

Why did America get involved in Vietnam?

Background to the War in Vietnam

Vietnam, a French colony, had been invaded and occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War. **Ho Chi Minh** was the leader of a group of Vietnamese, called the **Vietminh**, who opposed the Japanese. Ho Chi Minh supported **Communism** and by the end of the war the Vietminh had gained control of North Vietnam.

After the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, the French returned to re-take control of Vietnam. Communist China sent aid to the Vietnamese. The US, fearing that the Communists could take control of south-east Asia, sent aid to the French. By 1954, the French were defeated. Elections were held in the North and it became Communist led by Ho Chi Minh. The US stopped elections being held in the South because they were afraid that the Communists would win.

In April 1954, the world's powers had met at Geneva to discuss Vietnam. In July 1954, it was decided to divide the country in two at the 17th parallel. The meeting also decided that in 1956, there would be an election in both the north and south to decide who would rule the whole country. The election would be supervised by neutral countries. **This election did not take place and the split had become permanent by 1956.**

Ho Chi Minh was upset that elections had not been held in the South and launched a **guerrilla war** against the government in the South.



Ho Chi Minh



Domino Theory: American foreign policy after World War II was based on the goal of containing Communism and the assumptions of the so-called "domino theory"—if one country fell to Communism, the surrounding countries would fall, like dominoes. In response to that threat, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was formed in 1955 to prevent Communist expansion, and President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent some 700 military personnel as well as military and economic aid to the government of South Vietnam. The effort was foundering when John F. Kennedy became president.



North Vietnam had a population of 16 million. It was an agricultural nation. The Viet Minh trained guerrillas to go to the south to spread the word of communism. Their weapons mostly came from communist China. To the surprise of the South Vietnamese, those Viet Minh who went to the south helped them on their farms and did not abuse them. They had become used to fearing soldiers. Instead, the Viet Minh were courteous and helpful.

South Vietnam also had a population of 16 million. Its first proper leader was Ngo Dinh Diem who was a fanatical catholic. As communism hated religion, Diem hated all that communism stood for. This is why he got America's support - he had a poor record on human rights but his rule was in the era of the "**Domino Theory**" and anybody who was anti-communist in the Far East was likely to receive American backing - regardless of their less than savoury background. Ngo ruled as a dictator along with his brother - Nhu. Their government was corrupt and brutal but it was also backed by America. Corruption, religious differences, and mounting successes by the Vietcong guerrillas weakened the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem was Catholic, and public protests over the repression of Buddhists threatened the stability of his regime. Kennedy accelerated the flow of American aid and gradually increased U.S. military advisers to more than 16,000. At the same time, he pressed the Diem government to clean house and institute long-overdue political and economic reforms.

After the non-election of 1956, the *Viet Minh became more active militarily. Their guerrillas - now called the Viet Cong* - attacked soft targets in the south. They used the **Ho Chi Minh Trail** which was a 1000 mile trail along the border with Laos with heavy jungle coverage so that detection from the air was very difficult. The Viet Cong were trained by their commander Giap who learned from the tactics used by the Chinese communists in their fight against the Nationalist Chinese forces. One of the problems American troops faced was that while they thought they were fighting for the Vietnamese people's freedom to have democracy.

The situation did not improve. In September of 1963, President Kennedy declared in an interview, "In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help them, we can give them equipment, we can send our men out there as advisers, but they have to win it, the people of Vietnam, against the Communists... But I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake... [The United States] made this effort to defend Europe. Now Europe is quite secure. We also have to participate—we may not like it—in the defence of Asia.





A few weeks later, on November 1, 1963, the South Vietnamese government was overthrown. The coup had the tacit approval of the Kennedy administration. President Diem was assassinated, after refusing an American offer of safety if he agreed to resign. On November 22nd, 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated and Vice President Johnson became President of the USA. Johnson believed that if the Communists took South Vietnam they would then go on to take control of South-East Asia. This would mean the loss of important military, political and commercial interests. In the final weeks of his life, President Kennedy wrestled with the future of the United States' commitment in Vietnam. Whether he would have increased military involvement or negotiated a withdrawal of military personnel still remains hotly debated among historians and officials who served in the administrations of President Kennedy and President Lyndon B. Johnson.

By 1965 the government in the South was on the verge of collapse and Johnson made the decision to send American troops into Vietnam to defend the pro-American South Vietnamese government. The Americans sent money, arms and advisors to help the south but the Viet Cong (Vietnamese Communists) could not be defeated. Americans became divided over the issue of the Vietnam War and ultimately failed to achieve their goal to keep South Vietnam from falling to Communism. United States military aid to Vietnam increased during 1964. By 1965, President Johnson authorized US troops to begin military offensives and started the systematic bombing of North Vietnam. By 1968, the number of US forces surpassed 500,000. During that year's presidential campaign, Americans were deeply divided by the deteriorating military and political situation in Vietnam.

In May 1968, President Johnson announced that formal peace talks would soon begin in Paris. The talks stalled during the last eight months of Johnson's presidency, and the deadlock continued during the early years of Richard Nixon's administration. Finally, in January 1973, an agreement was reached, and President Nixon ordered an end to all US offensive actions against North Vietnam.

In January 1975, North Vietnam began massive invasions of South Vietnam. A few months later, the North Vietnamese captured the capital city of Saigon, and the last Americans were evacuated from the US embassy. The American war in Vietnam was over. More than 3 million Vietnamese and 58,000 Americans had lost their lives.



A quarter-century after the fall of Saigon, the long, divisive struggle in Indochina still lingers in the American fabric



Activities

1. Read the article and use the annotation guide to show your work.
2. Which countries controlled Vietnam before, during, & after WWII?
3. Who were the leaders of North and South Vietnam & which were supported by the USA & Communist China?
4. Why did the Americans stop elections in South Vietnam?
5. Explain why Ho Chi Minh was upset that elections did not take place & what actions did he take in response?
6. Why was South-East Asia so important to the Americans?
7. In which year did President Johnson make the decision to send troops to Vietnam & why did he decide to send troops?
8. Did the USA win the Vietnam War? Why or Why Not?