to a historic March 1968 meeting that Clifford arranged between Johnson and a group of assembled statesmen and retired military leaders collectively known as the “Wise Men.” Over dinner and a long evening of conversation, Johnson was shaken by the sense of futility and defeat that hung over the group. In the ensuing weeks, Johnson reluctantly concluded that withdrawal from Vietnam was the only possible course of action to pursue.

“[We in the Johnson administration] acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation,” said Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. “We made our decisions in light of those values. Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong.”

A Stunning Announcement

After the Tet Offensive, the Vietnam War loomed as a huge political problem for Johnson as well. Many Americans still supported the decision to enter Vietnam, but even among supporters, frustration with the war was growing.



During this March 1968 address to the nation, President Johnson announced his intention not to run for re-election.

After all, U.S. casualties were soaring, with no apparent progress toward long-promised victory. In addition, many Americans viewed the antiwar demonstrations taking place on college campuses and in major cities as representative of the larger cultural changes that were shaking American society during the 1960s. These changes—in attitudes toward sex, gender roles, drug use, and acceptance of traditional symbols and institutions of authority—were deeply alarming to many Americans.

Sensing Johnson's political vulnerability, several Democratic candidates lined up to run against their party's sitting president in the upcoming fall 1968 elections. Anti-war candidate Senator Eugene McCarthy performed well in the New Hampshire primary on March 12, and Senator Robert F. Kennedy announced his candidacy shortly thereafter. With polls showing his popularity shrinking and support for his war policies at record lows, Johnson wondered if he could even win the Democratic nomination, let alone the presidency.

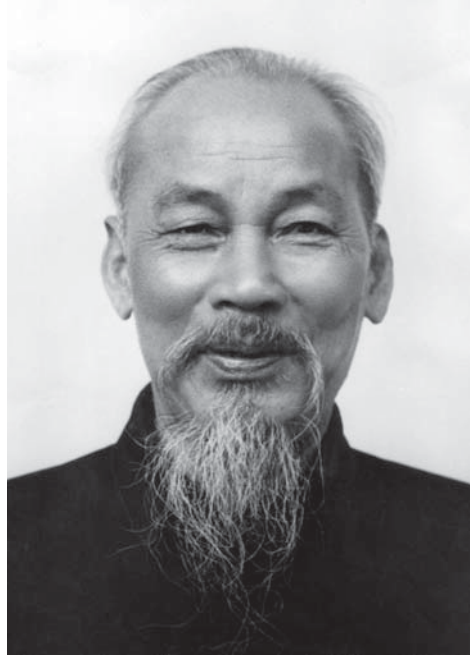
On March 31, 1968, Johnson delivered a nationally televised speech to the American people. The contents of that speech reflected not only changing U.S. perceptions of the Vietnam War after Tet, but also his weakened political standing. Johnson told Americans that he intended to dramatically scale back the aerial bombing campaigns against North Vietnam. He also called for a new round of negotiations with the Communists, rejected military requests for additional troops, and assured the American public that the U.S. military would put a new emphasis on training South Vietnam's military so that it could soon take over primary responsibility for the war's prosecution.

Finally, after a dramatic pause, Johnson made an announcement that startled most Americans: "With America's sons in the fields far away, with America's future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world's hopes for peace in the balance every day, I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office—the Presidency of your country. Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President." Johnson's shocking decision to forego another campaign for the White House assured that America's future course in Vietnam would be determined by new political leadership.

Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969)

Communist Revolutionary and President of North Vietnam, 1945-1969

The man who would become Ho Chi Minh was born Nguyen Sinh Cung on May 19, 1890, in the central Vietnamese village of Kim Lien. Cung was raised in a family with deep respect for education. His father, Nguyen Sinh Sac, was a local teacher who continued to pursue his studies during Ho's youth; his mother, Hoang Thi Loan, was the daughter of a respected local schoolmaster. When he was eleven, Cung was given an adult name, Nguyen Tat Thanh, meaning "he who will succeed." During these years, his father instilled in him a strong sense of patriotism toward his country—and an equally strong dislike for French colonial rule over Vietnam.



For a time, Ho followed in the professional footsteps of his father. After graduating in 1909 from Quoc Hoc, a French-run national academy in the regional capital of Hue, he taught in village schools. During this time, his resentment of French colonial rule over Vietnam increased. Frenchmen in Vietnam held all the important jobs and kept most of the nation's wealth, while Vietnamese peasants worked long hours in the rice fields for little gain. This state of affairs led Ho to engage in a variety of anti-French political activities. Within a matter of months, he became concerned that he might be targeted for arrest by French authorities. In 1911, Ho began a long and remarkable journey for a poor Vietnamese teacher. He signed on as a crew member on a French ocean liner and left his home. He did not return to Vietnam again until thirty years had passed.

Embraces Communism

Ho lived in England and France during the tumultuous years of World War I. Two events related to that war influenced his later politics. One was the Versailles Peace Conference of 1919, during which American President Woodrow Wilson spoke persuasively about the right of nations to pursue

democracy and self-determination. These were the things Ho wanted for his country, but when he attempted to present a proposal for Vietnamese freedom from French colonial rule to Wilson, he was turned away. The other influential event that shaped Ho's world view was the 1917 Communist Revolution in Russia. In this momentous event in world history, landless peasants violently removed the Russian aristocracy that had long ruled the country and set about creating a "worker's paradise" based on the ideas of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. Ho became a student of Communist ideas, and in 1920 he even helped to found the French Communist Party.

Through the early 1920s, Ho advanced his knowledge and training in Communist ideology. He wrote a series of pamphlets and articles protesting French rule of his homeland, and several of these writings were smuggled into Vietnam. He also spent time in the Russian capital of Moscow, studying at the University of Oriental Workers, and in Canton, China, where he trained in revolutionary tactics with other young Vietnamese dissidents. While in China, Ho organized the first Vietnamese group dedicated to Marxist revolution: the Revolutionary Youth League of Vietnam, or Thanh Nien. Five years later, in 1930, he led a group that created the Indochinese Communist Party. This organization was dedicated to bringing independence and Communist rule to all of Indochina, the cluster of nations located in the southeast peninsula of Asia.

These were tumultuous years for Ho. His writings and political activities had made him an underground hero in Vietnam. But he found himself in hostile territory during much of his travels. Only in Russia and its satellite states was Communism an accepted political view. In other nations where he spent time—China, Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies—Ho's movements were continually monitored by authorities, and he was actually arrested several times for his political activities. In June 1931, for example, Ho was arrested in Hong Kong by British colonial police and spent the next two years in prison. Upon gaining his release on a technicality, Ho promptly fled to Moscow. But Soviet leader Joseph Stalin distrusted Ho both for his intelligence and his independent streak, so the Vietnamese Communist leader was forced to curtail his activities for most of the rest of the decade.

Leads Viet Minh against French

In 1941 Ho—who had finally embraced the name Ho Chi Minh, meaning "He Who Enlightens"—and the Indochinese Communist Party created

the League for the Independence of Vietnam, better known as the Viet Minh. The Viet Minh brought together a range of smaller nationalist groups who had been seeking Vietnamese independence. It bound them together under strict Communist organizing principles, and united a wide range of seasoned Vietnamese Communist figures, such as Vo Nguyen Giap. It was during this period that Ho finally ended his three decades of exile and returned to Vietnam.

The Viet Minh hoped to use the chaos of World War II, during which Japan had supplanted France as the colonial administrator in Vietnam, to seize control of their homeland once and for all from foreign occupiers. Eager to court U.S. support for their cause, the Viet Minh downplayed their Communist roots and aided U.S. military forces against Japan. In August of 1945 the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As Japan reeled from these attacks, Viet Minh forces seized control of many of Vietnam's major cities. On August 14 Japan surrendered to the Allied forces, and on September 2, 1945, the Viet Minh declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Their new president, Ho Chi Minh, read a declaration of independence that was based on the United States' own beloved Declaration of Independence.

The victories of 1945 seemed to signal the realization of Ho's lifelong dream of Vietnamese independence, but France quickly announced that it was not ready to relinquish control of its long-time colony. The United States then decided that it would not support Vietnam's campaign for independence against French wishes. In 1946 France began a military campaign to regain control of Vietnam. The fledgling Vietnamese Army, known as the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), wilted in the face of French firepower and quickly lost control of Vietnam's major cities. But rather than give up, the Viet Minh turned to guerrilla warfare, locking the French into a bloody war for control of Vietnam.

Though the Viet Minh seemed outmatched against the French, Giap trained the growing Viet Minh army in guerilla tactics that frustrated the French military. Meanwhile, Ho rallied Vietnamese across the country to the Viet Minh cause, emphasizing the nationalistic aspects of the struggle.

Ho also negotiated with other Communist nations for support. He received the active backing of the Soviet Union, and after the Communists seized power in China in 1949, he also won the support of Chinese leader

Mao Zedong. Ho skillfully used the Communist giants' distrust for one another to maximum advantage, winning crucial military, economic, and tactical support along the way. By allying the Viet Minh independence movement so closely with these Communist nations, however, Ho alienated the United States, which had become determined to stop the spread of Communism around the world.

By 1954 the Viet Minh had fought France to a standstill and forced it to the negotiating table. But they were not strong enough to negotiate for a fully independent Vietnam. Instead, the Geneva Accords of 1954 called for the "temporary" creation of two Vietnams: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or North Vietnam, which was headed by Ho Chi Minh and his Communist allies; and the Republic of Vietnam, or South Vietnam, which was supported by the United States. Had elections been held to unify the country in 1956, as the Geneva Accords stipulated, Ho Chi Minh and the Communists would likely have won because of their leading role in ending French colonial rule. But the United States intervened. South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem and his American allies flatly refused to hold the promised elections.

War with the United States

In the years immediately following the war with France, Ho and his advisers focused on building the economy and solidifying their rule in North Vietnam. By 1959, however, they were strong enough to begin infiltrating South Vietnam with both soldiers and guerillas who preached the glories of Communist revolution. Through the early 1960s, North Vietnam encouraged revolution and resistance to the U.S.-supported Diem regime throughout South Vietnam. It did so partly through its National Liberation Front (NLF), a political organization that stressed national independence and democratic reforms to rural South Vietnamese (while hiding its links to Communist North Vietnam). Another weapon used by Ho's government to destabilize Diem's government was the Viet Cong, a guerrilla organization that essentially served as the military arm of the NLF.

By 1964 it was estimated that nearly half of South Vietnam was under Communist control. Late that year, President Lyndon B. Johnson approved a massive escalation of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. American bombing campaigns against North Vietnam (such as Operation Rolling Thunder)

were initiated early the following year, and U.S. troop deployments steadily rose, reaching more than 500,000 troops by 1968.

Ho's strategy from the beginning was to exhaust the United States into giving up the war. "You can kill ten of our men for every one we kill of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and we will win," he famously predicted. Ho's confidence was so great that he rebuffed any attempt to negotiate peace that did not give Vietnam complete independence.

During the mid-1960s, however, Ho's health declined significantly. Out of necessity, key decisionmaking responsibilities fell to other North Vietnamese leaders. By the late 1960s his role in the North Vietnamese government was, according to some reports, largely ceremonial. Ho died on September 3, 1969, well before the 1973 withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam and the final Communist victory over South Vietnam in 1975. One of the first acts of unification undertaken by the Communist conquerors was to rename the South Vietnamese capital city of Saigon as Ho Chi Minh City in honor of the legendary revolutionary figure.

Today, Ho Chi Minh remains one of the most controversial figures in recent world history. To many Vietnamese people, he was a humble but determined revolutionary who bravely promoted Vietnamese freedom from foreign domination. For many who revere him, Ho is primarily a nationalist who used Communism as the best tool to bring about independence for his country. Some historians share this basic view of him as well. Others characterize him as a ruthless opportunist who used nationalism as a wedge to advance his Marxist beliefs and increase his personal power, even if it brought death to millions of his countrymen. Finally, some scholars contend that this undeniably gifted leader was *both* a devoted patriot and a calculating Communist ideologue; according to these historians, Ho Chi Minh's foremost motivations will always remain somewhat of a mystery.

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American Soldiers Write Home from Vietnam

American soldiers were sent to Vietnam beginning in 1960. Ground troops began arriving in Vietnam in 1965, and on April 30, 1969, the number of American soldiers deployed in Vietnam reached a wartime high of 543,400. From that point forward, troop levels were steadily brought down, and the last U.S. troops left the country in the spring of 1973. The soldiers who served in Vietnam represented a diverse cross section of America, and their opinions about their experiences in Vietnam were equally diverse. In the letters reproduced here, three Americans—Hiram D. “Butch” Strickland of North Carolina; David L. Glading of New Jersey; and Charlie B. Dickey of Washington—wrote home to tell their loved ones about why they fought, what they saw, and what they hoped to find waiting at home for them when they finished their tours. Private Strickland did not return home; his letter was found among his belongings after he was killed on February 1, 1966. Sergeant Glading and Sergeant Dickey both survived the war.

From Hiram D. Strickland:

Dear Folks,

I’m writing this letter as my last one. You’ve probably already received word that I’m dead and that the government wishes to express its deepest regret.

Believe me, I didn’t want to die, but I know it was part of my job. I want my country to live for billions and billions of years to come.

I want it to stand as a light to all people oppressed and guide them to the same freedom we know. If we can stand and fight for freedom, then I think we have done the job God set down for us. It’s up to every American to fight for the freedom we hold so dear. If we don’t, the smells of free air could become dark and damp as in a prison cell.

We won’t be able to look at ourselves in a mirror, much less at our sons and daughters, because we know we have failed our God, country, and our future generations.

I can hold my head high because I fought, whether it be in heaven or hell. Besides, the saying goes, “One more GI from Vietnam, St. Peter; I’ve served my time in hell.”

From *Letters From Vietnam*, edited by Bill Adler, copyright © 2003 by Bill Adler. Used by permission of Presidio Press, an imprint of The Ballantine Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc.

I fought for Sandy, Nell, Gale [his sisters], Mom, Dad. But when the twins and Sandy's kids get old enough, they'll probably have to fight, too. Tell them to go proudly and without fear of death because it is worth keeping the land free.

I remember the story from Mr. Williams' [Thomas Williams, a teacher at Strickland's high school] English classes when I was a freshman that said, "The cowards die a thousand times, the brave die but once."

Don't mourn me, Mother, for I am happy I have died fighting my country's enemies, and I will live forever in people's minds. I've done what I've always dreamed of. Don't mourn me, for I have died a soldier of the United States of America.

God bless you all and take care. I'll be seeing you in heaven.
Your loving son and brother,
Butch

From David L. Glading:

18 Nov 69
Kathy,

I was reading the paper and feel kinda down because of the demonstration in Washington, DC. I guess I'm proud to be an American and proud of my country. It's still number one to me, right or wrong. Although I can't agree completely with the way the war is going, I don't agree on just up and leaving because then the whole purpose, the very reason all of these men have died for, is lost. People in the states need to have an enemy invade them, have them have to see homes burned, their fathers killed or taken away, living in a bunker with bugs and insects just to be able to live through mortar or artillery fire, having GIs come during the day and VC come at night. No one can understand unless they have been here. The demonstrations help the enemy more than anything else. The protests are a slap in the face to most of the guys over here. They are sent here to fight and possibly die protecting America and the other free nations. Their own people through the protesting are prolonging the war longer, thus more GIs get killed. The VC want to see the U.S. get on its knees. I don't.

I went down the road yesterday afternoon to get a few things and my two little girl friends were there. They were about 100 ft away from me and just ran all the way to me. Big smiles on their faces and just saying "Dabid"

and a bunch of other Vietnamese I couldn't understand. I gave them a few cans of C-rations. They picked me some berries and gave them to me to eat plus picked a bunch of flowers and put them in my hat. They like to look at the pictures in my wallet.

From Charlie B. Dickey:

1 June 1969

Dearest Jamie,

I'm sitting in my hootch right now, it is just starting to rain, from the looks of the clouds and the wind it's gonna be a real big one.

It was really hot today, well over 100 degrees, so hot you just don't feel like moving. Sweat just rolls off of you, like being in a sauna bath. No kidding! In fact it is just like that! Even the air burns your lungs.

My Wife, one can never realize how dear freedom is until you taste the bitterness of a war meant to protect freedom. People may scorn and protest but know that we fight for all of you who wish to be free. I know now what it means to have real freedom.

My Dearest, I must close for now, be good, be safe, remember I love you.
Your Devoted Husband,
Charlie

Source: Adler, Bill, ed. *Letters to Vietnam*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2003.

IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

Abrams, Jr., Creighton (1914-1974)

U.S. Army General, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam from 1968 to 1972.

ARVN

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the main military force of South Vietnam.

Ball, George (1909-1994)

United States Undersecretary of State, 1961-1966.

Colonialism

Political and military control over one country by another; often used in reference to the eighteenth through twentieth centuries, when European powers built worldwide empires based on this practice.

Communism

A political system in which the state controls all economic activity. In practice, Communist governments also establish single-party rule and place significant limits on personal freedom and individual rights.

Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)

A five-mile wide buffer zone between North and South Vietnam, established in 1954 by the Geneva Accords.

Democratic Republic of Vietnam

Official name for North Vietnam from 1945 until 1975, when South Vietnam was conquered and the reunified country was renamed the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Dien Bien Phu

Village in northern Vietnam that was the site of a pivotal 1954 battle between French and allied troops and Viet Minh guerrillas; the decisive

CHRONOLOGY

c. 208 B.C.E.

Chinese troops invade the northern half of present-day Vietnam, naming it “Nam Viet,” or “land of the southern Viets.” *See p. 6.*

111 C.E.

Chinese emperor Wu-ti conquers Nam Viet (which at the time includes only the northern half of the country) and makes it a province of China. *See p. 6.*

938

A Vietnamese army led by Ngo Quyen secures independence for Vietnam by defeating Chinese forces in the decisive naval battle of Bach Dang. *See p. 7.*

1428

China recognizes Vietnamese independence.

1627

Jesuit priest Alexander de Rhodes becomes the first Frenchman to enter Vietnam; his arrival marks the beginning of a new era of Catholic missionary work and French influence over Vietnamese economics and politics. *See p. 7.*

1858

France establishes a military base at the coastal city of Danang in Vietnam. *See p. 8.*

1887

France formally establishes French Indochina, comprised of Vietnam and Cambodia; Laos is folded into the empire six years later.

c. 1920

The Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD, or Vietnamese Nationalist Party) is established; it works for independence until 1930, when the group is crushed after a failed military uprising. *See p. 11.*

1930

Ho Chi Minh and others form the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), the first Communist organization in Vietnam. *See p. 11.*

1932

Bao Dai returns from France to reign as emperor of Vietnam under the French.

SOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

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- Caputo, Philip. *10,000 Days of Thunder: A History of the Vietnam War*. New York: Atheneum, 2005. This lavishly illustrated work, written by an award-winning journalist and Vietnam War veteran, brings together a string of short chapters discussing key events, weapons, and people involved in the war.
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