

The Vietnam War – An Overview

The Cold War and Colonial Independence

The American policy of containment soon extended to new nations emerging in the **Third World**. The United States often failed to recognize that indigenous or nationalist movements in emerging nations had their own goals and were not necessarily under the control of Communists. U.S. policymakers tended to support stable governments, as long as they were not Communist; some American allies were governed by dictatorships or repressive right-wing regimes.

In 1954, the United States helped form the **Southeast Asia Treaty Organization** (SEATO) to complement the NATO alliance in Europe. The Central Intelligence Agency moved beyond intelligence gathering into active, albeit covert, involvement in the internal affairs of foreign countries. In spite of this, Truman mismanaged a golden opportunity in Southeast Asia to bring the Vietnamese nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh into the American camp. Historians have debated whether Ho was primarily a Communist or a nationalist leader. There is no doubt that Ho was a Communist and received support from neighboring Communist governments in China and the Soviet Union. However, his first priority was the independence of his country, rather than its role in the Cold War. As the Cold War intensified, the Truman administration abandoned its previous policy of decolonization and provided domestic and military support to the French attempt after World War II to re-take the colony it had maintained since the mid-1800s. Truman incorrectly viewed Ho Chi Minh as an ardent Communist pledged against American interests. This began a long and disastrous French and later American crusade to bring the country of Vietnam under the control of unpopular political figures.

Truman's successor in the White House, Dwight D. Eisenhower, also failed to understand the importance of embracing a united Vietnam. If the French failed to regain control, Eisenhower argued, the **domino theory** would lead to the collapse of all non-Communist governments in the region. Although the United States eventually provided most of the financing, the French still failed to defeat the tenacious Viet-minh, the force of Vietnamese fighters. After a fifty-six-day siege in early 1954, the French went down to stunning defeat at the huge fortress of Dienbienphu. The French agreed to negotiate with the Vietnamese at what became known as the 1954 **Geneva Conference**.

The result was the **1954 Geneva Accords**, which partitioned Vietnam temporarily at the **seventeenth parallel**, committed France to withdraw from north of that line, and called for elections within two years that would lead to a unified Vietnam. The United States rejected the Geneva Accords and immediately set about undermining them. In June 1954, with the help of the CIA, a pro-American government took power in South Vietnam, eventually under the control of the corrupt **Ngo Dinh Diem**. As the last

French soldiers left in 1956, the United States took over, with South Vietnam now the front line in the American battle to contain communism in Southeast Asia.

Making a Commitment in Vietnam

In 1961, when John F. became president, he inherited Eisenhower's involvement in Vietnam. Kennedy saw Vietnam in very much the same Cold War terms. Eisenhower warned his successor about the dangers of making a large scale military commitment in Asia, yet urged the young president to do all he could to avoid defeat in Vietnam. Despite American aid, the corrupt and repressive Diem regime installed by Eisenhower in 1954 in South Vietnam was losing ground to domestic critics and North Vietnamese insurgents. Diem had little support outside of the capital Saigon. As a Catholic in a country of Buddhists he lacked legitimacy. His regime quickly became corrupt and autocratic, cracking down viciously on Buddhist leaders. Increasingly paranoid, he gave his family members important positions of leadership in the government, which they abused.

In line with Kennedy's **flexible response** strategic vision for the military, the Army was training U.S. Special Forces, called Green Berets for their distinctive headgear, to engage in unconventional, small-group warfare. Kennedy and his advisors wanted to try out the Green Berets in the Vietnamese jungles. In 1962, Kennedy agreed to send American forces to Vietnam as "advisors," marking the first official direct U.S. military involvement in the country. The numbers of the Military Assistance Command (MACV), as the unit was called, eventually numbered more than 16,000 troops at the time of Kennedy's death in 1963. Although the administration denied these troops were taking part in combat, it was clear they were.

Losing patience with Diem, Kennedy let it be known in Saigon that the United States would support a military coup. On November 1, 1963, Diem was overthrown and assassinated—a result evidently not anticipated by Kennedy. Kennedy himself was assassinated in a few weeks later.

Escalation under Johnson

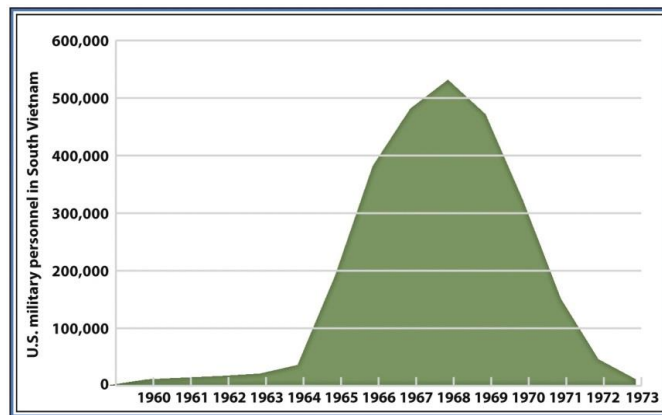
When Lyndon Johnson became president after Kennedy's murder, he continued and accelerated U.S. involvement in Vietnam based on the policy of containing communism. In the summer of 1964 Johnson heard reports that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had fired on American destroyers in international waters. **On August 7, 1964**, Congress authorized the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**, which allowed Johnson to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." With the presidential election looming in November, Johnson weighed up his options before acting. He criticized his opponent in the election, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, for his aggressive pro-war stance. With

a decisive landslide victory in the election Johnson was free to use the authority granted to him by Congress.

By the spring of 1965, the Johnson administration moved toward the **Americanization** of the war with **Operation Rolling Thunder**, a protracted bombing campaign that by 1968 had dropped a million tons of bombs on North Vietnam. Operation Rolling Thunder failed to end the intensified the North Vietnamese’s will to fight; the flow of their troops and supplies continued to the south unabated as the Communists rebuilt roads and bridges, moved munitions underground, and built networks of tunnels and shelters.

American Combat Troops

Simultaneously with the launch of Operation Rolling Thunder, the United States sent its first ground troops into combat in 1965; by 1966, more than 380,000 American soldiers were present in Vietnam; by 1968, more than 536,000 American soldiers were stationed in

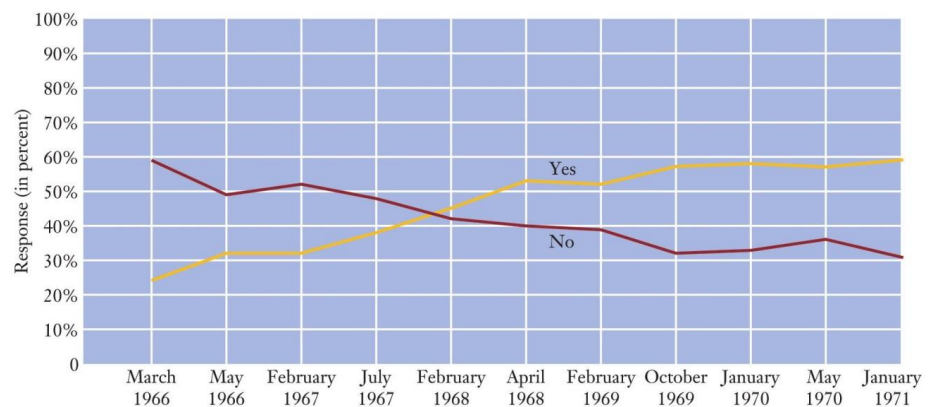


Vietnam. Hoping to win a war of attrition, the Johnson administration assumed that American superiority in personnel and weaponry would ultimately triumph.

Public Opinion and the War

By the late 1960s, public opinion began to turn against the war in Vietnam; television had much to do with these attitudes as Vietnam was the first televised war. Despite glowing statements made on television, by 1967, many administration

Responses to the question: “Do you think that the United States made a mistake in sending troops to fight there?”



officials privately reached a more pessimistic conclusion regarding the war. The administration was accused of suffering from a **“credibility gap”**; 1966 televised

hearings by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by **Senator J. William Fulbright** raised further questions about U.S. policy.

Economic developments put Johnson and his advisors even more on the defensive. The high financial costs of the war became evident as the growing federal deficit nudged the inflation rate upward, beginning the inflationary spiral that plagued the U.S. economy throughout the 1970s.

After the escalation in the spring of 1965, various antiwar coalitions organized several mass demonstrations in Washington. Participants shared a common skepticism about the means and aims of U.S. policy and argued that the war was antithetical to American ideals.

Rise of the Student Movement

American youth were among the key protestors of the era. In their manifesto, the Port Huron Statement, the **Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)** expressed their disillusionment with the consumer culture and the gulf between the prosperous and the poor and rejected Cold War ideology and foreign policy. The founders of SDS referred to themselves as the “New Left” to distinguish themselves from the “Old Left” of Communists and socialists of the 1930s and 1940s.

At the University of California at Berkeley, the **Free Speech Movement** organized a sit-in in response to administrators’ attempts to ban political activity on campus. Many protests centered on the draft, especially after the Selective Service system abolished automatic student deferments in January 1966. In public demonstrations of civil disobedience, opponents of the war burned their draft cards, closed down induction centers, and broke into Selective Service offices and destroyed records. Much of the universities’ research budgets came from Defense Department contracts. In response, students demanded that the Reserve Officer Training Corps be removed from college campuses. The Johnson administration had to face the reality of large-scale opposition to the war. The 1967 Mobilization to End the War brought 100,000 protestors into the streets of San Francisco and over 250,000 in New York.

The Counterculture

The “hippie” symbolized the new counterculture, a youthful movement that glorified liberation from traditional social strictures. Popular music by Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan expressed political idealism, protest, and loss of patience with the war and was an important part of the counterculture. Beatlemania helped to deepen the generational divide and paved the way for the more rebellious, angrier music of other British groups, notably the Rolling Stones. Drugs and sex intertwined with music as a crucial element of the youth culture as celebrated at rock concerts attended by hundreds of thousands of people.

In 1967, at the “world’s first Human Be-In” at San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, Timothy Leary urged gatherers to “turn on, tune in, and drop out.” 1967 was also the “Summer of Love,” in which city neighborhoods swelled with young dropouts, drifters, and teenage runaways dubbed “flower children.” Most young people stayed out of the counterculture and the antiwar movement, yet media coverage made it seem that all of America’s youth were rejecting political, social, and cultural norms.

Blood in the Streets

The Johnson administration’s hopes for Vietnam evaporated when the **Viet Cong**, Communist forces in the south of the country, unleashed a massive assault, known as the **Tet offensive**, on major urban areas in South Vietnam. The attack made a mockery of official pronouncements that the United States was winning the war and swung public opinion more strongly against the conflict. Antiwar Senator Eugene J. McCarthy’s strong showing in the presidential primaries that year reflected profound public dissatisfaction with the course of the war and propelled Senator Robert F. Kennedy into the race on an antiwar platform. Johnson pushed long serving Secretary of Defense **Robert McNamara** out of the administration replacing him with his close friend **Clark Clifford**. Clifford’s first task was to conduct a review of the war after which he concluded that further requests for more troops were futile as the United States could not win the war. Although militarily a defeat for the Communist forces, the Tet offensive showed that the Vietnamese were willing to outlast the Americans. On March 31, 1968, Johnson stunned the nation by announcing that he would not seek reelection. He vowed to devote his remaining months in office to the search for peace, and peace talks began in May 1968.

The year 1968 proved to be a bloody one at home also. In April the nation reeled from the assassination of Martin Luther King and its ensuing riots. Student protesters occupied several buildings at Columbia University and led to clashes with the police. A strike by students and labor toppled the French government. After winning the Californian Democratic primary and seemingly on course to take the party’s nomination, Robert Kennedy suffered the fate of his brother. Kennedy’s death shattered the dreams of those hoping for social change through political action. The Democratic Party never fully recovered from Johnson’s withdrawal and Robert Kennedy’s assassination.

The Antiwar Movement and the 1968 Election

At the Democratic Convention, the political divisions generated by the war consumed the party. Outside the convention “yippies” demonstrated, diverting attention from the more serious and numerous activists who came to Chicago as delegates or volunteers. The Democratic mayor of Chicago, **Richard J. Daley**, called out the police to break up the demonstrations. In what was later described as a “police riot,” patrolmen attacked

protestors at the convention with mace, tear gas, and clubs as TV viewers watched, which only cemented a popular impression of the Democrats as the party of disorder. Democrats dispiritedly nominated **Hubert H. Humphrey**, Johnson's Vice-President, and approved a platform that endorsed continued fighting in Vietnam while diplomatic means to an end were explored.

Former Republican Vice-President **Richard Nixon**, after losing the presidential campaign in 1960 and the California gubernatorial race in 1962, tapped the increasingly conservative mood of the electorate in an amazing political comeback, winning the 1968 Republican presidential nomination and courting the "silent majority" of law-abiding Americans. **George Wallace**, a third-party candidate, skillfully combined attacks on liberal intellectuals and government elites with denunciations of school segregation and forced busing.

Nixon offered a subtler version of Wallace's populism, adopting what his advisers called the "**southern strategy**" of courting disaffected southern white voters tired of the civil rights agenda of the Democratic Party. Nixon had also touted a non-existent "secret plan" to end the war in Vietnam. In a very close election, Nixon received 43.4 percent of the vote to Humphrey's 42.7 percent, defeating him by only 510,000 votes out of the 73 million that were cast. The New Deal coalition of the past thirty years was now broken for the Democratic Party.

Nixon's War in Vietnam

When it came to Vietnam, Nixon picked up where Johnson had left off. Abandoning Vietnam, Nixon insisted, would damage America's "credibility" and make the country seem "a pitiful, helpless giant." Nixon wanted peace, but only "peace with honor." To neutralize criticism at home, Nixon began delegating the ground fighting to the South Vietnamese. Under this new policy of "**Vietnamization**," American troop levels dropped from 543,000 in 1968 to 334,000 in 1971 to barely 24,000 by early 1973. Far from abating, however, the antiwar movement intensified. In November 1969, half a million demonstrators staged a huge protest in Washington.

On April 30, 1970, as part of a secret bombing campaign against Viet Cong supply lines operating in neutral Cambodia, American troops destroyed enemy bases there. When news of the invasion of Cambodia came out, American campuses exploded in outrage. On May 4, 1970, at **Kent State University** in Ohio, panicky National Guardsmen fired into an antiwar rally, killing four students and wounding eleven. At **Jackson State College** in Mississippi, Guardsmen stormed a dormitory, killing two black students.

Cold War Policy

In geostrategic terms, Nixon's policy of **détente** was to seek peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union and Communist China and to link these overtures of friendship with a plan to end the Vietnam War, a war fought ostensibly to halt the spread of communism. He traveled to Moscow to sign the first **Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT)** between the United States and the Soviet Union. The treaty limited the production and deployment of ICBMs and ABMs and signified that the United States could no longer afford massive military spending to regain the nuclear and military superiority it had enjoyed after World War II. Nixon traveled to China in 1972, the first sitting U.S. president to do so, in a symbolic visit that set the stage for the establishment of formal diplomatic relations.

In December 1972, to strengthen his negotiating position at the Paris Peace Talks with North Vietnam, Nixon stepped up military action with a series of B-52 bombings in what came to be known as the Christmas Bombings. On January 27, 1973, following years of negotiating the United States signed the Paris Peace Accords. The agreement called for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of US troops, the return of American prisoners of war, and a political settlement over the peaceful reunification of the country.

The agreements were widely flouted by both sides in Vietnam. The United States completed its withdrawal of troops, leaving a token force in the capital, Saigon. By late April 1975, the South Vietnamese government soon fell to Communist forces. Horrified Americans watched as American embassy personnel and Vietnamese citizens struggled to board helicopters leaving Saigon before North Vietnamese troops entered the city. On April 29, 1975, Northern forces completed the reunification of Vietnam and Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City in honor of the Communist leader who had died in 1969.

More than 58,000 Americans died and over 300,000 were wounded during a war that cost over \$150 billion and decreased Americans' confidence in their government system.

In spite of Nixon's victory in the 1972 election, Congress began pushing back against the war. Initially cutting of funding for any expansion of the fighting, further revelations regarding Nixon's secret bombing campaigns in neutral Cambodia led Congress to take more drastic action. In 1973 Congress passed the War Powers Act to increase congressional oversight over the president's ability to deploy the American military. The act required the president to notify Congress upon launching any U.S. military action abroad and limited any such action to sixty to ninety days in duration if Congress did not approve it.

Questions for Review

1. What difficulties did the United States face in fighting a war against North Vietnam and the Vietcong in South Vietnam?
2. Why did President Johnson suffer a “credibility gap” over Vietnam?
3. In what ways did 1968 represent a turning point in postwar history? In what ways did it represent a continuation of the status quo?
4. How was President Nixon’s Vietnam policy different from President Johnson’s? What were the consequences—to Vietnam and to the United States—of the war lasting another four years under Nixon?
5. Why is the Vietnam War so often called a quagmire?