VICTORY IN INDOCHINA! The peoples of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos have at last realised their dream and burning passion, which led them to make incredible sacrifices and achieve even more incredible deeds of political and military struggle. It is impossible to exaggerate either the world significance of this victory, or the immense human qualities of the peoples who defeated and humiliated the world's mightiest imperial power.

After so much has been written, it is unnecessary to repeat the statistics of bombs dropped, the unequal strengths of the armies, navies and air forces arrayed, or the industrial strength and wealth of the two sides. The United States, with 200 million people and the consumer of 40 per cent of the world's resources, drew into its aggressive war two developed capitalist countries - Australia and New Zealand. It used Japan's advanced
technology as a support base, and it levied armies from its vassal states in Asia - South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines.

Against this formidable strength, used with ruthless inhumanity unmatched since the Nazi conquest of Europe, the Indochina nations could muster only 40 million people, basically peasant economies, little industry and no advanced weapons technology - except for those “supplied” by the aggressors. At the beginning of the independence war in 1945, the Vietnamese had almost no arms. They received little outside military and economic aid for many years of their struggle, first against France, then the United States. The American excuses for their defeat include as a major cause the supply of Soviet, Chinese and other socialist countries’ arms and equipment. These undoubtedly helped a lot, in the later stage of the struggle, but they reached substantial proportions only after the struggle against US imperialism began in the south with no modern war weapons and little conventional armament - most of it captured from the French and the US.

The Vietnamese never used an air force, though the US deployed huge armadas for mass bombing, chemical warfare and tactical use in battles. The ingenuity, courage and skill shown against air war is but one of the many military achievements of the Vietnamese, which will cause military text-books to be rewritten. An agonising reappraisal of military strategy has already begun in the Pentagon and other imperialist military establishments, which will go on for years. But it is safe to say that these will never really penetrate to the essence of the reasons for the US defeat, for these are not purely military.

In Vietnam, the struggle was always seen as both military and political, with politics playing a major part. The struggle was above all a people’s war for national independence, with all the consequences flowing from this: the political struggle against imperialism and its puppet regimes with their social base in the classes which co-operated with French and American imperialisms. Military strategy and tactics flowed from this political strategy, with each stage of the independence war producing different military methods. Guerrilla war alternating with big positional battles, returning to guerrilla struggle, all directed by an unmatched political strategy which had definite aims at all stages.

The US imperialists tried to match this by devising their own counter-insurgency strategy. They called in “experts” from other countries - Britain’s Brigadier Thompson and Australia’s Serong, for example. The CIA was decisive in the gruesome genocidal planning - resettlement, strategic hamlets, concentration camps, massacres - all designed to dry up the sea in which the guerrillas swam among the people. This went to the criminal extent of deliberate destruction of crops, arable land and forests, to deny the Liberation forces food and shelter. Some US scientists have said it may take a century to overcome this deliberate destruction of the ecology.

No matter what strategy and tactics the US devised, whether it was “social engineering” to destroy the people’s will to resist by resettlement and “education”, or the use of frightfulness by air raids and wanton killing from the air or on the ground as at My Lai, the Liberation forces found the answers. This was not always easy; Wilfred Burchett has described the consternation caused by the first use of helicopter gunships at the battle of Ap Bac, and how this was overcome.

The Vietnamese won victory because the Liberation forces worked purposefully to implement their strategic aims, skilfully combining military and political struggle. Western military analysts declared the 1968 Tet offensive a failure, because the Vietnamese had lost so many of their military cadre. Yet the Tet offensive shattered the US position, destroyed the US military establishment’s nerve, and broke Johnson. It began the process of US withdrawal finally forced on the US in January, 1973, though many more battles had to be fought in Vietnam and political struggles waged in the US and throughout the world before the Americans finally accepted the inevitable. Even then they did so only after a last display of brutal force in the mass bombings of the North at Christmas, 1972.

Over two years of complicated political and military struggle followed the Paris Agreement - a political struggle for implementation of the Agreement, bitterly resisted by Thieu with US backing, and military struggle to resist land-grabbing by the Thieu regime. When it finally became obvious that Thieu and the US had no intention of implementing the Paris Agreement, and after repeated warnings, the Liberation forces launched the final offensive which again combined military and political struggle with uprisings in the cities coordinated with the military offensive.

The Paris Agreement was a decisive stage in the struggle. The Americans, Thieu and their
supporters in Australia and the world now claim that the Provisional Revolutionary Government frustrated the Agreement. But to little avail; Thieu would never implement any of the main clauses, of the Agreement, including setting up the National Council of Reconciliation, a coalition government and elections. The firm struggle for implementation of these provisions was an indispensable preparation for final victory, no matter what is said, by some “left” armchair strategists. These also opposed the Paris Agreement, particularly the struggle for a coalition government; their opposition counted for little and has been swept away by history as the irrelevancy it always was.

The Vietnam war was a turning point in the world-historic struggle which is the essence of the present epoch. The final victories in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos will change a lot, just as the Vietnam struggle changed so much in the world, in the United States and Australia not least. Much will yet be written, from both sides, to analyse the nature and results of this epic struggle. Its importance is already immediately obvious, as US president Ford makes a pilgrimage to Europe to assure America’s allies that it will stick to its commitments. World imperialism is at sixes and sevens, unsure of the future, undecided as to its strategy, beset by economic, political and social problems internally and globally.

US imperialism’s intervention in Vietnam played a big part in sharpening these contradictions. The huge US expenditure - $139 billion is admitted - accelerated the decline of the almighty dollar and precipitated the world currency crisis. The reckless war of aggression hastened the “resources crisis”, while the progressive erosion of US power credibility encouraged oil and other producers to tackle the imperialist economic domination of world trade. Equally important was the way that Vietnam polarised politics in the United States, with massive anti-war actions and the decline of US ruling class prestige at home and abroad. Two US presidents were broken by their failures in Vietnam and the ensuing challenge to the amorality of imperialism, its lying, its brutal use of force, its corruption and global crimes. If the Vietnamese people had not stayed firm and fought on, the world crisis of imperialism would not be nearly so advanced.

It might be argued that US imperialism need not have made the mistakes it did in Indochina. Indeed, even that shopsoiled Metternich, Dr Henry Kissinger, has admitted that Vietnam was a mistake - for which he is as responsible as any single individual. But imperialism is not a “policy” adopted by a government; it is the inescapable result of the social system of modern capitalism. Eisenhower justified the first US involvement by referring to the rich resources of Vietnam - its tin, tungsten and other minerals which should be kept for the “Free World”. This was long before the “resources crisis” hit the world headlines, when indeed virtually no-one thought about it as a real problem. Yet imperialism’s inexorable need for unlimited economic growth to make bigger and bigger profits led inevitably to a constant push to maintain and expand control over cheap raw materials through an imposed unequal trade, and to secure market and investment opportunities.

In this sense, the Vietnamese were in the forefront of the Third World’s struggle against imperialist domination. Far more than Vietnam’s own resources were involved in this gamble. This explains the desperation with which the United States stuck to the puppet Thieu regime, and Kissinger’s “strategy” of ensuring a “decent interval” before “allowing” a final liberation victory. That this meant extending the fighting and piled more suffering upon the Vietnamese was immaterial to this strategist; people mean nothing, they are but ciphers in the mathematical calculations of money and power. The ignoble spectacle of face-saving has its own crazy criminal logic, too; the stakes were so high that even a little face saved meant a lot to the imperialist planners, still hell-bent on maintaining their world position.

Fortunately, the more they strove to save face, the more face they lost. The same is true of the Mayaguez affair: Ford and Kissinger’s sordid gloating over their “famous victory” is already turning to ashes as the debits are totted up in another reappraisal. However, the US and other imperialists are unable to learn the real lessons, though they may become more skilled at their efforts to maintain their control. It seems that this may well become the central issue for political debate within the imperialist countries. The Ford-Kissinger-Schlesinger school shows little sign of change, judging by sabre-rattling threats against the oil-producers, the threats to North Korea and excuses for the Vietnam debacle. The latter are chillingly reminiscent of the German generals’ excuses for defeat in World War One, which prepared the way for Nazism and for the Second World War.

This grim logic of imperialist dynamics leads to the conclusion that the anti-imperialist
struggle must be stepped up, and the post-Vietnam situation is favourable for this, though the possibility of an even more desperate imperialist policy must be reckoned with. The struggle against continued expanded consumption of the world’s resources for ever-growing profits and a distorted, increasingly repellent social life, is a central issue in the fight against imperialism. That is the political essence of the fight against such actions as the mining of Fraser Island and uranium mining, as well as solidarity with all liberation movements.

It also raises deep questions of the nature of socialist societies for which we fight. In this, too, Vietnam has an important place, as it steps out on a course of economic advancement so vitally needed. The Vietnamese plan to combine the biological revolution with the chemical revolution in agriculture in a way that avoids the over-use of chemical fertilisers, and it appears that the bicycle and the bus will remain the main means of personal transport, instead of the car, while trucks and railways will be the main means of transporting goods. These and other plans for industrialising the country are forced by necessity, but they also provide a new alternative for social advance, one in accord with world needs.

The struggle for a new world society in harmony with the total environment is essentially a struggle against world capitalism and its economic laws, since it is motivated by profit, and economic growth for this aim, not the satisfaction of real human needs. But it also needs a review of the historical experience of socialist industrialisation, in which the experience of the Asian countries - China and Korea as well as Vietnam - could give new insights.

It is arguable that the US waged the Vietnam war with such desperate ferocity precisely to maintain its imperialist position in Asia and the world - a position vital to assure US capitalist control of resources, markets and investment. Vietnam became the test case for US imperial power; its defeat was crucial in turning the tide. No other event since the victory of the Chinese Revolution in 1949 so alters the world balance of forces. The problem for revolutionaries is how to press home this advantage, how to advance the forces for revolution everywhere to make the decisive change so urgent for a world being brought close to the edge of disaster by imperialist domination of at least two-thirds of the world economy.

The Communist Party of Australia has expressed the view that the Vietnamese Workers’ Party played a great role in upholding the banner of Communism and internationalism, when the movement was beset with serious divisions which reduced its attractive power and its strength. The Vietnamese were able to draw support from both sides of this conflict, and maintain a semblance of unity in relation to their struggle. It is to be hoped that the favourable perspectives flowing from the Indochina victory may influence an improvement in the relations between the Soviet Union and China, though there are many intractable problems in the way.

This is very important, since imperialism hopes to use the divisions, as indeed it used them during a crucial stage of the Indochina struggle (as in Nixon’s “detente” visits to Peking and Moscow). Thrashing around for some leverage in international politics, Kissinger has stressed the need for detente and has clearly implied threats if this does not help the US in its present crisis. This was the point of Kissinger’s statement deploring the “willingness of the Soviet Union to exploit strategic opportunities, even though some of these opportunities present themselves more or less spontaneously, and not as a result of the Soviet Union .... (this) constitutes a heavy mortgage on detente.”

One of the major lessons of the Vietnam struggle is that determination in struggle is vital; as Ho Chi Minh put it, “nothing is more precious than independence and freedom” (emphasis added). Underlining this is the well-known Vietnamese statement that “detente is relative; struggle is absolute.”

Opposition leader Malcolm Fraser has taken up the theme of utilising differences between the Soviet Union and China, as he urges a hardline course in foreign policy and a big expansion of Australian military power in the aftermath of the imperialist debacle in Indochina. Nowhere else in the capitalist world has there been such dismay and disarray in reactionary circles as in Australia. The Liberal-Country opposition cannot divest itself of its Pavlovian reflex to the alleged threat of the “southward thrust of Asian Communism”. It would be an interesting exercise in psychology to attempt to disentangle the strands which are knotted in this syndrome - to discover just how much is concerned with internal politics, how much with a gut racist reaction to Asia, and how much is genuine belief that the Asian hordes
really look with envious eyes at Australia's "empty spaces" and rich resources. Suffice it to say that Fraser and Co. have learnt nothing and forgotten nothing from their quarter-century of tying Australia to US policy, particularly in Asia, as the only way to Australian security through the Pax Americana which they saw as lasting for the whole 20th century and beyond.

Now that it has obviously ended, they cling to it, but with the nagging fear that the US cannot be depended upon. Therefore, they reason, Australia must be strong militarily. Not really for defence, though; it needs strength to back up a foreign policy which is designed to defend the dominoes it sees as falling. This is most openly stated by the papers owned by Sir Warwick Fairfax, who "seems to have gone off his brain following the liberation victories to back up a foreign policy which is designed cannot be depended upon. Therefore, they to it, but with the nagging fear that the US even the most avid sensation-monger has not days later; already a month has passed and the surrender came only eight clear it is not going to happen after Saigon falls or surrenders." The surrender of the Vietnamese. He was never happy with even Calwell's conditional opposition to the war; as late as 1968 he was praising the shift in US military policy to win the war through a "clear and hold" strategy. He was positively unhappy at public ministerial criticism of Nixon's last criminal bombings. He opposed recognition of the PRG at Terrigal, though this was the last opportunity to lend Australia's weight to an earlier and easier peace. It needs to be clearly understood that Labor's foreign policy is Whitlam's; this explains why he feels so unjustly accused by the Opposition of supporting the Vietnamese.

The Sydney Morning Herald carried 19 editorials warning of doom after Vietnam in the 44 editions from April 3 to May 24 this year. Its April 3 editorial "Sowing the wind" warned of "the progressive collapse of the land barriers which have hitherto separated us from the States and from a political system implacably dedicated to the destruction of the freedoms we take for granted." Referring to people "like Dr Cairns and Mr Uren", we are told "When we reap the whirlwind history will not have far to look for its guilty men." Somewhat strident - but only the beginning. More and more hysterically, the Herald ranted about the world situation after Vietnam and the Whitlam government's betrayal of Australia. It is instructive to re-read these editorials, feature articles and news reporting, as Sir Warwick's journalists piled horror on horror, menace upon menace. Orphans, refugees, bloodbaths, massacres followed day after day.

On April 22, we read that "The accounts reaching Saigon of mass executions and atrocities being committed by the victorious communists ... are growing in volume and horror ... It has been suggested, finally, that the horrors ... will cease with peace ... it is crystal clear it is not going to happen after Saigon falls or surrenders." The surrender came only eight days later; already a month has passed and even the most avid sensation-monger has not been able to find anything even remotely resembling reprisals, let alone the predicted "seven million to be purged".

Quite contrary to the rightwing predictions the Provisional Revolutionary Government is deliberately working to prevent reprisals, with the same farsighted political vision it has displayed through the long struggle. Its aim now is to prevent any further divisions, to heal the wounds of war and to draw in all possible forces in rebuilding the country. These include those trained in technical and administrative skills by the Americans. This policy of mercy and reconciliation contrasts sharply with the ruthless terror of the Thieu administration; it is perhaps helped by the flight of the war criminals from Thieu downwards, who carried their anti-popular crimes through to the end by decamping with all the gold, art treasures and anything else they could lay their hands on and get the Americans to transport for them.

All the hoo-ha about orphans, refugees and bloodbaths was always bound to be only a nine-days wonder, but what lies behind it has to be taken seriously. The rightwing forces are deadly serious in their intention to pursue a hardline pro-imperialist policy, to increase the armed forces and spend a lot more money on "defence". The Sydney Morning Herald is again the pacemaker for the right. In its April 19 editorial attacking the government's defence policy, it asserts that "... Mr Barnard shows only the most primitive appreciation of what defence forces are maintained for and totally fails to recognise that they represent an integral factor of foreign policy." (emphasis added). This fits in very well with Opposition spokesman Peacock's talk about the possibility of future Vietnam-type situations, foreshadowing possible interventions. This is a policy of madness, as is the Herald's naive belief that Australia could influence Asia by building a massive strike force - a task far beyond its capacity in any case.

It remains to analyse the Whitlam foreign policy in relation to Vietnam and the new situation. As distinct from people like Dr Cairns and Tom Uren, so execrated by the Herald, Mr Whitlam has always been equivocal on Vietnam. He was never happy with even Calwell's conditional opposition to the war; as late as 1968 he was praising the shift in US military policy to win the war through a "clear and hold" strategy. He was positively unhappy at public ministerial criticism of Nixon's last criminal bombings. He opposed recognition of the PRG at Terrigal, though this was the last opportunity to lend Australia's weight to an earlier and easier peace. It needs to be clearly understood that Labor's foreign policy is Whitlam's; this explains why he feels so unjustly accused by the Opposition of supporting the Vietnamese.
Whitlam to the end did his best to assist the United States on Vietnam, though with a seeming independence. In the new situation, with Australia recognising the PRG only when it had won, it is vital to mount a big campaign to force urgently needed aid on a large scale, not allowing it to be lost in Whitlam’s generalised call for an international effort, desirable as this is.

The broader questions of Australia’s post-Vietnam foreign policy need serious thought and action. Whitlam still pins his foreign policy on the US alliance, ANZUS and all the paraphenalia of the past. Visiting Ford in Washington, he expressed his faith in the United States and its world role. In practical terms, this has already led to agreement for the Omega base, allegedly never to be used in nuclear war but largely pointless without such planned use.

The Whitlam foreign policy has other intersections with US plans, notably Ford’s “line-drawing” in Asia - with particular reference to support for Suharto’s corrupt Indonesian regime. As we have said before, the Whitlam foreign policy is essentially an alternative capitalist policy, more realistic in that it seeks to project an image of a more independent ally of the United States and a less racist, therefore more acceptable “friend” of the nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The left should fight for a genuinely non-aligned foreign policy, whose alignment supports national liberation and is therefore anti-imperialist. The struggle for such a policy will assume greater and greater significance in domestic policy as well as foreign affairs, since US and internal reactionary pressure will increase for higher arms spending, expanding control and use of resources etc.

A key to this fight is active refutation of the big lie of “Vietnamese expansionism”, so assiduously pushed by people like Denis Warner. Shattered by the US defeat in Vietnam and the collapse of his predictions, this hired pen keeps returning to the theme of the Vietnamese pledge to “make a worthy contribution to the world revolution.” He represents this as threatened aggression, whereas the worthy contribution following its tremendous help by defeating US imperialism is precisely to unify and build up an independent, prosperous and happy Vietnam.

No matter how they twist and squirm, reactionaries can never make Vietnam a case of export of revolution. If ever there was a genuinely indigenous, independent and self-reliant revolution, it was this one, symbolised by Ho Chi Minh and his unique combination of internationalism and patriotism. The essence of Vietnam was the utter defeat of the export of counter-revolution in its most massive-ever attempt. This is the lesson of Vietnam, already influencing all national-liberation movements; this is its main influence upon world history.

There are lessons for all revolutionaries, too, not only for those who must wage an armed national liberation struggle. One of the most important of these is the need to find a correct strategy through deep analysis of the nature of the society one sets out to change, the class forces involved and the internal and external contradictions which help the revolution. Another is the need to stick firmly to principle and fight with determination and flexibility for the strategy, neither ignoring aid and advice nor sacrificing independence. Still another is the great importance of building a united revolutionary party to serve the mass struggle, not replace it.