



The Vietnam War

Beginnings

The Vietnam War was the longest war in which the United States was ever involved. U.S. participation began in 1957 and ended in 1975. However, this was really the second stage of a conflict which began in 1946. In the last decades of the 1800s, France had gained control of Indochina (the areas of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam) as part of its efforts to set up a colonial empire like England, Germany, and other European powers were doing. Japan conquered and controlled the region during World War II, but the defeat of Japan led to France's attempt to reestablish control over Indochina.

Ho Chi Minh

Ho Chi Minh, a dedicated nationalist, was a popular Vietnamese leader who had fought Japanese occupation. He wanted to unite Vietnam as a communist nation free from foreign occupation or domination. He and his Vietminh supporters fought an eight-year revolutionary war to free themselves from French colonial rule. They finally defeated the French army at Dien Bien Phu in a climactic battle that led to a peace treaty calling for free elections in 1956.

Two Vietnams

After the war, Minh established firm control of his Communist government in North Vietnam. He suppressed all other political parties, designed a system of land reform popular with the peasants, and established legal reforms giving women equality with

men. The United States was fearful of the spread of communism into Vietnam and decided to support an anti-communist government in the South led by Ngo Dinh Diem, an autocratic leader who was anti-communist but not democratic. Diem and the United States refused to support popular elections in 1956 as agreed to by the peace treaty with France because Minh was popular and likely to win.

Diem tried to eliminate the Viet Cong (communist rebels who wanted to overthrow Diem and unify the country under Ho's rule). By 1960 the rebels appeared to be gaining strength, so U.S. President John F. Kennedy sent military advisors to support the unpopular South Vietnamese government.





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Buddhist Opposition

Diem had been particularly heavy-handed and unfair in dealing with the Buddhists, who were a large majority of the South Vietnamese population. Several Buddhist monks set themselves on fire in protest, and this led to even greater resistance to the Diem government. A group of South Vietnamese generals overthrew Diem, which led to a series of unstable governments that came and went. North Vietnam took advantage of the turmoil and sent army units into the South. By 1964 the Viet Cong rebels and their northern supporters controlled about 75 percent of the population.

Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

A minor naval scuffle between North Vietnamese torpedo boats and two U.S. ships led to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed by Congress. It was used by President Lyndon Johnson as the legal basis for increased military involvement in Vietnam. The United States was trying to prevent the fall of another country to communism. U.S. leaders were convinced of the *domino theory*—that the fall of one nation to communism made the fall of neighboring countries likely, just like dominoes falling in a row.

America Goes to War

In March 1965, President Johnson sent a unit of U.S. Marines to Vietnam. These were the first American combat ground troops in the war. The United States and North Vietnam both quickly increased their forces, and the war escalated rapidly. By 1965 the

United States had committed 65,000 troops to Vietnam, and by 1969, the United States had over 540,000 troops there. The South Vietnamese Army numbered about 800,000. Almost 70,000 other troops arrived from New Zealand, Australia, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines. North Vietnam and their Viet Cong allies had at least 300,000 troops.



President Lyndon Johnson

Strategies

The United States believed that it could use massive firepower and technological superiority to crush the rebellion as it had used them to defeat Germany and Japan. The U.S. launched an extensive bombing campaign in North Vietnam and sent planes to attack large troop formations. They effectively used their greater firepower on the ground in pitched battles against the North Vietnamese troops. Bombers attacked the enemy supply route known as the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.



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War of Attrition

Sheer firepower, however, was not that effective against the hit-and-run guerrilla warfare tactics used by the Viet Cong and their allies, who fought a superb war of attrition by attacking and retreating before the Americans could react with useful counter measures. The lightly armed Viet Cong hid in the jungle terrain and fought very successfully using ambush attacks. They knew the land, had the support of some of the people, and could appear and vanish with ease.

Course of the War

From 1965 through 1967, the United States and its South Vietnamese allies fought the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong to a draw. The war was fought in hundreds of small villages and along thousands of jungle trails. The U.S. forces inflicted terrible casualties on the enemy armies and on the civilian population, but they were not able to force the withdrawal of the North Vietnamese or to win the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese people.

Reaction in the United States

The massive cost in terms of the heavy American casualties led to increased resistance to the war as the United States kept sending more and more troops into the conflict. The financial cost of the war was also beginning to be felt as new taxes were imposed, and some of the social programs to help the poor were cut. The conflict between the *hawks* who supported the war and the

doves who opposed the war led to large demonstrations and opposition to the military draft in the U.S.

The Tet Offensive

On January 30, 1968, the first day of the *Tet*, or Vietnamese New Year, North Vietnam launched a series of attacks against military bases as well as cities in South Vietnam, especially the capital city of Saigon and the ancient city of Hue. With the *Tet Offensive* they hoped to increase the American people's opposition to the war, cause uprisings in South Vietnamese cities, and defeat or cripple the military forces of the United States and South Vietnam.

The U.S. Changes Course

The North Vietnamese suffered huge casualties in the Tet Offensive, and they were unsuccessful in their military objectives. They did, however, cause the U.S. to reevaluate the war as many Americans became convinced that the war could not be won. As a result, President Johnson refused to send another 200,000 troops requested by American generals, and he cut back on the bombing of North Vietnam. Johnson also called for peace negotiations and decided not to seek reelection as president. Peace talks opened in May but were not successful.



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Nixon Looks for an Exit Strategy

After his election in 1968, President Richard Nixon tried to reduce U.S. involvement in Vietnam by increasing the training of the South Vietnamese army and gradually withdrawing U.S. ground troops. The road to peace was littered with obstacles. The U.S. sent forces into Cambodia in April 1970 to destroy huge supplies of war material stockpiled by the North Vietnamese. This probably prevented another massive North Vietnamese attack.

The U.S. Senate voted to repeal the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which made it more difficult for the president to fund the war. Protests in American cities and on college campuses became larger and more violent, and four students were killed at Kent State University in Ohio in a clash with National Guardsmen. In 1971 Lieutenant William Calley was court-martialed and imprisoned for his role in the My Lai massacre of several hundred innocent Vietnamese civilians.



President Richard Nixon

The End of the War

In March 1972, North Vietnam began another major invasion into South Vietnam. The U.S. responded by bombing North Vietnam, its troops, and supplies. The invasion was stopped in the summer of 1972, and a new round of peace negotiations began. A cease-fire was signed in January of 1973 between all of the major parties in the conflict, and the last U.S. ground troops were withdrawn. No peace treaty was signed, however, and North Vietnam began a relentless series of attacks which culminated in the capture of Saigon on April 30, 1975. The war was finally over.

The Cost

More than 58,000 American soldiers were killed in the Vietnam conflict, and more than 300,000 were wounded. North Vietnamese forces lost one million dead and more than 600,000 wounded. South Vietnam suffered 224,000 military deaths, more than one million soldiers wounded, and as many as 10 million civilian refugees, although no one knows exactly how many Vietnamese civilians on both sides were killed or wounded. The country's agriculture and industrial capabilities were severely crippled for years to come.