

# **The Strategic Importance of the Vietnam War**

And its central role in world history



**By Larry Chambers**

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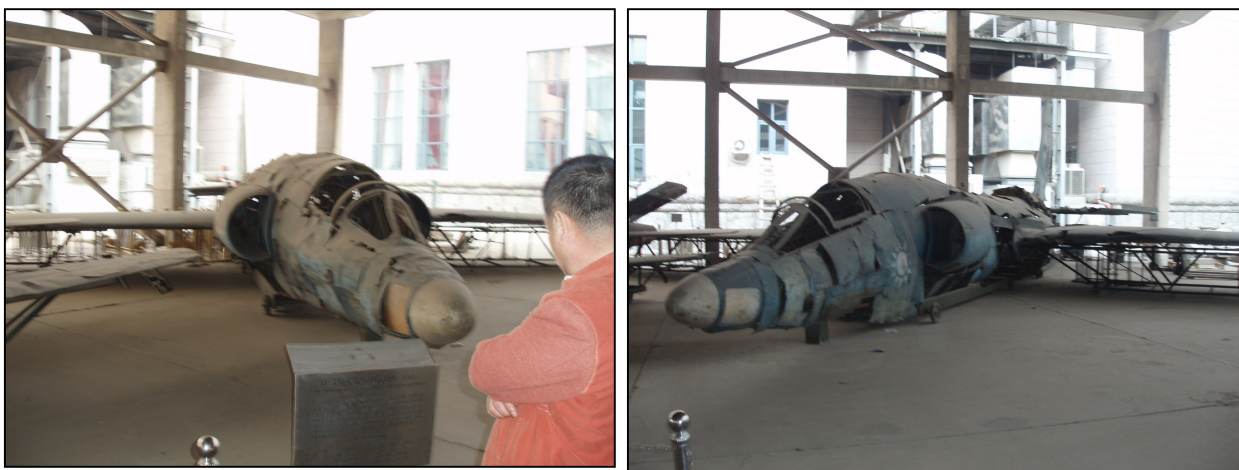
Most people have very few real facts about America's part in the Vietnam War, and while they might feel sympathy for Vietnam veterans and the way they were mistreated upon returning home, they don't realize that lies and misinformation have become embedded in America's narrative history of the Vietnam War.

### **Beijing Military Museum, China Present Day**

This story began in 2008 in mainland China. During the Beijing portion of the tour, I convinced a fellow traveler to hop off the government sponsored tour bus with me and take an unsupervised visit of the Beijing Military Museum.

The Beijing Military Museum is the size of a football stadium, with hundreds of extraordinary military exhibits, including Soviet missiles, Chinese and Soviet airplanes, Mig-21s, and dozens of older MIGs. But it's what I found inside the *Hall of Modern Wars* that started me on this journey of discovery.

The Hall of Modern Wars



There, at the far end of the open hanger, sat the broken fuselage of a 1960 Lockheed Martin U-2. The sign written in Chinese told of how the spy plane had been shot down over Beijing. I asked my companion if he remembered ever hearing about the Chinese shooting down an American U-2 plane.

"Yes, Frances Gary Powers, 1960," he said.

"Yes, but Powers was shot down over Russia, not China," I reminded him.

You can still make out the Taiwanese Sun insignia just before the intake manifold, which got me thinking, why haven't I'd ever heard about Communist China shooting down a U-2 over mainland China? That information would have been declassified decades ago. (I later discovered there were actually five U-2s shot down over Mainland China, including the U-2 in the photo).

Most American students of economics might find this museum a paradox, given that today China is the largest consumer of U.S. treasury bills, yet the museum seems dedicated to all the wars in which communist China "defeated" the United States, including the Korean War. (I'm sure my father would have been shocked to learn that China teaches how they won the Korean War, but that another story)

### **The Hall of Modern Wars**



These were a just a few of the hundreds of exhibits I saw in the Hall of Modern Wars.

As I strolled past the Vietnam War exhibit with its collection of U.S. Army M-16 rifles, jeeps, bazookas, mortars, radios, and automatic weapons I had this strange feeling wash over me; like I'd stopped by a neighbor's yard sale only to recognize all my stolen stereo gear on display in his backyard. But my discovery, along with the mysterious U-2, only made furthered my curiosity —what other silent evidence remained hidden in China's archives?

### **Mao - The Unknown Story**

That's why when I spotted the red covered book with a painting of Mao Tse Tung's ugly mug on the cover I bought it. Normally anything written about Mao was just

propaganda or dribble but not this book. It grabbed me; first, it explained how the Vietnam War came about better than any university scholar could have written.

*Mao - The Unknown Story* was written by two Chinese scholars—Jon Halliday and Jung Chang—their is a biographical account of Mao Tse Tung<sup>1</sup> and his rise to power, his obsessions with obtaining an atomic bomb from the Soviets and ruling the world. The book could not have been written until only recently. The reason is people in China are still afraid of Mao's legacy. There was a time when anything bad said about Chairman Mao Tse Tung drew you a death sense. But times have changed; in fact, the authors were able to interview most of Mao's circle of advisors, including his interpreter Shi Zhe, who provided the most insightful information about Mao's relationship to Vietnam.

There are plenty of books that try to explain the Vietnam War, but they always seem to focus on defaming the American military by vilifying our soldiers, but that is not the case, with *Mao - The Unknown Story*. What these author's had revealed was the backstage to the Vietnam War.

Imagine a theater play. When you see a play, you really see only a very small part of what is actually taking place. What you don't see is what's going on backstage. In the same way, what got reported on the nightly news were only the events playing out on the front stage. What they didn't see was all the activity going on backstage with China, and the Soviet Union.

After I returned home I decided to present my findings in this paper: The Strategic Importance of the Vietnam War - And its central role in world history from the Chinese perspective.

The aftermath of World War II, totalitarian Communist states expanded their influence across Asia and Eastern Europe. U.S. leaders decided that drawing the line in Thailand and Vietnam limited the danger of a direct and escalated conflict

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<sup>1</sup> Mao - *The Unknown Story*—written by two Chinese scholars, Jon Halliday and Jung Chang, they methodically demolished every pillar of Mao's claim to sympathy and legitimacy.

with Russian interests. President John F. Kennedy endorsed the "Domino Principle" enunciated in 1954 by President Dwight Eisenhower. Failure to hold the line in South Vietnam, Kennedy felt, would endanger Laos, Cambodia, Burma, the Philippines—perhaps even New Zealand and Australia.

After Mao Tse Tung's 1949 victory in the Chinese Civil War, Stalin recognized that Mao had the drive, ambition, and resources (people) to expand Stalin's ambitions and frontiers.



## Vietnam

After WWII, Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the Vietnamese guerrilla forces, requested support from President Truman in his bid to liberate Vietnam from France. But the policy makers in Washington did not understand that Ho was more a nationalist than a communist. In their minds, Ho was just another communist leader crying for independence; besides, Truman couldn't forsake one of America's oldest allegiances—France. That meant Ho Chi Minh would have to look north and seek the support he'd need in fighting the French from China's Mao Tse Tung, who didn't give a hoot about Ho's quest for independence. Mao saw Ho's Viet Minh as another link in his expanding influence.

Stalin had allocated Indo-China (Vietnam) to Mao and told him that Vietnam would be his responsibility. Mao started training, funding, and arming the Viet Minh, and had planned on sending in Chinese troops when Stalin gave him a bigger assignment—running the Korean War and overseeing North Korea's communist leader, Kim Sung III.

Mao jumped at the chance, which had nothing to do with protecting China or his people (who were starving at that time). Ruling the world was Mao's ambition, and

that meant he'd need his own atomic bombs. But Stalin never had any intentions of handing over an atomic bomb to the Chinese leader. Stalin may have been a paranoid murdering bastard, but he wasn't stupid.

### **Mao Gets the A-Bomb**

The Korean War ends in 1953 and Stalin unexpectedly dies; Nikita Khrushchev takes over the leadership of the Communist Party, and Mao simply shifts his (I need an A-bomb) dog dance onto Khrushchev.

Mao's strategy: His forces started bombing Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist-held Taiwan islands, which forced U.S. President Eisenhower to sign a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan and set up the possibility for a confrontation between the U.S. and China. But Khrushchev didn't want to get dragged into a nuclear showdown with the United States over some tiny Chinese island. Mao's scheme worked because Khrushchev caved in and gave Mao what he wanted most—his own atomic bomb. (Khrushchev obviously never read Mao's pamphlet on guerrilla warfare.)

### **Cuban Missile Crisis**

Next, comes the Cuban Missile Crisis (October 1962) and the closest the world has come to nuclear war. During the '60s, both the United States and the former U.S.S.R. had huge arsenals of nuclear weapons. Both sides had targeted each other's major cities and both sides had the same problem—had either side launched a first strike (accidental or otherwise), there would have been half a billion people killed outright; 200 million people would have been lost in Europe alone. And, if somehow either side were able to launch a second strike, the amount of devastation would have set up a chain reaction that would have destroyed all of humanity within five years.

Imagine you were President Kennedy and you just learned the Soviet Union was building a missile launch site 90 miles from your coast. Soviet field commanders had been authorized to use tactical nuclear weapons if invaded by the U.S. The fate of millions literally hinged upon Kennedy's ability to get the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, to stand-down. Khrushchev agrees to withdraw the missiles in return for a promise by Kennedy not to invade Cuba (and an unpublished promise to pull US missiles out of Turkey) and to neutralize Laos.

## The Backstage



Some of the events taking place off stage: Mao's threat to go to war with India. His cover story; a supposed border dispute, but Kennedy didn't buy it because he'd been shown a time series of U-2 photos taken from possibly the very same U-2 I'd seen laying in pieces in China's Hall of Modern Wars. The photos showed that Mao's real intention had nothing to do with China's borders, but everything to do with destroying America's access to India's air base at Charbatia. Mao's nuclear bomb test site located in Lop Nor in northwest China was beyond the range of U-2 planes flying out of Taiwan, but within range from Charbatia, India, an airbase we'd been using with the Indian government's permission.

Kennedy had considered air strikes on China's nuclear facilities, so Kennedy wasn't about to leave Southeast Asia unguarded. Kennedy sidestepped Laos and shifted his support behind the Diem regime in South Vietnam, hoping that President Diem could maintain an anti-communist position in that part of the world. In other words, keeping China's Mao Tse Tung contained was what got us into Vietnam.

November 1961 Kennedy increased American military aid to South Vietnam. By mid-1962, there were 12,000 U.S. military advisors in Vietnam.

## Mao's Strategy

Mao kept pressuring Ho Chi Minh into expanding the war into neighboring countries, of Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand, but Ho wouldn't budge. He knew Mao's real objectives were to start a pan-Indochina war, believing he would be called upon to take the leading role. Ho had no interest in further "provoking" America into a larger war, and stuck to his policy—which was to get the USA to de-escalate.



Mao wanted the North Vietnamese to create an incident that would force American troops to invade North Vietnam, believing that no American President would dare attack China with nuclear weapons if American troops were within range. That way, if China was attacked, Mao would use the same tactic he'd used at the beginning of the Korean War—send mass waves of Chinese forces to overrun the American soldiers.

Mao had prepared by stationing 300,000-500,000 combat troops along Vietnam's northern border, and allocated funds in order to move the Chinese fleet closer to Vietnam, to the port of Zhanjiang and Chou En-lai. Mao instructed his commanders to get ready to attack South Vietnam. Mao's agenda, as Chou En-lai later spelled out in a letter to Egypt's President Nasser, was to draw the maximum number of American troops into Vietnam as "an insurance policy" for China against a possible US attack.

### **The Front stage – Vietnam**

Ho needed Mao's support but, in return, Mao wanted Hanoi to break all ties with Moscow. The Vietnamese leaders influenced by Ho Chi Minh did not let Mao take over the war. Mao's only way to try to exert influence was to pour in more money, goods, and soldiers<sup>2</sup>, but he could not prevent Hanoi moving closer to the Russians.

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<sup>2</sup> Mao sent over 350,000 Chinese combat troops into Vietnam (1965-1968); including more than 150,000 anti-aircraft technicians, some who stayed into late 1973<sup>2</sup>. The presence of these troops in North Vietnam allowed Hanoi to send many more of its own NVA forces into the South, where some



Finally, the power shifted, after the new Brezhnev-Kosygin team took over leadership in the Kremlin and the Soviets began stepping up military assistance to Hanoi. Mao couldn't compete. Even the communist guerrillas in Laos chose Vietnam's Ho as their patron saint and aligned with Moscow.

## Stopped Vietnam

Mao had been stopped in Vietnam<sup>3</sup>. In 1969, Hanoi began distancing themselves from Mao, ignoring his advice and starting their own negotiations with the U.S. But Mao, true to his nature, shifted his focus to grooming a new player in a then little-known rebel group in Cambodia—the Khmer Rouge. Mao's Cambodian creation, Pol Pot, the leader the Khmer Rouge, was his last chance to spread his influence. But that, too, would fail.

Mao's had told his coterie that "Now we are isolated and nobody wants to have anything to do with us."

By 1969, the U.S. Intelligence community considered that the Maoist model was no longer a threat in the Third World, which meant the original containment mission as outlined by three US presidents had been completed, setting the stage for the complete withdrawal of all U.S. combat forces in Vietnam. Once a cease-fire agreement—brokered by Henry Kissinger<sup>4</sup>—with North Vietnam, the Vietcong, and South Vietnam was reached, all US troops were pulled out of South Vietnam (Jan 27, 1973).

Two years after the US forces had signed a truce and left Vietnam, North Vietnam attacked South Vietnam, but this time there would be no help coming. President

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Chinese accompanied them. In 1965, a Chinese general was present to watch US forces landing at Da Nang, South Vietnam.

<sup>3</sup> Mao - *The Unknown Story*— Jon Halliday and Jung Chang, p 561.

<sup>4</sup> 1973 Henry Kissinger won a Nobel Prize along with Viet Nam's Le Duc Tho, having negotiated a cease fire agreement in Vietnam.

Ford was not about to send American troops back to help South Vietnam, and the U.S. Congress had voted to cut funding to South Vietnam, letting their Army die a very public death (April 1975). Six months after the end of the Vietnam War, Mao Tse-tung died and Deng Xiaoping became China's new leader.

### **History Doesn't Reward Acts of Prevention**

The years prior to the Vietnam War were possibly the most dangerous years in the history of man's brief existence. The default future of the world seemed to rest on who will drop the big one first. If either side had accidentally or intentionally launched a first strike experts estimate that five hundred million people would die outright, 200 million over the next few months; and if either side were able to launch a second strike the rest of humanity would perish in less than five years.

The Vietnam War helped took the world in a different direction; those ten years America fought in Vietnam (1962-1972) acted like a pressure relief valve; allowing steam to bleed off causing the world's pressures to reduce and preventing a much larger war from taking place.

America's original strategy of containing the enemy at the borders worked. The Vietnam War bought the world time. America's presence provided *time* needed for the most extreme leaders behind the war, such as China's Mao, USSR's Nikita Khrushchev, and some of America's old guard to lose their influence.

Time became the ingredient that tipped the balance of power across the world in favor of radical reformers like Mikhail Gorbachev, and Boris Yeltsin, who advocated for democratic governance and moved the Soviet people away from the old authoritarian rule of the communist state. Six months later, a half million East Germans tore down the Berlin Wall, followed by the collapse of every Eastern European communist regime, one after another.

The men and woman who fought in the Vietnam War have never been told that they made a contribution because America has been led to believe that the Vietnam War had no strategic value and simply ended as a losing venture. *They were never aware of their contribution precisely because they were successful.*

## **The Author**

Larry Chambers lives in Ojai, CA and is dedicated to changing the story about Vietnam and how soldiers think about their role in defending a nation.

Chambers served with F 58<sup>th</sup> Inf LRP and the original L Co 75<sup>th</sup> Rangers 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division in Vietnam 1968/69. Chambers has 26 Long range reconnaissance patrol missions and flew as helicopter 'bellyman' on another 20 LRRP operations.

Chambers can be reached at (Larry@lchambers.com)