

Our Vietnam, by A. J. Langguth

Reviewed by [Tran Van Dinh](#) in the [February 7, 2001](#) issue

President Clinton's trip to Hanoi this past November was the first state visit by a U.S. president to an independent and reunified Vietnam. In his remarks to the faculty and students of Vietnam National University, Clinton recalled two past opportunities for peaceful and friendly relations with Vietnam: "Two centuries ago, during the early days of the United States, we reached across the seas for partners in trade and one of the first nations we encountered was Vietnam. In 1945, at the moment of your country's birth, the words of Thomas Jefferson were chosen to be echoed in your Declaration of Independence. . . . Of course, all of this common history . . . has been obscured by the conflict we call the Vietnam War and *you call the American War*" (emphasis mine).

Clinton didn't go further in his historical account. He did not recall for the audience what happened after the day when, at the Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi, the Vietnamese revolutionary patriot Ho Chi Minh read the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence quoting Jefferson's famous words "All men are created equal . . ." France refused to recognize the independence of Vietnam and to accept Cochinchina (southern Vietnam) as part of Vietnamese territory. When war between France and Vietnam broke out in 1946 the U.S. sided with France and supplied the French armed forces with planes and dollars until their defeat in May 1954 by the Vietnam People's Army at the battle of Dien Bien Phu.

Bowing to internal pressures and lack of U.S. support, Ho Chi Minh agreed to the temporary partition of the country at the 17th parallel. According to the agreement, after two years elections were to be held for reunification. But in 1955 the U.S. decided to build up South Vietnam as a separate U.S. bastion in the cold war. Yet the constitutions of both the Republic of (South) Vietnam and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North) began with the same article: "Vietnam is one country and territorially indivisible." The resulting war ended in 1975, at the cost of 58,000 American and 3 million Vietnamese lives. It took 25 years for the U.S. finally to normalize relations between the two countries.

In Vietnam, President Clinton admitted that "Vietnam is an ancient and enduring country" and that the Vietnamese "have proven to the world that you will make your own decisions." He confirmed the truth that Vietnam is a nation, not a war--a truth that is the underlying theme of A. J. Langguth's book. Langguth, who is now a professor of journalism, covered the war in Vietnam for the *New York Times* in the '60s.

The war was brought to Vietnam by the U.S., with its fleets of B52s, its Agent Orange defoliant, which causes birth defects, and its vast quantities of mines--3.5 million of which are still buried in Vietnamese jungles and ricefields, along with 300,000 tons of unexploded bombs. Still unaccounted for are 1,498 U.S. servicemen and more than 300,000 Vietnamese missing in action.

President Clinton's state visit was an important step for reconciliation between the two countries. But lasting reconciliation requires that the American people understand the history, the nature and the effects of the conflict. Of the millions of declassified documents and thousands of books now available to the public, most tell only parts of the story. Langguth's book is an exception. It provides readers with an unbiased, comprehensive and vivid account of the war.

By now, most writers on Vietnam have concluded that the conflict was a tragedy. The Vietnamese people describe political activities as "san khau chinh tri" (political theater). Fittingly, Langguth's book has the structure of a play. It begins with President John F. Kennedy and Ho Chi Minh in 1960, and ends in 1975 with Le Duan, who directed the war from the North after Ho Chi Minh's death in 1969. Langguth's talents as a storyteller create a compelling sense of historical continuity and movement. His characters become alive, intimate. He shows us the faces of the "faceless" Vietcong. He makes us see the land and the people of northern Vietnam caught under U.S. carpet bombing. He familiarizes us with the politics and leaders of countries that influenced the events in Vietnam, from Cambodia to the People's Republic of China to the Soviet Union.

Langguth concludes, "On April 30, 1975, one judgment was possible about the war just ended: North Vietnam's leaders had deserved to win. South Vietnam's leaders had deserved to lose. And America's leaders, for 30 years, had failed the people of the North, the people of the South, and the people of the United States." His conclusion is fair, or as the Vietnamese would say, "hop tinh, hop ly" (conform to feeling, conform to reason). The *Washington Post* reported that during the debate on the "Gulf Crisis between January 3 and January 15 [1993], members of the U.S.

Congress mentioned Vietnam 413 times on the Senate and House floors." Vietnam continues to haunt American foreign policy decisions. But the process of reconciliation between the two peoples that was started at least 20 years ago by Vietnam War veterans and various nongovernmental organizations will continue. *Our Vietnam* helps provide the justification for that continuing effort at reconciliation.