

The impact of the Indochinese war on America: A Sociopolitical Perspective

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive historical analysis of the American entanglement in Indochina and its profound sociopolitical impact on the American society. The study delves into the intricate layers of the conflict in an attempt to highlight its causes, progression, and posthumous effects. As the research paper encompasses both historical and sociopolitical dimensions, it offers a nuanced understanding of the American entanglement complexity and its ramifications which continue to reverberate until today on American mainland.

تأثير حرب الفيتنام على أمريكا من منظور سوسيوسياسي

بن علية إسماعيل

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مخبر التمكين الاجتماعي والتنمية المستدامة في البيئة الصحراوية



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الكلمات المفتاحية	الملخص
المجتمع الأمريكي؛ التورط؛ السياسة الخارجية؛ الهند الصينية؛ اجتماعي سياسي؛ الحرب.	تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تقديم تحليل تاريخي شامل للتورط الأمريكي في الفيتنام والوقوف على تداعياته الاجتماعية والسياسية العميقة على المجتمع الأمريكي، حيث تستكشف الدراسة الطبقات المعقدة للصراع في محاولة لتسليط الضوء على أسبابه، تطوره، والآثار المترتبة عنه. وبما أن البحث يشمل كلا من البعدين التاريخي والسوسيو سياسي، فإنه يقدم فهماً دقيقاً للتدخل الأمريكي وأثاره المستمرة التي لا تزال تتردد حتى اليوم على المجتمع الأمريكي.

1- Introduction:

The American occupation of Vietnam did not occur spontaneously, but rather emerged as a consequence of a series of complex developments and events characterized by political, military, and economic tensions. These tensions were exacerbated by the prevailing geopolitical ideology of the time, notably the domino theory, which posited that the spread of communism in one country would lead to its spread to neighboring countries. This theory heightened concerns within the American government about the potential repercussions of communist victory in Vietnam, further contributing to the escalation of conflict and the subsequent involvement of the United States. The ramifications of this conflict extended beyond the geopolitical context of Vietnam as a colony, permeating sociological and political dimensions within the American government and society.

2- Historical Overview

Before considering the vicissitudes of the second world war and the western powers entanglement in Vietnam, an inkling of the paradoxically coincident settlement of France as “the protecting nation” and Japan as the “liberator of Asia” which had a profound impact on American policy towards Indochina, shall be instructive.

2-1- Encounters of the French, Japanese, and Vietnamese:

In 1940, After the Nazi’ aggressive emancipation had dislodged the French suzerainty to the Vichy’s¹ Government, Japanese military troops moved into northern Vietnam in search of raw material. Accordingly, the coincident condominiums opened a new phase in Vietnamese history. Notwithstanding their concurrent attempts to achieve the loyalty of the native population, the two colonial powers had reluctantly reached a compromise that protected their own closest interests (Kiernan, 2017, p. 376). A number of authors have posited such a complex situation encompassing heterogeneous perspectives. In this research however, it solely pertains to the Vietnamese perspective which a local weekly magazine encapsulated in the following,

It’s a difficult situation for us Vietnamese. If we have social or economic relations with the Japanese, the French consider us traitors or treat us even worse. If we maintain our relations with the French, the Japanese will be suspicious of our hesitation toward them and hold a grudge against us. What are we to do? Can we avoid any contact? We will just be considered cowards. Will we take either side? Either choice is dangerous. Where do our loyalties lie? (Namba, 2019, p. 81)

¹ “During the Second World War in France, a fascist government known as the Vichy Government replaced the Third French Republic” (Anh, 1985, p. 37)



The aforementioned delineates the challenging implications for the Vietnamese in the nexus of colonial powers. The exigencies of both settlers wreaked political, economic, and social instability. Linguistically, the Japanese had opened twelve schools in six cities to teach their language by the end of 1943. In an attempt to lure the locals; Japan broadcasted in Indochina with messages like “The English and Americans will be chased out of Southeast Asia, and all industry and commerce will be in the hands of the Japanese” and “If you learn Japanese, you will be able to communicate throughout Asia.” (Namba, 2019, p. 83). Analytically, this unfolds the following:

- French acquiescence was in evidence.
- Japan prophesied an American intervention especially after the oil embargo.
- “Communicate through Asia” conveys the Japanese temptations as it “preached its antiimperialist doctrine of “Asia for Asians”
- From a Vietnamese perspective, such an appeal not only elucidates rejection of the language but of the settlement as well.

The ramifications of the Franco-Japanese concur inaugurated the communists’ insurgency. After being absent from Vietnam for thirty years, Ho Chi Minh returned to his country in 1941. Several months later, he established the league for the Independence of Vietnam (Vietminh) which united different revolutionary and patriotic groups despite their orientations. The Vietminh’s unremitting contention dislodged the French authority. In March 1945, the Japanese declared the abolition of the 1885 Vietnam-French treaty and declared a fully independent Vietnam. Shortly afterwards, incessant uprisings culminated in the August revolution in 1945 (Chan, 2006, p. 27).

Of the most significant successes of the August revolution was the substantial devolution of the Japanese power and the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in September 1945. However, regional interstices subsisted as “The northern area was completely under Vietminh control, and in central Vietnam, Bao Dai was forced to abdicate and move to Hanoi to ... Cochin China was another story. Disparate groups filled the political vacuum in the area” (Woods, 2002, p. 61). Such breaches made Vietnam vulnerable.

2-2- The First Indochina War:

After the axis powers defeat and Japan withdrawal from Vietnam, France temptations resurrected. Notwithstanding its suzerainty loss, France endeavored to re-establish its rule over Indochina, it sought to restore a republican France. The Vietminh responded furiously and, thus, the first Indochinese war broke in 1964 (Namba, 2019, p. 93)

Because of weaponry superiority, the French quickly recaptured the urban areas in Vietnam. However, the tumultuous situation aggravated and became global when the cold



world divided the world between capitalists and communists. Capitalists' consistency was weakened with the founding of "The Communist People's Republic of China" coincident with North Korea communist army incursions on South Korea. In this context, "During the first Eisenhower-Nixon administration, the United States began to send a tremendous amount of aid to the French fighting force in Vietnam" (Woods, 2002, p. 63). In an attempt to curb communists' emancipation in Asia. "On May 7, 1954 the Vietnamese forces charged at the French troops from all directions" (Chan, 2006, p. 41). In the eminent battle of Dien Bien Phu² "which was labeled the greatest defeat of a colonial army in Asia" (Woods, 2002, p. 64). Vietminh troops at Dien Bien Phu learned the slogan "Gain independence for the fatherland, return the fields to the peasants, advance to socialism." (Kiernan, 2017, p. 391).

After the French debacle, Vietnam issue was firmly placed on the international agenda at the Geneva Conference. the DRV delegation, led by Pham Van Dong, negotiated the political vacuum in the south. "They pressed hard for full independence and a French promise to withdraw all troops under French command" (Chan, 2006, p. 41).

After two months of bargaining with major powers' pressure, it was agreed that the country would be temporarily partitioned at the seventeenth parallel. The French forces and the hundred-thousand strong State of Vietnam army they had trained would regroup south under the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) while the communist DRV forces would regroup to the north. Accordingly, the two major cities of Saigon and Hanoi fell into separate zones. Within two years, internationally supervised nationwide elections would be held to decide on a government for all of Vietnam. The parties agreed that the temporary border would serve as a military demarcation rather than a border between states. Yet, no person, military or civilian, shall be permitted to cross the provisional military demarcation line unless specifically authorized to do so by the Joint Commission (UN Peacemaker, 1954).

Ho Chi Minh achievements, which have undeniably altered the course of the first Indochina war, are often associated with his communist approach. In 1961, he publicly declared that he adopted Leninism as an attempt save his compatriots. He confirmed this with his remark to the U.S. intelligence officer Charles Fenn in 1945 queries. He condensed,

² A district capital near the Lao border in the Tay Bac or northwestern region of Vietnam, had originally been set up by the Nguyen dynasty in 1841 to consolidate the borderland and prevent bandit forays into the Red River Delta (Duiker & Lockhart, 2006)



First, you must understand that to gain independence from a great power like France is a formidable task that cannot be achieved without some outside help, not necessarily in things like arms, but in the nature of advice and contacts. One doesn't in fact gain independence by throwing bombs and such. That was the mistake the early revolutionaries all too often made. One must gain it through organization, propaganda, training and discipline. One also needs ... a set of beliefs, a gospel, a practical analysis, you might even say a bible. Marxism-Leninism gave me that framework (Duiker, 2000, p. 303).

The aforementioned not only questions Ho Chi Minh's persuasions but proves the potential of the USSR intervention as well. This, along with the united states' intervention in the Geneva Conference as a crucial initial step which globally pertains to the Cold War and Anti-Communist containment policy indicates that another battle was looming.

3- America in Vietnamese front door:

The Geneva conference accommodation of an internationally supervised nationwide elections within two years was unquestionably an undue procrastination for an ultimate triumphal crusade against the communist propagation.

The last emperor Bao Dai, under United States pressure, remained in France and appointed Ngo Dinh Diem as the RVN's Prime Minister. Within a year, he deposed Bao Dai in an orchestrated election to become to leader of the RVN. Ngo Dinh Diem not only had catholic ancestors but plainly disagreed with the communist ideology as well and, thus, his credentials were appealing for the United States (Woods, 2002, pp. 65-66).

Ngo Dinh Diem reign -1954 until 1963- was characterized by economic, religious, and political suppressions. Religiously, Diem brutally repressed influential religious sects including the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao. Politically, Diem's administration conducted a campaign to annihilate communists' expansion. The Poulo Condor prison, which the French had used to imprison anti-French militants, was once more crowded with anti-Diem opponents (Chan, 2006, pp. 46-48). On economic level, large landowners to exploited the landless tenant farmers. Likewise, he uprooted entire villages to prevent communists' infiltration. Such practises unquestionably have connotations of neocolonialism. According to research from Parker,

In many countries, local oligarchs and dictators betrayed the promise of independence by exploiting the divisions and disarray left by colonialism. Such leaders reproduce many of the abuses of colonialism, including the concentration of capital and resources in a few hands, undemocratic government, ethnic and racial demagoguery, the exploitation of labor and the environment, the displacement of local



populations, and restrictions on speech and civil liberties. Under their leadership, postcolonialism transforms into neocolonialism. **(Robert, 2020).**

Following Diem's policies, a determined resistance escalated politically and religiously. Evidently, the tumultuous situation raised the communists' popularity. The Vietminh created the National Liberation Front for southern communists. Whoever joined the NLF were pejoratively referred to as "Vietcong". Similarly, the fervent Catholic's intransigence resulted in religious uprisings. The Buddhist clan's manifestations culminated in pagodas attacked and monks arrested inside. Such propaganda was significant at the time. Consequently, On November 1, 1963, generals in the RVN dislodged Diem as well as his family in senior positions with full support from the United States administration **(Woods, 2002, pp. 67-69).**

consecutive temporary governments followed the death of the Diem's family. Accordingly, political instability prevailed and an American quagmire loomed on the horizon. On January 30, 1964, General Nguyen Khanh overruled the south for a year. On February, 1965, Phan Huy Quat, a civilian, took over the reins of government for only 5 months. In June, 1965 Air Force Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, who previously participated in a series of American covert military operations in North Vietnam, became prime minister with Army General Nguyen Van Thieu as head of state. In September 1971, Thieu pushed aside Ky, as well as other high-ranking military and political leaders, and instituted one-man rule **(Chan, 2006, p. 48).**

4- A changing foreign policy:

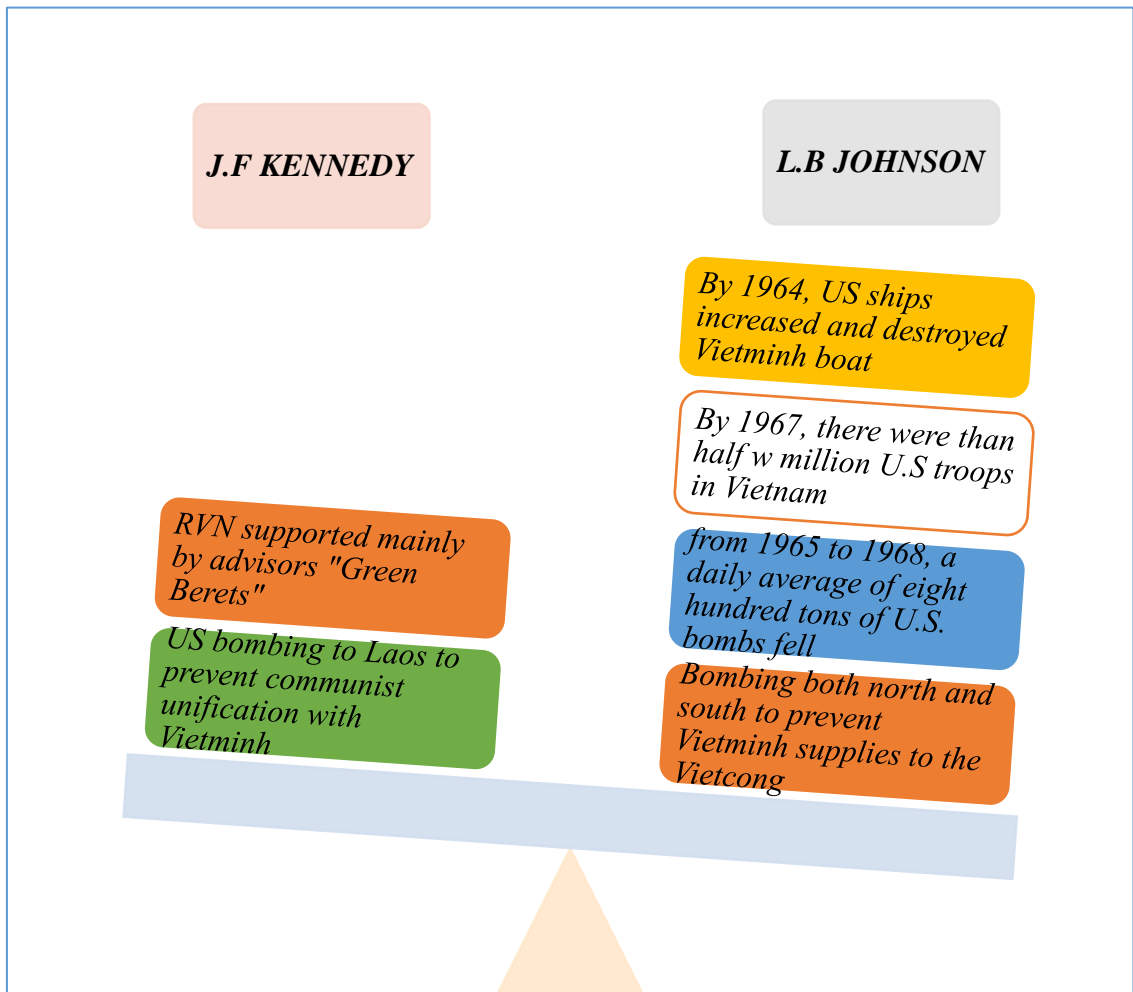
In a 1954 press conference, U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower famously condensed his foreign policy towards the Vietnamese issue as "the falling domino principle". He stated, "you have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So, you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences." **(Leeson & Dean, 2009, p. 533).** Plainly, Eisenhower drew an analogy between the dominoes and the Asian countries and concluded the extent to which communist' impairment is undue.

From Eisenhower to Lyndon B Johnson, the United States administration undeniably embraced "the falling domino principle" with variant adaptability degree. Eisenhower's administration not only provided aid for the French but also supported Diem's Reign **(Woods, 2002, p. 69).** Indeed, Without U.S. support Diem almost certainly



could not have exerted his power on the South. From 1954 to 1960, Washington provided Diem's government with \$444 million for military aid and \$1.4 billion for economic aid (Kiernan, 2017, pp. 400-404). The following figure examines the considerable variation in the U.S foreign policy towards Vietnam, which were extensions for Eisenhower strategies, from 1961 to 1969

Figure N° 1
Evolution of U.S Approach to the Vietnamese Issue



Source (Mahajani, 1971, p. 97)

delving into the aforementioned, we may condense that Vietnam was an increasingly significant issue for the United States. The drastic measures of Johnson's administration confirmed the worst fears about communists' emancipation. George F. Kennan, previous ambassador to Yugoslavia, wrote in his diaries that he was "absolutely appalled at what

was going on” and worried that Johnson had “lost his head completely (Kiernan, 2017, p. 433).

Richard Nixon, Johnson’s successor, extended the previous strategies. In 1972, he resumed regular bombing runs which were partial since Johnson ordered in 1968. The bombing strikes had destroyed or severely damaged all of North Vietnam’s industrial and transportation infrastructure. Ultimately, more than a million tons of bombs were thrown on North Vietnam, 4 million tons on South Vietnam (Chan, 2006, p. 50).

Coincident with the global uprisings, the Vietnam issue created a rift in the cold war theater. The United States attempted to disrupt communism in Vietnam while the USSR had to defend their zones of influence. “North Vietnam’s efforts were encouraged by support from the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. It appeared that Vietnam was going to be a pawn in a much larger game, and Ho was willing to play his part” (Woods, 2002, p. 70).

In January 1968, notwithstanding temporary ceasefire for the Vietnamese Tet³ holiday, North Vietnamese forces and the “Viet Cong” conducted significant assaults against numerous South Vietnamese cities and villages. The incident was labelled as the Tet offensive as the assaults perverted the Tet’s sacredness. Although the incident was a debacle for the communist bloc, it paradoxically became an immense psychological defeat for the United States. With the latter endowing war with two billion dollars per month, President Johnson announced that he would not run for a second term. Richard M Nixon, who took office in 1968, promised to bring an honorable peace in Vietnam. (Chan, 2006, pp. 52-53).

Prior research generally confirm that the Tet Offensive was an attempt to unite Vietnam before Ho Chi Minh’s death. Concerns about his health condition were evident as he frequently traveled to China for medical care in the later 1960s. After Ho’s death on September 2, 1969, Le Duan became the Leading figure of the Vietnamese Communist movement and general secretary of the Party (1908–1986) (Duiker, 2000).

5- Social impact: The rise of anti-war movements

Ho Chi Minh Tet attack inaugurated an international media propaganda against the American intervention in Vietnam. In a recent research, by 1960 more than 80% of Americans owned TVs. (Cokeley, 2002). Evidently, according to a CNN report, TV and journalism, besides entertainment, proved an effective political power. “By 1960, most American households had a television, and that year’s Nixon/Kennedy debate was the first televised presidential debate” (AUGUST, 2023). In the American war realm, Dr. Huebner annotated, “Vietnam is best remembered as the first televised war”.

³ the lunar New Year that Vietnamese people celebrate on January 30th.



By 1965, there were print journalists representing four magazines, several news papers, and prominent photographs (Huebner, 2005, p. 151). Accordingly, incessant images of war were pervading internationally through media lenses. Significantly, two days after the Tet Offensive, a NYTIMES photographer Eddie Adams established the cornerstone of an antiwar propaganda as he immortalized the scene of a south army general shooting a Vietcong. Dr. Huebner commented, “The infamous footage of the South Vietnamese general Nguyen Ngoc Loan shooting a bound Vietcong prisoner in 1968 surely sickened millions as had no earlier image”. Likewise, a NYTIMES reporter condensed its powerful impact, “The image gave Americans a stark glimpse of the brutality of the Vietnam War and helped fuel a decisive shift in public opinion” (Astor, s.d.). Accordingly, the legitimacy of such a drastic intervention was called into question and support for the war dramatically decreased both at home and abroad. It was the beginning of the end for the American Vietnamese war.

The impact of the Vietnam War extended beyond the battlefield, significantly influencing American society and sparking a strong anti-war movement. This movement, led by various groups including students, intellectuals, civil rights activists, and religious leaders, vigorously opposed U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Criticisms focused on the war's legitimacy, its human toll, and moral implications, leading to widespread protests like the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam in 1969. These protests reflected a growing public dissatisfaction with government policies. (Minh, 2023, p. 40)

As mentioned earlier, president Richard .M Nixon assumed responsibility for the American Vietnamese war. after winning the presidency in 1968, he assured an exit from Vietnam “with honor”. Peace talks were opened secretly in early 1969 in Paris and proved a debacle for four years. The negotiation process involved defeats, retreats, and military camouflage to alter the negotiation course. On march 18, 1969, Nixon authorized a bombing campaign over eastern Cambodia to destroy both Ho Chi Minh Trail⁴ and communists’ sanctuaries. The raids culminated in invading Cambodia in 1970 and southern Laos in 1971. The accumulated external interventions further engulfed anti-war movements. During the talks, North Vietnam insisted on total American withdrawal and an overall country unification. However, it was not until 1975 that the DRV government of Saigon was toppled and the process of unification began. (Chan, 2006, pp. 54-65)

6- Conclusion

Examining the unrivaled history of Vietnam in its totally affords first a critical view on the motives behind the United States entanglements not only in Vietnam but worldwide

⁴ GROUP 559. Military organization established in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the spring of 1959 to construct and maintain a system of trails into the Republic of Vietnam to facilitate the infiltration of personnel and supplies into the South. The system, which was built partly on existing trails and passed through parts of southern Laos, was eventually dubbed the Hồ Chí Minh Trail.



as well., *The United States quagmire was not only an attempt to curb communism expansions but foreign policy, economic interests, and geopolitical domination were crucial motives as well. Furthermore, the research has highlighted the profound impact of the Vietnam War on U.S. foreign policy. It profoundly reshaped diplomatic strategies and influenced subsequent military interventions. On the social level, the rise of anti-war movements, fueled by moral objections and disillusionment with government policies, exemplifies the deep societal divisions and the questioning of authority that characterized this turbulent period in American history.*

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