

“The Vietnam War Was an Unwinnable War”:

Is This Judgment Right or Wrong?

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It is safe to say that the Americans, not the Vietnamese, that have produced the most writings about the Vietnam War. The volume of documents written in English by the Americans on the Vietnam War is monumental. The contributions by the Vietnamese authors were quite modest. Today, the American authors are divided clearly into two schools of thought: 1) The majority belongs to the “orthodox” school; and, 2) The minority belongs to the “revisionist” school. In general terms, their positions are totally opposite: for the “orthodox” authors, ***“the Vietnam War was an unwinnable war”*** while the “revisionist” authors believe that the Vietnam War could have been won and at a much lower cost had the U.S employed a more appropriate strategy. This Chapter is an effort to understand, analyze, and evaluate that judgment by the “orthodox” authors that ***“the Vietnam War was an unwinnable war.”***

Origin of the Phrase “An Unwinnable War”

The phrase “an unwinnable war,” which later was used by some of the “orthodox” authors even in the titles of their books, (for example: ***Autopsy of an unwinnable war: Vietnam*** written by William C. Haponski and Jerry J. Burcham, and published by Casemate in 2019; and, ***Vietnam: the history of an unwinnable war, 1945-1975*** written by John Prados, and published by University Press of Kansas in 2009), was probably insinuated for the first time by Mr. George Ball (1909-1994), Assistant Secretary of State in the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson, who advised the President to resolve the war by negotiations because he did not believe that the U.S. would be able to win the war. In his memo to President Johnson, dated July 1, 1965, he presented very clearly his thoughts on the Vietnam War, with the objective to advise President Johnson not to escalate the war. Right in the opening paragraph of his memo, under the heading ***“A Losing War,”*** he gave the following statement:

“The South Vietnamese are losing the war to the Viet Cong. No one can assure you that we can beat the Viet Cong or even force them to the conference on our terms, no matter how many hundred thousand white, foreign (US) troops we deploy.”^[1]

At that time, President Johnson did not listen to this advice, and still decided to escalate the war. Later, after President Johnson's death and the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library had been built, during a recorded oral interview made by the Library, Mr. Ball used the phrase "unwinnable war" for the first time:

"... But each one was addressed at some particular proposal for escalation, challenging the proposal and arguing that we were losing the war, that it was an unwinnable war, that we could commit any number of – 500,000 I think the figure I used at one point in a memorandum – and that we still would not win." [2]

Arguments for the Judgment

In order to clearly understand this negative judgment on the Vietnam War, we must go back to the period when the U.S. government decided to escalate the war. That was the beginning of 1965, two years after the military coup overthrowing the Ngô Đình Diệm regime, with the continuous power struggle among the ARVN generals leading to the internal political chaos and the rapid and strong development of the Communist forces in South Vietnam. This unwanted enemy growth has gradually turned into a very serious threat that forced the U.S. government to make the decision to send ground combat troops to the RVN in order to reverse that dangerous situation.^[3]

^{4]} At that time, except for Mr. George Ball as previously mentioned, almost all close advisors of President Johnson, in particular Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, agreed on the policy of escalating the war in South Vietnam. The escalation of the Vietnam War was carried out through two simultaneous military action programs: 1) Massive build-up of U.S. ground combat troops in South Vietnam; and, 2) Sustained bombings of North Vietnam with Operation Rolling Thunder, by jet fighters from Danang Airbase, from the aircraft carriers offshore, and by B-52 strategic bombers from Guam and Thailand. And for the 3-year period (1965-1967), the intensity of the Vietnam War has increased to the unimaginably horrible level. Following is what Mr. McNamara said in his memoir:

"Between 1965 and 1967, U.S. and South Vietnamese air forces dropped over a million tons of bombs on the South, more than twice the tonnage dropped on the North. ... Sorties against North Vietnam grew from 25,000 in 1965 to 79,000 in 1966 to 108,000 in 1967, and the tonnage of bombs dropped rose from 63,000 to 136,000 to 226,000." [5]

In addition to the objective of reversing the bad situation in South Vietnam at the beginning of 1965, the U.S. government's decision to get itself directly involved in the war and to escalate the war also had another objective, which was to show North Vietnam its determination to defend the South, and to inflict great damages to the North so that they would have to renounce its intention to conquer the South militarily. The U.S. would never be able to achieve this second objective. It is also in his memoir that Mr. McNamara admitted the failure of the Operation Rolling Thunder:

"... as Rolling Thunder intensified, U.S. intelligence estimated that infiltration increased from about 35,000 men in 1965 to as many as 90,000 in 1967, while Hanoi's will to carry on the fight stayed firm." [6]

From that moment on, Mr. McNamara started having second thought about the U.S. ability to win the war. He began to have disagreements with the American senior generals of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) ^[7] on the Vietnam War, especially on the policy of the sustained bombing of North Vietnam. On May 2, 1967, he recommended that President Johnson reject JCS's request to reinforce and expand Operation Rolling Thunder. Then on May 19, 1967, he sent a memo to President Johnson containing his pessimistic judgment on the Vietnam War as follows:

“... Continuation of our present moderate policy, while avoiding a larger war, will not change Hanoi’s mind, so is not enough to satisfy the American people; increased force levels and actions against the North are likewise unlikely to change Hanoi’s mind, and are likely to get us in even deeper in Southeast Asia and into a serious confrontation, if not war, with China and Russia; and we are not willing to yield. So we must choose among imperfect alternatives.” ^[8]

The disagreement between the Mr. McNamara and the JCS was gradually getting more and more serious. Only one day after that memo, i.e., on May 20, 1967, the JCS sent Mr. McNamara a memo in which they referred even to the use of nuclear weapons. Mr. McNamara recounted it in his memoir as follows:

“On May 20, they sent me another memo repeating their views that invasions of North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia might become necessary, involving the deployment of U.S. forces to Thailand, and, quite possibly, the use of nuclear weapons in South China. All of this, they emphasized, highlighted the need to mobilize U.S. reserves. Their continued willingness to risk a nuclear confrontation appalled me.” ^[9]

Having lost the confidence in the JCS' way of thinking, Mr. McNamara turned to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and asked them to evaluate the option of bombing of North Vietnam. The CIA frankly responded as follows:

“We do not believe that any of the programs ... is capable of reducing the flow of military and other essential goods sufficiently to affect the war in the South or to decrease Hanoi’s determination to persist in the war.” ^[10]

Mr. McNamara has then taken a further step in the re-evaluation of the situation of the Vietnam War. He and Mr. Paul Nitze, the Secretary of the Navy, unofficially established a special research group inside the Navy called ***Navy Vietnam Appraisal Group***, which included 10 admirals of the Navy and one brigadier-general of the U.S. Marine Corps, headed by Rear-Admiral Gene R. LaRocque, and sent to Vietnam to study the situation on the spot. In the period of six months, this group tried to understand, studied and evaluated a series of programs, plans, capabilities that could be used as options for the Vietnam War, including the possibility of U.S. troops landing and attacking directly North Vietnam. Its final conclusion was that the U.S. would not be able to win militarily. Mr. McNamara has recorded in his memoir as follows:

“These and other options examined were evaluated as insufficient to achieve a military victory.” ^[11]

With his ingrained pessimistic thoughts and now with the above mentioned totally pessimistic conclusions of the CIA and the research group of the Navy, Mr. McNamara

reached the conclusion that the U.S. had already failed in the Vietnam War. He has written the following statement in his memoir:

“By now it was clear to me that our policies and programs in Indochina had evolved in ways we had neither anticipated nor intended, and that the costs—human, political, social, and economic—had grown far farther than anyone had imagined. We had failed.”^[12]

The Tet Offensive by the Communists (from January 30, 1968), although actually a military defeat of the Communists with a very heavy loss, on the contrary has helped Mr. McNamara to think that he was right in his pessimistic thoughts: the Communists had won. He resigned from his position as Secretary of Defense at the end of February 1968. And his last decision before his resignation was to reject General Westmoreland's request of February 27, 1968 for an additional 200,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam.^[13]

On March 31, 1968, President Johnson announced that he would not run for re-election, stopped the bombing of North Vietnam, and called Hanoi to come to the conference table. After his ascending to the power, President Richard M. Nixon began the implementation of his policy of **Vietnamization of the War**, started the withdrawal of U.S. troops, continued the peace talk with North Vietnam, and finally signed Paris Peace Accords on January 27, 1973. U.S. Congress began to implement measures to tie the hands of the Executive, decreased and finally cut off all military aids to the RVN. On April 30, 1975, the RVN had to surrender. The Communists won the Vietnam War.

Developments of the Judgment

After 1975, the American people have suffered from the **Vietnam syndrome** for several decades. In 1995, Mr. McNamara published his memoir. The memoir has caused a lot of discussions among the American scholars and research, who had studied the Vietnam War. Of course, there were praises and attacks as well. In spite of all these remarks, Mr. McNamara maintained that his memoir has shown only one side of the evaluation of the Vietnam War. He wanted to know what and how the other side (i.e., the Communists) has seen and thought of the war. He sought help from Mr. Leslie Gelb, who was then President of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR),^[14] a non-profit think tank on foreign policy and issues in international relations. He asked the CFR to sound out whether Hanoi wanted to exchange experience of the Vietnam War with the U.S. The timing was good since the U.S. Government had lifted the embargo against Vietnam in February 1994, re-established diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1995, and on April 11, 1997, Mr. Douglas “Pete” Peterson, a former American pilot shot down in North Vietnam and held as a prisoner of war in Hỏa Lò Prison in Hanoi for more than 6 years, would be nominated by President Bill Clinton to serve as the first American Ambassador in Vietnam after the Vietnam War.

In the period from November 1995 to February 1998, there was a total of six waves of meetings in Hanoi, between the American and Vietnamese scholars and former civilian and military officials, which included the two most important persons in

both sides: Secretary of Defence Robert S. McNamara, and North Vietnamese General Võ Nguyên Giáp. Several documents were prepared on the topics of discussions for those meetings. After that, all of them were put together in a folder of documents used for discussions at an international conference called ***“The Vietnam War Re-examined: Its History and Lessons”*** organized by Rockefeller Foundation in Bellagio, Italy, from July 27 to July 31, 1998, with the participation of American and Vietnamese scholars and former officials together with a number of international scholars. After the conference, in 1999, that document folder was published in New York as a book by Public Affairs Publisher under title ***“Argument without end: in search of answers to the Vietnam tragedy.”***^[15] This book included 8 chapters and presented the conclusions of all topics of discussions in the meetings in Hanoi. Chapter Seven, under the title ***U.S. Military Victory in Vietnam: A Dangerous Illusion?*** from page 313 to page 371, will help us understand very clearly the basic argument for the negative judgment on the Vietnam War of Mr. McNamara and his supporters. The whole Chapter Seven, except for the Introduction by Mr. McNamara, was written by former Colonel Herbert Y. Schandler.

Mr. Herbert Y. Schandler (1928-2015) was a veteran and a researcher on the Vietnam War. He graduated from Westpoint Military Academy in 1952, had served two tours of duty in Vietnam in the Special Forces, and retired from the U.S. Army as a Colonel. He obtained a Ph.D. in Public Administration from Harvard University, and was the author of two following famous books on the Vietnam War:

- ***The Unmaking of a president: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam***, published by Princeton University Press in 1977
- ***America in Vietnam: the war that couldn't be won***, published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2009

Dr. Schandler was assigned by Mr. McNamara the responsibility to answer the principal question used as the title for Chapter Seven: ***U.S. Military Victory in Vietnam: A Dangerous Illusion?*** Anh his answer was as follows:

“The achievement of a military victory by U.S. forces in Vietnam was indeed a dangerous illusion.”^[16]

In his explanation of why he thought that the U.S. military victory in Vietnam was an illusion, he wrote very clearly as follows:

“The heart of the illusion is the failure of the U.S. military and civilian leaders alike to understand the nature of the war in which they became involved in Vietnam. It was a people's War – a civil war. Fundamentally, therefore, it was not simply a war of North Vietnamese aggression, as we viewed it at the time.”^[17]

Criticism of Arguments for the Judgment

The most important foundation of the arguments for the negative judgment of the Vietnam War was originated from the failure of the French Expeditionary Force in the

Indochina War (1945-1954), i.e., the resistance war of the Vietnamese people against the evil intention of the French to come back and impose again their domination in Vietnam. The authors of the “orthodox” school all saw the Vietnam War as the continuation of the Indochina War, and the U.S. troops, like the French soldiers, as a foreign army, and as such, would be hated by the Vietnamese people and, in the end, would be defeated just like the French Expeditionary Force. This point of view was the origin of all wrong arguments of the “orthodox” school of thought regarding the nature of the Vietnam War. The “orthodox” authors have based on the thoughts and conclusions of Mr. McNamara, the architect of the American military policy in Vietnam. And they were that the U.S. had done everything possible militarily and still could not win; therefore, the Vietnam War was indeed **“an unwinnable war.”** We will try to evaluate each of all these arguments of this negative judgment.

Arguments on the Nature of the Vietnam War

Let’s begin with a discussion of Dr. Schandler’s affirmation that the Vietnam War was a **“people’s war,”** and, thus, it was **“an unwinnable war.”** This argument by Dr. Schandler showed that he had been much influenced by the Communist line of thinking. The concept of people’s war was synthesized by Communist General Võ Nguyên Giáp from the thousand-year experience of the Vietnamese people in resistance wars against foreign invaders. It was completely appropriate in talking about the Indochina War when the entire Vietnamese people stood up to fight against the French Expeditionary Force. But it was completely wrong in talking about the Vietnam War with the intention to tie the U.S. forces a role similar to the one of the French forces, and to see the South Vietnamese people just like the Vietnamese people in the Indochina War. ***It is quite clear that the American people did not understand Vietnamese contemporary history at all.*** The “orthodox” authors often said that the U.S. political and military leaders did not understand North Vietnam (and that’s why Mr. McNamara had to go to Hanoi several times, during 1995-1998, enduring humiliation to get to understand North Vietnam, though too late), but, in reality, ***these people did not understand even their ally, the RVN, either.***

It can be said that the majority of the American people, who have tried to get some knowledge of Vietnam, including the “orthodox” authors as well as the political and military leaders, believed that North Vietnam, represented by the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), was the only legitimate representative of the Vietnamese people, and also had the merit of defeating the French Expeditionary Force and obtaining the independence for Vietnam. Biased by this incorrect thinking, despite the fact that the RVN was one of the U.S. allies in the Cold War against the expansion of the Communists in Southeast Asia, the Americans did not really completely respect the RVN, and sometimes even openly showed their contempt. ***They did not spend enough time to understand clearly how the RVN was born and why the RVN, from the government to the people, just could not accept to live together with the***

Communists. The below presentation will show Vietnamese contemporary historical events leading to the establishment of the country called the RVN.

“During the French domination in Vietnam, in terms of political organizations and parties, the VCP was neither the first nor the only one to fight against the French. In the latter part of the 19th century there were already many anti-French resistance movements, e.g., Cần Vương (Response to the Call of the Emperor), Văn Thân (Movement of the Intellectuals), Đông Du (Journey East), etc. At the beginning of the 20th century, many political parties were created, e.g., Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng (Vietnam Nationalist Party), Đại Việt Đảng (Greater Viet Party), Duy Dân Đảng (Populist Party), Tân Việt Cách Mạng Đảng (New Viet Revolutionary Party), etc. The Yên Bái Uprising launched by the Vietnam Nationalist Party occurred even before the creation of the VCP in 1930. As a person, Hồ Chí Minh was neither the first nor the only one patriot to fight against the French. As Vietnamese, we have learned and known (from elementary schools) the names of our anti-French patriots and heroes: Nguyễn Trung Trực, Thủ Khoa Nghĩa, Thủ Khoa Huân, Phan Đình Phùng, Nguyễn Thiện Thuật, Hoàng Hoa Thám, etc. of the 19th century; and Phan Bội Châu, Phan Châu Trinh, Kỳ Ngoại Hầu Cường Để, Tạ Thu Thâu, Nguyễn An Ninh, Phan Văn Hùm, etc. of the early 20th century.” ^[18]

Even before the VCP succeeded in the August Revolution in Hà Nội (from August 14 to August 30, 1945), the people of South Vietnam (at that time it was still known as Nam Kỳ or Nam Bộ) had enthusiastically participated in different organizations or movements involved in the struggle for the independence of Vietnam.

“Ngày 18 tháng 3, 1945 tức hơn một tuần sau ngày Nhật đảo chánh 9 tháng 3, lần đầu tiên ở Sài Gòn đã có một cuộc biểu tình khổng lồ, công khai, trên 50.000 người ở sân thể thao Vườn Ông Thượng. Dân chúng Sài Gòn đã nô nức hưởng ứng lời kêu gọi của Hồ Văn Ngà tham dự lễ tưởng niệm các nhà ái quốc Hoàng Hoa Thám, Phan Đình Phùng, Phan Châu Trinh, Nguyễn Thái Học, Nguyễn An Ninh, Dương Bá Trạc. Hài cốt hỏa thiêu của Dương Bá Trạc đã được ông Trần Văn Ân gửi về từ Chiêu Nam (Singapore). Một bàn thờ Tổ Quốc với một đại kỳ màu vàng trên có khắc hai chữ Việt Nam đỏ chói được dựng lên giữa sân, khói trầm nghi ngút. Lần lượt lên diễn đàn có: Hồ Văn Ngà chủ tịch Việt Nam Quốc gia Độc lập Đảng, Trần Quang Vinh đại biểu Cao Đài, Nguyễn Vĩnh Thạnh đoàn trưởng Cận vệ quân và Nội ứng Nghĩa binh (đã cộng tác với quân đội Nhật trong ngày đảo chánh Pháp), luật sư Diệp Ba... Những lời kêu gọi dân chúng tham gia cùng đứng lên củng cố hàng ngũ quyết tâm xóa tan tàn tích thực dân Pháp, những lời tha thiết tưởng niệm các nhà ái quốc đã từng hy sinh cho đại cuộc chống ngoại xâm, đã được hùng hồn nói lên trong bầu không khí tự do, phấn khởi của một dân tộc không còn e dè, lo ngại kẻ thù như trước.” ^[19]

(Translation:

“On March 18, 1945, i.e., more than one week after the Japanese military coup of March 9, for the first time in Sài Gòn, there was a huge public demonstration, with more than 50,000 people in the stadium of Vườn Ông Thượng. The Sài Gòn people have enthusiastically responded to the call of Mr. Hồ Văn Ngà to participate in the ceremony commemorating our patriots such as Hoàng Hoa Thám, Phan Đình Phùng, Phan Châu Trinh, Nguyễn Thái Học, Nguyễn An Ninh, Dương Bá Trạc. Mr. Dương Bá Trạc’s ashes were sent back from Singapore by Mr. Trần Văn Ân. An altar for the Fatherland with a big yellow flag bearing the two bright red words Việt Nam was set up in the middle of the stadium, all in an ambience of burned sandal wooded-incense. The successive speakers were: Hồ Văn Ngà, President of Việt Nam Quốc gia Độc lập Đảng [Vietnamese National Independence Party], Trần Quang Vinh, Cao Đài Representative,

Nguyễn Vĩnh Thanh, Leader of Cận vệ quân và Nội ứng Nghĩa binh [Internal Support Volunteer Guards] (having co-operated with the Japanese Army in the coup to overthrow the French), Lawyer Diệp Ba... The calls for the people to rise up, to strengthen the determination to wipe out all French colonialist relics, the fervent words in memory of all patriots having sacrificed in the fight against the invaders, all were pronounced in an atmosphere of freedom and enthusiasm of a nation that was no longer hesitant or afraid of the enemy like before...")

After the Japanese surrendered, when the British army arrived to disarm them, the French took advantage of the opportunity, and brought their troops back with the intention to recapture Việt Nam, the South Vietnamese people, from all walks of life, regardless of age, and with rudimentary weapons, like just bamboo sticks, once more, immediately organized their resistance from September 23, 1945, a long time before Hanoi officially launched the national resistance on December 19, 1946. In Volume 2 of his memoir (1945-1954), the famous South Vietnamese reporter Nam Đình Nguyễn Kỳ Nam recounted that situation as follows:

“Tức thì, hôm sau [tức là ngày 24-9-1945], súng nổ khắp nơi: Cầu Mac-Mahon [tức cầu Công Lý, trên đường dẫn ra phi trường Tân Sơn Nhất] bị dân-quân giàn trận đánh quân Anh-Ấn giữ cầu rồi đến cầu Bông, cầu Thị Nghè, cầu Kiệu [cuối đường Hai Bà Trưng dẫn sang Phú Nhuận] đâu đâu cũng có trận đánh kịch-liệt. Dân-quân rút ra khỏi Saigon, tổ-chức lại: hể đêm đến, là đột-nhập châu thành đánh phá khắp nơi.” [20]

(Translation:

“Right away, the next day [i.e., September 24, 1945], firearms went off everywhere; the militia were deploying their forces, getting ready to attack the British-Indian troops that were guarding the Mac-Mahon Bridge [i.e., Công Lý Bridge on the road to Tân Sơn Nhất airport]; and along Bông Bridge, Thị Nghè Bridge, Kiệu Bridge [at the end of Hai Bà Trưng Street leading to Phú Nhuận] fierce fighting was everywhere. The militia then withdrew out of Sài Gòn, and regrouped; at nights, they infiltrated back into the city and attacked everywhere.”)

From that moment on, Viet Minh, led by the VCP, have used all tricks to liquidate a fairly large number of the non-communist patriots in all groups, all political parties in order to have the monopoly of leading the national resistance against the French. Even right in Sài Gòn, the Communists were not hesitant in their killings of these patriots.

“Bà Nguyễn Ngọc Sương [Thủ Lãnh Phụ Nữ Tiền Phong], y khoa bác sĩ tốt nghiệp từ Pháp, và chồng là luật sư Hồ Vĩnh Ký, khoảng một tháng sau ngày mở màn Nam bộ Kháng chiến, đã bị bộ hạ của Trần Văn Giàu [cán bộ Cộng Sản, thủ lãnh Việt Minh] xử bắn ở Bến Súc cùng nhiều đồng chí khác, ngày 23 tháng 10-1945, khi quân đội Anh-Ấn tiến chiếm Thủ Dầu Một. Những người bị Trần Văn Giàu bắt ở Thủ Đức trong đó có Trần Văn Thạch (người đã hỏi Trần Văn Giàu trong buổi họp có báo chí tham dự ngày 30 tháng 8-1945, năm ngày sau khi Lâm ủy Hành chánh ra mắt: “Ai đã cử anh làm Chủ tịch Ủy Ban Hành Pháp?”), tất cả đã bị bọn cai ngục được lệnh phải thủ tiêu.” [21]

(Translation:

“Mrs. Nguyễn Ngọc Sương [leader of the Vanguard Women Movement], a medical doctor educated in France, and her husband Hồ Vĩnh Ký, a lawyer, were executed by subordinates of Trần Văn Giàu [Communist cadre, Leader of Viet Minh] in Bến Súc together with several other comrades on October 23, 1945 when the British-Indian troops attacked Thủ Dầu Một. All the people arrested by Trần Văn Giàu in Thủ Đức, including Trần Văn Thạch (the man who had asked Trần Văn Giàu at the meeting attended by the press on August 30, 1945, five days after the creation of the Provisional Administrative Committee: “Who nominated you to be Chairman of the Provisional Administrative Committee?”) were liquidated by the prison guards ordered to do so.”)

During the first period of the Nam Bộ Kháng Chiến (Southern Resistance), Việt Minh, with the Quốc Gia Tự Vệ Cuộc (National Self-Defense Agency) under the leadership of Communist cadres such as Dương Bạch Mai, Nguyễn Văn Trấn (notorious as the Butcher of Chợ Đệm), have murdered numerous non-Communist patriots like Mr. Huỳnh Phú Sổ, Leader of Hòa Hảo Religious Sect, or even Communists, belonging to the Trotskyist Fourth International, like Phan Văn Hùm, Tạ Thu Thâu, Trần Văn Thạch, etc. Meanwhile, in North Vietnam, numerous members of nationalist political parties like the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng (Viet Nam Nationalist Party); were also assassinated by the Communists. Khái Hưng, a famous author of Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (Self-Reliance Writers' Group), had the same fate^[22] just because he was a member of Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng. Having discovered the true nature of the VCP, the non-Communist patriots began to leave the resistance, using all means to escape from the resistance zone and go back to the cities. In the North, **“dinh tê,”** (leave the resistance or leave for enemy-occupied zones) was the popular term for that movement, and in the South it was called **“về thành.”** (go back to the city). Following are the two typical cases of two famous Southern politicians: 1) Professor Trần Văn Hương, when the Southern Resistance began, was Chairman of the Resistance's Administrative Committee of the Province of Tây Ninh; later he served as Mayor of Saigon twice, Prime Minister also twice, Vice-President, and finally President of the Republic of Vietnam; 2) Dr. Nguyễn Lưu Viên, during the resistance time, was Chief Medical Officer of the 320th Division,^[23] later he served as commissioner, minister, and deputy-prime minister in several governments of the RVN. The majority of these **“về thành”** persons did not collaborate with the French administration. For example: Mr. Trần Văn Hương joined the government in the position of Mayor of Saigon only after Mr. Ngô Đình Diệm came back from France to form the government in July 1954. However, these efforts to leave and come back to the city were just some personal decisions. It was only after the VCP launched its program of land reform (Cải Cách Ruộng Đất) in 1953, killing hundreds of thousands of innocent people that the North Vietnamese people could see clearly its cruelty, brutality, and immorality,^[24] and the **“dinh tê”** has really become a popular movement.

Another important political concept needs to be clarified: the legitimacy of the Government of North Vietnam. This issue was discussed by an author as follows:

“Phải thành thật mà nhận rằng, do hoàn cảnh lịch sử đưa đẩy, nhà nước Việt Nam Dân Chủ Cộng Hòa (VNDCCH) lúc mới thành lập đã hội đủ phần nào các điều kiện để mang tính chính thống và được hậu thuẫn của nhân dân. Điểm quan trọng cần ghi nhận ngay ở đây là sự hậu thuẫn này nhân dân Việt Nam dành cho một chính quyền đại diện cho toàn dân để tranh đấu cho độc lập và tự do của đất nước, chứ không phải dành cho một nhà nước Cộng sản để xây dựng chủ nghĩa xã hội. Cuộc kháng chiến thần thánh của nhân dân ta chống thực dân Pháp cũng đặt trên cơ sở này. Chính quyền VNDCCH đã tự động và đơn phương thay đổi điều kiện trong bản hợp đồng với nhân dân. Năm 1951, khi ĐCSVN tái sinh dưới danh hiệu Đảng Lao Động VN và trực tiếp nắm quyền lãnh đạo kháng chiến, đẩy nhân dân vào chỗ giết nhau trong các vụ đấu tố cải cách ruộng đất (trong khi miệng vẫn hô hào đoàn kết toàn dân) thì cũng chính năm đó phải được xem là thời điểm chấm dứt tính chính thống của nhà nước VNDCCH. Phân tích đến cùng, ta phải thấy rõ là thật ra chính ĐCSVN đã bức tử nhà nước chính thống VNDCCH. Và hành động bất hợp pháp này, ngay lập tức, đã bị nhân dân phản kháng và chống đối. Sự gia tăng rõ rệt của những vụ liêu chết tìm cách rời bỏ chiến khu để trở về thành sau năm 1952 của nhiều phần tử yêu nước đã từng thực sự đóng góp cho kháng chiến và của đông đảo đồng bào nông thôn đã nói lên sự phản đối này. Tiếp theo đó, với sự chia cắt đất nước, trắng trợn phản bội quyền lợi của đất nước và với sự quyết liệt chối bỏ và xa lánh của hàng triệu người di cư vào Nam, sự chính thống của nhà nước VNDCCH vĩnh viễn chấm dứt.” [25]

(Translation:

*“Honestly, we have to recognize, by the special circumstances of the country, the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), at its creation, had partially fulfilled the conditions for legitimacy and the support of the people. The important point that needs to be emphasized here is that the support that the Vietnamese people had given to the DRV had been for a government representing the whole nation with the objective of fighting against the French for the country’s independence and freedom, NOT for a Communist government to build socialism. The sacred Resistance of the Vietnamese people was also based on this foundation. The DRV had automatically and unilaterally changed these conditions in the contract with the Vietnamese people. In 1951, when the VCP changed its name to Vietnamese Labor Party (Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam) and directly led the Resistance, and pushed the people into the fratricide in the Land Reform Program (while still calling for national unity) then it is appropriate to take that year as the time the DRV’s legitimacy officially ended. In final analysis, we have to admit that it was the VCP that sentenced the DRV to death and terminated its legitimacy. And this totally illegal action by the VCP was immediately opposed by the Vietnamese people. The huge surge of the “**dinh tê**” movement after 1952, including the patriots who had contributed to the Resistance as well the rural people who had personally witnessed the atrocities of the Land Reform Program, was speaking loudly of this opposition to the DRV and to the VCP. After that, with the division of Vietnam in 1954 accepted by the DRV and the VCP, a blatant betrayal of the national interest, and with the strong determination of the Vietnamese people to reject the Communist regime in the great exodus of North Vietnamese people to the South in 1954-55, the legitimacy of the DRV was terminated for good.”)*

In the meantime, the French Expeditionary Force was gradually bogging down in the war, forcing the French government to find a political solution. The anti-Communist nationalist political parties have invited ex-Emperor Bảo Đại to come back to form a new government.

“Ngày 9-9-1947, 24 đại diện các đảng phái và đoàn thể sang Hong Kong gặp C.H. Bảo Đại.”^[26]

(Translation:

“On September 9, 1947, 24 representatives of political parties and organizations went to Hong Kong to meet ex-Emperor Bảo Đại.”)

They presented their common aspiration:

“...yêu cầu Cựu hoàng Bảo Đại, người đại diện độc nhất, đủ tư cách của dân tộc Việt Nam ra chấp chính và mở cuộc đàm phán với nước Pháp, hằm tái lập hòa bình ở Việt Nam và thực hiện hòa bình và độc lập.”^[27]

(Translation:

“...demanded that ex-Emperor Bảo Đại, the only eligible representative of the Vietnamese people, form a government and open negotiations with France in order to re-establish peace and obtain independence for Vietnam.”)

After the French Government has satisfied all of his demands, including the **prerequisite of returning Cochinchina (i.e., Nam Kỳ) to Vietnam, the ex-Emperor accepted** to come back to Vietnam, and formed the first Government of the State of Vietnam on July 1, 1949, of which he held the position of Prime Minister.^[28] This State of Vietnam was the predecessor of the RVN that was created on October 26, 1955 with Mr. Ngô Đình Diệm as the first president.

All of these above-mentioned developments of the contemporary history of Vietnam show very clearly that the judgment by the “orthodox” authors regarding the DRV as the legitimate government of Vietnam and the RVN as a creation by the U.S. after the 1954 Geneva Accords **was totally wrong**. Even the accusation that the RVN violated the 1954 Geneva Accords with its refusal to organize the general elections in 1956 (the main reason for which North Vietnam decided to launch the war in the south in order to reunify the country) was also legally baseless since the State of Vietnam (of which the RVN was the successor) **did not sign and recognize the Accords**. Dr. Trần Văn Đỗ, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Head of the State of Vietnam Delegation at the Geneva Conference, has made the following announcement:

“Việc ký hiệp định giữa Pháp và Việt Minh có những điều khoản gây nguy hại nặng nề cho tương lai chính trị của Quốc gia Việt Nam. Hiệp định đã nhượng cho Việt Minh những vùng mà quân đội quốc gia còn đóng quân và tước mất của (Quốc gia) Việt Nam quyền tổ chức phòng thủ. Bộ Tư lệnh Pháp đã tự ấn định ngày tổ chức tuyển cử mà không có sự thỏa thuận với phái đoàn quốc gia Việt Nam... chính phủ Quốc gia Việt Nam yêu cầu Hội nghị ghi nhận một cách chính thức rằng Việt Nam long trọng phản đối cách ký kết Hiệp định cùng những điều khoản không tôn trọng nguyện vọng sâu xa của dân Việt. Chính phủ Quốc gia Việt Nam yêu cầu Hội nghị ghi nhận rằng

Chính phủ tự dành cho mình quyền hoàn toàn tự do hành động để bảo vệ quyền thiêng liêng của dân tộc Việt Nam trong công cuộc thực hiện Thống nhất, Độc lập, và Tự do cho xứ sở.”^[29]

(Translation:

“The signing of the accords between the French and Viet Minh has several clauses that will seriously harm the political future of the State of Vietnam. The accords have yielded to Viet Minh areas where the army of the State of Vietnam was still occupying, and deprived (the State of) Vietnam the rights to organize its defense. The French Command has unilaterally decided on the date to organize the general elections without the consensus of the State of Vietnam Delegation... The Government of the State of Vietnam demands that the Conference officially register Vietnam’s opposition to the way the accords were signed and to the clauses that do not respect the deep aspiration of the Vietnamese people. The Government of the State of Vietnam demands the Conference register that it reserves the rights to act in order to protect the sacred rights of the Vietnamese people to achieve Unification, Independence, and Freedom for the country.”

After the Geneva Accords were signed on July 20, 1954, there was a period of 300 days during which the people were free to move to where they wanted to live. And the result showed that during that time there were only 4,269 people who chose to go and live in the North, compared to a total of 892,876 people who chose to go and live in the South.^[30]

Therefore, it is very clear that the Vietnam War was not a **people’s war** like Dr. Schandler has determined. It must be seen as a **war of invasion**. The reasons were straightforward as follows:

- Both the RVN and the DRV were countries that possessed all factors regulated by international public laws according to the **Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States (1933)**:
 - Having a defined territory
 - Having a permanent population
 - Having a government
 - Having capacity to enter into relations with the other states
- **“The act of using military forces to deprive another state of government, territory, according to the definition of Article 1, Resolution 3314 of 1974 of the General Assembly of the United Nations, is an act of invasion under international public laws.”**^[31]

There is one additional point that needs to be cleared: this war of invasion was not an ordinary one but a very complex war of invasion mixed with ideology between people of the same blood, pretty much like the Korean War (1951-53), termed an invasion by the United Nations, which allowed many nations to send troops to fight against the invading North Koreans.

Arguments on U.S. Military Strategy in Vietnam

These arguments were based on the two following main points:

- The U.S. had used all its military forces and still failed to force North Vietnam abandon its intention to conquer South Vietnam
- If the escalation had continued a nuclear confrontation would not have been avoided

Let's take a close look at each of these points.

U.S. Had Used All Its Military Forces

This argument showed both the means and the objective of U.S. intervention in Vietnam: 1) means: using all military forces available; 2) objective: making North Vietnam know the price, and forcing it to abandon its intention to seize South Vietnam by force.

Let's discuss the objective. This argument showed very clearly the limit of the U.S. intervention: the U.S. only wanted North Vietnam to stop attacking South Vietnam, i.e., going back to the status quo of the two countries demarcated at the 17th parallel (just like the situations in Germany and Korea). Many people, therefore, have rightly criticized that the U.S. went to war but did not want a win, just a tie while the enemy was determined to win at all cost, and, thus, a U.S. loss was something in the making. Because of this limited objective, the U.S. Government, i.e., the civilian leaders, established numerous limitations called **"rules of engagement,"** for the military to observe. In the bombing of North Vietnam, i.e., Operation Rolling Thunder, the targets were very limited and were selected by the civilian leaders, with damaging results as can be seen in the following judgment by General Bruce Palmer, Jr. Commander of U.S. II Field Force in Vietnam during 1967-1968:

"In the end, these limited strikes had little effect on the enemy buildup culminating in the massive Easter Offensive across the DMZ in late March 1972. This buildup, incidentally, should have warned the allies of the strong probability of an attack launched directly from the DMZ." ^[32]

It was also because of this limited objective that the U.S. also applied the strategy of gradual escalation. This method of gradual escalation might bring good results in the political or diplomatic struggle, but, in a war, it was a big mistake, causing serious damages because it gave the enemy time to regroup, strengthen, and re-attack. To be more precise, however, the U.S. strategy was much worse: fight and stop, stop and fight, it was very clear that there was no intention to finish off the fight. Looking back at the proceeding of the war, we can see very clearly that the Communists had 3- or 4-year intervals to regroup for their general offensives: Tết Offensive (1968), Easter Offensive (1972), and the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign (1975). In their book ***"The real lessons of the Vietnam War"***, editors John Norton Moore and Robert F. Turner had the following criticism of this U.S. strategy:

“In fact, our policy was not even gradual escalation; that is, progressive and increasing application of force to strangle the enemy. Instead, our policy was escalation and de-escalation, an “on again, off again” knee-jerk reaction that varied with the intuitive whims of President Johnson and his advisors.” [33]

In summary, in terms of objective, it was no doubt the U.S. did not want to destroy the enemy, North Vietnam, i.e., they did not want an absolute, total victory in the Vietnam War. It was a war policy that was completely opposite to the military thoughts of generals from the ancient time to the modern time, reflected in General of the Army (5-star General) Douglas MacArthur’s famous statement: ***“In war there is no substitute for victory.”***

In term of the means, the judgment by the “orthodox” authors was that the U.S. had exhausted all its military means. Is it true?

Generally speaking, the U.S. military strategy in Vietnam included two components: 1) Introducing ground combat troops into the South in order to destroy units of the armed forces of the National Liberation Front (i.e., Viet Cong) and units of the armed forces of North Vietnam having infiltrated through the Ho Chi Minh Trail; and, 2) Using its Air Force to prevent the North Vietnamese troops from infiltrating through the Ho Chi Minh Trail and bombing North Vietnam to quench its intention of conquering the South.

Regarding the presence of the U.S. troops in the South, we have to admit that at the beginning of 1968, the U.S. was maintaining a very large army, almost half a million men (497, 498) of all services and combat-experienced units, including the following most significant units:

- U.S. Army:
 - 1st Cavalry Division - Airmobile
 - 3 infantry divisions: the 1st, the 9th, and the 25th
 - 23rd Infantry Division, named Americal Division
 - 101st Airborne Division
 - 3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division
- U.S. Marine Corps:
 - 1st Marine Division, in Chu Lai, Quảng Ngãi Province
 - 3rd Marine Division, in Danang, Quảng Nam Province
 - 5th Marine Division, in Khe Sanh, Quảng Trị Province
- U.S. Navy:
 - In the end, there was a total of 20 aircraft carriers deployed during the Vietnam War, such as Coral Sea, Enterprise, Hancock, Hornet, Midway, etc. Each aircraft carrier had hundreds of jet fighters, such as A-4 Skyhawk, A-6 Intruder, A-7 Corsair II, etc.
- U.S. Air Force:

- o Seventh Air Force, with its headquarters in Tân Sơn Nhứt và its squadrons deployed at 10 airbases scattered all over the RVN territory; most aircraft were the famous F-4 Phantom and F-105 Thunderchief jet fighters, etc.

What needs to be discussed here is how the U.S. had used these mighty, with what strategy and what results. The Command of all these forces was called MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) and the Commander was General (4-star general) William C. Westmoreland (1914-2005), nick-named Westy by the U.S. media. General Westmoreland graduated from Westpoint Military Academy in 1936, began his career as an artillery officer, saw action in World War II at various battlefields in North Africa, Italy, France, Germany, recorded numerous victories, and moved up very fast through the ranks to become a Colonel, Chief of Staff of the 9th Infantry Division. After World War II ended, he took a parachute jump training course offered by the Army, and was nominated Commander of the 504th Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division, and then Chief of Staff of the Division. In 1952, at 38, he was promoted to Brigadier-General (one-star general) and became the youngest brigadier-general of the U.S. Army. In the Korean War, he was Commander of the 187th Airborne Regiment. After the Korean War, he successively assumed the positions of Commander of the 101st Airborne Division (1958-1960), Superintendent of the Westpoint Military Academy (1960-1963); he was then promoted to Lieutenant-General (3-star general) in July 1963, and nominated Commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps. In January 1964, he was sent to Vietnam as Deputy-Commander of MACV, and in June 1964 he was promoted to General (4-star general) and was nominated by President Johnson as Commander of MACV.

General Westmoreland put in place a strategy called ***Search and Destroy***, in fact a war of attrition with the objective of destroying enemy forces to the maximum in order to get to a ***“crossover point”*** defined as the point when the enemy re-supply of men could not make up their casualties. General Westmoreland, therefore, had decided to organize very expensive large-scale operations, using huge forces of regimental or divisional level, attacking important enemy bases and secret zones, e.g., Operation Attleboro in Dầu Tiếng, Bình Dương Province, from September 14 to November 25, 1966, Operation Cedar Falls in the Iron Triangle, from January 8 to January 26, 1967, and, Operation Junction City in War Zone C, from February 22 to May 14, 1967. In 3 years, with his army increasing from 184,300 (1965) up to 485,600 men (1967), General Westmoreland still could not reach the expected ***“crossover point,”*** even with the convenient way of calculating the order-of-battle (often referred to as OB) in his report by minimizing the numbers of the Communist guerillas and militia, resulting in a big controversy between MACV and the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), reflected in the intelligence document called SNIE14.3-67.^[34] In 1967, a number of people inside and outside of the U.S. government started to have some doubts, made critical comments of, and finally recommended that President Johnson drop General Westmoreland’s ***“Search and Destroy”*** strategy. But President Johnson did not listen

and continued to trust General Westmoreland. At the end of 1967, on November 21, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., General Westmoreland was still optimistic in his statement as follows:

"We have reached an important point where the end begins to come into view." ^[35]

Only more than two months later, on January 31, 1968, the Tet Offensive was fiercely carried out by Communist forces in the capital city of Saigon, in other large cities, and in almost all provincial downtowns of the RVN. General Westmoreland's "search and destroy" strategy was a total failure. His request for additional 200,000 men was bluntly rejected by President Johnson. He was called back to serve as U.S. Army Chief of Staff and his deputy, General Creighton Abrams (1914-1974) was nominated to replace him as Commander of MACV.

One important point needs to be kept in mind here. The Tet Offensive was a huge, unprecedented military defeat of the Communists. Following are casualty figures officially confirmed by the VCP:

"-111306 cán bộ, chiến sĩ lực lượng vũ trang và chính trị ở miền nam đã hy sinh và bị thương, hàng vạn quần chúng cách mạng đã ngã xuống" (dẫn theo Viện Nghiên cứu chủ nghĩa Mác - Lê-nin và Tư tưởng Hồ Chí Minh: Lịch sử Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, tập 2 - 1954-1975, Nhà xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia, Hà Nội, 1995, tr. 441).

- Trong đó, 44.824 cán bộ, chiến sĩ lực lượng vũ trang đã anh dũng hy sinh (Đường 9: 3.994, Trị Thiên: 4.862; Đồng bằng Khu 5: 10.732; Tây Nguyên: 3.436; Khu 6: 1.254; Khu 10: 440; Đông Nam Bộ: 14.121; Khu 8: 2.484; Khu 9: 3.501); 61.267 bị thương (Cục Tác chiến, số 124/TGi, hồ sơ 1.103 (11-2-1969))." ^[36]

(Translation:

"111,306 cadres, soldiers of the armed forces and political cadres in the south were sacrificed and wounded, tens of thousands of revolutionary people have fallen" (excerpt from Institute of Research of Marxist-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's Thoughts: History of the Vietnamese Communist Party, volume 2 – 1954-1975, National Politics Publishing House, Hà Nội, 1995, p. 441).

- Including 44,824 cadres, soldiers of the armed forces were heroically sacrificed (Route 9: 3,994; Trị Thiên [i.e., Provinces of Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên]: 4,862; Zone 5 Plains: 10,732; Western Highlands: 3,436; Zone 6: 1,254; Zone 19: 440; Eastern South Vietnam: 14,121; Zone 8: 2,484; Zone 9: 3,501; 61,267 wounded (Directorate for Combat Actions, no. 124/TGi, file 1,103 (February 11, 1969))."*

Ironically, however, the Americans saw it as a huge failure of the Free World, and, from that moment on, they decided to find ways to de-escalate the war, enter into negotiations with the Communists in order to withdraw. President Johnson ordered to stop the bombings of North Vietnam and announced that he would not seek re-election. After he was elected, President Nixon carried out the withdrawal of troops in his Vietnamization program.

The majority of the “orthodox” authors used the Tet Offensive in 1968 as the starting point when the U.S. Government definitely realized that a victory in Vietnam would be impossible. Three important books of the “orthodox” authors were: ***Vietnam: a history*** by Stanley Karnow, ***America’s longest war*** by George Herring, and ***A Bright shining lie*** by Neil Sheehan all reserved a large number of pages to talk about the Vietnam War until 1968 (1965-1968), while the discussion of the remaining period of the Vietnam War (twice in length from 1968 to 1975) was very sketchy as can be seen below:

- ***Vietnam: a history:***
 - For the period until 1968: 567 pages (pp.1-567)
 - For the period 1968-1975: only 102 pages (pp. 568-670)
- ***America’s longest war:***
 - For the period until 1968: 221 pages (pp. 1-221)
 - For the period 1968-1975: only 60 pages (pp. 222-282)
- ***A Bright shining lie:***
 - For the period until 1968: 725 pages (pp. 1-725)
 - For the period 1968-1975: only 65 pages (pp. 726-791)

In reality, it was very clear that since after the Tet Offensive the RVN and its Allies had won several big victories, sometimes having changed the course of the Vietnam War, and caused a lot of difficulties for the Communists.

In addition to the two big victories in 1968 and 1972 (Summer of Fire, Defending An Lộc, Recapture of Quảng Trị, and Safeguarding Kontum), the U.S. army, under the command of General Abrams, applied a new strategy called “***Clear and Hold***” with a focus on pacification. A high-ranking CIA agent, Mr. William Colby (formerly Chief CIA Station in Vietnam), was nominated to head CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support), of which the main responsibility was to carry out a new pacification plan called APC (Accelerated Pacification Campaign). The core program of the APC was the Phoenix Program aimed at destroying the VCI (Viet Cong Infrastructure) in order to re-establish security for the hamlets and villages under the control of the RVN Government. The APC Plan had the initial objective for the first three months (90 days) of neutralizing the VCI and re-establishing security for 1,000 semi-controlled hamlets. This plan has achieved its initial objective very well in more than the planned 1,000 hamlets. In fact, in the beginning of January 1969, the RVN already had 1,320 hamlets under its total control.^[37] The Phoenix Program caused great damages for the Communists as follows:

“Between 1968 and 1972, Phoenix “neutralized” 81,740 people suspected of VC membership, of whom 26,369 were killed. A significant number of VC were killed, and between 1969 and 1971 the program was quite successful in destroying VC infrastructure in many important areas.”^[38]

Moreover, a number of limitations from the time of the Johnson administration were lifted. After General Lon Nol organized the successful coup overthrowing the pro-Communist government of Prince Sihanouk at the beginning of 1970, President Nixon, at the end of April 1970, ordered the U.S. troops, together with the ARVN, to cross the border, move into Cambodian territory, attack and destroy all Communist secured and secret zones located along the border, which had been authorized by Prince Sihanouk several years prior. This operation achieved the following important results as can be seen below:

“Major General Nguyễn Duy Hinh, author of a postwar monograph, summed up results of the incursion overall, tabulating 9,300 tons of weapons, ammunition, and supplies seized, plus 7,000 tons of rice, altogether constituting enemy requirements for at least six months of operations in the COSVN area.”^[39]

Within the same spirit of abolishing the limitations imposed during the administration of President Johnson, on May 9, 1972, President Nixon ordered the aircraft carrier USS Coral Sea to implement the blockage of Haiphong port (where North Vietnam received 85% of its imported goods) by mining the Gulf of Tonkin. And when North Vietnam unilaterally and blatantly left the Paris Peace Talks at the end of 1972, President Nixon ordered USAF to use B-52 strategic bombers to carpet bomb Hanoi for 13 days and nights during Christmas 1972 (Christmas Bombing) and forced Hà Nội to come back to the conference table.

All these above-mentioned points show very clearly that the strategy that the U.S. applied from 1965 (after bringing combat ground troops into South Vietnam) to 1968 (Tet Offensive) was a total mistake, and, thus, could not help achieve victory. We have also seen that with the new strategy, paying more attention to the issue of pacification, and, at the same time, all absurd barriers and limitations binding the hands of the military, and imposed by the American civilians, the U.S. army and the ARVN have achieved many clear-cut victories (during 1968, 1970, and 1972), that really changed the course of the Vietnam War in favor for the allies. All these points really helped to affirm that ***The Vietnam War definitely was not an unwinnable war and if the U.S. had applied a right strategy right from the beginning the U.S. and the RVN would have won the Vietnam War.***

If More Escalation Had Been Carried Out a Nuclear Confrontation Would Have Been Unavoidable

As previously mentioned, the possibility of using nuclear weapons was referred to in the memo of the JCS dated May 20, 1967 and caused some panic to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. Let's evaluate the value of this argument within the background of the Cold War and within the timeframe of 1965-1975.

As presented in details in the previous part of this article, the probability for the U.S. and the RVN, with a different strategy and without those absurd barriers and limitations, to win the Vietnam War, without resorting to the use of nuclear weapons, would have been quite high.

Now, let's suppose that if even with a new strategy and without these barriers and limitations, the U.S. still could not win the war and had had to resort to the use of nuclear weapons then would a nuclear confrontation have occurred?

The answer is: **very probably NOT**. Why NOT?

If the U.S. had used nuclear weapons in the Southern part of China, China would not be able to retaliate, and, thus, there would NOT have been any **“nuclear confrontation”** because, in fact, **only** China would get the nuclear bombs. China could not retaliate because, although they had already conducted some nuclear tests since October 1964, China did not yet develop the delivery system, i.e., intercontinental missiles with nuclear warheads. Moreover, during the 1960s, China was still suffering from the seriously chaotic and divisive Cultural Revolution. Only the Soviet Union had the means of retaliation against the U.S. But the probability for the Soviet Union to engage in a nuclear confrontation with the U.S. **was almost certainly NIL**. There were two historical events, which could help us reach that conclusion.

First, during the 1962 Cuban Crisis, the Soviet Union had blinked in the showdown with the U.S. ready to accept a nuclear confrontation, and decided to dismantle all missiles already installed in Cuba. The Soviet Union had refused to sacrifice for Cuba, why should it sacrifice for China?

Second, the Soviet Union and China, during the 1960s, became enemies, and fought each other quite a few fierce battles in their border war in 1969 (from March 2 to September 1, 1969) in Zhenbao Island, on the Ussuri River, close to the border of Manchuria. It was exactly during the period of this border conflict that the Soviet Union has already explored the possibility to carry out a pre-emptive nuclear attack against the Chinese nuclear research and development facilities. The Soviet Union approached and sounded out the communist parties of Australia, Finland and Italy, and even the U.S. on that issue.^[40]

Concluding Remarks

This article has shown very clearly that the judgment **“The Vietnam War was an unwinnable war”** was totally wrong. If, right from the beginning, the U.S. had applied a different strategy, completely without the absurd barriers and limitations, it could have won the Vietnam War, and with a much lower price. In reality, the U.S. had not done it. Moreover, with the unscrupulous betrayal of the U.S. 93rd (1973-1975) and 94th (1975-1977) Congresses under the total control of the Democratic Party, abandoning its ally, cutting off all military aids, the U.S. Government had to witness the tragic result as

its ally, the RVN, had to surrender and ceased to exist. An American author of the “revisionist” school has given a very correct judgment of the defeat of the RVN as follows:

“The South Vietnamese regime did not fall in 1975 because it was uniquely corrupt and illegitimate. It fell to Soviet-equipped North Vietnamese tanks only because the United States, which had left troops in South Korea to defend a comparably corrupt and authoritarian dictatorship, had abandoned its allies in South Vietnam.”^[41]

NOTES:

1. **Memorandum for the President from George Ball, “A Compromise Solution in South Vietnam,” 1 July 1965**, online document, accessible in full-text at this URL: <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon4/doc260.htm>
2. Barrett, David M. “The mythology surrounding Lyndon Johnson, his advisers, and the 1965 decision to escalate the Vietnam War,” *Political science quarterly*, vol. 103, issue 4 (winter 1988/1989), p. 641.
3. Lâm Vĩnh-Thế. ***Tìm hiểu thêm về việc Thủy Quân Lục Chiến Hoa Kỳ đổ bộ vào Đà Nẵng ngày 8 tháng 3 năm 1965*** (Further research study on U.S. Marines’ landing in Đà Nẵng on March 8, 1965), online document, accessible in full-text at this URL: <https://tuyen-tap-vinh-nhon-lam-vinh-the.blogspot.com/2016/06/tim-hieu-them-ve-viec-thuy-quan-luc.html> In this article, the author has referred to the Memoir by General William C. Westmoreland, Commander of MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam), entitled ***A soldier reports***, new edition, published by De Capo Press in 1989. On page 122, General Westmoreland wrote: ***“I expressed concern “that we are headed toward a VC takeover,” probably within a year.”***
4. ***In country: remembering the Vietnam War*** / edited by John Prados. Lanham, Md.: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2011. On p. 8, the editor stated: ***“... President Johnson considered General Westmoreland’s large-scale reinforcement and approved it. The deployment of the First Cavalry Division (Airmobile), along with the Third Marine Division, followed by the First Infantry Division and the First Brigade/101st Airborne Division, was the first wave of the new MACV force. ... the fact is that in the twelve months ending in December 1965 the American force level in country increased from twenty-three thousand to 183,000 personnel.”***
5. McNamara, Robert S. and Brian VanDeMark. ***In retrospect: the tragedy and lessons of Vietnam***. New York: Random House, 1995, pp. 243-244.
6. McNamara, op. cit., p. 244.
7. ***Joint Chiefs of Staff***, online document, accessible in full-text at this URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joint_Chiefs_of_Staff. JCS was the inter-service General Staff of the U.S. Armed Forces, including all Generals (4-star), Chiefs of Staff of all four main services, i.e., Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps, headed by a Chairman, alternatively chosen from the four services, and nominated by the President. At this point in time, the Chairman of the JCS was Army General Earl (Bus) Wheeler.
8. McNamara, op. cit., p. 266.
9. McNamara, op. cit., p. 275.
10. McNamara, ibid.
11. McNamara, op. cit., p. 276.
12. McNamara, op. cit., p. 280.
13. McNamara, op. cit., p. 315.
14. ***Council on Foreign Relation***, online document, accessible in full-text at this URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_on_Foreign_Relation

15. *Argument without end: in search of answers to the Vietnam tragedy* / Robert S. McNamara, et al. New York: Public Affairs, 1999.
16. *Argument without end*, op. cit., p. 368.
17. *Argument without end*, op. cit., p. 319.
18. Lâm Vĩnh-Thế. *Critical Review of the Vietnam War: the PBS documentary film directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick*, online document, accessible in full-text at this URL: <https://tuyen-tap-vinh-nhon-lam-vinh-the.blogspot.com/2021/08/critical-review-of-vietnam-war-pbs.html>
19. Trần Ngươn Phiêu. *Gió mùa Đông Bắc (Chương 6)* (The Northeast monsoon (Chapter 6)), online document, accessible in full-text at this URL: <https://www.diendanthekey.net/2011/04/gio-mua-ong-bac-chuong-6.html>
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21. Trần Ngươn Phiêu, op. cit., Chapter 7.
22. Hoàng Hưng. *Cái chết của Khái Hưng* (The Death of Khái Hưng), online document, accessible in full-text at this URL: <https://baotienngdan.com/2019/07/29/cai-chet-cua-khai-hung/>
23. Lâm Lễ Trinh. *Mạn đàm với BS Nguyễn Lưu Viên: từ Hà Nội, La Celle Saint-Cloud đến những ngày VNCH hấp hối* (Conversation with Dr. Nguyễn Lưu Viên: from Hà Nội, La Cell Saint-Cloud to the agonizing days of the RVN), online document, accessible in full-text at this URL: http://aihuuluatkhoa.com/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/MAN_DAM_VOI_BSI_NLV.5092817.p_dif
24. Nguyễn Minh Cần. *Xin đừng quên! Nửa thế kỷ trước... Mở hồ sơ tội ác Hồ Chí Minh: vấy máu Cải Cách Ruộng Đất* (Please do not forget! Half a century ago... Reopening the criminal file of Hồ Chí Minh: the bloody Land Reform), online document, accessible in full-text at this URL: http://www.geocities.ws/xaohantuong/nmc_xdq.htm
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26. Đoàn Thêm, op. cit., p. 37.
27. Bảo Đại. *Con rồng Việt Nam: hồi ký chính trị (1913-1987)* (The Dragon of Vietnam: political memoir (1913-1987)). [No place of publication: Nguyễn Phước Royal Family, 1990, p. 284.
28. Đoàn Thêm, op. cit., p. 56.
29. *Hiệp định Genève, 1954* (The 1954 Geneva Accords), online document, accessible in full-text at this URL: https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hi%E1%BB%87p_%C4%91%E1%BB%8Bnh_Gen%C3%A8ve,_1954
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31. Nguyễn Quốc Tấn Trung. *30/4 – Xâm lược hay giải phóng: từ góc nhìn công pháp quốc tế* (April 30 – Invasion or liberation: from the international public law point of view), online document, accessible in full-text at this URL: <https://www.luatkhoa.org/2017/04/30-4-xam-luoc-hay-giai-phong-tu-goc-nhin-cong-phap-quoc-t-e/>
32. Palmer, Bruce. *The 25-year war: America’s military role in Vietnam*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984, p. 125.
33. *The Real lessons of the Vietnam War: reflections twenty-five years after the fall of Saigon* / edited by John Norton Moore & Robert F. Turner. Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2002, p. 391.

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38. **Phoenix Program**, online document, accessible in full-text at this URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoenix_Program
39. Sorley, op. cit., pp. 204-205. The information provided by the author was extracted from p. 7 of the monograph entitled **Lam Son 719** authored by Major-General Nguyễn Duy Hinh, and published by U.S. Army Center for Military History in Washington, D.C. in 1979.
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