

Baby boomer is the term for the population explosion of births after WWII. My sister was born during WWII, my brother two years later, and me, four years after my brother. A time when Las Vegas was a one street town and the gambling capital of the world was still Havana, Cuba. Nevada was better known for atomic bomb tests.

At Edwards Air Force base and Patuxent River Naval Air Station, jet pilots were breaking the sound barrier on a daily basis as they tested the newest jets for speed, altitude and maneuverability.

Our family accepted the cold war preparedness because our father was a Naval Aviator. But for my brother and me, along with most of my youthful pals, the last real war had been fought in Korea. We grew up with the atomic threat and knew that wars could only be fought with the Soviets in a spy vs spy manner we laughed about in "Mad" magazine. But as my brother and I approached draft age, the Vietnam conflict grew to be a real war for baby boomers. The war and how it affected us have a significant impact in "[Journals from the Edge.](#)"

The problems in French Indochina had started long before we were born but escalated for the U.S. as we grew up. My sister remembers our grandmother, a war bride from WWI France, crying in 1954 as the garrison at Dien Bien Phu was wiped out and the glory of pre-WWII France with them. I was too young to remember that and even though the names of Indochinese countries filtered out of the news static, I had no idea about what Vietnam would mean during my early years. My only concern was when would the radio play my favorite song. In this French colony the song had been tragic for many years.

French catholic missionaries, in what is now Vietnam, were viewed as an increasing threat to the Nguyen Dynasty during the 1850's and were under pressure to be expelled. Napoleon III reacted in 1859 by ordering the French Navy to attack Da Nang and a year later Saigon, in order to preserve the missions.

The French established a *colonie d'exploitation*, which collected taxes on Vietnamese and exacted an almost complete control over the trade of rice alcohol, salt and opium. Religious and cultural changes were forced on what was predominantly a Buddhist population.

The demand for rubber exploded with the invention of the automobile in the early 1900's and plantations throughout the colony utilized cheap labor. At the same time, the French ignored increasing calls for self-government and civil rights. The colonialists crushed scattered rebellions and their grip remained strong. Taxes increased even more during WWI in order to finance France's war effort in Europe and Vietnamese were used as soldiers to fight in the trenches. But an identity and nationalistic movement continued to grow.

In 1918, President Woodrow Wilson unveiled his blueprint for peace in the world, the "Fourteen Points." Point Five called for "a free, open-minded and absolutely impartial adjustment of colonial claims, based upon strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined."

A year later, nationalistic leaders from Vietnam, including a young Ho Chi Minh, using the words of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, appealed to Wilson for acknowledgment of civil rights and self-determination at Versailles. But despite his previous call for open-minded adjustment of colonial claims, Wilson ignored the delegation of Vietnamese and their call for the French to let go of their colony.

At the same time, Russian communists had just unshackled years of oppression from Czarist rule. The appeal of communism for subjugated people throughout the world was enticing in 1919. The outcome of Ho's rejection by the western powers at Versailles was that Ho and many of his delegation were radicalized towards communism.

But the French still remained masters until the Japanese occupied Indochina during WWII. Ho Chi Minh and his comrades fought together with members of the American O.S.S. against the Japanese during the war.

In 1941, before the U.S. had even actively entered WWII, a treaty was made up by Roosevelt and Churchill to determine goals for the post war world. The third point of the Atlantic charter was that former colonial possessions should have the right to self-determination. Any hope of American pressure on the French to give up their colony was lost when FDR died before the war ended. Truman, who was famous for the buck stops here, allowed the

influence of Adlai Stevenson, a European supporter, to influence him in favor of allowing the French to maintain their colony in Southeast Asia.

This was Ho's second experience with what he felt was western hypocrisy. With the military empowerment they had developed fighting the Japanese, the Vietnamese communists began an eight-year war of independence from France.

When Dwight Eisenhower was elected, he selected John Foster Dulles as his Secretary of State. Dulles referred to communism as godless terrorism. In the wake of the anti-communist fever of this time, the State Department had shut out the foreign policy voices of most men that had any experience in Southeast Asia. The result was foreign policy based on limited intelligence. The world theater was simple for men like Dulles. There were only communists and non-communist states and communism must be stopped at all costs. Because the French were fighting Ho Chi Minh, the U.S. labeled their conflict as a war of communist aggression—not of people seeking self-determination and escaping the yoke of French rule.

When Germany and Japan surrendered, few in the U.S. knew or wanted to know any of this history or paid much attention to colonial wars in Indochina and Indonesia. The cold war with the Soviets became the primary attention for the U.S. public and along with the hot war in Korea (1950-53) distracted from focusing on events in Vietnam.

Yet in March of 1954 the American government was paying attention. Almost 50,000 North Vietnamese forces had surrounded and laid siege to a 20,000 man French garrison at Dien Bien Phu. The U.S. had given limited covert American air support for the French outpost and in April, with the fate of the battle looking grim for the French, President Eisenhower referred to a principal of "falling dominos," in reference to the theory that once one country fell under the reins of the communists, other neighboring countries would soon follow. The top U.S. military officer and Vice President Nixon recommended the use of three tactical atomic weapons to save the French troops. Ike said the airstrike wouldn't work and ultimately determined that intervention and U.S. troops were too much of a

political risk. Dien Bien Phu fell to the North Vietnamese and the French surrendered all of Indochina.

Ngo Dinh Diem had a history as a fanatical anti-communist catholic and spent a significant time with Cardinal Spellman in New Jersey. The politically powerful cleric became Diem's strongest supporter in America and introduced him into right-wing groups where Diem lobbied extensively that Vietnam could only be rescued for the free world if the U.S. backed a government that would fight the communists. Ardent anti-communists in the America thought Diem was tailor made for their cause.

When the French departed after Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam was split into the communist north, ruled by Ho Chi Minh, and the non-communist south where Eisenhower threw American support behind Diem. The split was supposed to be temporary until there would be elections a year later to unify the country. Diem won a highly fraudulent election in the south and then cancelled the unifying elections.

Although he was tailor made for the U.S., Diem wasn't for the Buddhist majority in Vietnam. He imposed a corrupt dictatorship that appeared to that majority as similar to the old French rule where the wealthy Catholic minority subjugated Buddhists. Land ownership was highly regarded by the Vietnamese and during the war with the French, land had been distributed to peasants. When Diem came to power he reversed those reforms in favor of his supporters in the catholic minority.

Communist and non-communist groups that voiced any dissent against Diem were hunted by his secret police. The communist party or Viet Cong formed a military guerrilla movement in response to Diem's repression.

Although Eisenhower had rejected the use of atomic weapons and U.S. troops at Dien Bien Phu, in 1955 his domino theory of communist aggression did justify the beginning of a policy that sent American advisors to train Diem's army to help suppress the guerrillas.

During this Cold War period the Soviets seized the opportunity to spread their sphere of influence by sending North Vietnam military aid. With the VC on the ropes in 1959, the North, under Ho Chi Minh, began sending military aid to the Viet Cong by expanding an old series of paths into a supply route through neighboring Laos. They used the jungle to their advantage by camouflaging the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was later considered one of the greatest achievements of military engineering in the 20th century.

In 1961, the new President, John Kennedy, thought that tripling the number of American military advisors would be successful in what he viewed as "a brush fire war." Covert Special Forces, "Green Berets" were deployed on guerrilla operations in Vietnam and Laos. But by 1963 JFK began to see the lack of will in the South Vietnamese military. The war would be unwinnable without the involvement of overt American troops.

In Vietnam, Diem had declared South Vietnam a catholic country. To further aggravate the issue, Madame Nhu, the wife of Diem's brother, who was the head of the secret police, said she would supply more matches and gasoline for the barbecue after a monk burned himself alive in protest to Diem's anti-Buddhist policies. Kennedy began to distance himself from Diem and soon after, the South Vietnamese army, with the OK from the CIA, assassinated Diem. A series of military governments followed while clashes with Viet Cong guerrillas escalated.

In August of 1964 an incident against U.S. Navy destroyers reportedly occurred in the Gulf of Tonkin. President Johnson stated that overt hostilities with North Vietnam had commenced and in March of 1965, after waiting an hour for heavy surf to subside, U.S. Marines landed in Da Nang.

On the home front, the entrance of active U.S. troops wasn't scrutinized as heavily as it was few years later. These were the Marines. How could a rag tag bunch of Asian guerrillas be a match? America also had massive airpower and a new form of rapid deployment—helicopters.

But the Viet Cong had already been fighting the Japanese and then the French for twenty years. Their tactics of hit and run were a

match for any country. They used the jungle to their advantage. The Viet Cong owned Spartan dedication—reportedly living on one cup of rice a day.

Over North Vietnam, Soviet missiles shot down U.S. jets. POWs and KIA reports became the mainstay of the evening news. U.S. casualties mounted. The war, like the one in Korea, was limited by the threat of super-power alliances entering with nuclear capability.

The war lasted ten years with the result that the country of Vietnam became united under communist rule in 1974. The cost for the U.S. was severe both financially and emotionally. There were over 50,000 American casualties and many survivors with no visible wounds returned with **War Trauma**. The cases continued to add up long after the war and in 1990, psychologists assigned the term PTSD to those Vietnam Vets who returned unfit for civilian life. The affect of U.S. culture had been devastating as well. Some would argue that the political distrust created in the wake of the war had created a cultural PTSD.

For Vietnam, one domino in the theory had fallen to communism but fears that the country would collapse under the domination of their Chinese neighbors to the north were dashed in 1979 when a historical distrust resulted in a border war. Despite having a similar communist political system, Vietnamese fought Chinese forces. The Chinese retreated and Vietnam remained fiercely nationalistic—not eager to ever again fall under the domination of any nation. Ho had once said, “I’d rather smell French shit than Chinese shit.” He was referring to the thousand year period of Chinese rule.

Today, although Vietnam still retains a communist political system, it’s arguably one of the most capitalistic economies in the world today. Despite sustaining heavy losses during the war years with the Americans, the Vietnamese have opened their country to U.S. investment for manufactured goods. Old battlefields have become friendly tourist destinations for older U.S. vets. Some might say we lost the war but others look at the country today and wonder why we even fought.

END

