

# **The Vietnam War: A Brief History**

Few chapters in U.S. history dominated the nation's heart and soul like the war in Vietnam. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Americans were preoccupied with the conflict in Southeast Asia—a war that was costing thousands of lives and billions of dollars and dividing the nation as never before in the twentieth century. Each evening, the American people watched the daily events of the conflict—the world's first televised war. They saw death and destruction, anti-war protesters marching in the streets, young men burning their draft cards, and college campuses erupting in violence. They developed a cynicism toward their elected officials who could not agree on either a way to win the war or a way to get out. And most of all, they wondered when it would all be over. By the time the war finally ended, it had forever changed how Americans and their leaders would look at involvement in future conflicts.

## **Why Did the United States Get Involved?**

Soon after World War II ended in 1945, the Cold War began. The Soviet Union became the enemy as Americans worried about its communist ideology spreading; Soviet-style communist governments were already in place in eastern Europe and China was about to “fall” to communist revolutionaries. In response, President Harry Truman outlined the U.S. foreign policy of containment—part of a plan called the Truman Doctrine. U.S. leaders believed that the only way to keep communism from spreading was to stop it in its tracks, using American troops if necessary. U.S. military action in Korea in 1950–53 signaled to Soviet and Chinese leaders that the United States was serious about containing communism. Therefore, when communists in the Southeast Asian country of Vietnam, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, sought to drive the French army out of their Indochinese colonies in 1953 and 1954, the U.S. government looked for ways to help the French.

President Dwight Eisenhower, fearing growing communist strength in Southeast Asia, advanced what he called the “domino theory.” He believed that if Vietnam fell to the communists, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand, like dominos, would soon follow. But token U.S. aid did not help the French, and they were forced out. Under the terms of the Geneva Accords of 1954, Vietnam was divided: North Vietnam would be ruled by Ho Chi Minh and his communists while South Vietnam would be governed by a new premier, Ngo Dinh Diem. In October 1954, Eisenhower sent economic aid along with a few hundred military officers and agents of the Central Intelligence Agency to help train Diem's armed forces and police.

## **The Conflict Grows**

However, Diem proved to be autocratic and ineffective and by the late 1950s no longer had the support of his people. By 1957, communist guerrillas from South Vietnam called the Viet Cong had begun attacks on the government. Diem's repressive tactics against communists and Buddhists in his country added to his enemy's strength. U.S. officials were afraid that the Viet Cong—now organized into a resistance movement called the National Liberation Front—would take over South Vietnam. In response, several high-ranking U.S. government officials began to urge President John Kennedy to send more troops there. Kennedy refused to commit U.S. soldiers to combat, but did continue to dispatch what the White House called “advisers” to South Vietnam to stabilize the situation. When Kennedy took office in 1961, there were 2,000 Americans in South Vietnam; by the end of 1963 there were 16,000. But it soon became clear to U.S. officials that Diem was a lost cause; he was clearly unable to defeat the Viet Cong or deal with the mounting unrest in his country. In the fall of 1963,

Washington did not intervene as South Vietnamese generals, in a coup d'état, overthrew and murdered Diem. At that point, Kennedy signaled his administration's intention to withdraw most U.S. forces from South Vietnam by 1965. However, in November 1963, just as Vietnam was becoming a major foreign policy issue, President Kennedy was assassinated.

### **"Take All Necessary Measures"**

Following Kennedy's death, Vietnam became President Lyndon Johnson's problem. Johnson, like the two presidents before him, was not eager to involve the U.S. military in Vietnam but at the same time did not want to be known as the president who "lost" Vietnam to the communists. Thus, he decided to escalate his country's involvement.

**Tonkin Gulf Resolution.** In August 1964, President Johnson told a national television audience that two American destroyers had been attacked by North Vietnamese vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin. Congress then passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution giving Johnson the authorization to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." The president interpreted this resolution as a congressional declaration of war—a war Congress was now willing to fully fund.

**Troop Buildup.** Soon after winning reelection in 1964, Johnson ordered the first sustained bombing of North Vietnam to stop the flow of soldiers and supplies to the south. Soon thereafter, the U.S. commander in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, requested and got the first U.S. combat soldiers sent to Southeast Asia. These troops were soon engaged in "search and destroy" operations. By the end of 1965 there were almost 200,000 American troops in Vietnam; in 1966 the troop count was 385,000; by the summer of 1968 the American troop presence reached its high of nearly 550,000.

### **Fading Support at Home**

By sending in hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops and conducting daily heavy bombing raids on North Vietnam, American officials hoped the communists would lose their will to continue. But the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese proved to be resilient fighters. By the late 1960s, American support for the war had faded when it became clear that the end was not in sight. On television every night, Americans heard the latest body counts and saw the steel coffins being unloaded at air force bases around the country. Soon college campuses across the country erupted in rioting. Huge anti-war demonstrations took place in Washington, D.C., and other U.S. cities. Thousands of young men fled to Canada to avoid being drafted. More and more members of Congress became outspoken critics of U.S. policy in Vietnam and urged their colleagues to cut off funding for the war.

**The Tet Offensive.** On January 31, 1968—the first day of the Vietnamese New Year (Tet)—with U.S. support of the war flagging, the Viet Cong launched heavy assaults on American and South Vietnamese forces in the cities of Hue and Saigon. The effect of the offensive on American public opinion was great. Larger numbers of Americans now demanded U.S. withdrawal. President Johnson's popularity dipped to 35 percent in opinion polls. In April 1968, he announced that he would not seek reelection.

### **Vietnamization**

The task of withdrawing U.S. forces from Southeast Asia fell to the new president, Richard Nixon. While campaigning in 1968, Nixon said he had a secret plan to bring "peace with honor" in Vietnam. In 1969, President Nixon began a slow withdrawal of American troops and initiated peace talks. Nixon called his plan "Vietnamization"—the equipping and training of the South Vietnamese army to take over the fighting. It soon became clear to most U.S. soldiers and civilians that military victory was no longer the objective in Vietnam. But

the fighting continued. Twenty thousand more Americans died in Vietnam even after troop withdrawal began.

President Nixon withdrew U.S. troops at a steady pace between 1969 and 1973. By 1973, only 50,000 U.S. troops remained in Southeast Asia. The president did, however, increase the air war with the aim of convincing the enemy to agree to peace terms more quickly. Heavy American bombing raids continued on Hanoi and Haiphong in North Vietnam and on communist sanctuaries in Cambodia well into the 1970s.

## **The End**

The social divisions at home and the upcoming 1972 presidential elections finally led to more intense negotiations at the peace table. In January 1973, the United States signed an agreement ending the war and restoring peace in Vietnam. On March 29, 1973, the last American combat troops left Vietnam; on that same day hundreds of American prisoners of war were released by the communists.

Within a few months, the war between north and south resumed—this time without U.S. troops. In March 1975, North Vietnam launched a full-scale invasion of the south. The U.S. Congress refused South Vietnam's request for American help. On April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese tanks rolled into Saigon and helicopters lifted the last officials in the American embassy to ships waiting offshore. Thus ended the U.S. presence in Vietnam. More than 58,000 Americans died and 153,000 more were wounded in the war. American taxpayers spent nearly \$200 billion to fund the only war their country ever lost.

### **Answer the following questions.**

1. Where is Vietnam?
2. Why was the United States fighting in Vietnam?
3. Who fought on each side in the Vietnam War?
4. During what years was the United States most heavily involved in the war?
5. What was the final outcome of the war?