VIETNAMESE TROOPS withdrew from Cambodia last September, ending a decade of occupation. Although the invasion had imposed foreign rule on Cambodians, it brought them relief from the murderous regime of the Communist Khmer Rouge. Vietnam had invaded Cambodia in retaliation for a Khmer Rouge attack and stayed on to assure that the government it placed in power would survive. During the occupation, the Khmer Rouge and two non-Communist opposition forces took refuge in bases near the Thai border. With the departure of the Vietnamese troops, they had a choice: negotiate a political settlement or try to overthrow the Vietnamese-backed government. The choice was not entirely theirs to make. Other nations have a vested interest in their country.

Cambodia, and for that matter all of Indochina, the region comprising Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, was occupied by France for close to a century, except for the World War II years when Japan took control. In August 1945 Japan surrendered to the allies and its forces withdrew from Indochina. The French colony of Vietnam then became embroiled in the first of three wars, a war for independence from France (1946–54).

In the second war (1960–75), South Vietnam, with U.S. political and military backing, fought and ultimately lost power to a Communist insurgency supported by North Vietnam, the Soviet Union and China. In the aftermath of war, an estimated one million Vietnamese fled their country by boat or on foot rather than endure political repression and economic deprivation.

Cambodia’s rash attacks on Vietnam starting in 1977 led to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978, inaugurating a third Indochina war. Vietnam’s withdrawal last September may have closed this chapter, although civil war now appears likely.

Since World War II, the great powers have held four major conferences to end wars in Indochina but peace has not yet taken hold. The most recent conference convened in Paris last August to work out the details of a political settlement for Cambodia, but the participants could not reach agreement.

Today, the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China exert a major influence on regional affairs; the U.S. plays a less visible role. In Cambo-
The Soviets support the Vietnamese-backed government while China supports the Khmer Rouge. The U.S. and most of the pro-Western countries in Asean, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (see box), back two non-Communist groups headed by the former Cambodian head of state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

What are the options for Cambodia’s future? One is continued rule by the present government of Prime Minister Hun Sen. With the Vietnamese army no longer there to protect it, however, its staying power is uncertain. A second option is a coalition government that would include some or all of the three opposition factions. This solution has founded on the question of whether the Khmer Rouge, whom most Cambodians loathe, should be included. If they are, they may try to subvert the government from within. If excluded, the likelihood is that the Khmer Rouge, militarily the strongest of the three, will fight to regain power. If no political solution can be reached, the prospect is for more war, more economic hardship, more refugees and more outside intervention.

The Soviet Union and China are now seeking to remove Indochina as a source of tension between them. They favor a negotiated settlement in Cambodia, but disagree on the specifics.

The non-Communist neighbors of Cambodia and Vietnam, especially Thailand, are wary of Vietnam’s past attempts to exert hegemony over the region. They support a coalition government under Prince Sihanouk in Cambodia, but they are divided on their policy toward Vietnam. Thailand is promoting accommodation; Singapore so far has favored continued exclusion of Vietnam from regional affairs.

The U.S. tie

The U.S. severed diplomatic relations with Vietnam and Cambodia in 1975, when both fell under Communist rule. Since then, Washington has sought to isolate Vietnam diplomatically and prevent it from receiving Western aid and trade.

The U.S. denounced Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia and made the withdrawal of its troops a condition for normalizing relations. Although the troops appear to be out, the U.S. has imposed a new condition for normalization—Vietnamese acceptance of a comprehensive political settlement in Cambodia. Vietnam’s cooperation in accounting for American servicemen missing in the Vietnam War will also affect the pace and scope of relations.

U.S. involvement in negotiating a peaceful end to the strife in Cambodia evokes for many Americans something they would rather forget—the prior U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. That conflict cost 58,000 American lives, divided the nation, and tarnished U.S. prestige around the world. The flood of visitors to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., which was dedicated in 1982 in belated recognition of the sacrifices of the veterans of that war, and the brisk sales of books and movies dealing with Vietnam suggest that Americans are at last trying to come to terms with that era.
Have Americans finally put the "Vietnam syndrome," characterized by a U.S. reluctance to get involved abroad, behind them? Is the "Vietnam generation" prepared to put relations with Vietnam on a normal footing? What policy should the U.S. adopt toward Cambodia? In seeking to answer those questions, it is necessary to review the region's history, the roots of U.S. military engagement in Indochina and the lessons of the Vietnam War.

**Legacy of colonialism**

OUTSIDE INTERVENTION is an old story in Indochina: Vietnam was a Chinese province before it became independent in A.D. 939, and Cambodia and Laos were Buddhist kingdoms influenced by India. Despite foreign conquest and occupation, Vietnam and Cambodia retained their distinctive national identities. They also retained an ancient rivalry. From the 9th to the 15th century A.D., Cambodian kings, enriched by rice cultivation, governed the Indochinese peninsula from the temple city of Angkor. Until the 18th century much of present-day southern Vietnam was ruled by Khmers, who make up 90% of Cambodia's population. Since that time the regional powerhouse has been Vietnam, which has historically considered control of all of Indochina essential to its security. With 67 million people, Vietnam greatly outnumbered Cambodia (with 7 million) and Laos (4 million).

European colonialism in the 19th century changed the political alignments of the region by creating an entity that had not existed before—French Indochina. France invaded Vietnam in the 1850s in the mistaken belief that this would facilitate trade with China, and by 1885 extended its rule over the entire region. Cambodia, which had sought French protection since the 1850s, was made a French protectorate in 1863. After 1887 the five parts of Indochina (northern, central and southern Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) were placed under the control of a French governor-general in Hanoi. French Indochina, however, was an artificial creation which inspired the various associations of Southeast Asian nations.

**Association of Southeast Asian Nations**

Asean, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, was founded in 1967 to strengthen regional cohesion and self-reliance and includes the states of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

Economic cooperation, another reason for Asean's founding, still has far to go. Most members produce and export primary commodities such as rubber, rice and palm oil that compete with rather than complement one another. Brunei's economy is based on oil exports and Singapore, a major regional business center, has important export industries such as electronics.

The U.S. and Japan together account for 70% of foreign investment in Asean countries. Collectively, Asean is the seventh-largest U.S. trade partner, with two-way trade in 1987 amounting to $27 billion.

Pro-Western Asean is not a security or defense alliance, although two members, Thailand and the Philippines, are U.S. military allies. Many of its governments have contended with Communist insurgencies and, with the departure of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia, are wary of Chinese intentions. Soviet access to bases in Vietnam is also a cause for concern.

Asean's greatest success has been diplomatic. It took the lead in condemning the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, especially at the UN, and was the main backer, along with China, of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (Cambodia), headed by Sihanouk.

The prospect of peace in Indochina has ironically put Asean's unity under new strain. Some members, such as Thailand and to a lesser degree Indonesia and Malaysia, have broken ranks with Asean policy and are eager to resume trading with Vietnam, Singapore, ethnically Chinese, so far has opposed dealing with Hun Sen.

If the superpowers agree on a settlement in Cambodia, Asean may once again be relegated to watching outsiders, rather than insiders, determine the shape of the region's politics.
subject peoples no allegiance or loyalty. During the colonial period, the French developed the Mekong River delta into a major rice-growing region, and planted large parts of Vietnam and Cambodia with rubber trees. Both commodities were exported to France, and by World War II Indochina was the third-largest rice exporter in the world.

**Independence movement**

The Vietnamese elite helped the French administer Indochina, and French culture flourished in the cities. But for most people, colonial rule was harsh and oppressive and gave rise between the two world wars to a clandestine nationalist movement. Its leader was Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969), who studied and worked abroad before returning to Vietnam in 1941. Ho was a man of action and a master strategist who cooperated briefly with U.S. forces during World War II. In September 1945, after the withdrawal of Japanese troops, Ho, quoting from the U.S. Declaration of Independence, proclaimed Vietnam’s independence.

**First Indochina war**

The French, determined to hold onto their overseas colonies, were not about to grant independence. Negotiations between France and the Vietminh, a nationalist front dominated by Communists, ended in deadlock and war broke out in December 1946.

For the Vietminh, war was not only a matter of military engagements but a political struggle involving every citizen. Ho warned the French, “You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.” The Vietminh correctly reckoned that time was on their side and the French public would tire of supporting a faraway battle for a lost cause. They adopted guerrilla tactics, which emphasized surprise, continuous attacks, and the use of modest resources against a superior foe. Following the Communist victory in China in 1949, the Vietminh could count on a safe haven across the border and vital Chinese military supplies.

In contrast to Vietnam, there was no significant Communist activity in Cambodia or Laos until the 1950s. Following a well-publicized campaign by Sihanouk, France granted full independence to Cambodia as well as to Laos in 1953.

After eight years of fighting the Vietminh, the French decided to risk all on a major battle at Dien Bien Phu, in a remote valley on the Laotian border. They badly misread enemy capabilities and were defeated in May 1954 in a battle that has since become a byword for military disaster.

**Geneva conference**

Because the conflict in Indochina affected the interests of all the great powers, an international conference was convened in Geneva, Switzerland, in May 1954 to work out the terms of a peace settlement. The U.S., Britain, France and the Soviet Union were joined by the People’s Republic of China, Cambodia, Laos and the opposing Vietnamese factions—the pro-West government of Emperor Bao Dai and Ho Chi Minh’s Vietminh, who called themselves the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

Neither the U.S. nor Britain was prepared to see Bao Dai replaced by a Communist government. Although Vietnam was seen primarily as France’s responsibility, the U.S. had underwritten a major part of France’s war costs in an effort to keep the Chinese Communists from expanding their domain, and Britain was fighting a Communist insurgency in its nearby colony of Malaya.

Although allies of the Vietminh, the Soviet Union and China readily sacrificed Vietnamese interests to advance their own. As far as China was concerned, a divided Vietnam was a weaker Vietnam and therefore more easily controlled. The Soviets saw partition as a way to prevent the war from expanding and the U.S. from intervening. The Vietminh had no choice but to go along.

The Geneva conference resulted in a cease-fire and the withdrawal of French troops—but not a final political settlement. Vietnam was temporarily divided at the 17th parallel between a Communist north, based in Hanoi, and a non-Communist south, based in Saigon. Nationwide elections leading to unification were to be held in 1956.

The conference in Geneva also gave Sihanouk the international recognition he wanted for Cambodia’s neutrality and independence. However, he was obliged to hold elections to legitimize his rule. In a political masterstroke, he renounced the throne to run for office and was elected prime minister in 1955. Sihanouk was genuinely popular at the time, but his steamroller tactics, which ensured that all the seats in the Assembly went to his handpicked candidates, cost him support. By the early 1960s, opposition to his autocratic rule began to build.

**South Vietnam**

From 1954 to 1963, South Vietnam was governed by Ngo Dinh Diem, with strong U.S. support. Diem had been raised in France in the lap of luxury and ruled like a mandarin, expecting obedience and refusing to share power. He cracked down hard on Vietminh cells remaining in the south, and alienated peasants by herding them against their will into armed stockades to isolate them from the Communists. Diem also helped landlords regain land that the Vietminh had redistributed to poor peasants during the war against France.

The intensity of the opposition to Diem caught the world’s attention when a Buddhist priest set himself on fire to protest his rule in June 1963. That November Diem was ousted and executed in a coup with the knowledge (if not the complicity) of the U.S. A series of successors even less capable than Diem tried, with U.S. support, to contain the growing Communist insurgency.

**North Vietnam**

In anticipation of Communist rule in northern Vietnam as sanctioned in the Geneva agreements, nearly a million refugees, mostly Catholics, fled to the south. The U.S. Navy played an important role in their evacuation. Hanoi spent the first five years after the war of independence recovering from the widespread damage it had suffered. Then in 1959, after southern revolutionaries had begun attacking the Diem regime, Hanoi resumed the battle for the south. In December 1960 it formed the National Liberation Front (NLF), an umbrella organization of southerners opposed to the Diem government. In less than two years the Communist guerrillas (or Vietcong, meaning Vietnamese Communists) controlled or in-
fluened two thirds of the villages in the south. By late 1964 Hanoi was sending regular forces to South Vietnam.

Second Indochina war

As the struggle between the Vietcong and the Saigon government escalated, so did the size of the U.S. commitment. The number of U.S. military advisers grew from a few hundred in 1961 to 16,700 at the time of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963. In March 1965 the first U.S. Marines landed at Da Nang to protect an American airfield there. Before long they were dispatched on search and destroy missions and engaged in “pacifying” villages.

U.S. forces were joined by allied troops from South Korea, the Philippines and elsewhere.

The U.S. carried out a massive bombing campaign of North Vietnam, “Operation Rolling Thunder,” from March 1965 until November 1968. The U.S. also repeatedly bombed the Ho Chi Minh trail, an intricate and elusive supply network stretching from North Vietnam south through Laos and Cambodia. The bombing did not stop the flow of war matériel nor did it demoralize Hanoi’s leadership or affect its ability to wage war. No sooner were roads or bridges destroyed than they were rebuilt. The north’s simple agrarian economy was barely disrupted.

The GI experience

For many of the 3 million American soldiers who served there, Vietnam was a nightmare. Many were confused as to U.S. war aims. Their idea of a war was the one in which their fathers had fought, World War II. In that conflict there was no confusion about the enemy; progress on the ground could easily be measured; and U.S. troops were welcomed as liberators.

In Vietnam, everything was different. U.S. soldiers could not distinguish friend from foe—a pro-American Vietnamese from a Vietcong. Also, there were no front lines. Once “liberated,” a village would be retaken as soon as the Americans left.

The war exerted great stress, both psychologically and physical, on soldiers whose average age was 19—seven years younger than that of servicemen in World War II. On combat patrols, many had to put up for months on end with tropical heat, never-ending rain and relentless insects.

In the latter stages of the war, the troops’ morale plummeted and the main preoccupation—especially of the draftees who only had to serve one year—was survival. Drug use became widespread. Thousands were exposed to the chemical herbicide Agent Orange, used to defoliate the countryside and expose the enemy.

Tet offensive

Despite its massive effort, the U.S. was not winning. The Vietcong offensive in February 1968 during Tet, the lunar New Year, marked the turning point of the war. The enemy simultaneously attacked more than 100 cities, including Saigon, where they breached the walls of the American embassy. Although the Tet offensive was a military defeat for the Vietcong, they had now brought the war into urban areas and demonstrated U.S. vulnerability.

The Tet offensive had a powerful effect on public opinion in the U.S., reinforcing opposition to the war and convincing many that the South Vietnamese could not win. Although the U.S. continued to send more men—the number peaked at 543,000 in April 1969—it was the beginning of the end of U.S. involvement.

Many in South Vietnam feared the Communists and hoped that the country, despite the odds, could achieve real democracy, as called for in its 1967 constitution. But the Communists proved to be astute political leaders, both ruthless and effective.

As the war began winding down in Vietnam, hostilities expanded into Cambodia, where U.S. troops operated in “hot pursuit” of the Vietcong in uninhabited areas and for 14 months conducted a secret bombing campaign. In March 1970, the increasingly unpopular Sihanouk, abroad at the time, was deposed by his pro-American, anti-Communist prime minister, Lon Nol. President Richard M. Nixon, in a show of support for the new government, launched a major attack on Communist bases in Cambodia the following month.

Despite continued U.S. military assistance and bombing of Communist targets, the Cambodian government could not hold out. The capital, Phnom Penh, fell to the Communist Khmer Rouge, led by the French-educated Pol Pot, on April 17, 1975. Sihanouk returned to Cambodia from China, where he had taken refuge, in time to anoint the Khmer Rouge as his country’s new rulers. Sihanouk’s support gave the Khmer Rouge the credibility they would not otherwise have had. Although Pol Pot had Sihanouk placed under house arrest and murdered several family members, Sihanouk continued to support him, possibly out of fear.

Negotiations

As early as the spring of 1965, the U.S. called for talks to end the war. Hanoi refused to participate until April 1968, after President Lyndon B. Johnson agreed to end the bombing of North Vietnam. The negotiations dragged on for six years. The main stumbling blocks were the U.S. demand that all North Vietnamese troops be withdrawn from the south and the North Vietnamese demand that the U.S. set a specific date to withdraw its troops.

In October 1972, shortly before the U.S. presidential election, Washington and Hanoi announced agreement. The Saigon government, however, refused to accept the terms, which permitted northern troops to remain in the south. When the North Vietnamese walked out of the peace talks in December, Nixon ordered a massive bombing campaign against the north. Hanoi returned to the negotiating table, and a final peace agreement was signed in Paris on January 27, 1973. Major provisions were a cease-fire, a withdrawal of U.S. troops, the release of prisoners of war and U.S. aid for postwar reconstruction in North Vietnam.

The U.S. pullout left the Saigon government with only a small, demoralized army to defend the country. Both sides ignored the cease-fire. In March 1975 Hanoi launched a major offensive that caught the U.S. and South Vietnam by surprise. As Communist troops advanced, the Saigon government abandoned the northern provinces and concentrated its troops in the capital. They could not hold it, and on April 30, Saigon fell to Vietcong guerrillas and North Vietnamese troops.
COMMUNIST INDOCHINA

North Vietnam's long-standing goal of reunification was achieved in 1976, but at huge cost: more than 4 million Vietnamese on both sides, soldiers and civilians, were killed or wounded. Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City, with Hanoi the capital of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Upward of 100,000 southerners who had collaborated with the U.S. were banished to harsh "reeducation camps." The government forced others to relocate to "new economic zones."

Relations between Vietnam and China, its erstwhile ally, quickly deteriorated. Vietnam made life intolerable for many merchants of Chinese origin, accusing them of impeding economic progress. Tens of thousands of ethnic Chinese were expelled or fled the country, many by boat.

The killing fields

Once in control of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge completely restructuring the country, which they called by its Cambodian name, Kampuchea. They hoped to expand agricultural production and use the proceeds from exports to industrialize. To accomplish this they emptied entire cities of their inhabitants and forced them to move to the countryside. Phnom Penh became a ghost town.

By 1979 upward of one million people, a quarter of Cambodia's population, had been executed or had died from disease or starvation. The educated, in particular, suffered. The Khmer Rouge's chilling slogan was, "To preserve you is no gain, to lose you is no loss." In the words of Dith Pran, a photographer for The New York Times whose escape from Cambodia was portrayed in the film "The Killing Fields," "They seemed like from a different planet and tried to destroy all of us. We were completely crazy."

Third Indochina war

Although Vietnam and Cambodia were both under Communist control by the end of 1975, old antagonisms persisted. Cambodia attacked Vietnamese border areas in 1977 in an attempt to regain territory inhabited by ethnic Khmers but long administered by Vietnam. In retaliation, Vietnam invaded Cambodia in December 1978, drove out the Khmer Rouge, and installed a government headed by Heng Samrin and made up of Khmer Rouge defectors who had been living in Vietnam.

China, outraged by the assault on its Cambodian protégés, attacked Vietnam in February 1979 in a month-long campaign intended, in its words, to "teach it a lesson." But this did not end the Vietnamese occupation. If anything, it taught China a lesson.

China continued its support for the Khmer Rouge, whose forces (30,000-40,000) retreated to the western part of the country. They drew on the refugee camps in Thailand for their manpower to fight against the new Phnom Penh government. The Khmer Rouge leadership remains a mystery to outsiders: Pol Pot, whose name is synonymous with genocide in most of the world, supposedly retired in 1985, but many believe he still issues directives from his base in the Thai border area.

Two non-Communist resistance groups also kept up the pressure to rid the country of Vietnamese forces. One was led by Prince Sihanouk (with about 18,000 troops); the other by Son Sann, a former prime minister (with about 12,000). The three groups operated separately until June 1982, when they entered into a marriage of convenience known as the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea.

Perestroika, Indochina-style

Vietnam's economy was shattered during the second Indochina war and has not yet recovered. Today Vietnam is one of the poorest countries in the world, with per capita income estimated at $130 to $150 a year. The population has to contend with acute food shortages, a scarcity of jobs and high inflation. Production is hampered by the poor state of the country's infrastructure. Only about 10% of Vietnam's roads are paved; the railroad linking north and south is in poor condition (it takes longer to go from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City today than it did before 1945); and its ports can only handle half of the country's shipping needs.

In 1986 a Communist party congress reshuffled the top leadership and named an economic pragmatist, Nguyen Van Linh, to the party's highest post. Central economic planning was scrapped in favor of a more market-oriented economy, and investment in agriculture and light industry was increased. Military expenditures, which accounted for as much as a third of the budget, were reduced.

At present, three quarters of Vietnam's exports (agricultural and handicraft products, seafood, rubber and coal) go to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Businessmen from Thailand and Japan, as well as other Southeast Asian countries, have shown an interest in developing Vietnam's offshore oil and gas deposits, light industry, fish and seafood production and tourism.

One of Vietnam's top priorities is getting economic assistance from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank; it is also counting on Japanese aid and investment.

By late 1989 the pace of economic reform had slowed. Party leaders were apparently frightened that demands for political freedoms that had affected China and Eastern Europe could spread to Vietnam.

In Cambodia (as it is once again known), the Hun Sen government has provided a measure of stability and appears to have won a degree of acceptance from Cambodians. Hun Sen is prime minister and number three in a government headed by Communist party General Secretary Heng Samrin. To his critics Hun Sen is a Vietnamese puppet, but many Cambodians prefer him to rule by the Khmer Rouge.

The Hun Sen government reintroduced free-market principles in the early 1980s and encouraged foreign investment. In 1989 it adopted a new constitution, strengthened safeguards on private property, reinstated Buddhism as the state religion and sponsored a Khmer renaissance. In Phnom Penh, privately owned shops, restaurants and even discos opened.
After the collapse of the Paris conference in August and the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces in September, Cambodians awaited the future with foreboding. Although the Khmer Rouge claim to have changed their ways, no one doubts that they want to rule Cambodia again. In late October Khmer Rouge forces captured the strategically located town of Pailin in western Cambodia. In anticipation of a showdown, the Soviets doubled military aid to Hun Sen in the first half of 1989 over 1988 levels.

The Khmer Rouge and others charge that Vietnam, while ostensibly withdrawing, has actually infiltrated settlers to "colonize" Cambodia. The issue is muddied since ethnic Vietnamese, originally brought by the French to work on Cambodian rubber plantations, have always lived in Cambodia, especially in border areas. At the Paris conference Prince Sihanouk claimed that there were 1.25 million Vietnamese living on Cambodian soil. The Phnom Penh government uses the number of 80,000, and Western diplomats in Bangkok, 200,000 to 400,000. Hun Sen has invited the UN to send in observers to determine the truth.

Refugee issues

For manpower the Khmer Rouge and the non-Communists alike have forced into service some of the 300,000 Cambodians now living in refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border. The refugees are part of a human tide displaced by war and its aftermath. There are also about 75,000 Laotian refugees living in Thailand.

A conference held in Geneva in 1979 assured the "boat people" fleeing Vietnam and other Indochinese refugees asylum in nearby countries such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, provided that other countries later accepted them for permanent resettlement. Since 1975, over 1.5 million Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians have left their homes; 1.2 million have resettled in the West. The U.S. took in about 60%, with the rest going to Canada, Australia, France and Britain.

Until 1985, the number of Vietnamese boat people resettled in the West exceeded the number of new refugees arriving in temporary safe havens. But in the late 1980s the exodus greatly increased due to worsening economic conditions in northern Vietnam. Today, some 90,000 Vietnamese languish in camps throughout Southeast Asia awaiting permanent relocation.

The countries of final asylum like the U.S. are no longer ready to accept as many refugees from Southeast Asia as before and some are drawing the line between political and economic refugees. Whereas 10 years ago virtually all leaving the region were considered political refugees who faced persecution for their beliefs if they returned home, now many are escaping economic hardship. In March 1989 the Asean countries began screening all arrivals, and Hong Kong, the major destination for boat people, announced it had run out of room and would forcibly repatriate any immigrants it believed had come for economic reasons.

A refugee conference held in Geneva in June 1989 reflected the changed attitude toward the boat people. Britain and most Southeast Asian nations favored returning the refugees; the U.S., the Soviet Union and Vietnam opposed forced repatriation. In the end the delegates asked Vietnam to prevent its people from leaving and urged those who had left to return voluntarily. But few want to go back. In the first six months of 1989, over 20,000 boat people arrived in Hong Kong; only 143 returned to Vietnam voluntarily.

Other actors

During the Vietnam War, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China both backed North Vietnam. Afterward, historical animosity between China and Vietnam resurfaced and the U.S.S.R. became Vietnam's main benefactor. In return, the Soviets received the use of military facilities at Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang.
Each of the Communist giants is now confronted with internal demands for economic and political modernization and appears less interested in subsidizing and competing for the allegiance of Third World countries. The historic visit of Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev to Beijing, China, in May 1989 officially ended 30 years of estrangement between the two nations, but the meeting did not lead to an agreement on Cambodia.

China is hostile to Vietnam and will not improve relations until there is a settlement in Cambodia. It is happy to see the Khmer Rouge harass the Hun Sen government. In the words of a Western diplomat in Beijing, "they don't love the Khmer Rouge for itself. They love the fact that each dollar they put in Khmer Rouge hands produces a dead Vietnamese."

China's goal appears to be to pressure Hun Sen militarily so at a future conference he will be more accommodating to Khmer Rouge demands.

Thailand opposed the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia and provided the Khmer Rouge with sanctuaries and supply lines. Thai traders are eager to see peace return so that battlefields can be turned into marketplaces. Thailand's Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan has developed informal ties with the Phnom Penh government and has tried to promote a cease-fire in Cambodia.

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THE VIETNAM WAR may ultimately be judged to have had greater impact on the U.S. than on Vietnam. It was the longest war the U.S. has fought and the first war it "lost," in spite of a heavy expenditure of American lives and money, a total of $141 billion. The war was brought into every American's living room by the nightly television broadcasts. It strained the trust between government and people, sharply divided U.S. society and indelibly marked a generation that came of age during its course.

Americans had backed their government's objective of keeping South Vietnam out of Communist hands and sending U.S. troops to combat the Communist insurgency. But as the casualties mounted and the prospect of victory receded, a massive antiwar movement polarized the country. As the casualties mounted and the prospect of victory receded, a massive antiwar movement polarized the country. As the casualties mounted and the prospect of victory receded, a massive antiwar movement polarized the country. As the casualties mounted and the prospect of victory receded, a massive antiwar movement polarized the country.

Five Presidents, one goal

The basic U.S. objective, endorsed by every President since Harry S. Truman, was to prevent Communists from taking power in South Vietnam. Fear of Communist expansionism in Asia stemmed from the victory of Mao Zedong in China in 1949 and the North Korean attack on South Korea in 1950. President Dwight D. Eisenhower shared the view that communism had to be stopped in Indochina: otherwise, he warned, the Southeast Asian countries would fall to communism like a row of dominoes. However, he overruled his top advisers and refused to intervene at Dien Bien Phu to prevent the French defeat.

In the fall of 1954 the U.S. helped form the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (Seato), made up of the U.S., Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Pakistan and the Philippines. Seato's mission, like that of its counterparts, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (Cento), was to contain Communist expansion.

President Kennedy's aims were the same as his predecessors': "We want the war to be won, the Communists to be contained, and our men to come home. We are not there to see a war lost." Kennedy greatly increased the number of U.S. military advisers and sought to strengthen the South Vietnamese economy by creating the largest economic aid mission in U.S. history and funding it to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars.

Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, introduced U.S. ground troops in the south and carried out an air war against the north. For this he needed legislative authority. In response to an alleged North Vietnamese attack on two U.S. destroyers, Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution on August 7, 1964. It authorized the President "to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force," to prevent a Communist takeover of South Vietnam. The resolution was used to justify a major escalation of U.S. involvement between 1965 and 1968.

President Nixon took office in January 1969 and promised to deliver "peace with honor." Nixon sought to "Vietnamize" the conflict by gradually scaling down U.S. force levels and having Saigon's troops do more of the fighting. But these tactics did not work; the Saigon government was too corrupt and its army was reluctant to fight.

Nixon simultaneously sought to negotiate, first in secret and later in public. Determined not to be the first President to lose a war, he did succeed in concluding a peace agreement—but its terms meant the end of the South Vietnamese government.

Lessons of the war

There is no consensus on the "lessons" of the Vietnam War, except that perhaps, as journalist Stanley Karnow observed, it was "the war nobody won." President Ronald Reagan, among others, believed that the U.S. could have prevailed if it had had the will and had committed more men and matériel. U.S. Presidents, indeed, always insisted Vietnam was a limited war.

The news media were accused of stirring up U.S. popular opposition to the war, especially after Tet, thus giving solace to Hanoi and restraining U.S. Administrations from implementing a winning strategy. Some policymakers blamed Congress for cutting off support.

Others pointed out that the U.S. effort was doomed to fail because it was based on support for a corrupt, unpopular government in Saigon. Vietnam, many maintained, was simply not worth fighting for.

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The 'Vietnam syndrome'
Some American strategists regarded the war, like the Korean War or World War II, as mainly a contest for territory. But in Vietnam there were no front lines, and guerrilla warfare required unconventional tactics. There were no set-piece battles by which to measure victories and defeats. On one point there appears to be consensus: the U.S. never really understood the enemy. The U.S. continued to believe that if it applied enough firepower, the Hanoi government would crack; it never did.

In seeing the Vietnam conflict as part of the Communist drive for world power orchestrated by Moscow and Beijing, the U.S. disregarded the long history of antagonism between Vietnam and China and failed to recognize what was essentially an anticolonial, nationalist struggle.

After the war, most Americans wanted to hear nothing more about Vietnam. But Vietnam would not go away. As former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger later wrote, “Vietnam is still with us. It has created doubts about American judgment, about American credibility, about American power—not only at home, but throughout the world. It has poisoned our domestic debate. So we paid an exorbitant price for the decisions that were made in good faith and for good purpose.”

'No more 'Vietnams'
Whatever the lessons of Vietnam, the war was a major turning point in U.S. foreign policy and left many Americans disillusioned about foreign adventures. The postwar consensus that had given the government the benefit of the doubt in foreign-policy making fell apart, and was replaced by a new reluctance to intervene abroad. Congress, which had repealed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1970, sought a more assertive role in foreign policy. The 1973 War Powers Resolution, landmark legislation that curbs the President’s ability to take military action abroad, reflected the new attitude of Congress.

As for the Pentagon, a new generation of military officers became more cautious about employing military force, especially without the clear support of the American people. Many in the military believed that policymakers had put them in an untenable position in

The Reagan Administration ruled out normalizing relations with Hanoi until it withdrew its troops from Cambodia and accounted for all U.S. prisoners of war (POWs) and soldiers missing in action (MIAs). The Bush Administration has now imposed a new condition, that of reaching a satisfactory settlement in Cambodia. Both Administrations voted in favor of the Khmer Rouge continuing to represent Cambodia in the UN. The U.S. believes it would set a bad precedent to recognize a government imposed by force.

The issues currently of principal importance to the U.S. include:

- Cambodia’s future. The Bush Administration believes that a comprehensive settlement must be reached by all the parties to the conflict; that it must provide for free elections; and that an interim coalition government must be formed under Prince Sihanouk’s leadership. Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d told the Paris conference last July, “the U.S. strongly believes that the Khmer Rouge should play no role in Cambodia’s future.” However, if Sihanouk deems it necessary, the U.S. would support the inclusion of the Khmer Rouge in a coalition government. The chief obstacle to a settlement, according to the U.S., is Hun Sen and his Vietnamese backers.

Opposing viewpoints
The most controversial aspect of U.S. policy is over including the Khmer Rouge in an interim government. Critics believe it is morally repugnant to help restore to power a regime responsible for the deaths of upward of a million of its citizens. “The U.S. does not have the luxury of recusing itself from moral judgments. In this regard there is a view of many, including this member, that Pol Pot should be brought before an international tribunal for war crimes,” Rep. Jim Leach (R-Iowa) told a congressional hearing last September.

Critics believe the U.S. could put more pressure on China to stop backing the Khmer Rouge. They say Washington should also reconsider its hostility to Hun Sen.

U.S. support for Sihanouk also is questioned. “The time has come for Washington to rethink its confused and confusing strategy,” The New York Times commented after the collapse of
the Paris conference. "...Tying U.S. policy to the Prince's gyrations no longer makes sense."

The Administration maintains that Sihanouk is the only national figure with enough credibility in Cambodia to form an effective government and one that would attract international support. The U.S., therefore, is willing to follow the prince's lead on how to deal with the Khmer Rouge. It believes that, if allowed into the government, the Khmer Rouge will be easier to control.

Critics fear that if they are included in a coalition government, the Khmer Rouge will subvert it from within and make any agreement to the Prince's gyrations no easier to implement. Sihanouk is notoriously unpredictable and his policymakers are not the most sound. The Khmer Rouge will subvert it from within and make any agreement impossible. The Vietnamese government denies that it holds any POWs. Since 1985, Hanoi has permitted U.S. teams to excavate sites believed to contain the bodies of American servicemen. In return for help in locating MIAs, Vietnam requested humanitarian aid from the U.S. for its war victims, including orphans, the disabled and those harmed by chemical warfare. The U.S. government indicated it was sympathetic to these requests and has quietly assisted private aid efforts.

The U.S. government refuses to rule out the possibility that Vietnam and Laos are holding American prisoners, although it has no firm evidence. There were some 9,200 reports of live sightings between April 1975 and March 1989, the vast majority of which turned out to be spurious. Some Americans may have remained in Indochina voluntarily.

Some individuals and organizations believe that the U.S. government has information that Americans are being detained, and they have demanded the release of raw intelligence data to allow independent evaluation. Both Congress and the Department of Defense, however, refused these reports, and private "rescue missions" have come back empty-handed.

Indochina refugees. The U.S. wants Southeast Asian countries to continue to give asylum to refugees, pending their safe and orderly emigration. The U.S. has taken in 857,000 Indochinese refugees since 1975 and financed their resettlement. Many have come to the U.S. under the Orderly Departure Program, set up in 1979 to facilitate the legal emigration of Vietnamese who helped the U.S. during the war. Under this program, 6,000 Amerasians, children fathered by American servicemen who are regarded as outcasts by other Vietnamese, have come to the U.S., along with 10,000 relatives. An estimated 40,000 remain; the U.S. expects to admit 10,000 more Amerasians and their families in 1989.

The U.S. has also contributed over $500 million since 1979 to support the refugee camps in Southeast Asia. Whereas the U.S. insists that only political refugees are eligible for resettlement, it opposes forced repatriation.

Should the U.S. increase the number of refugees it accepts from Indochina? The Bush Administration plans to let in a total of 125,000 refugees from all countries in 1989; of these 51,500 would be from Indochina. About half would come directly from Vietnam and half from the refugee camps. If the U.S. increases the quota, countries would be more willing to give temporary asylum to the boat people rather than turn them away.

On the other hand, raising the quota for Indochinese refugees would mean smaller quotas for others facing political persecution. Moreover, there are economic constraints on the number of refugees the U.S. can accept.

According to a well-informed observer of Indochina, the Indian journalist Nayan Chanda, "the story of the last decade should serve as an object lesson: history and nationalism—not ideology—shape the future of this volatile region."

If this is the case, why should the U.S. want to get involved again in Indochina? As one prominent member of the Vietnam generation, Rep. Chester G. Atkins (D-Mass.), put it, "the U.S. and Vietnam are inextricably linked by the wounds of war. We have economic links, security interests and humanitarian concerns that permanently bind us to Southeast Asia, and Vietnam in particular." These multiple interests will influence the role the U.S. plays in this region's recovery from its third war in 45 years.
FOR DISCUSSION

1. According to former diplomat George W. Ball, the Vietnam War was "probably the greatest single error made by America in its history." What did he mean? Do you agree or disagree?

2. Are Americans still affected by the "Vietnam syndrome"? What was the most important lesson of the war, in your opinion? How has it affected U.S. foreign policy in recent years?

3. Has the time come for the U.S. to stop trying to isolate Vietnam and extend diplomatic recognition? Should the U.S. continue to attach conditions?

4. President Eisenhower feared the "domino effect" in Southeast Asia: if one country fell to communism, the rest would fall. Ultimately only Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos ended up with Communist governments. Is communism still a threat to Southeast Asia? If so, which country poses the greatest threat—China, the Soviet Union or Vietnam?

5. The question of whether to deal with the Khmer Rouge poses a moral dilemma for Americans. Should the U.S. insist they be excluded from power at all costs? Are they more dangerous outside the government or as part of a coalition with Prince Sihanouk?

6. A generation of Americans born since the late 1960s is searching for explanations of the meaning of the Vietnam War. How would you explain that period? Did you or anyone in your family serve in the war? participate in the antiwar movement?

7. There have been three Indochina wars since World War II. Do you think the conflicts stemmed from communism or nationalism? How do you account for the Communists' success in taking over movements of national liberation?

8. What interests do the U.S., the Soviet Union and China share in Indochina? How do their interests differ?

9. The countries in Asean have taken different positions on a settlement in Cambodia, although U.S. Administrations claim they follow Asean policy. Should the U.S. play a stronger leadership role in getting the Asean countries to agree on excluding the Khmer Rouge from power?

10. At congressional hearings on Indochina, Rep. Stephen J. Solarz (D-N.Y.) said he had never dealt with a more politically and morally complex problem. Does the U.S. understand what is happening in Indochina any better now than two or three decades ago?

SUGGESTED READINGS


Chanda, Nayan, "Civil War in Cambodia?" Foreign Policy, Fall 1989, pp. 26-43. Journalist who has followed Indochina for two decades examines roots of the present conflict and predicts "the road to national reconciliation may be long and tortuous."

Clifford, Geoffrey, and Balaban, John, Vietnam: The Land We Never Knew. San Francisco, Calif., Chronicle Books, 1989, 144 pp. $18.95 (paper). Superb photos and evocative text attempt to separate the country from the war.


Steinberg, David Joel, ed., In Search of Southeast Asia, rev. ed. Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1987. 590 pp. $18.50 (paper). Comprehensive history of Southeast Asia with extensive up-to-date bibliography.


For further in-depth reading, write for the Great Decisions 1990 Bibliography (see page 4).