
Insurgency Revisited: The Case of Vietnam

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Introduction

When President Wilson announced his Fourteen Points in 1918, he encouraged the idea of self-determination—the notion that people can only be governed with their own consent. The United States' foreign policy approach all throughout the twentieth century highlights the tension between anti-colonialism and anti-communism. This is evident in their interventions during the twentieth century. Fearful of Vietnam becoming entirely communist in a Cold War environment, the United States supported the South Vietnamese. What became known as the Vietnam War in the United States was known in Vietnam as the American War.¹ Labeling the war as an insurgency—as has become popular among many policy makers and historians—ignores the Vietnamese narrative of self-determination. It assumes the narrative of the United States. Understanding the nature of an insurgency is therefore crucial—an uprising against a justly constituted government²—how the Vietnam War became an insurgency, and why that definition is not useful in this case.

The Vietnam War was a struggle for independence, the presumption of an insurgency is incorrect and based on a flawed understanding of insurgencies. Such a serious error of history relies on several fallacious assumptions regarding the context and contours of the war. Since the Republic of Vietnam was not a justly constituted legitimate national government, opposing it is therefore not an act of political insurgency. The great powers, hoping to further their ideologies, imported the Cold War politics to the Vietnamese peninsula. The United States, as will be discussed, violently opposed the popular will of the people. The insurgency label justified the amount of force used by the United States; limited applications of force were the result of the insurgency label at the war's outset. On the other hand, overwhelming force was the result of the insurgency label in the war's later years.

National Independence Movement

Vietnam's national story is crucial to contextualizing the war. Vietnamese citizens were accustomed to fighting for their independence for millennia. Four waves of Chinese imperialism molded the political landscape in Vietnam until the early fifteenth century. Burbank and Cooper³ use empires as the unit of analysis in their study of global history. Significant support for their thesis, that history is the study of the interaction of empires, applies in Vietnam. From imperial

¹ Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

² Joint Chiefs of Staff and Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 1-02 Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*. (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2007), http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf.

³ Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

expansion; to the politics of difference, that empires govern disparate polities;⁴ to revolutions;⁵ and post-war development projects,⁶ Vietnam experienced them all. Centuries of resistance contributed to the national identity—this identity fueled the *esprit de corps*⁷ of guerillas during the Vietnam War.

Various colonial powers arrived from Europe in the sixteenth century and did not depart for five hundred years. Portuguese ships began landing in Vietnam in the early sixteenth century, but local resistance deterred a lengthy stay. Dutch attempts to penetrate Vietnam date as far back to the seventeenth century—their efforts were met unfavorably by the local population—a further rejection of external influence. British inroads into Vietnam were also rebuffed with violence, though a limited British presence was later permitted. When Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam's independence in September 1945, he borrowed language from the French Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen and the United States Constitution; ironically, both were guilty of imperialism in Vietnam.⁸ The struggle for independence resonated with the assembled crowd.

French involvement in Vietnam began late in the seventeenth century and continued until 1954. French traders and missionaries established a destabilizing presence that, “brought profound disruptions to the political and social organization of Vietnamese society and to the lives of indigenous peasants and elites.”⁹ Vietnamese sovereignty, to the extent a concept of sovereignty existed, was undermined as French domination was all encompassing. The French framed national resistance as symptomatic of a xenophobic and uneducated polity who needed the support and guidance of French colonists and missionaries. Rebellions against French rule were suppressed and demands for self-determination were ignored. In addition to violently repressing protests, the established plantation economy ensured a regular supply of profitable commodities to France. Independence from colonialism was the goal of Vietnamese violence—from the days of colonialism to the reunification in 1975.

Ho Chi Minh was among the leaders of the Vietnamese communist independence movement beginning in the 1920s. Amid growing nationalist independence sentiment, Vietnam fell to Japan in 1940. Nguyen Van Thieu formalized the National Liberation Front (NLF), a nationalist party rooted in communist ideology that drew upon the popular support of rural peasantry. Ho Chi Minh offered military training that contributed to his increased influence. Vietnamese resistance to US intervention reminded many of their own anticolonial revolutions, not insurgencies. Ho Chi Minh's acceptance of Soviet support was more for the gain of his independence movement than a Soviet endorsement.

Instead of granting self-determination to Vietnam, the French, with permission from the international community, returned to Vietnam after World War II. Marks explains, “The global

⁴ Ibid, 11.

⁵ Ibid, 408.

⁶ Ibid, 413.

⁷ A feeling of pride or fellowship, often in the face of hardship.

⁸ Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.

⁹ Ibid, 15.

scale of World War II created the conditions not only for decolonization but also for revolutions, mostly led by communist or other leftist parties.”¹⁰ In that regard, Vietnam was no different than other liberation movements with socialist leadership. Ho Chi Minh led the August revolution in August 1945, which fundamentally shifted the political realities in Vietnam; communists were now in power.¹¹ In September 1945, the NLF held Hanoi and proclaimed independence. Nine more years of “a people’s war”¹² for independence from the French finally concluded in 1954 with the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Even after twenty additional years of fighting the United States and its South Vietnamese proxy army, millions of deaths and devastation, Vietnam was still far from its independence.

Labelling the Vietnam War as an insurgency versus counter-insurgency struggle fails to recognize the Vietnamese drive for independence and the political will of the rural peasantry. No single legitimate government entity is found in the course of Vietnamese history, from the Chinese to the French, Japanese to the Americans. North Vietnam was a justly constituted and internationally recognized polity with a uniformed army and established political leadership. The NLF and their Northern backers, comprised of socialist Vietnamese peasants, fought for liberation from a series of illegitimate governments whose backers provided funding and training to an army for the explicit purpose of opposing the communist will of the people—this is the story of Vietnam, not the story of an insurgency.

Insurgency?

An insurgency is more than guerilla tactics; it is a matter of political perspectives and desired outcomes. Insurgencies are linked to the small wars in which they occur. *Guerilla* comes from the Spanish resistance to the 1808 French occupation of Spain—they were resistance fighters, not insurgents against a legally constituted national government. Limited wars are a trend in global conflict and labelling them as insurgencies is a convenient pejorative, “ ‘small wars’ in Greece, Algeria, Malaya, and elsewhere and in Venezuela and Vietnam, to cite two current examples, are essentially insurgency and counter-insurgency types of warfare.”¹³ Atkinson posits that nuclear capabilities are responsible for maintaining a general peace while increasing the likelihood of insurgency and counter-insurgency warfare.¹⁴ Atkinson does not specifically address the Vietnam War; he instead connects it to a collection of small-scale conflicts. Ahmad counts as many as fifty insurgencies in 1969.¹⁵ Inherent in such an analysis is the danger of muting national narratives of liberation, presuming a Euro-centric perspective, and

¹⁰ Robert Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World* (3rd ed.) (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 192.

¹¹ Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 37.

¹² *Ibid*, 47.

¹³ James D. Atkinson, “Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in the 1960’s,” *World Affairs* 126, no. 3 (1963): www.jstor.org/stable/20670356.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 185.

¹⁵ Eqbal Ahmad, “Revolutionary War and Counter Insurgency,” *Journal of International Affairs* 25, no. 1 (1972), www.jstor.org/stable/24356753.

denying self-determination. An insurgency is connected more to political perspective than military tactics.

Insurgency is a term for defining guerilla conflicts where the insurgency is attempting to replace the legitimate government.¹⁶ The fluid definition of insurgency allows government legitimacy to determine the labeling of militant actors as insurgents. A government is legitimate when it reflects the popular national will. Guerilla then, according to Javed, is a tactical methodology while insurgent refers to the political dimension.¹⁷ The application of such a label in Vietnam runs counter to popular support for the Vietnamese nationalist-communist movement throughout Vietnam.

Some historians are unsatisfied with this simplistic terminology of tactics and motivations, instead they base their language in terms of revolution. In his 1965 article, Bernard Fall writes that an ignored element of “[insurgency] is the combination of guerilla warfare and political action.”¹⁸ Atkinson focuses initially on the tactical dimension, “[insurgents] are characterized by sabotage, assassination of leadership elements...hit and run raids by guerilla bands, ambushes, and larger-scale guerilla operations.”¹⁹ Atkinson goes on to suggest and justify a tactical response. Later, he addresses the strategic level, blaming the Soviets for fomenting revolutionary communist sentiment,²⁰ although that ignores the decades of rising communist ideology cultivated by Ho Chi Minh.²¹

Revolutionary and nationalist sentiments motivate fighters to continue fighting even while suffering heavy casualties, suggesting that political ideologies are not the determining factor. Combatting guerilla tactics is challenging for large militaries accustomed to a frontal enemy who is similarly equipped, uses familiar tactics, and who acts to preserve its personnel to fulfill a political goal. Tactical considerations do not make an insurgency either. Oppressed people around the world adopt guerilla fighting methods because it allows them to maximize tactical effectiveness with limited means. Guerilla warfare is increasingly identified as a weapon of the weak, and a disenfranchised fight against an established government. When a government is justly constituted and representative of the people’s will, we may refer to the conflict as an insurgency, but a justly constituted government assumes a certain approach to the narrative.

John Nagl traces the development of the insurgency idea over several centuries, from theorists to historians.²² Carl von Clausewitz and Antoine-Henri Jomini, according to Nagl, addressed conventional warfare and the methods required to achieve victory. Jomini focused on complete enemy destruction in order to prevent reconstitution, a tactic adopted by the United

¹⁶ Ambreen Javed, “Resistance and its Progression to Insurgency,” *Strategic Studies* 30, no. 1 (2010), doi:10.2307/48527670.

¹⁷ Ibid, 175.

¹⁸ Bernard Fall, “The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency,” *Naval War College Review* 18, no. 3 (1965) <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol18/iss3/4>.

¹⁹ James D. Atkinson, “Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in the 1960’s,” *World Affairs* 126, no. 3 (1963): www.jstor.org/stable/20670356.

²⁰ Ibid, 185.

²¹ Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²² John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

States in Vietnam to serve a political end. Clausewitz, by contrast, valued the power of nationalist armies who fought for a closely-held set of ideals—not dissimilar to the North Vietnamese and NLF. Mao Zedong wrote of the power of this kind of nationalist warfare, one where the power to wage war is determined by the will of the people.²³ Mao applied these principles in fighting the Japanese during their occupation of China. While they were certainly guerillas, Mao and his fighters—like the Spanish—were not insurgents. They were defending their homeland and aspirations for self-determination which is parallel to Ho Chi Minh’s actions in Vietnam.

Southern Governance

Armed with an understanding of the contours of insurgency, attention can be shifted to the government in the Republic of Vietnam. When Ngo Dinh Diem’s government faced questions of legitimacy, he attempted to harness support through coercion:

Throughout the late 1950s Diem unleashed a series of campaigns aimed at consolidating his hold on power... They gradually prompted DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] support... one that by the early 1960s had launched an increasingly successful political and military challenge to Diem. The authoritarian and dictatorial nature of Diem’s government also produced widespread opposition from the urban middle class and the Buddhist protests...²⁴

A referendum offered voters the choice between Bao Dai or Ngo Dinh Diem. Election irregularities, campaign restrictions, and dubious vote tallies contributed to the illegitimacy of the elections. Diem then refused to hold scheduled elections intended to unify the North and South based on an assumption that free elections were an impossibility in the communist North. Diem’s fears were well founded. The NLF had “gained control over 70 percent of rural Vietnam during 1957–1962.”²⁵ Diem consolidated power under the auspices of the constitution but grew more dictatorial over the course of his premiership. Diem’s political motivations were meant to align with the broader Vietnamese project of independence. Despite his apparent commitment to independence and national legitimacy, Diem’s government was largely illegitimate.

Insurgencies, as discussed, are a matter of political perspective. Vietnam’s national independence movement was stunted by France and the United States. The 1954 Geneva agreement divided Vietnam in two, although the political aspirations of independence were unified nationally. National unification was promised in 1956 but, “The United States supported a client regime and Vietnam remained divided.”²⁶ A divided Vietnam was beset with challenges, “When the US supported southern regime had difficulty governing itself and maintaining popular support against the northern and NLF guerilla fighters (not insurgents), the United States first

²³ Ibid, 22.

²⁴ Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 77-78.

²⁵ Eqbal Ahmad, “Revolutionary War and Counter Insurgency,” *Journal of International Affairs* 25, no. 1 (1972), 8. www.jstor.org/stable/24356753.

²⁶ Robert Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World* (3rd ed.) (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 177.

sent advisors and then combat troops to support the south.”²⁷ The illegitimacy of the government in South Vietnam makes it difficult to view the Viet Minh and NLF as insurgents. The United States denied the political will for independence and self-governance by the Vietnamese because of its own domestic political priorities, Vietnamese priorities were ignored. Fighting for the will of the people and against an unjustly constituted government does not qualify as an insurgency.

Southern governance throughout the three decades following World War II is pockmarked with poor governance and authoritarianism. Diem’s removal in a 1963 coup caused further deterioration, leading to twelve different governments between 1963 and 1965. “The NLF took full advantage of this political instability to make further gains in territory and popular support.”²⁸ President Johnson, motivated by a widely-held American desire to modernize the global economy, in an era when the administration pursued policies of development, called for the establishment of a Mekong Valley Development Authority. Local populations suffered due to the “forced relocation of thousands of farmers in the strategic hamlets scheme.”²⁹ Presidents Kennedy and Eisenhower understood that total self-governance would result in a unified Vietnam under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh.³⁰ Vietnam was denied self-determination because of the inevitable results of holding a vote; this is consistent with Westad’s understanding that great power interventions in the Third World were driven by a drive to spread ideologies.³¹ Presumptions of an insurgency in Vietnam suggests government legitimacy while ignoring the instability caused by foreign-supported client leadership.

Tactical Excuses

The mislabeling of the Vietnam War as an insurgency, combined with its goal to prevent communism in South East Asia, led the United States to make tactical decisions that require evaluation. For example, initial troop commitments in Vietnam are a result of the insurgency label. A massive troop build-up would have been inappropriate for an insurgent enemy; sending smaller numbers of soldiers is the result of a flawed enemy assessment. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson were reluctant to commit combat troops; they preferred to rely on advisers to construct a robust South Vietnamese army. When the policy failed, the United States deployed combat soldiers. Merom summarizes the military approach as a three-pronged attack.³² First, airpower was deployed against the North—intended to punish the Democratic Republic of Vietnam for its support of NLF communists, and for its alliance with the Soviet Union and China. Air power was also used to bomb the Ho Chi Minh trail—aimed at denying supplies to NLF guerillas. Counter-guerilla operations in the south—aimed at neutralizing communist forces and their political influence—failed to deliver substantive gains.³³ NVA and NLF tactical abilities were not

²⁷ Ibid, 177.

²⁸ Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 104.

²⁹ Mark Mazower, *Governing the World* (New York: Penguin Books 2012), 295.

³⁰ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 180.

³¹ Ibid, 4.

³² Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

³³ Ibid, 232.

significantly affected by the bombing raids; their high levels of motivation also contributed to suppressing American tactical successes.

Subsequent escalations in troop commitments reflect updated understandings of the situation in Vietnam—a stubborn insurgency. The alleged insurgents would not be defeated, and the United States would have to change tactics. President Johnson’s strategy of attrition could be justified by escalating the killing of suspected communists. Secretary of Defense McNamara proposed that the United States and the Army of South Vietnam should aim to kill more NLF fighters. The idea was that if the insurgents were killed faster than new ones were indoctrinated to communism, the United States should prevail. Well-armed and coordinated communist forces functioned more as an army than McNamara and Johnson could admit, and the insurgency label blinded them to the situation on the ground.

The Tet Offensive is the best example of the tactical considerations in Vietnam. Via the Ho Chi Minh trail, NLF fighters spent months preparing and training. American intelligence sources pointed to a military build-up by local communist forces and North Vietnam. On January 30, 1968, North Vietnam and the NLF launched a coordinated attack against provincial capitals, such as Cholon and Hue, and on Saigon. North Vietnamese participants, numbering approximately half a million, were told by the communist leadership that they were participating in the writing of a new history for Vietnam. United States Army officials were convinced that their fight was against an insurgent enemy incapable of major maneuvers. Blindness to the truth left the United States unprepared and resulted in heavy losses. Once they overcame the initial shock, the United States and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) unleashed unrelenting firepower on the communist forces. Casualty numbers on the Vietnamese side among combatants and civilians were staggering. This was the cost of winning a war that was incorrectly assumed to be an insurgency. Although South Vietnam and the United States achieved a tactical victory, the Tet Offensive was a propaganda victory for the communist forces, who could claim that they took the fight to the Americans, and began to turn American public opinion against the war.³⁴

Dubbing the Vietnam War an insurgency created conditions where tactical miscalculations were possible. By not granting the appropriate status to the hostilities in Vietnam, this mislabeling allowed for military miscalculations and perpetuated a lie to the public. Paradoxically, the insurgency label justified limited forces and overwhelming firepower. Limited forces were best for fighting a limited insurgent enemy while overwhelming force was required to suppress brutal and dangerous insurgent communists. The labeling of the Vietnam War as an insurgency instead of a national independence movement allowed for the destruction of life and property on both ends of the Vietnamese Peninsula.

³⁴ Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 152-153.

Importing the Cold War

Global geopolitics, in the form of the Cold War, were imported to Vietnam in early 1950. Westad remarks that the “interventionist mindset” of both great powers was responsible for turning Vietnam into a Cold War battleground.³⁵ Referring to the Vietnam War as an insurgency ignores the fact that the Vietnam War was transformed from an independence struggle into “a central battleground of the Cold War.”³⁶ It is important to remember that the primary goal from a Vietnamese perspective was shedding French rule, against whom they engaged in a protracted guerilla war. Establishing an independent Vietnam was of utmost importance to Ho Chi Minh and his followers, not becoming Cold War puppets for a great power.

Mutual recognition between the People’s Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and subsequent establishment of diplomatic relations sent political shockwaves across the Pacific Ocean. By the end of January 1950, as the great powers faced off on the Korean peninsula, the Soviet Union also diplomatically recognized the DRV. Vietnam’s place in the Cold War was not of its own choosing, and it likely would have preferred to declare independence and remain on the sidelines. Military aid, however, was desperately needed. During the Cold war, aid from one of the superpowers or their allies was a welcomed rescue package for many Third World countries. The diplomatic recognition of Vietnam by the two largest communist countries was an opportunity for Vietnam to exercise its own agency and decide its future by extracting military support for ideological brethren. They were, however, not seeking an endorsement of any great power for internal legitimacy or political gain. Vietnamese communists were similarly disinterested in a confrontation with the United States.

In January 1950, the Cold War arrived in Vietnam. The great powers brought conflict and destabilized the region. United States officials, as Bradley explains, understood that the former emperor of Vietnam ruled without legitimacy.³⁷ Questions about legitimacy indicate that policy makers in the United States feared Ho Chi Minh’s “commanding nationalist following in Vietnam despite their opposition to him.”³⁸ His legitimacy and commitment to self-determination frightened the United States. Ho Chi Minh was committed to the post-colonial independence project and enjoyed support from the rural Vietnamese peasantry. Self-determination, allegedly a foreign policy priority for the United States, was subsumed when the United States turned an independence movement into a Cold War struggle.

President Eisenhower contributed to dragging Vietnam into the Cold War when he proclaimed his domino theory—that a Vietnamese communist state would result in the neighboring countries becoming communist—in 1954. President Eisenhower characterized the threat as a *fall* to communism instead of the realization of a popular political will. North Vietnamese citizens and the communist leadership were happy to receive military aid from the Soviet Union and the PRC but not, as mentioned, because they were interested in an alliance.

³⁵ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 180.

³⁶ Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 56.

³⁷ Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2000)

³⁸ *Ibid*, 179.

Neither the Soviet Union nor the PRC wanted to provide too much aid because they feared a confrontation with the United States. Undeterred by potential confrontations, the United States saw a growing communist problem, a so-called “insurgency”. Foreign powers thrust Cold War politics on Vietnam even as the Vietnamese were attempting to rid themselves of French control in 1954; an insurgency narrative was born.

When we consider that Vietnam was dragged into the Cold War by foreign powers and the fact that insurgents are understood as violent uprisings against justly constituted governments, characterizing the Vietnam War as an insurgency denies the contours of history. Eisenhower’s words contribute to the presumption that democratic governments and market economies are the will of all peoples and that communism is the antithesis to freedom. Public opinion in Vietnam indicates that Eisenhower’s underlying assumptions were incorrect. Vietnamese communists enjoyed wide ranging support and were successful in ousting the French. Efforts of communist suppression and containment coupled with the language of *falling* to communism demonstrates two problematic historical positions on behalf of the United States. First, it presumes a historical narrative that is West-centered—that the natural progression of humanity is towards democracy and market economies. Such a teleology is fundamentally flawed. There are no predetermined outcomes to history. Second, it assumes the superiority of one political system over another while ignoring Wilson’s commitment to self-determination and the will of Vietnamese peasants. Imported Cold War politics that destabilized a region cannot be responsible for an insurgency. The factors that breed such a view are a fallacy.

Conclusion

As we have seen, a conglomeration of factors is responsible for the Vietnam War becoming known as an insurgency. Such a characterization is dubious because it fails to account for historical intricacies. An insurgency is an illegal uprising against a justly constituted national government; guerilla tactics are employed by insurgents because it allows them to maximize the tactical yield. However, the constitution of the government of South Vietnam from the years of 1954 until 1975 was decidedly unjust because it did not reflect the national will of the people of Vietnam. Guerilla fighters in Vietnam were committed to ousting foreign influences and obtaining independence.

Casting aside the context of an anti-colonial independence war allows us to forget that the global Cold War was forced upon Vietnam by external powers, whose influence they were attempting to escape. Excuses are developed for tactical decisions by the United States. Presumptions of political legitimacy in South Vietnam presupposes democracy as superior despite the support by rural peasantry for communism. Ho Chi Minh requested a meeting with President Wilson to discuss the issue of independence in Vietnam following World War I. It would take nearly six more decades until those dreams were realized. References to Ho Chi Minh’s followers as insurgents denies their agency for affecting postcolonial change and obfuscates the role of the United States in destabilizing the region. That is the true historical crime of a so-called insurgency.