CHAPTER 4

Why Did the United States Fight in Vietnam?

NEITHER YOU NOR I KNOW THE AMERICANS WELL, BUT WHAT WE DO KNOW OF THEM . . . SUGGESTS THAT THEY ARE MORE PRACTICAL AND CLEAR-SIGHTED THAN OTHER CAPITALIST NATIONS. THEY WILL NOT POUR THEIR RESOURCES INTO VIETNAM ENDLESSLY.

—*Ho Chi Minh, in conversation with a Communist diplomat, autumn 1963*[1]

The Vietnam War was the longest war the United States ever fought. It also proved the most demoralizing for Americans, plunging the nation into its most bitter civil conflict in a century. Before the war ran its course, more than 58,000 Americans, and millions of Vietnamese, would die. Before the war ran its course, two American presidencies would be either directly or indirectly shattered by its consequences. Before the war ran its course, Americans would get used to thinking of each other as divided into polarized enemy camps: pro-war and antiwar, hawks and doves, and on from there to ever more scurrilous epithets. No legacy of the 1960s had as long and embittering an effect on the politics and culture of the United States as that left by the war in Vietnam.

The war in Vietnam differed from other American conflicts in which the United States had fought for clearly defined strategic or territorial goals. In Vietnam, the rationale for fighting the war, like the battlefront itself, was constantly shifting. The most consistent explanation for why Americans needed to fight in Vietnam was the defense of the "credibility" of the United States—in itself a murky, ambiguous goal.

Vietnam also differed from other American wars in which clearly defined lines divided peace and war, such as the Confederate firing on Fort Sumter in 1861. In Vietnam no single event or decision clearly marked the beginning of the war. Arguments could be made to date the real start of the con-

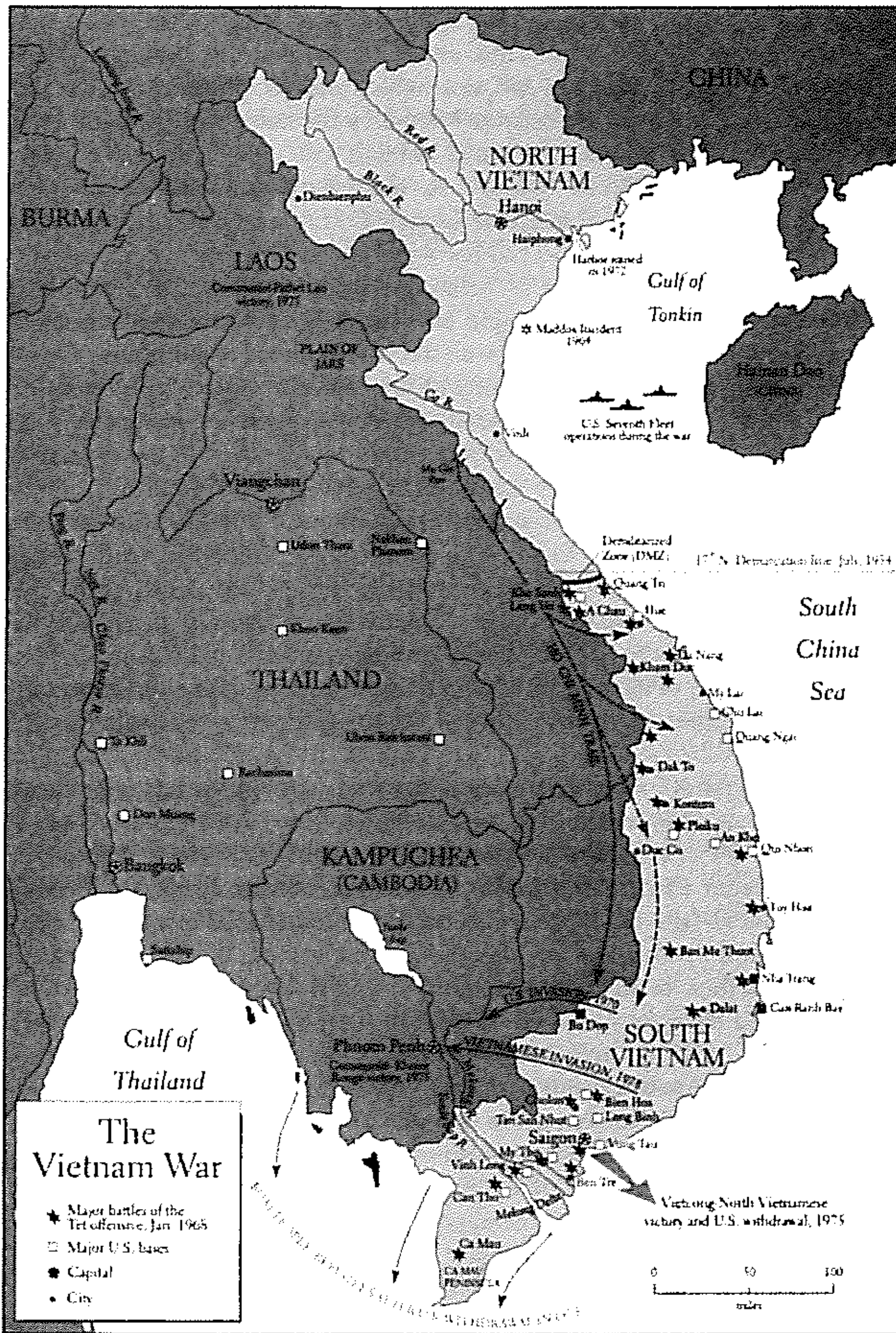
flict, or at least the point of no return, anytime from the mid-1950s until the mid-1960s. The roots of American involvement stretch back much further.[2]

Vietnam, a country that is roughly the size of New Mexico in square miles, stretches in an S-shaped curve along the eastern seaboard of Southeast Asia. Two fertile river deltas, the Red River in the north and the Mekong River in the south, fan out to the sea. A narrow coastal plain runs up the seacoast, while rugged mountain chains and high plateaus run north and south the length of the country's heavily forested interior.

When Americans first fought in Vietnam, they did so, ironically, as allies of Vietnamese Communist leader Ho Chi Minh. Indochina, which includes Laos and Cambodia as well as Vietnam, had been colonized by France since the late nineteenth century, the richest and most important colony in the French empire. For over a half century the French ruthlessly suppressed any challenge to their authority in the region. Then, in 1940, France was itself conquered by Nazi Germany. The following year, French Indochina was occupied by Japan. French colonialists offered little resistance to the Japanese invaders, but Ho Chi Minh and the Communists formed a national resistance movement, opposing both the Japanese occupation and French colonialism. Within four years the Viet Minh had a half million followers, and a 5000-man army.

In the closing days of the Second World War, a team of American intelligence agents parachuted behind Japanese lines in Vietnam to establish contact with Ho Chi Minh's forces. These troops, the Viet Minh, had proved themselves useful to the Americans by rescuing downed American fliers. In July 1945 the Americans brought medical supplies and small arms to Ho, and trained his Viet Minh fighters in guerrilla tactics. Two months later, following the Japanese surrender, American advisers were with Ho when his troops marched in to take control of Hanoi, the principal city of northern Vietnam. On September 2, 1945, Ho, a frail man with a wispy beard, whose bearing suggested more a scholar than a military commander or a politician, stood before a crowd of a half-million of his countrymen in a central square in Hanoi and declared Vietnamese independence. He chose to do so in words that sounded familiar to the American military men in attendance: "We hold truths that all men are created equal," Ho declared. "That they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights: among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."[3]

Though he had borrowed freely from the American declaration of independence, Ho Chi Minh was by no means a Jeffersonian democrat. He was a hard-bitten revolutionary who had spent many years in exile from Vietnam in the service of the Communist movement. He was born as Nguyen Tat Thanh in 1890 in Nghe An Province in central coastal Vietnam. Though well educated, he signed onto a ship in 1912 as a common laborer and sailed over the next few years to Africa, Europe and North America. (During this period



Map of Vietnam. Source: *From* Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974 *by James T. Patterson. Copyright © 1996 by Oxford University Press, Inc. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.*

he lived for nearly a year in Brooklyn, New York.) His thoughts, however, remained anchored in his homeland, and it was during this period also that he took a new name, Nguyen Ai-Quoc, which means "Nguyen the Patriot" in Vietnamese. He would not become known by the name Ho Chi Minh ("He Who Enlightens" in Vietnamese) until 1944.

During the First World War and its immediate aftermath, Ho lived in Paris. There, in 1920, he joined the French Communist Party. Communist leaders in Moscow had issued a call for world revolution, including the overthrow of the colonial regimes of Asia and Africa. To Ho, the Communist movement represented a long-sought ally for Vietnamese independence. He rose quickly within the leadership of the international Communist movement, traveling to Moscow and China on its behalf.

In 1930 Ho held a secret meeting in Hong Kong to organize the Vietnamese Communist Party. However, the party could not function openly in Vietnam. The French regularly executed nationalist and Communist opponents in Vietnam; Ho knew he faced a death sentence if he was captured. In 1941 he slipped back into Vietnam to organize the Viet Minh to do battle with the Japanese and the French.

Ho was a Communist, but his first priority was attaining Vietnamese independence. During the Second World War, he came to hope that the United States, for reasons of its own, could be brought to support the cause of Vietnamese independence.

America's wartime leader, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was certainly no admirer of French colonialism. "[T]he case of Indochina is perfectly clear," he wrote to Secretary of State Cordell Hull in January 1944. "France has milked it for one hundred years. The people of Indochina are entitled to something better than that."[4] Beyond vague speculation about establishing an international "trusteeship" to govern Indochina after the war, however, Roosevelt never spelled out any definite alternatives to allowing the French to reestablish their control of the region.

The world changed swiftly in the months that followed Roosevelt's death in April 1945, with the unraveling of the wartime alliance of the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union. In March 1947 President Harry Truman announced what became known as the Truman Doctrine, declaring it the policy of the United States "to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."[5] Never before had an American president committed the nation to a foreign policy that, potentially, involved an unceasing series of military interventions throughout the world.

In Vietnam, in the year following the end of the Second World War, the contending French and Viet Minh forces faced each other in an uneasy standoff. In February 1946 Ho wrote Truman and asked that the United States become the "guardian" of Vietnam. Noting that the United States had recently granted independence to its former protectorate in the Philippine islands, Ho

declared: "Like the Philippines our goal is full independence and full cooperation with the UNITED STATES. We will do our best to make this independence and cooperation profitable to the whole world."[6]

In all, Ho addressed 11 such messages to the American government. His movement received no material aid from the Soviet Union, or any other Communist country in those years. Some American intelligence officers who kept tabs on Indochina in the 1940s believed Ho had the potential to become the "Tito of Southeast Asia"—that is, like Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia, he would steer an independent course in foreign relations, not beholden to the Soviet Union.

Truman never responded to Ho's entreaties. Indochina was a minor concern to American policymakers. Their main concern was the defense of western Europe, where France was a valued American ally. The French, who had suffered a grave national humiliation with their defeat and occupation by the Nazis, had no intention of relinquishing control over their colonial empire. To Truman and his advisers, there seemed no alternative to backing the French in Indochina.

In November 1946 French forces went on the offensive against the Viet Minh. French warships bombarded the northern Vietnamese port of Haiphong, killing 6000 civilians. The Viet Minh abandoned the cities to the French and fought back from the countryside, using the classic guerrilla tactics of stealth and surprise.

Other armies were on the march in Asia. In October 1949 Chinese Communist forces led by Mao Zedong came to power on the Chinese mainland; afterward, arms and ammunition began to be smuggled to the Viet Minh across the Chinese–Vietnamese border. In June 1950 the armies of Communist North Korea swept over the border into South Korea. To American leaders, the events in China and Korea were ominously reminiscent of Hitler's aggression in Europe in the late 1930s; in 1950 President Truman believed that the Korean invasion represented the opening shots of a Third World War.

From the experience of dealing with the Nazis in the 1930s, American leaders concluded that appeasement only whetted the appetite of aggressors. The only way to deter an expansionist dictatorship, whether led by a Hitler or a Stalin, was the resolute application of counterforce. It was with this understanding that Truman in June 1950 committed America's military might to the aid of the beleaguered South Koreans. For the first time, American soldiers were engaged in a full-scale shooting war against a Communist foe. That same month, the United States began providing military supplies to the French forces in Indochina. By 1954 American aid had increased to the point where the United States was funding nearly 80 percent of the French war effort.

The Viet Minh proved a formidable enemy, and after a series of military setbacks, the French switched commanders in Indochina. In May 1953, the

new French commander, General Henri Navarre, declared, "Now we can see [victory] clearly, like light at the end of a tunnel."[7] The phrase would come back to haunt him. Seeking a climactic showdown with the Viet Minh, the French commander sent 15,000 crack troops to a remote village in northwestern Vietnam called Dien Bien Phu. But in their overconfidence, the French neglected to occupy the heights surrounding their new base.

Viet Minh troops under the command of Vo Nguyen Giap cut roads through supposedly impassable terrain, and dragged artillery to those hilltops. On March 13, 1954, they launched their offensive, cutting off the French garrison from reinforcement or retreat. Americans took part in the attempted resupply of the garrison; two American pilots were shot down and killed in the effort. A crisis atmosphere prevailed in Washington as Admiral Arthur Radford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, proposed to President Eisenhower that the United States relieve the defenders by means of air strikes, possibly including the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

Several influential lawmakers, including Senator John F. Kennedy and Senate majority leader Lyndon B. Johnson, warned against intervention, as did Army Chief of Staff General Matthew Ridgway. No one wanted another costly land war in Asia. Eisenhower, who had been elected in November 1952 in part because of his promise to a war-weary electorate to end the Korean war, held back. Surrounded and outnumbered, the battered survivors of the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu surrendered to the Viet Minh on May 7, 1954.

In the weeks that followed, a conference of western and Communist powers meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, drew up an agreement to end the conflict. The Geneva accords provided for the temporary division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel, with Viet Minh forces left in control of the northern half of the country and the Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai (an ally of the French) in control of the southern half. Nationwide elections were scheduled for 1956 to reunify the country. As President Eisenhower would later acknowledge, Ho Chi Minh was by far the most popular political figure in Vietnam during the war and would easily have won a free election for national leader.[8]

Shortly before the fall of Dien Bien Phu, President Eisenhower likened the loss of Vietnam to the Communists to a "falling domino": "You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. . . . So, the possible consequences of the loss are just incalculable to the free world."[9] Over the next few years Eisenhower committed substantial economic and military aid to shoring up an independent anticommunist regime in southern Vietnam.

Ngo Dinh Diem, a conservative nationalist from a wealthy background, emerged as the new strong man in South Vietnamese politics. He returned from years of exile in the United States and Belgium in 1954 to become prime minister under Emperor Bao Dai. Diem, an ardent Catholic, enjoyed the pa-

tronage of influential American backers, including Senator Kennedy and New York City's Cardinal Spellman. In October 1955 Diem organized a national referendum that led to the creation of the new Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), with its capital in Saigon. Diem was elected the republic's first president by means of a blatantly rigged election. The following summer he refused to allow reunification elections with northern Vietnam to be held as scheduled by the Geneva accords. In the meantime, the Communists consolidated their own power in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), with its capital in Hanoi. When Diem visited the United States in May 1957, President Eisenhower hailed him as the "miracle man" of Asia, who had saved southern Vietnam from Communist enslavement. Without American aid, however, Diem could never have remained in power. In the mid-1960s the U.S. Defense Department undertook a top-secret study of the origins of American involvement the Vietnam war. The authors of what became known as the "Pentagon Papers" concluded, simply, that "South Vietnam was essentially the creation the United States."[10]

As fears of Soviet conquest of western Europe subsided in the later 1950s, the focus of Cold War competition shifted to what was beginning to be called the "Third World," the less developed nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev pledged his country's support to "wars of national liberation," and many in the Third World, like Castro in Cuba, looked to the Communist world for models of revolutionary struggle and economic development. But in South Vietnam, the march of Communism had apparently been stopped in its tracks. The country was emerging in the eyes of American policymakers as a "proving ground for democracy" as then-Senator Kennedy called it.[11]

Edward Lansdale (head of the CIA mission in Saigon), forged close relations with Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem owed a lot to Lansdale, who helped organize a mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of northern Vietnamese Catholics to South Vietnam in 1954. Catholic refugees became Diem's most reliable supporters—in a country with a large Buddhist majority. Lansdale also made generous use of CIA funds to buy off potential South Vietnamese rivals to Diem.

The early days of American involvement in Vietnam were almost like an adventure story. Ogden Williams, a CIA official who worked as an assistant to Colonel Lansdale in Saigon, would later recall his time in Vietnam with obvious nostalgia. First of all, there was a strong "sense of mission" shared by the military advisers and intelligence agents in the country:

> We were the nation that had won World War II and was honored throughout the world. To serve the United States overseas was a dream in those days, because you had very high standing—even low-level Americans did. We had enormous prestige in that period.

Americans had long cherished the belief that they had a special role to play in determining the future of Asia. Generations of religious missionaries had dedicated their lives to redeeming China from pagan superstition and barbaric custom. The Communist revolution in China had brought the expulsion of those missionaries. But some of the same impulse lived on, in more secular form, among the young men like Ogden Williams who were sent to Saigon in the 1950s with the goal of preserving the South Vietnamese from the political dangers that beset them from the north. And it didn't hurt that Vietnam was such an exotic destination:

> There was that sense of a young country, which was very inspiring. . . . There was a very graceful, traditional culture, an enormously pleasant way of life. Saigon was an elegant city. The beautiful tropical foliage, the flamboyant trees, the cabarets, the lovely slim women. . . . The whole thing was just elegant and romantic as hell. . . . It was always an enormous letdown to come back to the United States.[12]

Those who served in Vietnam in those years knew, of course, that the Diem regime's methods of governing were less than democratic. His American-trained police arrested tens of thousands of political opponents, many of whom were tortured and executed. His government reclaimed land that had been turned over to the peasants by the Viet Minh during the first Indochinese war and distributed it to wealthy landlords and Catholic refugees. But, in the name of shoring up an anti-Communist ally, Americans in Saigon and Washington were willing to overlook Diem's shortcomings. Certainly the North Vietnamese Communists, who executed thousands of peasant landowners during "land reform" campaigns in the mid-1950s, were no gentler in their own methods of governing. Given the choice, Americans believed, no people would of their own volition choose communism over the political and material advantages offered by an alliance with the United States.

What American diplomatic and political strategists overlooked was that the Vietnamese had their own way of looking at the world, one that did not necessarily coincide with the assumptions guiding policymaking in Washington. American policymakers looked at Ho and saw a Communist; Vietnamese peasants looked at Ho and saw a patriot. A thousand years before the start of the Second World War, a Vietnamese army had driven out Chinese invaders to establish an independent kingdom. Time and again in the centuries that followed, the Vietnamese fought would-be conquerors from China and other nations. Vietnamese history was filled with stories of heroes and martyrs in the cause of independence, and Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh inherited their prestige when they challenged and defeated the French in 1946–1954. Joseph Alsop, a prominent American journalist and ordinarily a staunch supporter of Cold War assumptions, toured Viet Minh–controlled areas of southern Vietnam in December 1954. He described it as an under-

ground government (a "palm hut state") with a "loyal population" of nearly 2 million Vietnamese:

> At first, it was difficult for me, as it is for any Westerner, to conceive of a Communist government's genuinely "serving the people." I could hardly imagine a Communist government that was also a popular government and almost a democratic government. But this is just the sort of government the palm-hut state actually was.[13]

Few of Alsop's countrymen in the 1950s were prepared to look beyond the stereotypes of the Cold War in interpreting events in Southeast Asia (and Alsop himself would later become a firm supporter of the U.S. war effort in Vietnam).

In opposing Ho, Diem could count on the backing of most of the country's Catholic population. His other major source of support was the army, most of whose commanders had served the French in the war against the Viet Minh. Diem used the army, and his American-trained police force, to root out the vestiges of Viet Minh support in the south. Thousands of suspected Communists were killed or imprisoned. Starting in 1957, former Viet Minh soldiers still living in southern Vietnam countered with their own campaign of assassination of Diem's police agents and village chiefs. With weapons left over from the First Indochina War, or captured from Diem's forces, they also launched small-scale attacks against government forces. Ho Chi Minh and other North Vietnamese Communist leaders were ambivalent about the campaign. They wanted to solve pressing political and economic problems in the north before being drawn into renewed military conflict. It was not until 1959 that Hanoi decided to lend its support to the spontaneously emerging guerrilla movement in South Vietnam.

Southern-born Viet Minh soldiers, who had moved to northern Vietnam after the partition of the country, returned to join the struggle. Some of them were regular soldiers in the North Vietnamese army; before they left for the south they exchanged their army uniforms for the black pajamas of the typical Vietnamese peasant. They made their way southward along a network of rough paths and dirt roads running through the border regions of eastern Laos and Cambodia, which came to be known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. There they joined up with the existing guerrilla forces in the South. In December 1960, the revolutionary movement in South Vietnam officially established itself as the National Liberation Front (NLF). South Vietnamese and American official called them the Viet Cong, a derogatory phrase for "Vietnamese Communists." To the American soldiers who would soon be arriving by the thousands in South Vietnam, the enemy would become familiarly known as the "VC," or "Victor Charlie," or just "Charlie."[14]

When John F. Kennedy delivered his inaugural address pledging that the United States would "pay any price, bear any burden, [and] meet any hard-

Ho Chi Minh. Source: *Archive Photos*

ship" in the defense of liberty around the world, there were about 800 American military advisers stationed in South Vietnam. The war was beginning to cost Americans lives as well as money; two U.S. advisers were killed in a guerrilla attack at Bienhoa in July 1959, the first Americans to die in the renewed warfare in Vietnam.

Kennedy's first six months in office were filled with setbacks in foreign policy. In June 1961, when Kennedy met with Khrushchev in Geneva, the Soviet leader had attempted to intimidate the inexperienced American president. Shaken by Russian bullying, Kennedy remarked to a reporter afterwards: "Now we have a problem in making our power credible, and Vietnam is the place."[15]

But was Vietnam the right place to reestablish "credibility" with the Russians? Kennedy's top foreign policy advisers, almost to a man, agreed that it was. One of the trademarks of these men was their habitual reliance on argument by statistical analysis—although in reality the statistics they cited were often substantiated by little more than guesswork and wishful thinking. Thus acting Assistant Secretary of Defense William Bundy, a graduate of Harvard Law School and a former CIA agent, sent a memorandum to Robert Mc-

Namara in October 1961 outlining U.S. options in South Vietnam in the face of recent gains by the Viet Cong:

> An early and hard-hitting operation has a good chance (70% would be my guess) of arresting things and giving Diem a chance to do better and clean up. Even if we follow up hard . . . however, the chances are not much better that we will in fact be able to clean up the situation. It all depends on Diem's effectiveness, which is very problematical. The 30% chance is that we wind up like the French in 1954; white men can't win this kind of fight. On a 70–30 basis, I would myself favor going in.[16]

For all his criticisms of Eisenhower's foreign policy, Kennedy was no more eager than his predecessor to involve the United States in a major land war in Asia. But he never seriously considered abandoning the American commitment to the preservation of a noncommunist South Vietnam. Like Eisenhower, he believed in the domino theory. In early September of 1963, he was interviewed for CBS News by television correspondent Walter Cronkite. While telling Cronkite that "in the final analysis" the war was one that the South Vietnamese would have to win for themselves, he also warned of the consequences of defeat. Should the United States withdraw from South Vietnam and leave it to its fate, "pretty soon Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Malaya would go and all of Southeast Asia would be under control of the Communists and under the domination of the Chinese."[17] And Kennedy was also haunted by the memory of how the last Democrat to sit in the White House, Harry Truman, had been attacked by Republicans for "losing" China. As he commented to an aide in 1963, "If I tried to pull out completely now from Vietnam we would have another Joe McCarthy red scare on our hands."[18]

The use of credibility as a rationale for American involvement had the quality of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more the United States declared that Vietnam was the place where its credibility would be established, the more its credibility would suffer if things didn't work out as expected. George Ball, who served as undersecretary of state in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, was one of the few dissenters from the pro-war consensus in the executive branch. Ball warned Kennedy in 1961 that deepening involvement in Vietnam could get out of hand, leading to the deployment of hundreds of thousands of American troops within a few years' time. Kennedy laughed and dismissed that possibility: "George, you're supposed to be one of the smartest guys in town, but you're crazier than hell. That will never happen."[19]

One of the reasons that Kennedy was eager to engage the enemy in Vietnam was that it would give the United States an opportunity to test out a new political/military strategy known as "counterinsurgency." Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong had taught his followers that in guerrilla war main-

taining close relations with the local populace was all-important: the guerrillas were the fish swimming in the sea of the people. In the First Indochina War, the Viet Minh could depend on the peasants to warn them of the deployment and movement of French troops. American strategists in the early 1960s reasoned that the way to defeat a guerrilla insurgency was to dry up that sea of popular support for the guerrillas. That meant convincing Vietnamese peasants that they should give their allegiance to the government and not the guerrillas. Counterinsurgency, which made use of relatively small numbers of American military advisers and technicians, would supposedly forestall the necessity for a major commitment of American ground forces.

The men of the U.S. Army's Special Forces were assigned a key role in this strategy. The Special Forces had been established in 1952 with the mission of waging unconventional warfare: fighting behind enemy lines, living off the land, and enlisting and training local populations for guerrilla operations. No one ever thought they would be America's first line of defense in any future war: it was assumed by the military that they would be deployed behind the lines in eastern Europe in the event of an all-out war with the Soviet Union. The first Special Forces units had been sent to Vietnam in 1957 to train South Vietnamese troops (the Saigon government's military forces were, in official jargon, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN).

Until Kennedy came into office, the Special Forces enjoyed little prestige or attention. It was widely believed in the U.S. Army that for an officer to be assigned to Special Forces was a career-killing dead end. But Kennedy rescued the unit from obscurity, if not from the disdain of regular army officers. He believed that the Special Forces represented the kind of "flexible response" capability the United States needed to counter the Communists in limited wars. He ordered their expansion and authorized them to wear the distinctive headgear that gave them their popular nickname, the "Green Berets."

In the spring of 1961, Kennedy sent an additional 400 Green Berets to Vietnam. Their new mission was to train the hill tribes of South Vietnam, like the Montagnards who lived along the country's rugged western frontier, as a paramilitary force. The Green Berets specialized in raids and ambushes, designed to harass the Viet Cong with their own tactics on their own terrain. Special Forces advisers shared living quarters and food with the tribesmen and often forged close relationships with them. They now enjoyed flattering press coverage in the United States, where they were celebrated as a combination of James Bond and Daniel Boone (or, as one magazine article described them, the "Harvard PhDs of warfare"). They also were the subject of the only popular pro-war song to come out of the Vietnam era, Special Forces staff sergeant and Vietnam veteran Barry Sadler's 1966 hit "Ballad of the Green Berets," which in turn inspired the only profitable movie set in Vietnam in the 1960s, John Wayne's *The Green Berets*. Highly motivated, many Special

Forces soldiers signed up for repeated tours of duty in Vietnam. But by the mid-1960s their efforts would be overshadowed by those of more conventional U.S. military units assigned to Vietnam.[20]

The enemy that the Green Berets were sent to fight was unlike any the American military had confronted in the twentieth century. If anything, in those first years of the conflict, the war in Vietnam most closely resembled the Indian wars of the American frontier in the nineteenth century. "Come on," an American infantry captain remarked to war correspondent Michael Herr inviting him to go along on a mission into Viet Cong–held territory, "we'll take you out to play Cowboys and Indians."[21]

The NLF or Viet Cong was not a conventional army; it had no tanks, no airplanes, no army bases or barracks. Its soldiers dressed in the same black pajamas as the local peasants; their footwear consisted of "Ho Chi Minh sandals," shoes cut out of rubber tires, held onto the foot by a strip of inner tube. The Viet Cong's strength was greatest in rural areas of South Vietnam, where four-fifths of the population lived. In Communist-controlled regions, the Viet Cong functioned as a combination military force, political movement, and government rolled into one. Part of its power was based on intimidation; officials and villagers who cooperated with the government were executed by Viet Cong death squads.

But there is no question that, in much of the countryside, the Viet Cong enjoyed genuine popular support. The guerrillas were often related to or neighbors of the villagers; they provided schooling and medical services and helped grow crops to feed both themselves and villagers. They also championed the cause of land reform. As *Washington Star* reporter Richard Critchfield wrote in the mid-1960s in a dispatch from rural Long An Province:

> [G]overnment and the mass of peasantry still seem to be on the opposing sides. Land is of such paramount importance here that the Viet Cong allow only the landless or very poor farmers to command guerrilla units or qualify as party members. The provincial government's social order is the exact reverse. Most of the military officers, civil servants, and community leaders come from the land-owing classes.[22]

Communist ideology was probably not much of a draw to the average peasant, but the Viet Cong's claim to represent both the cause of land reform and national sovereignty was a powerful one.[23]

At the start of the 1960s, the Viet Cong could count about 15,000 fighters in its ranks. Most of them were natives of southern Vietnam, still living in or near the villages in which they had been raised, reinforced and often led by well-trained Viet Minh veterans returning from the North. Their numbers grew rapidly; by mid-decade there were an estimated 63,000 full-time guerrillas, and somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 part-time local fighters. As late as 1963, according to U.S. intelligence estimates, less than 10 per-

cent of their arms came from allied Communist nations; the remainder were captured from the French or the Americans, or were homemade. Although later in the decade they would acquire more sophisticated weapons from the Soviet Union and China, including the deadly AK-47 automatic rifle and the RPG (rocket propelled grenade) rocket launcher, the Viet Cong were always outgunned by the Americans and South Vietnamese government forces. But superior enemy gunfire, and the heavy casualties they often suffered, did not seem to faze the Viet Cong. As Kennedy military adviser Maxwell Taylor would note, with obvious admiration: "The ability of the Viet Cong continuously to rebuild their units and to make good their losses is one of the mysteries of this guerrilla war. . . . Not only do the Viet Cong units have the recuperative powers of the phoenix, but they have an amazing ability to maintain morale."[24]

American military strategy in Vietnam in the early 1960s was two-pronged: while the Green Berets were out fighting an unconventional war in the bush, American advisers and technology would be employed to help the regular South Vietnamese army fight a more effective conventional war. In August 1961 U.S. advisers were authorized to accompany ARVN battalions and even company-sized units on field operations. Soon American pilots began bombing raids in support of South Vietnamese operations. By early 1962 American helicopters were ferrying ARVN soldiers into battle zones. Helicopter pilots and crew members saw some of the fiercest fighting in the early days of the war. Helicopters provided the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies the much-prized capacity for "air mobility." Troops could be moved swiftly from distant bases to reinforce an embattled outpost or attack an enemy stronghold. The rough terrain and thick jungle that made up so much of Vietnam's landscape posed no obstacle to the transport into battle of airborne troops.

Marine lieutenant Kenneth Babbs recalled that when he arrived in Vietnam, the U.S. military effort was still officially limited to advisory and technical support:

> Our job was to haul supplies in and out of outposts; evacuate wounded; and carry ARVN on heliborne operations. We weren't supposed to participate in the fighting. But when we started taking on fire, we knew we had to be ready to protect ourselves, and we started arming our choppers. . . . At first the VC were frightened by the choppers, but word must have gotten around quickly how vulnerable the machines were. . . . As our tour continued, instead of running the VC stayed and fired back.

Before long, marines in Babbs's squadron were getting involved in firefights with guerrillas. "We went in like Boy Scouts and came out like Hell's Angels," he concluded.[25] Despite public denials by President Kennedy that American troops were involved in combat in Vietnam, the death count began to climb. Army Specialist Fourth Class James Davis was killed in a Viet

A marine helicopter manned by an American advisor supplies South Vietnamese Army troops, 1964. Source: *Archive Photos*

Cong ambush on December 22, 1961, the first "official" U.S. death in the Vietnam War.

To meet the requirements of a widening war, the American military command structure in Saigon was reorganized in February 1962 with the establishment of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). MACV was initially under the command of General Paul Harkins; in 1964 Harkins was replaced by his deputy, General William Westmoreland.

Military and political advisers provided Kennedy with a stream of optimistic reports on the prospects for victory in Vietnam. General Maxwell Taylor was Kennedy's most trusted military adviser (in 1962 Kennedy would appoint him as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and he would also serve as the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam in 1964–1965.) Following a visit to Saigon in November 1961, Taylor cabled the president with advice to expand U.S. forces in South Vietnam. "As an area for the operation of U.S. troops," he told Kennedy, the Vietnamese countryside was "not an excessively difficult or unpleasant place to operate." Taylor urged Kennedy to increase logistical support for the ARVN, and to dispatch 8000 U.S. combat troops to the country under the guise of providing "flood relief." He dismissed the possibility that the United States might be "backing into a major Asia war" as "not impressive."[26] Secretary of Defense McNamara, who formed a close working relationship with Taylor, concurred.

Although McNamara later claimed that he soon had second thoughts about the wisdom of Taylor's report, he could hardly rein in his own enthusiasm on many subsequent occasions, so much so that the the newspapers began to call the conflict in Vietnam "McNamara's War."[27] Returning from a whirlwind inspection tour of the American war effort in South Vietnam in 1962, McNamara briskly informed a skeptical reporter, "Every quantitative measure we have shows we're winning the war."[28]

Kennedy, publicly as optimistic as his advisers, occasionally gave vent to some doubts about the Vietnam enterprise in private. "The troops will march in; the bands will play; the crowd will cheer; and in four days everyone will have forgotten," he complained to speechwriter Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in November 1961, while considering Taylor's proposal for increased military involvement in South Vietnam. "Then we will be told we have to send in more troops. It's like taking a drink. The effect wears off, and you have to take another."[29] Kennedy nonetheless steadily increased the U.S. commitment. By January 1, 1963, Kennedy had stationed 11,000 American "advisers" in Vietnam. Seventy-seven had been killed to date in the war.

Many more would soon be on the way to defend the credibility of the United States.