



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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South Vietnam 1955–75

Executive Summary

The Vietnam War was a 20 year–long conflict that pitted South Vietnam, an initially temporary political construct created in 1955, against the Communist Party of North Vietnam and its agents and supporters in the South. From 1955 to 1965, after the proclaimed Republic of South Vietnam rejected the terms of the 1954 Geneva Accords, it received support from the United States in the form of military equipment, financial assistance, and military advisers. When South Vietnam’s political and military situation deteriorated in the early 1960s, the United States intervened with ground troops against the organic Viet Minh (dubbed “Viet Cong” by the South) guerilla movement; the Viet Cong received increasing support from North Vietnam during this time. North Vietnam fought to unify all of Vietnam into a single, postcolonial state under a communist government, as modeled throughout the Soviet Union and mainland (communist) China. South Vietnam sought to preserve an independent, noncommunist state aligned with the West.

The conflict from 1955–75 was the successor to the wider First Indochina War (1946–54) against French colonial rule following World War II. After the defeat of French colonial forces in 1954, major participants in the conflict signed the Geneva Accords (1954) to end French rule over Southeast Asia; the Geneva Accords specifically called for a partitioning of Vietnam along the 17th parallel for 18 months until a general election could be held to unify the country under a single government. The administration in the South, led by conservative Catholic Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem, soon repudiated the required elections and declared itself an independent state.¹ Following the Geneva Accords, the region experienced a mass movement of Catholic, francophone, and anti-communist Vietnamese migrating to the southern state, as well as an accompanying movement of southern communist sympathizers moving to the northern state. A committed group of communists remained hidden in the South, however, forming a clandestine organization known as the Viet Minh. Numerous other factions in the South, including Catholic groups opposed to Diem, organized crime groups, Buddhists, and royalists who still supported the indolent Emperor of Vietnam Bao Dai, fractured South Vietnamese loyalties and politics. By 1960, the Viet Minh established a military arm known as the National Liberation Front to consolidate resistance to Diem rule, conduct guerilla warfare in rural areas, and foment political unrest in the cities.² Diem consolidated his power in the South by crushing the various competing blocs in succession, beginning in 1955.³ The Viet Minh began to carry out small-scale guerilla operations against South Vietnamese state and security targets in 1957, causing the United States to ramp up security assistance in response.

The primary effort of the Viet Minh in the early years of the conflict after 1955 included political organization and proselytizing in the densely populated coastal areas of South Vietnam at the village level using methods of co-optation, coercion, and terrorism. Through these violent efforts, the Viet Minh could secure control of the rural Buddhist peasantry, a group that comprised 80 percent of the South’s population.

Diem's fixation with his political opposition, however, drove the appointment of senior military officers based on their perceived loyalty to Diem, not their military competence. The resulting ineptitude and corruption within the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) caused alarm in Washington that South Vietnam would be "lost to communism" without direct US military intervention.⁴

The United States first escalated the conflict with a bombing campaign of North Vietnam dubbed Rolling Thunder. North Vietnamese regulars launched offenses from the 17th parallel, or the demilitarized zone, and increased the number of regular North Vietnamese Army troops infiltrating the south.⁵ The United States sent in ground troops in 1965, eventually reaching a strength of 540,000 personnel, but its strategy of attrition and efforts to force the North Vietnamese government to end the conflict never came close to breaking the North's will to continue the fight; additionally, US military intervention could not overcome the overwhelming corruption, incompetence, and illegitimacy throughout the South Vietnamese government, which never gained the support of a majority of its own people. The war raged for eight years, taking the lives of 58,000 American military personnel, more than 250,000 ARVN soldiers, and as many as one million communist troops without appreciably blunting communist political gains in the South. In the United States, public support for the war declined dramatically during the late 1960s, and in 1973, the last American military unit departed South Vietnam. Two years later, North Vietnam launched a reconnaissance in force into the South, which snowballed into a rout. Although the South's total armed security forces numbered some 1.3 million men, and the South had more and better tanks in addition to the world's fourth-largest Air Force, resistance in the South collapsed, and the North took full control within two months.⁶

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

No. Although many South Vietnamese held strong anti-communist sentiments and there were significant cultural, regional differences between northern and southern Vietnamese, the Diem regime alienated the majority of the southern population through the repression of the Buddhist religion.⁷ Instead of attempting to unite and reconcile the various anti-communist elements present in the South, Diem focused on consolidating his own personal power.⁸ A temporary strengthening of southern nationalism emerged after the Tet Offensive. Ellsworth Bunker, the US ambassador to Saigon, reported a sharp increase in volunteers for the ARVN, but South Vietnam's leadership squandered this opportunity too.⁹ Because the strands of nationalism in the South did not connect 85 percent of the state, South Vietnam never achieved an independent national identity separate from a broader, pan-national Vietnamese identity.

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

No. The government was not perceived as legitimate. Diem came to power with the help of the US government and almost comically rigged elections. His government was made up of close friends and family members, virtually all from the educated elite Catholic minority that comprised about 12 percent of the South's population. The traditional source of legitimacy of governance in the South, the emperor (at this time Bao Dai), was marginalized and went into exile. After the assassination of Diem and his brother in Saigon in 1964, a revolving door of military coups and rigged elections came and went with bewildering frequency, never approaching 85 percent legitimacy.¹⁰

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

Yes → No. The Viet Minh were initially weak in the countryside as well as in larger villages and hamlets, but they slowly consolidated their control in the rural areas. The Tet Offensive of 1968 decimated the Viet Minh, but by that time, North Vietnam had a huge number of regular forces operating in the South.¹¹ Most US military estimates suggest the South Vietnamese government was able to isolate and protect, at most, about 40 percent of the rural population from contact with communist forces.

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

Yes. Both the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese regulars maintained sanctuary and safe havens in Cambodia and Laos, receiving support through an enormous logistical effort along the network of roads and jungle paths known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.¹² The United States dropped a large tonnage of bombs along the Ho Chi Minh trail network from 1965–73 without any appreciable effect.

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. After the departure of the French, many dedicated anti-communist soldiers who had fought with the French regrouped in South Vietnam, creating a military force (the ARVN) that grew steadily in size with US support from 1955 to 1960.¹³ A newly established National Police force protected the urban areas.

SOUTH VIETNAM 1955–75	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	NO
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO
POPULATION SECURITY	YES → NO
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Outcome

Government defeat. Saigon fell in 1975, and the North Vietnamese government reunited the country.¹⁴ Over the next decade, as many as one million South Vietnamese fled the country, and remnants of the South Vietnamese government escaped to Taiwan.¹⁵ The Five Factors model would have predicted government defeat.

Endnotes

1. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Vietnam War, 1954–1975,” last updated May 9, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Vietnam-War>.
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3. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, “Vietnam War.”
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7. Jennifer Llewellyn, Jim Southey, and Steve Thompson, “South Vietnam under Ngo Dinh Diem,” Vietnam War, Alphahistory (website), updated 2018, <https://alphahistory.com/vietnamwar/south-vietnam/>.
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<https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/Research-Commentary/Study-of-Internal-Conflict/SOIC-Conflict-Studies/>

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