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FOREIGN POLICY

El Salvador and Vietnam: How to read history

*On the relevance of the lessons of US involvement in Indochina*By Robert Manning
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When President Reagan at his news conference late in February delivered his astonishing version of how the United States got into war in Vietnam, my mind went back to a pair of photographs taken in 1945. One shows American OSS agents who had infiltrated into Vietnam; they are teaching Vietnamese insurgents how to throw hand grenades. The other, taken on Sept. 2, 1945, shows Vietnamese followers of Ho Chi Minh saluting as the flag of Ho's newly proclaimed Independent Republic of Vietnam is raised. Standing with the Vietnamese at full salute are uniformed American members of the OSS team.

Contrary to Mr. Reagan's simplistic reconstruction of history, America's involvement in its longest war began not suddenly in 1965, but at the time pinpointed in those photographs. When President Johnson (not President Kennedy, as Mr. Reagan said) ordered a brigade of US Marines into Vietnam, the United States had been increasingly involved for 20 years in the struggle for control of Vietnam, and had already become engaged in fighting there.

It began with that OSS mission in the waning days of World War II. The wartime agency, later to become the CIA, sent the team, under a young Army major named Archimedes Patti, to "establish an intelligence network in the entire peninsula of Indo-China." It was thought then that the fight against Japan, whose forces had occupied Vietnam, might go on for another two or three years. Patti's team was charged with reconnoitering Japanese forces and harassing them when possible, and with establishing escape routes for shot-down American fliers. It needed reliable native contacts. Patti, drawing on an OSS dossier that told of the exploits of a tough, wispy-seeming Vietnamese Communist called Ho Chi Minh ("He who enlightens"), set out to hook up with the considerable underground organization that Ho, while in exile in France and China, had built to resist the Japanese and to

organize against the return of Indo-China's French colonizers after the war.

Though those old photographs today seem to drip with irony—the spectacle of Americans grooming for war the very soldiers they would fight later—the collaboration was at that time not an odd one. America's anticolonial policy, dictated by President Franklin Roosevelt, was to oppose France's return to control over Indo-China. The OSS mission trained Ho, his schoolteacher turned general, Vo Nguyen Giap, and their several hundred insurgents in modern military tactics and provided them with machine guns, Browning automatic rifles, and grenades. Perhaps as many as 200 future leaders of North Vietnam's armed forces got early training from the American OSS men. "Some of us," Patti wrote later, "may have suspected that in the future the weapons and training might be used against the French, but no one dreamed that they would ever be used against Americans."

A change in American policy

The collaboration between Americans and Ho's Vietnamese was of far more than technical value to Ho. His artful use of the alliance spread throughout Vietnam the impression that that America truly favored Vietnamese independence and supported Ho Chi Minh's determination to forestall France's return. On the day he proclaimed independence—the event memorialized in the flag-raising photo—Ho released a Declaration of Independence drawing heavily on the language of America's own Declaration. Major Patti even helped Ho compose it. ("He had the words life and liberty kind of transposed, and I worked it out a little bit for him...")

And as the Republic's red flag with its yellow star was being raised, there appeared overhead, quite inadvertently, it appears, a squadron of American fighter planes. Out of curiosity, the planes swooped low over the Independence Day crowd, and word soon swept through the countryside of an American aerial salute, yet another sign that the United States supported freedom from France.