

such an agreement before the chances for a peace settlement had been explored at Geneva.

The French, too, were reluctant to expand the war and did not want to torpedo the conference. In the end, the proposal was temporarily shelved, and the U.S. reluctantly agreed to attend the proceedings at Geneva. This decision is analyzed in depth in Chapter 2. On May 7, 1954, delegations from the major world powers as well as the involved states in Indochina met at Geneva to discuss a settlement of the conflict. On the eve of the conference, the French military post at Dienbienphu fell to the Vietminh, leaving the French in a defeatist mood. In June, the Laniel government resigned. The new Prime Minister, Pierre Mendes-France, favored a French withdrawal and pledged to bring the war to an end by mid-summer. Similar pressure for a settlement was also imposed on the DRV by the Soviet Union and China. They both wanted an end to the conflict in order to promote peaceful coexistence with the West so they could concentrate on domestic concerns.

On July 21, an agreement to end the conflict was finally reached. There were in fact two agreements: a cease-fire between France and the DRV, and a political accord to achieve a lasting solution to the issues that had led to the war. The cease-fire was achieved by establishing two roughly equal regroupment zones, divided at the seventeenth parallel where a demilitarized zone (DMZ) was set up at the Ben Hai River. All Vietminh forces were to retreat north of the DMZ, while supporters of the Bao Dai government were to move to the south. On the insistence of both Vietnamese governments, these zones were not to be construed as sovereign political entities but as a temporary division to end the war until a political agreement could be reached (see Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of the Geneva Agreement).

The process of achieving such an agreement was contained in the Political Accords, the second component of the Geneva Agreement. According to this arrangement, representatives of the two zones were to consult in July 1955 to agree on plans to hold reunification elections one year later. An International Control Commission was created to make sure the agreements were carried out. Related agreements brought an end to the conflicts in Laos and Cambodia. The "Associated States" created by the French were recognized as the legal government in both countries.

In Laos, the Vietminh-supported Pathet Lao move-

ment was granted two provinces in the mountainous northeast as a regroupment zone prior to negotiations with the royal government in Vientiane. The Khmer Rouge revolutionary forces in Cambodia received no such recognition. The government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk in Phnom Penh was recognized as the sole legal entity in the country, and all foreign troops—both French and Vietminh forces—were to withdraw. At the insistence of China, the entire area was declared neutral. None of the governments in Indochina were permitted to join military alliances, although they were allowed to seek military assistance if their security were threatened.

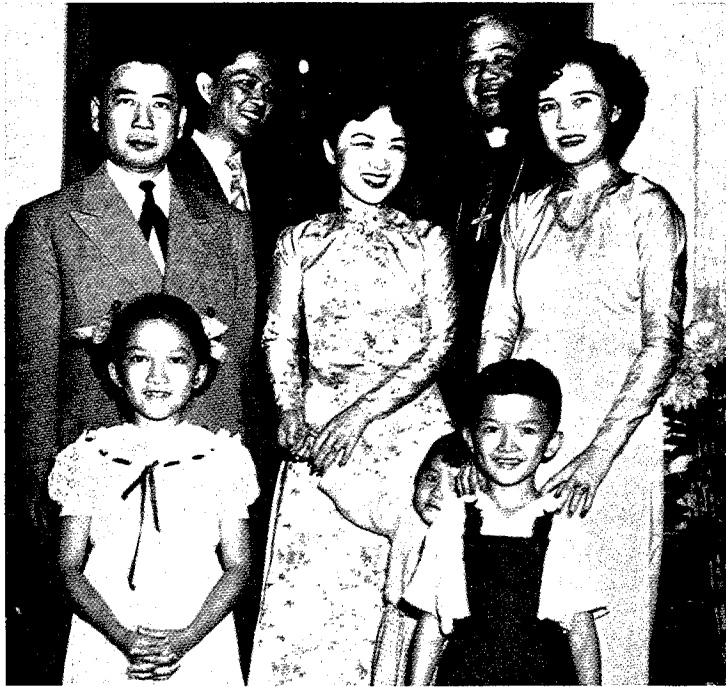
With the signing of the Geneva Agreements, the first Indochina war came to an end. But it ended on an ominous note. The United States, believing that reunification elections would lead to a victory for the widely popular Ho Chi Minh, refused to adhere to the political accords. In a written statement, it promised not to disturb them. But the Eisenhower administration also announced that it intended to build up what Secretary of State John Foster Dulles called "the truly independent states of Cambodia, Laos, and southern Vietnam." Finally, it served notice that it would seek to create an anti-communist alliance among its western allies and friendly states in Southeast Asia to resist further communist encroachment in the region. The stage was set for a new Cold War confrontation in Asia.

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## The Regime of Ngo Dinh Diem

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After Geneva, two hostile governments faced each other across the DMZ. In North Vietnam, with its capital returned to Hanoi, President Ho Chi Minh's DRV attempted to build a socialist society with assistance from China and the Soviet Union. In the cities and towns, industry and commerce were nationalized. In the countryside, a massive program of land reform confiscated the property of wealthy farmers and redistributed it to the poor. According to contemporary estimates, about 60 percent of the peasants in North Vietnam received some land under the program. There



Ngo Dinh Diem with his two brothers and influential sister-in-law:

(left-right) Diem, Ngo Dinh Nhu, Madame Nhu (center) and Archbishop Thuc

was a violent side to the program, however. Many Vietnamese considered hostile to the revolution were arrested and some were executed. To placate critics, Ho Chi Minh fired the government minister in charge of the program and soon demoted the Party Secretary General, Truong Chinh.

In South Vietnam, the government of Bao Dai was replaced by a new regime under the veteran Vietnamese politician Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem was popular in Washington. Descended from a prominent Catholic family in central Vietnam, he disliked both the French and the communists. U.S. officials particularly liked the fact that he was Catholic, for many of the two million Vietnamese Catholics were among the best educated and most anti-communist elements in Vietnam. Diem's Catholicism assumed even greater importance when the Geneva agreement permitted all Vietnamese a grace period in order to settle in either zone depending on their political preference. Of the 900,000 refugees who fled to the South, two thirds, or 600,000, were Catholics. Most settled near the new capital of Saigon, where they became a major force in helping Diem to build a firm political base.

Under pressure from the United States, Bao Dai appointed Diem prime minister during the Geneva

Conference. During the next few months, Diem moved rapidly to consolidate his position, removing pro-French elements from the Bao Dai administration, crushing opposition from the sects and attempting to eliminate those Vietminh elements the DRV had instructed to remain in South Vietnam after Geneva to represent its interests there. In October 1955, he organized a plebiscite between himself and Chief of State Bao Dai. In an election widely viewed as fraudulent, Diem received over 98 percent of the vote.

In July 1955, the Hanoi regime called for consultations on reunification elections as required by the Geneva Agreement. Diem refused on the grounds that the Bao Dai government, like the United States, had not ratified the accords. Conscious of the legal ambiguities in the situation, the Eisenhower administration recommended that Saigon agree to hold talks while placing stiff conditions on elections in the hope that Hanoi would refuse. But Diem refused even to hold consultations with North Vietnam and the United States publicly backed him.

Diem's refusal to agree to consultations on national elections was a severe blow to Hanoi. The DRV, needing time and resources to build an advanced socialist society in the north, undoubtedly hoped that national

elections would be held and a renewal of the war avoided. They also were confident that the popularity of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh mystique would guarantee an electoral victory over Ngo Dinh Diem. For the moment, however, Hanoi did nothing, hoping that the Diem regime would eventually collapse.

But in Washington, officials were optimistic for Ngo Dinh Diem appeared to be the answer to the U.S. "problem" in Vietnam. Backed by firm U.S. support, Diem established a presidential system based on the American model, with himself as President. On U.S. advice, Diem also launched a land reform program designed to reduce the inequality of land holding in the rice-rich Mekong Delta. With American aid, the Saigon

*"South and North are washed  
by the same sea. In our hearts  
there can be no boundary ."*

To Huu 20th century

regime built up its armed forces. Although the U.S. was prohibited from establishing a direct alliance with South Vietnam, it did set up a multinational Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) to protect the states in the area from further communist encroachment. Although the Geneva Accords prohibited South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia from becoming members of the alliance, the U.S. evaded that prohibition by including them in a so-called "umbrella clause" in the treaty (see Chapter 3 for more discussion).

By the late 1950s, unfortunately for the United States, the early promise of the Diem regime had begun to fade. Diem's autocratic tendencies alienated key groups within South Vietnam, including the sects, the tribal minorities, the overseas Chinese, and many intellectuals. Much of the criticism was directed at Diem's brother, the manipulative Ngo Dinh Nhu who, as Minister of the Interior, was the dominant figure in the Saigon regime. Diem responded to criticism with persecution and censorship.

The land reform program had only limited success because wealthy absentee landlords found it easy to evade the loose provisions of the limitations on land holding. Where the land reform program in North Vietnam had provided land to well over half the rural

population, in the south only about ten percent of those eligible to receive land actually did so. Finally, Diem's tendency to favor Catholics irritated many Buddhists, who represented the majority of the population.

The DRV, as we have seen, had left a small contingent of Party leaders in South Vietnam. During the late 1950s, they attempted to gain a following among the increasing number of discontented. Diem severely repressed all resistance to his regime, sending revolutionary tribunals from village to village to root out and eliminate suspected communist sympathizers. With their ranks severely depleted by Diem's campaign, and convinced that popular sentiment was turning in favor of the revolution, the DRV now decided to promote a new revolutionary uprising in South Vietnam. Several thousand southerners who had been sent north for training after Geneva were infiltrated back into the south to provide experienced leadership for the movement. Rebel forces began to attack isolated villages and South Vietnamese military posts, while special units assassinated village chiefs and other individuals identified with the Saigon regime.

By early 1961, when John F. Kennedy became President of the United States, the political situation in South Vietnam had become highly unstable. Sparked by Diem's repressive policies, many urban and rural Vietnamese responded to the appeal of the revolutionary movement. Some joined the People's Liberation Armed Forces, referred to by U.S. officials and the Diem regime as the Vietcong (Vietnamese communists). Thousands of others became members of a new political organization called the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (NLF). Like its predecessor, the Vietminh, the NLF was created by party strategists in the DRV as a non-partisan alliance for all patriotic South Vietnamese opposed to the Diem regime and its American ally. Its program emphasized such popular issues as land reform, democratic freedoms, and social justice. It said little about communism and spoke only in vague terms about eventual reunification with the north.

Most major NLF strategy decisions apparently were made in Hanoi and many of the key officials in the Front also were members of the communist party. However, the NLF had its own organizational structure and included thousands of members who had joined for reasons of patriotism or the desire for political and social reform rather than because of a commitment to Marxist



The Vietnamese Buddhist monk 73-year-old Thich (venerable) Quang Duc immolates himself in front of a crowd of Buddhist monks and shocked onlookers.

doctrine. Even many of those who were aware of the close links with the north believed that, after the victory of the revolution, the south would be in a position to take its own road to national unity and socialism. Benefiting from Diem's mistakes as well as from the appeal of its own program, the NLF won wide support among many southerners who had grievances against the Diem regime, and who viewed the NLF as the legitimate representative of the South Vietnamese people.

Vietnam was not President Kennedy's only foreign policy problem. In its first few months, the new administration faced crises in Berlin, in Laos—where the Pathet Lao movement was becoming an increasing threat to the royal Lao government—and in Cuba, where the Bay of Pigs invasion had ended in an embarrassing fiasco. Convinced that only a firm stand on Vietnam would persuade Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev of his willingness to defend U.S. interests,

Kennedy strengthened the U.S. commitment to the Diem regime. He increased the number of American advisers and made it clear that the United States intended to win in Vietnam. But Kennedy also was convinced that Diem could not succeed without improving his political performance and adopting a new strategy to counter the mounting guerrilla war in the South.

In late 1961, Kennedy approved an increase in U.S. military assistance, part of which called for increased training in counter-guerrilla warfare. But he rejected a proposal to send two divisions of American combat troops to South Vietnam as a symbol of U.S. determination. In fact, Kennedy warned Diem that, unless Saigon moved to reduce internal dissent to the regime, the United States might reevaluate its policy of providing firm support.

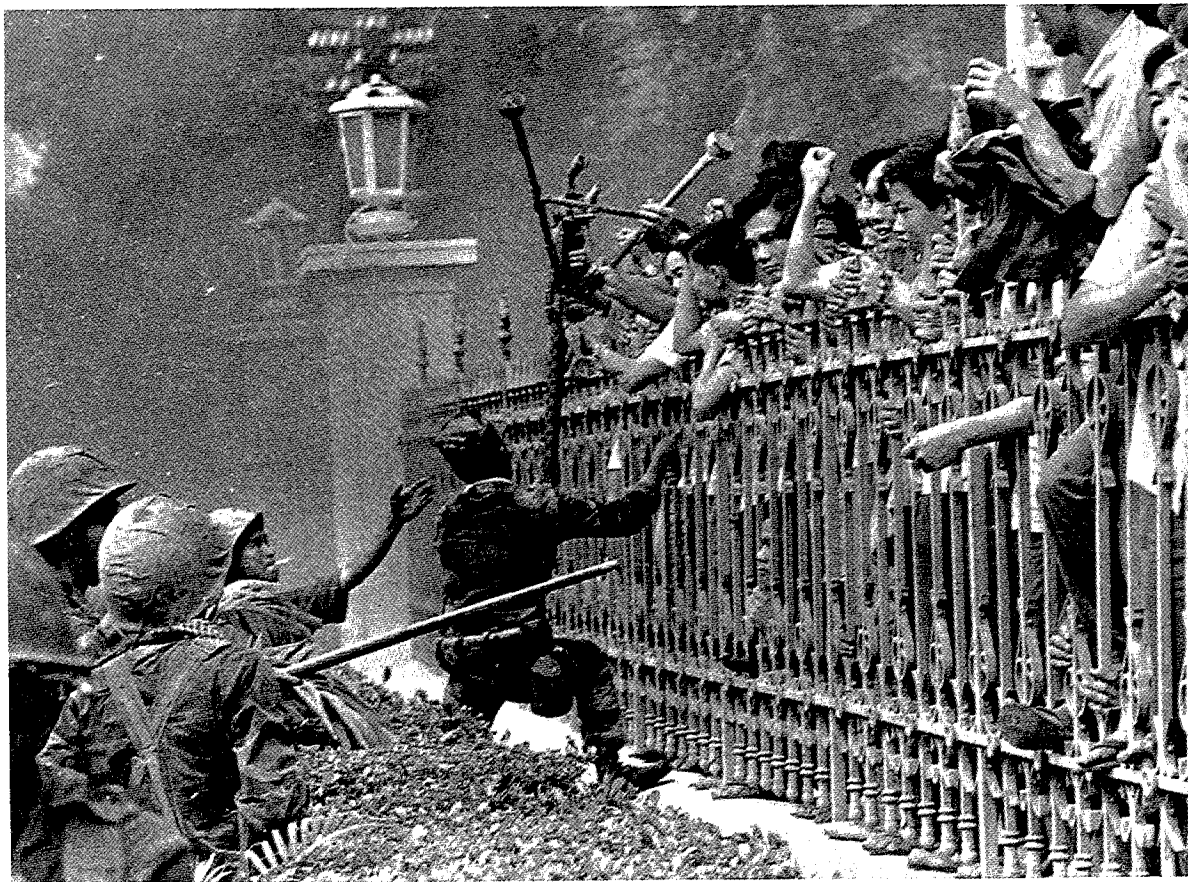
During the next two years, Diem, with U.S. support,

intensified his efforts to eliminate the insurgency movement in South Vietnam. The primary focus of his strategy was the construction of so-called "strategic hamlets" throughout much of the countryside. Strategic hamlets were villages that were fortified to isolate the rural population from the forces of the revolution. Sometimes, however, they were artificially created, and peasants were compelled to move from smaller and more vulnerable hamlets to larger units in order to facilitate the building of a defensive perimeter. Villagers were expected to bear the cost of fortifying the "strategic hamlet" and frequently resented official arrogance and insensitivity in carrying out the program. Moreover, contrary to U.S. advice, Diem hurriedly created large numbers of strategic hamlets in insecure areas, thus providing the NLF with the opportunity to destroy the hamlets and discredit the program.

Diem's failure to "win hearts and minds" in the countryside was repeated in the cities. After 1961, tension between the government and the Buddhist movement intensified. Many Buddhist monks and lay intellectuals not only resented Diem's tendency to favor Catholics, but they also opposed his policy of vigorously suppressing the revolutionary movement and refusing to hold peace talks with Hanoi. By 1963, popular feelings in the cities turned increasingly hostile to the Saigon regime, and particularly to Diem's brother, Nhu.

During the Spring of 1963, Buddhist protests against the regime accelerated. When some Buddhist monks participated in demonstrations, the police raided the temples and threw protestors in prison. To symbolize popular resistance to regime policies, one Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, committed suicide by setting

Civilians pass a machine gun to helmeted rebel troops inside the gates of the Presidential Palace following the coup on November 3.



himself afire on a street in Saigon. That public gesture galvanized anti-Diem sentiment abroad. Even the Kennedy administration, exasperated at Diem's failure to follow U.S. advice, publicly disassociated itself from his actions.

Discontent within the South Vietnamese armed forces, which had originally surfaced in 1960, once more began to simmer. During the summer dissident officers secretly approached U.S. officials to ascertain Washington's reaction to a possible coup d'état to overthrow the Diem regime. At first, the Kennedy administration opposed a coup, fearing that it would lead to a collapse of anti-communist efforts in South Vietnam. But when Diem continued to refuse U.S. advice (including the suggestion that Ngo Dinh Nhu should be removed from the cabinet), Washington signalled its approval and agreed to provide communications assistance to the plotters.

The coup erupted on the night of November 1, 1963. Units commanded by dissident military officers took control of key installations and surrounded the Presidential Palace in Saigon. Diem phoned U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge to request U.S. support. Lodge declined to provide assistance but offered the President asylum at the U.S. embassy. Diem refused and fled with his brother to a church in the nearby suburb of Cholon. The next morning they were apprehended by a rebel army officer who executed them in the back of the personnel carrier that was supposed to transport them back to Saigon.

President Kennedy was horrified at the murder of Ngo Dinh Diem but was resigned to the necessity of a change of government in Saigon. The U.S. quickly signaled its support for the new military leadership, which immediately formed a Military Revolutionary Council under the leadership of the popular southern General Duong Van Minh (often known as "Big Minh").

The North Vietnamese regime was initially puzzled at how to respond to the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem. He had been a tough opponent, but the widespread antagonism to him had provided fuel to the revolution. By contrast, the new military government, although inexperienced, appeared to have wide approval from the general populace in the South. At first, the DRV quietly signaled its willingness to start exploratory peace talks. When its overtures were rejected, Hanoi decided to take advantage of the inexperience of the

new government in Saigon by escalating the war in the South. At a major meeting held in December, Party leaders approved a proposal to intensify pressure on Saigon by infiltrating regular units of the North Vietnamese armed forces down the "Ho Chi Minh Trail," through the mountains and jungles of central Vietnam and neighboring Laos and Cambodia. Hoping that the United States would not respond, Hanoi was now prepared to use North Vietnamese regular troops to achieve its objective of national unification.

Three weeks after the murder of Ngo Dinh Diem, John Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. His successor, Lyndon Johnson, was anxious to avoid an escalation of the Vietnam conflict but, like Kennedy, was determined not to "lose" the war. But in the months following the overthrow of the Diem regime, the political and military situation in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate. In the political arena, the new military government was plagued with factionalism. "Big

*"Being stubborn and patient,  
not yielding an inch  
though physically I suffer,  
my spirit is unbroken."*

Ho Chi Minh 20th century

Minh" was soon replaced by his colleagues on the Military Revolutionary Council. The Saigon regime became a game of musical chairs, with military and civilian prime ministers following each other in office within months of each other.

The effects were soon felt on the battlefield, where the revolutionary forces continued to extend their control over the countryside. According to intelligence estimates, more than half the population were under the control of the revolutionary forces, and it was considered unsafe for Americans—now numbering more than 20,000—to travel outside the major cities. Equally ominous, U.S. intelligence was receiving reports that the infiltration of men and supplies from North Vietnam was running well above previous years. In fact, it was becoming evident that, unless the U.S. took drastic action, the fall of South Vietnam could take place in a matter of months.

In this context, the famous "Tonkin Gulf incident"

took place in August of 1964. American warships on an intelligence mission in the Tonkin Gulf off the coast of North Vietnam were allegedly attacked by North Vietnamese coastal craft. President Johnson claimed that the attacks had been unprovoked and asked Congress to give him the authority to take whatever action was necessary to protect U.S. lives and security interests in the area. Critics raised doubts about the administration's version of the incidents and some even questioned whether they had taken place. Nevertheless, Congress was stirred by patriotic fervor and approved the President's request. Lyndon Johnson was now armed with the authority to take further military action

to prevent the spread of communism in Indochina. (The true facts and legal issues surrounding the Gulf of Tonkin incident and resolution are discussed in Chapters 2, 3, and 8).

The Tonkin Gulf incident suddenly brought the growing crisis in Indochina to the attention of the American people. The Johnson administration proposed that the civil war in Vietnam now was a vital issue in American foreign policy. American money and American lives might soon be invested in a Cold War struggle some 10,000 miles away.

With the crisis came controversy. At this stage in the struggle, most Americans accepted the rationale pre-

### CHRISTMAS

The Hessian in his last letter home  
said in part

" they are all rebels here  
who will not stand to fight  
but each time fade before us  
as water into sand . . .

the children beg in their rude hamlets

the women stare with hate

the men flee into the barrens at our approach  
to lay in ambush

some talk of desertion . . .  
were it not for the hatred  
they bear us, more would do so

There is no glory here  
Tell Hals he must evade the Prince's levy  
through exile or deformity

Winter is hard upon us. On the morrow we enter  
Trenton. There we rest until the New Year . . ."

—Steve Hassett



mented by the Johnson administration that Vietnam, and Southeast Asia as a whole, were vital to U.S. national security interests. Still, some began to question whether increased involvement was in the overall American interest. On college campuses where students and professors organized “teach-ins” to bring public attention to the war, questions about the nature of the conflict and the U.S. role in precipitating the crisis began to be raised.

Much of the controversy centered around the origins of the problem. Was the growing conflict in South Vietnam an “armed attack” from the north, as the administration contended? Or was it primarily a civil war, provoked by the brutal policies of the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, which drove desperate peasants, minority tribesmen, and urban intellectuals into the ranks of the NLF? Was the NLF itself a creature of Hanoi? Or was it an independent organization truly representative of the aspirations of the people in South Vietnam?

Other questions dealt with legal issues. Had the United States, or the DRV, broken the Geneva Accords? Had Diem been within his legal rights to refuse consultations on elections in 1955? Others were moral. Did the United States have any business in becoming involved in a bitter struggle where the issues, both moral

and political, were sometimes less than clear?

Although some Americans found easy answers to such questions, most were uninformed or confused. Many Americans were persuaded by Cold War rhetoric and the experience of World War II that the United States had no choice but to aid South Vietnam in order to deter further aggression and prevent the entire region from sliding into the clutches of international communism. Others, recalling the enormous costs of Korea, were concerned greatly about getting bogged down in another land war in Asia. Still others found the lessons of both World War II and Korea irrelevant to the crisis in Indochina. To them, the conflict in Vietnam appeared to be less an attempt by Moscow or Beijing to spread the Red Tide throughout the Pacific than an internal revolution, fueled by human misery, political brutality, and a desire for social justice.

In 1964, such arguments were only beginning to be heard. They were certainly not the views of the majority of the American people. Yet the American public approached the growing crisis in South Vietnam with a profound sense of uneasiness, and a sense of foreboding that the worst was yet to come.



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### Discussion Questions

1. What nations and/or geographic features border Vietnam? What two areas of Vietnam are considered the "heartland" of the country?
2. Most of the population of Vietnam is composed of people known as the \_\_\_\_\_? They make up approximately \_\_\_% of the entire population. What groups make-up the remaining percentage of the population of Vietnam?
3. What were the major colonial powers of the Pacific region during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? What were their primary interests in the area now known as Vietnam and in the other Southeast Asian territories? Have any Asian countries been involved in the colonization or occupation of Vietnam over the course of history? If yes, which one(s)?
4. What did France consider its "mission civilisatrice" in Indochina? What were the positive and negative consequences of French colonial policy? What, if any, of these consequences do you believe the Indochinese people would have considered positive at the time?
5. What events of WW II contributed to the rise of the Communist Party in Vietnam? Who was its leader? What was (who were) the "Vietcong," the "NLF?" What were the objectives of these groups? Who controlled them, if anyone?
6. What was the major reason that the U.S. became involved in assisting the "Associated State of Vietnam" in the 1950s?
7. What was the major military strategy of the "Viet-minh" in fighting the French in the 1950s? How does this strategy compare with that used to fight the American, South Vietnamese and allied troops during the 1960s and 70s?
8. What were the two major components of the Geneva Agreement of 1954? Were they adhered to by either side? If not, what happened, and why?
9. What do you believe were the major successes and failures of the Diem regime? What might have been done by him and his government that could have changed the outcome of the 1960s and 70s in Vietnam; in the American involvement in Vietnam?
10. Do you believe that the outcome of the Diem regime was what the Kennedy administration wanted? Why? What do you believe would have been the best American policy toward Vietnam during the periods of the Diem and "Big Minh" governments? Why?
11. What was the general, overall foreign policy context of American involvement in Vietnam, i.e., why were we there and why did we stay? What were the "pros" and "cons" of such a policy? If you had been President at the time, how would you have handled the situation in Vietnam?