

Vietnam War Timeline and *Miss Saigon* Glossary¹

By Jeffrey Mason and Hock Tjoa

Historic Facts:

European military action in Vietnam began in the late eighteenth century with minor conflicts involving the French, who had come as Catholic missionaries. In 1887, France consolidated its power in Vietnam with a colony known as French Indochina.

1946 – An eight-year war began between French forces and the Viet Minh, or Vietnam Independence League, which later became the government of North Vietnam.

Ho Chi Minh – The Marxist revolutionary who led the Vietnamese nationalist movement and served as president of North Vietnam from 1945 until his death in 1969. He was a legend among his people as a leader and fighter against the French.

1954 — Under the terms of the Geneva Accords, France agreed to withdraw its troops, while the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (aka North Vietnam) agreed to pull back north of the seventeenth parallel, a new boundary that “temporarily” divided the country in anticipation of elections that would reunite the nation in 1956. Neither the State of Vietnam (aka South Vietnam) nor the United States signed the covenant, but President Eisenhower reluctantly agreed not to interfere with its implementation.

1955 — In a fraudulent referendum, Ngo Dinh Diem was elected President of the new Republic of Vietnam (aka South Vietnam), and he subsequently refused to hold the elections promised in the Geneva Accords.

1961-1963—United States supplied South Vietnam with increased aid, equipment, and advisers, reaching 15,000 in American military personnel by December 1963 and \$500 million in aid for 1963 alone.

1964 – North Vietnamese patrol boats repeatedly attacked the American destroyer USS *Maddox*. Congress passed a resolution known as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing President Johnson to use conventional military forces in aid of other SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) nations, all without a formal declaration of war. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution marked the beginning of American direct military involvement in Vietnam and the ensuing escalation.

1965 -- In response to continued attacks on American installations, President Johnson increased bombing in North Vietnam, known as Operation Rolling Thunder, authorized on February 13, and initiated on March 2, to last through November 1, 1968. The first U.S. combat troops landed in Vietnam on March 8. By December, American troops reached nearly 200,000.

1966-1967 – Bombing of North Vietnam continued. American troops reached nearly 500,000 by the end of 1967. Sustained bombing and fighting destroyed much of Vietnam, creating poor and homeless communities. Many fled to the cities, where, as shown in the first act of *Miss Saigon*, it was not uncommon for women to enter prostitution.

¹ Abbreviated and edited from The Study Guide for *Miss Saigon*, by Helen Sneed, with additional information from Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983).

1969 —In June, President Nixon met with South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu and subsequently began withdrawing American troops from Vietnam. In September, Ho Chi Minh died in Hanoi. In the United States, the burgeoning anti-war movement led to the National Moratorium on October 15, when hundreds of thousands of people around the country refused to go to work or to school as a gesture of protest.

1972 – The North initiated a major offensive on March 30, crossing the Demilitarized Zone and advanced toward Hue. With the support of American bombers, the South defended the city and pushed back the North Vietnamese troops, but the North attacked again, taking Dong Ha on April 29 and Quang Tri on May 1. The most notable “new” bombing campaign by the Americans was Operation Linebacker, which lasted twelve days in late December and involved strategic strikes against North Vietnamese military installations in and near Hanoi and Haiphong.

1973 – After nearly two years of negotiations, many held in secret, cease-fire agreements between the United States (with Henry Kissinger as the U.S. negotiator) and the North Vietnam government were signed in Paris on January 27. The last American combat troops left Vietnam on March 29, leaving military advisors and Marines to protect U.S. installations, including the embassy.

April 30, 1975 - Communist forces took over Saigon, the capital city of South Vietnam, and changed the name to “Ho Chi Minh City.” Helicopters transported over a thousand Americans and nearly six thousand out of Saigon, leaving behind thousands of Vietnamese who had supported the American involvement.

November 13, 1982 - Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated in Washington, DC, honoring over 58,000 Americans who gave their lives in Vietnam.

Glossary:

Paper Tiger – This translation of a Chinese phrase refers to anything that seems as threatening as a tiger but turns out to be weak or inconsequential; Mao Tse-Tung referred to the United States as a “paper tiger” as early as 1956.

Vietcong - The organization of South Vietnamese guerillas that opposed the government of South Vietnam. The American soldiers' nickname for the Vietcong was “the V.C.”

Bangkok - The capital of Thailand; it was the destination for many refugees from Vietnam, traveling by land from the borders and by boat across the dangerous bay of Mekong.

Re-education – Over a million South Vietnamese people were put in prison camps after the fall of Saigon to “re-educate” them in Communist doctrine. “Re-education” often involved torture and brainwashing. The Engineer in *Miss Saigon* spent three years in a re-education camp before finding Kim again.

Bui Doi – A phrase translated as “dust of life” that has referred, at various times, to rural vagrants who sought refuge in cities or to street children who sometimes formed gangs. The authors of *Miss Saigon* borrowed and repurposed the phrase to denote the unwanted, scorned children of Vietnamese women and American soldiers.

Boat People – Large-scale emigration from Vietnam by boat began in 1978. Although the boats were often small crafts from Thailand, they headed into open waters in hopes of reaching South Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Australia.