



Introduction

The struggle for Vietnam, a poor South-East Asian country the size of California, comprising mountains, jungles and paddies which enchant twenty-first-century tourists but were uncongenial to twentieth-century Western warriors, lasted three decades and cost between two and three million lives. In the eyes of the world, and even those of the communists' Chinese and Soviet armourers, for the first twenty years it was a marginal affair. During its last phase, however, the war seized the imagination, roused the dismay and indeed revulsion of hundreds of millions of Western people, while destroying one US president and contributing to the downfall of a second. In the wave of youthful protest against authority which swept many countries in the 1960s, rejection of old sexual morality and an enthusiasm for the joys of marijuana and LSD became conflated with lunges against capitalism and imperialism, of which Vietnam appeared an exceptionally ugly manifestation. Moreover, many older Americans who lacked sympathy for any of those causes came to oppose the war because it was revealed as the fount of systematic deceptions by their own government, and also seemed doomed to fail.

The 1975 fall of Saigon represented a humiliation for the planet's most powerful nation: peasant revolutionaries had prevailed over American will, wealth and hardware. The silhouetted stairway up which on the evening of 29 April fugitives ascended to a helicopter, as if towards Calvary, secured a place among the symbolic images of that era. Vietnam exercised greater cultural influence upon its times than has any other conflict since 1945.

The merits of rival causes are never absolute. Even in the Second World War, the Western allied struggle against fascism was compromised by its reliance upon the tyranny of Stalin to pay most of the blood price for destroying the tyranny of Hitler. Only simpletons of the political right and left dare to suggest that in Vietnam either side possessed a monopoly of virtue. The authors of all the authoritative works about the conflict are American or French. More than a few of the former write as if it was their own nation's story. Yet this was predominantly an Asian tragedy, upon which a US nightmare was overlaid: around forty Vietnamese perished for every American.

Although my narrative is chronological, I have not attempted to chronicle or even mention every action, but instead to capture the nature of Vietnam's experience through three decades. As in all my books, while relating the political and strategic tale I also try to answer the