Summary and Epilogue

This volume is designed to present the varied viewpoints that constitute the revisionist narrative on the Vietnam War and explain why the revisionist perspective poses a serious challenge to the orthodox consensus on that war. Because multiple and sometimes conflicting viewpoints comprise the revisionist narrative, it seems appropriate to conclude by summarizing some key points that have been covered in this reexamination of the war. The epilogue will explore why developments since 1975 provide an additional compelling reason to reexamine the Vietnam War.

SUMMARY

The revisionist case begins with a survey of Vietnamese history. It reveals that as the Vietnamese expanded southward, significant differences emerged between the people of northern and southern Vietnam, to the point where for more than 200 years beginning in the mid-sixteenth century Vietnam was divided de facto into two rival dynastic states. The dividing line between these states was approximately the 17th parallel, the same dividing line established by the 1954 Geneva Accords. These differences between north and south in effect contradict the contention that there could be only one legitimate vision of Vietnamese nationalism. Aside from the version based on Marxism-Leninism, an alien ideology imported from Europe, others were based on a variety of ideas. The preeminence by the 1940s of Marxist nationalism in Vietnam – that is, the totalitarian Stalinist version adopted by Ho Chi Minh and his comrades – was due largely

to outside help from an international movement based in the Soviet Union and the use of force against rival nationalist groups. Further, for Ho and his comrades, the commitment to Marxism's goal of a world socialist revolution took precedence over Vietnamese nationalism. The Communists' most effective nationalist opponent turned out to be Ngo Dinh Diem, a leader of stature who after 1954 headed a regime in South Vietnam that constituted a legitimate and potentially viable alternative to Ho's Stalinist dictatorship in North Vietnam.

With regard to America's involvement in Vietnam, the decision in 1954 to defend the existence of an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam was based on a reasonable assessment of national interests given the geopolitical realities of the Cold War. From the start, the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam, far from being an independent movement, was initiated and controlled by the government of North Vietnam. The Kennedy administration's decision to support Diem's overthrow in 1963 was a huge blunder, possibly the worst mistake the United States made during its involvement in Vietnam. Graduated pressure, the tenet upon which the Johnson/McNamara approach to the war was based, violated the basic principles of warfare worked out by practitioners and theorists of war over many centuries. Once the United States became directly involved in combat, graduated pressure produced the policy of gradual escalation from 1965 to 1968. Gradual escalation was a costly failure that wasted three crucial years at great expense and pain to the American people. It crippled Rolling Thunder, the bombing campaign against North Vietnam, and hampered the ground war effort inside South Vietnam.

The errors of gradual escalation were compounded by the US failure to isolate the battlefield by cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the main route by which North Vietnam infiltrated troops and supplies into South Vietnam. This enabled Hanoi to maintain and rebuild its forces in the South and thereby permitted those forces to recover from military defeats that might otherwise have made it impossible to continue the war. Allowing the Vietcong and PAVN troops to find sanctuary in Cambodia and Laos further enhanced Hanoi's ability to continue a war it might otherwise have lost. Gradual escalation therefore produced a stalemate on the battlefield in Vietnam and at the same time eroded support for the war in the United States. This policy finally was discarded after the Tet Offensive of 1968. This effort by North Vietnam to end the war resulted instead in a major US/South Vietnamese military victory; however, because of

various public relations factors, this tactical military victory ended up as a strategic political defeat.

Between 1968 and 1972, the United States adopted a policy of Vietnamization, which in part was possible because Communist forces were badly weakened by the military defeat they suffered during Tet. Improvements and reforms in South Vietnam's government and armed forces fostered by Vietnamization further weakened the Communist insurgency and strengthened the position of the South Vietnamese regime. This was true despite the fact that, as part of Vietnamization, most US troops gradually were withdrawn from Vietnam. The improved position of the South Vietnamese regime forced North Vietnam to change its strategy, and in 1972 Hanoi launched an all-out conventional invasion of the South known as the Easter Offensive. Backed by massive US combat air support, South Vietnam's armed forces fought well and repelled the attack.

Finally, after the Paris Peace Accords of 1973, which included the major flaw of allowing more than 150,000 North Vietnamese troops to remain in South Vietnam, the United States in effect abandoned South Vietnam. This abandonment occurred because President Nixon was weakened and then forced to resign the presidency as a result of the Watergate scandal. Nixon's political decline and eventual resignation helped antiwar members of Congress reduce aid to South Vietnam and also end all funding for any US military operations anywhere in Indochina. Freed from interdiction by US air power, North Vietnam transformed the Ho Chi Minh Trail into an all-weather route, thereby significantly increasing its ability to move troops and supplies, including artillery and tanks, into South Vietnam.

In this burgeoning mix of adverse developments, the precipitous reduction in US aid to the South Vietnamese government was a major and probably the most important factor that led to South Vietnam's defeat. This occurred in 1975 when North Vietnam, its forces bolstered by retraining and new supplies of modern Soviet weapons, launched a second conventional invasion of South Vietnam. South Vietnam's armed forces were overwhelmed and the country fell to the Communists. An observation by Mark Moyar succinctly sums up that denouement: "No small nation could long survive the assaults of an enemy lavishly supported by two great powers unless it received substantial assistance from another great power."[1]

[1] Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 184.

EPILOGUE

When he wrote *Vietnam: A History*, a volume published in 1983 and probably still the most widely acclaimed journalistic history of the Vietnam War, Stanley Karnow called his first chapter "The War Nobody Won." His point was to highlight the grim fact that after winning its war to control all of Vietnam at such dreadful cost, the country's Communist rulers in Hanoi imposed a brutal, corrupt, and economically inefficient regime on the people of the former South Vietnam. The demoralization this caused quickly spread from southerners who had opposed Communism to many of those who had embraced and fought for it. Karnow quotes a number of the latter, including a physician and longtime Communist who "burst out" with the following comment to him: "I've been a Communist all my life. But now for the first time I have seen the realities of Communism. It is a failure – mismanagement, corruption, privilege, repression. My ideals are gone."[2]

Coverage of the tyranny that Communism brought to a unified Vietnam is widespread and easily accessible elsewhere. It will suffice here to mention expressions of regret from two former Communist soldiers, one a Vietcong colonel and the other a PAVN colonel. In 1990 the former Vietcong officer bitterly complained that decades of struggle and talk of liberation had produced "this impoverished broken-down country led by a gang of cruel and paternalistic half-educated theorists."[3] Less bitter, perhaps, but reflecting no less disillusionment, is the regret of Bui Tin, the PAVN colonel who in April 1975 accepted the South Vietnamese surrender in Saigon. Living in exile in 2002, he wrote that "my saddest moments come when I think of my land, which is still so backward politically, and my people, who still, after all these long years of sacrifice and deprivation, have not found freedom."[4]

These comments, and many more like them about what Communism brought to the former South Vietnam – to say nothing of the genocide it brought to Cambodia – can and have been used by many commentators to reinforce the revisionist case at the expense of the orthodox narrative. But this author would like to shift the focus to an overlooked irony that lies at the very heart of the orthodox case: the assertion, covered at some length in Chapter 1 of this volume, that in 1954 the United States should have left South Vietnam to its fate because it was an entity lacking in legitimacy and

[2] Quoted in Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 37. [3] Quoted in Sorley, *A Better War*, 384.
[4] Bui Tin, *From Enemy to Friend*, 144.

hence viability. The argument goes as follows: South Vietnam's non-Communist regime did not rest on an adequate social base; the elites who controlled it were hopelessly compromised by their association with the French and were thoroughly corrupt to boot; it was riddled with inequalities and injustices to the point where it was beyond redemption; and it existed only because the United States was propping it up. Thus South Vietnam, in one historian's trenchant phrasing, was a "pseudo-nation," a "counterfeit creation" of the United States.[5] In contrast, Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communists had wide and deep popular support and genuine nationalist credentials by virtue of their long and effective struggle against the French and the social reforms they carried out in the areas they controlled prior to 1954. Their successful melding of Marxism and nationalism gave them their strength and viability, and, perhaps more importantly, their legitimacy.

The problem with this analysis is that it misidentifies what actually was and was not viable. Looking at a world map today, one can find many nations with all the flaws of South Vietnam, and in many cases nations with flaws that are far worse. If South Vietnam inherently was a "pseudo-nation" doomed by its unfixable flaws, what are all these other countries doing on the map? And what happens if one looks for Marxist states built on the foundations that presumably gave Ho Chi Minh and North Vietnam their strength, viability, and legitimacy? It turns out they are almost nowhere to be found. During the Vietnam War, Communist regimes ruled one-third of the world's people; today only stagnant Cuba and dystopian North Korea still have Communist social and economic systems, neither of which is likely to serve as an example for any other country to follow.[6] Of North Vietnam's two great Communist benefactors, the Soviet Union is defunct, to be found not on a map but rather in what Leon Trotsky, once Lenin's right-hand man, called the "dustbin of history." The People's Republic of China is still on the map, but it is a Communist state in name only. The Chinese Communist Party still rules through its one-party dictatorship, but the PRC's socialist economy established under Mao Zedong lies along with the Soviet Union in the dustbin of history, having been replaced by a form of state capitalism. Thus in both the Soviet Union

[5] David Anderson, "Review by David Anderson," *H-Diplo Roundtable Review*, XI, no. 7 (2009), 7; quoted in Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*, 41.

[6] China, Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam, and Laos are the five countries in the world that generally are considered Communist because Communist parties still rule there.

and the People's Republic of China, Communism self-destructed, albeit in different ways.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, like the PRC, is still on the map, and, like the PRC, it is still ruled by a one-party dictatorship that calls itself Communist. But Vietnam also has abandoned Communism, and its economy, like the PRC's, is a form of state capitalism. In another ironic twist, in both the PRC and Vietnam the transition from Communism to capitalism, beginning with the dismantling of the failed collective farm system, was carried out by the countries' respective ruling Communist parties. Vietnam's official name, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and its ruling party's official name, the Communist Party of Vietnam, are nothing but veils masking a one-party dictatorship ruling over a country with a state-capitalist economy.

What happened? It turns out that rather than countries like the much maligned South Vietnam, it was the Communism, in particular the Communist economic and social system, that was not viable. Communism did not disappear from the Soviet Union, China, and Vietnam, because of conquest or any other form of force. It dissolved on its own because it could not provide adequately for the people who lived under it, at least when measured against what capitalism could provide. The system based on a body of thought that stressed the primacy of economics in determining how societies are structured could not produce a workable economic system.

Marxism got things backward. According to Marxist theory, capitalism and its exploitation come to an end when the proletariat seizes power. This social class, exploited under capitalism, establishes a state called the dictatorship of the proletariat – that is, the rule of the majority – and that state begins the process of building a socialist economic system, which over time gradually evolves into communism. As society approaches communism, the economic system under which all contribute according to their ability and receive according to their need, the state gradually becomes unnecessary and, in the words of Marx and Engels, it ultimately "withers away." In fact, in China and Vietnam, and in a somewhat different way in the Soviet Union, it was communism that withered away while the dictatorial state survived.

The process of withering began in all three countries with growing and unsolvable inefficiencies inherent in state-planned, centralized economies. It continued and accelerated as the Communist parties of those countries began a series of reforms, beginning in the late 1970s in China and during the 1980s in Vietnam and the Soviet Union. In the end, the Communist

economic systems crumbed; they "withered away." In China and Vietnam, the dictatorial one-party state remained, with the old Communist party still in control. In the Soviet Union, the old Communist state collapsed, and along with fourteen independent non-Russian countries, a non-Communist Russia (officially: the Russian Federation) emerged from under the Communist rubble. Then, after about a decade of turmoil in the Russian Federation, a strong, dictatorial Russian state filled the vacuum left by the defunct Soviet state.[7]

Precisely how all this applies to the orthodox/revisionist debate on the Vietnam War itself is open to debate. But it is fair to say that while Ho Chi Minh and his comrades won the battle to control Vietnam, they lost the war to establish Communism there. They lost that war for one of the fundamental reasons orthodox commentators use to decry the American effort to defend South Vietnam: Communism, it turned out, was not a viable way of life, but, to borrow words that have been used to describe and dismiss South Vietnam, rather a pseudo, counterfeit system. And that gives us perhaps the most compelling of many reasons one can cite to re-examine the Vietnam War.

[7] A fairly similar process to what happened in China and Vietnam occurred in Laos, where today a Communist party rules over a country with an economy that is largely capitalist. In Eastern Europe, all the Communist regimes collapsed and the socialist economic systems were replaced by capitalist ones. Unlike in most of the former Soviet Union, political democracy replaced the Communist dictatorships in most of Eastern Europe. Cambodia once again is a monarchy.