

General Vo Nguyen Giap: Defeated French Imperialism, Drove the U.S. out of Vietnam

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Vietnamese Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, who helped defeat Japan, then France, then the United States in a 35-year war for national independence, died in Hanoi on Oct. 4 at the age of 102. He had been ailing and living in a military hospital for the last four years.

Giap's extraordinary generalship drove French imperialism out of the three countries of Indochina — Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia — in the mid-1950s. At the time he declared the anti-French struggle "was victorious because we had a wide and firm National United Front... organized and led by the party of the working class — the Indochinese Communist Party, now the Vietnam Workers Party."

Decades later, he described the Vietnamese triumph against France as "the first great victory for a weak, colonized people struggling against the full strength of modern Western forces. This is why it was the first great defeat for the West. It shook the foundations of colonialism and called on people to fight for their freedom."

Next came what the Vietnamese call the American War. The United States supported French colonialism in Indochina beginning in 1954 with money and a Military Assistance Advisory Group. It remained in the southern half of the country after France withdrew its tattered legions, virtually destroying Vietnam with its bombs, heavy artillery, chemical poisons and a half million troops until it was ousted with finality in 1975. Gen. Giap played a major role in bringing about this stunning defeat of history's most powerful military state. It was the first time the U.S. lost a war.

"We had to use the small against the big — backward weapons to defeat modern weapons," Giap said. "At the end, it was the human factor that determined the victory." He further noted elsewhere that "guerrilla warfare is the means whereby the people of a weak, badly equipped country can stand up against an aggressive army possessing better equipment and techniques."

At the same time, Giap made it entirely clear that the enormous pressure put upon Washington by the nationwide antiwar movement in the U.S. was a major contributing factor to Vietnam's victory. He later told historian Stanley Karnow: "We were not strong enough to drive out a half million American troops, but that wasn't our aim. Our intention was to break the will of the American government to continue the war." The U.S. "second front" — consisting of millions of American civilians and GIs who expressed their opposition to an unjust war — helped bring it to an end.

Another factor contributing to Vietnam's success was the material support from both Russia and China despite the growing political antagonism between the two communist giants.

Given that he is considered one of the great generals in modern history, and called by some the "Red Napoleon," it is of no little interest that he was self-taught in the arts of war, never having attended even one class in the subject.

Giap was familiar with Vietnam's long history, dating back thousands of years, of resisting foreign invasions and domination, mainly from China and Mongolia. He studied some of these engagements. But his practical abilities derived from modern sources. Primarily, he studied the extensive contemporary military writings of Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Zedong, adapting them to the social, political and geographical conditions of Vietnam. He further learned from his mentor, Ho Chi Minh, the great leader of the Indochinese struggle for national liberation, as well as Marx, Engels, Lenin and others.

Additional factors molded his military prowess. He had an abiding hatred of foreign domination. He was a passionate communist and sought to build a socialist society benefitting the masses of people. He applied Marxist analysis to problems.

Vo Nguyen Giap (pronounced vonwin ZHAP) was born in 1911 to an educated farming family with strong nationalist views against France, which occupied parts, then all of Vietnam, starting in the mid-1800s. His father took part in unsuccessful uprisings against French domination in the 1880s. Years later he was arrested for subversion and died in prison in 1919 —some say he was murdered — when his son was eight. Soon afterward, one of his older sisters was arrested and eventually released due to illness brought about by prison conditions, and died weeks later, while her younger brother was nine. When he was an adult, the French arrested his first wife, who also died in prison.

Anti-French activity was subdued in Vietnam during Giap's formative years, though he carried on the rebel tradition. At around the age of 12, according to Wikipedia, "He was expelled from school after two years for taking part in protests, and went home to his village for a while. While there, he joined the Tân Việt (New Vietnamese) Revolutionary Party, an underground group founded in 1924, which introduced him to communism. He returned to Hue and continued his political activities. He was arrested in 1930 for taking part in student protests and served 13 months in Lao Bảo Prison. He joined the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1931 and took part in several demonstrations against French rule in Indochina as well as assisting in founding the Democratic Front...."

"From 1933 to 1938, Giap studied at the University of Hanoi (and continued his political activities) as he earned a bachelor's degree in law with a major in political economy." He worked as a history teacher and married fellow student and revolutionary Nguyen Thi Minh Giang in 1938 and had a daughter named HohgAnh (Red Queen of Flowers).

France outlawed the Indochinese Communist Party, causing many members to hide and operate as an underground. Party leader Ho Chi Minh and others escaped to neighboring China to continue their work. Over 2,000 party members were arrested. Giap left for China in May 1940; his wife stayed in Vietnam with her family and was soon arrested and sentenced to 15 years in prison. He never saw her again.

Four months later, most of France was in the hands of the Nazi collaborationist Vichy government, which allowed imperialist Japan to occupy Vietnam to "protect" Indochina. Ho,

now back in Vietnam, formed the Vietnam Independence League to organize against the occupation. Giap, who was 20 at the time, was assigned to build an intelligence network and develop political bases in the far north of Vietnam. He edited a periodic newsheet for distribution to the masses. Many years later he admitted one of the toughest jobs in his life was writing the simple, very short items Ho ordered. Ho was right because many of the people receiving the news sheet could hardly read.

In the next few years Giap would rise from this position to that of military commander of the Viet Minh — the League for the Independence of Vietnam, the communist coalition to seek separation from France — and the commander of the Vietnam People's Army. (We will refer to the Viet Minh during the anti-French war, and then to the Vietnam People's Army afterward.) His close proximity to Ho didn't hurt, but without ability he would have gotten nowhere.

In 1942, Giap and others were ordered to build the League's military wing. A year later he learned that his wife died in prison but that Red Queen of Flowers was safe with her maternal grandparents (as an adult she became a doctor). By the end of 1943 Giap reported hundreds of men and women had joined the Viet Minh army. That same year, membership in the Independence League was said to have reached hundreds of thousands.

The Communist Party called on Giap to form a "Vietnamese People's Propaganda Unit for National Liberation," which became the People's Army of Vietnam a year later. Giap built and led the first Armed Propaganda Brigade of 33 men and three women armed with one machine gun, 31 rifles and 2 revolvers. They would fight if attacked but their main task was mobilizing the people of various hamlets against Japanese and French imperialism through propaganda plays, skits, music, dance and bringing news of the struggle to remote areas. In time many such brigades were created. The U.S., incidentally, helped finance the Viet Minh's struggle against the Japanese by supplying rifles and perhaps other aid, though it supported the return of the French.

Japan was defeated in August 1945 and was preparing for a formal surrender in September. By that time the rebel forces numbered a few thousand. Ho on Aug. 19 ordered the Viet Minh to begin the revolution against the restoration of French colonial rule. There were uprisings against the French throughout Vietnam. The Japanese just looked the other way.

On Sept. 2, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). He was named Chairman of the Provisional Government, in effect the Premier of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Giap became Minister of the Interior, while still commanding the Viet Minh. Ho sought to obtain recognition of the DRV from the U.S., to no avail despite repeated entreaties to President Truman, who ignored them.

The Nationalist Chinese army arrived in Vietnam in early September, ostensibly to disarm the Japanese but occupying the northern half of the country. At the same time British forces occupied the southern half. They remained until the French colonial army returned, starting in October. The leaders of the U.S., the USSR and the UK (the Big Three) prearranged this scenario, which also succeeded in closing any gap in military authority that the resistance forces might seek to exploit before the French returned.

The Communist Party officially dissolved in 1945, presumably to save itself, although the leadership continued functioning, membership kept increasing and the Viet Minh was in the beginning stages of a war for independence against powerful French force. The date for the

beginning of the full-blown Anti-French Resistance War in Indochina is Dec. 19, 1946. This was, in effect, the First Indochina War. The second was against the U.S.

The Communist Party was formally reestablished in 1951, but with a new name: the Workers Party of Vietnam. According to the CIA, it had between 200,000 and 400,000 members.

Ho and Giap entered negotiations with the French, testing whether it might be possible to gain independence without a war. Ho followed up with a six-month parlay with the French government in Paris, leaving Giap in Hanoi, leading the DRV. In August 1946 Giap married a second time to Ba Hanh, who eventually gave birth to four children.

By October, 1946, the war was beginning, even while Ho was still negotiating abroad. On Dec. 19 the DRV declared war on France. A succession of skirmishes and small engagements followed. The Viet Minh had no heavy weapons and other essential accouterment for a larger war until the Chinese Communist Party won its war against the Nationalists in October 1949. Chinese and Soviet supplies soon began to cross the Chinese border, as did some Chinese instructors. Giap was soon able to launch large battles that seriously bruised the French forces. This broadened the antiwar movement in France and spawned doubts in a sector of the population about the necessity for holding on to Indochina.

By 1953 French generals feared the insurrection was spreading across Vietnam's western border into Laos after a Viet Minh unit attacked French border outposts in that country. This convinced the French commander, Gen. Henri Navarre, to establish a major military base near the small town of Dien Bien Phu, just 10 miles from the border in northwest Vietnam. He intended to interdict Vietnamese forces heading to Laos or lure them to attack a base that he considered invulnerable because of its fortifications, and the fact that it was surrounded by mountains, with a nearby former Japanese airstrip for resupply. Navarre knew Giap did not possess heavy artillery or the means to transport such tonnage up the mountains and into position. After several months the base was ready by the end of 1953.

Giap figured out what to do — one of the most audacious maneuvers in modern military history. It resulted in France losing its three colonies in Indochina, and paved the way for the loss of most of its other colonies, mainly in Africa.

Navarre was wrong. Giap had artillery but he kept it a secret until the right moment. His plan required 50,000 troops, thousands of support forces, 24 howitzers, and anti-aircraft guns, ammunition and supplies for an army. Each howitzer weighs between 3 and 7 tons, depending on the type Giap used. The problem was how to get the howitzers up the mountains despite roadless, very difficult terrain without being detected. He decided that large teams of porters would push and haul each piece up the backside of the mountains, facing away from the base. Once there, they would tunnel and drag the howitzers to the forward slopes on the other side facing the enemy down below, and position them to cause maximum damage to various parts of the sprawling base. It was an incredible accomplishment.

The French — who numbered about 13,000 — discovered the Viet Minh had heavy weapons on March 14, 1954, when the first shot came crashing down upon them. After two weeks of this bombardment, Giap sent in the troops. It was a tough fight, including trenches. On May 7, Giap sent 25,000 Viet Minh on a final assault on the remainder of the garrison — and it was over. (Figures on the dead and wounded are contradictory but it is generally believed

that the Viet Minh lost far more troops than the French — a not uncommon happening in Giap's battles.)

Americans participated in Dien Bien Phu, from the armed forces and CIA. A total of 37 CIA pilots took part in air drops to supply the French. The Navy sent maintenance crews and mechanics. The U.S. sent planes and troop carriers.

An elated Ho was in Geneva when Giap claimed victory, planning to attend the May 8 Geneva Conference on Indochina. It was clear Dien Bien Phu was the end for France in Indochina. The conference came to a decision June 17: Vietnam would be split temporarily in two at the 17th parallel. The DRV would remain in control of the north. The powerful forces in the south were Emperor Bao Dai (a collaborator with both the French and Japanese) and his conservative government, the Catholic Church and the United States. A free election was to be held throughout Vietnam in two years to vote for a president who would rule the unified country. About a million people, overwhelmingly Catholics, migrated from north to south during the first year. The U.S. Navy supplied the ships. About 100,000 from the south went north, mostly leftists.

The election never took place, however. South Vietnam and its U.S. backers refused to participate. Presiding President Dwight D. Eisenhower explained why in his memoirs: Ho was going to get 80% of the vote, in his (and presumably the CIA's) opinion. The U.S. only wanted a reunified Vietnam if it was in the hands of an anti-communist government.

According to the New York Times, "about 94,000 French troops died in the war to keep Vietnam, and the struggle for independence killed, by conservative estimates, about 300,000 Vietnamese fighters.

The Pentagon says the Vietnam War lasted 11 years, (1962-1973), but U.S. involvement actually continued for 21 years (1954-1975). When Paris withdrew remaining French troops in April 1956, according to writer John Prados, "their departure made America South Vietnam's big brother," i.e., overlord and military protector against popular liberation forces in the southern half of the country.

Giap led the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) throughout much of the American War, building it into a world class fighting force. He was also in charge of the guerrilla forces of the south, the fighting wing of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. Many were southerners who moved north after the split, only to return surreptitiously as an organized fighting force. Others never left the south.

The NLF guerrillas played an extraordinary role in the anti-U.S. struggle. In time the VPA sent many detachments from the north to join them in battle against U.S. troops.

Giap supplied the forces in the south through what was called the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which consisted of newly built trails connected to many refurbished old paths from the now Democratic Republic of Vietnam, into Laos, south through Cambodia to various exits in South Vietnam. Much of it is covered by a canopy of jungle growth, hiding traffic from the air. It was put together, constantly repaired and sometimes diverted because of U.S. air strikes, between 1959 and 1975. It was clear enough by the decisive year of 1973 for heavy trucks to travel its length. Total length with many offshoots is said to be at least miles.

By June 1962, 9,700 U.S. "military advisers" plus a large number of CIA agents were

training and fighting to support the corrupt U.S.-backed regime in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), at which time President Kennedy's Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara, announced that "every quantitative measure shows that we're winning the war." There were 20,000 by the end of 1963.

The major escalation of U.S. troops began after President Lyndon B. Johnson evidently lied about an alleged North Vietnamese attack Aug. 4, 1964, on a U.S. Navy destroyer, the Maddox, cruising in the Gulf of Tonkin. There had been an altercation between three Vietnamese torpedo boats and the Maddox on Aug. 2. The boats were heading toward the U.S. vessel when the Maddox opened fire, evidently believing it was coming under attack. Torpedoes were then fired, missing their target, and the small boats fled.

On Aug. 4, the Maddox reported it was again attacked, prompting an outcry from Johnson and Defense Secretary McNamara the next day. Two days later, at Johnson's request, both houses of Congress overwhelmingly passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that allowed the U.S. to ultimately increase ground forces to 535,040 troops in Vietnam. The DRV always maintained there was no second attack. McNamara, who eventually regretted his role, traveled to Vietnam 31 years later to meet with Giap. During his visit, he asked the general what really happened Aug. 4, to which Giap replied, "Nothing."

Perhaps the worst problem Giap faced was not U.S. ground forces but an almost unbelievable amount of attacks from the air that not only slaughtered untold numbers of civilians in both halves of Vietnam but came close to destroying Hanoi's economy, making it more dependent than ever on supplies from China and the Soviet Union. One response, which Giap approved, was to dig underground tunnels throughout the country — some with living space — so families, farmers, workers and soldiers could find safety from bombs, shells, napalm, and Agent Orange poison defoliant.

U.S. bombs and heavy artillery pulverized Indochina. The Pentagon detonated 15,500,000 tons of air and ground munitions — 12,000,000 tons on South Vietnam alone. By comparison, the U.S. detonated only 6,000,000 tons of ground and air munitions throughout World War II in Europe and the Far East. All told, by the end of the war, 26,000,000 bomb craters pockmarked Indochina, nearly all from U.S. weapons and bombers.

Vietnam's most famous battle of the war was the Tet Offensive, led by about 85,000 National Liberation Front and Vietnam Peoples Army troops from the north between Jan. 30-March 28, 1968, against soldiers from South Vietnam, the U.S., South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and Thailand. (Tet is the lunar new year.) Two smaller, follow-up phases of the offensive took place May 5-June 15 and Aug. 17-Sept. 23. (It is estimated that some 200,000 NLF/VPA may have participated in the entire campaign. The U.S. et al troop strength was about a million.)

Liberation fighters attacked Saigon, 36 of 44 provincial capitals, a few autonomous cities, 64 district capitals and dozens of hamlets. They raided many military bases and airfields. In Saigon, they attacked the U.S. embassy and the Presidential Palace.

Ultimately, the attack did not succeed in military terms. NLF/VPA troops suffered far higher casualties and retained only a trace of territory. The uprising that the planners believed would take place throughout South Vietnam — a prime objective — did not happen.

Politically, however, the Tet Offensive was a strategic success for the Vietnamese, leading to

U.S. withdrawal in five years and to complete victory two years later.

On the home front before Tet, Washington was promising that victory was near, and the truth is that the DRV and the Liberated Zones of South Korea had taken a terrible beating. But many Americans had already turned against the war. The antiwar movement was large and vocal. Gradually, the truth about America's brutal conduct in the war began to leak out. For many Americans the enormous scope of the Tet offensive was a shock, propelling many more into the antiwar camp.

As a direct result of Tet and the shift in public opinion, Johnson made two historic moves. (1) In March he announced that America's vicious bombing campaign, Operation Rolling Thunder, would end Nov. 1, paving the way for peace talks. (2) This was followed by an announcement March 31 that Johnson would not run for a second term in the November elections.

Giap is often depicted as the brilliant general behind Tet, but that does not appear to be accurate. He evidently entertained qualms about a massive attack as opposed to expanding a guerrilla-type struggle. For almost a year, the upper political and military echelons of the government and Workers Party discussed, argued about and finally planned the Tet Offensive. Some of the arguments reflected differences in approach that evidently emanated from the Sino-Soviet ideological split. Once the decision was made, all sides — certainly including Ho, who seemed to be in the middle — united to make it as successful as possible.

Gen. Hoang Van Thieu led the Tet campaign. Giap himself was now the Defense Minister, and worked for its success, though he was critical of the failure to order the withdrawal of troops in vulnerable situations. Over the years Giap made these comments about Tet:

“The Tet offensive had been directed primarily at the people of South Vietnam, but as it turned out, it affected the people of the United States more. Until Tet, they thought they could win the war, but now they knew that they could not.”

He told the journalist Stanley Karnow: “We wanted to show the Americans that we were not exhausted, that we could attack their arsenals, communications, elite units, even their headquarters, the brains behind the war....We wanted to project the war into the homes of America's families, because we knew that most of them had nothing against us.”

Ho Chi Minh died at the age of 79 on Sept. 2, 1969. He had been ill and relinquished his offices four years earlier, remaining one of the party leaders. He was and is Vietnam's most beloved figure. Ho was also Giap's mentor and close ally.

U.S. Troops pulled entirely out of Vietnam in 1973.

The final days of the war for liberation, reunification and socialism began with the 1975 Spring Offensive led by Gen. Van Tien Dung, who was Giap's chief of staff during the fight for Dien Bien Phu. Giap was consulted but did not play a big role. Virtually the entire armed forces were thrown into the campaign to capture Saigon, the capital, of southern Vietnam, which succeeded on April 30, 1975. The name Saigon was soon changed to Ho Chi Minh City, now a thriving metropolis. The name of the unified state was the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Giap Giap advised against the invasion of Cambodia to oust the Khmer Rouge, which took place Dec. 25, 1978. He was removed as Defense Minister earlier that year. He lost his position as a long time member of the party's top organization, the Politburo, in 1982, and his tenure as deputy prime minister ended in 1991.

He was without portfolio but that did nothing to reduce his extreme popularity among the Vietnamese people, where it remains to this day. Giap was out of power, but he lived quite comfortably. In his latter years he became an outspoken environmentalist. In time he regained considerable public recognition. The party brought him back to public view when he was honored at the 40th anniversary of the victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1994, and the 30th anniversary of victory and the naming of Ho Chi Minh City in 2005.

This writer attended the 2005 ceremonies as a guest. Giap was seated in the front row of a grandstand during a military parade celebrating the liberation. Up close, he was a very old, very small man with pure white hair, adorned in a splendorous white general's uniform with golden epaulets. He had only one medal on his chest. He was also the center of attention — a giant of a man who helped slay the dragons of Japanese, French and American imperialism.

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