

Vietnam

During World War II, a Vietnamese communist, Ho Chi Minh, had led a rebellion which had driven the colonial French rulers from his country. On 2 September 1945, in Hanoi, North Vietnam, he announced Vietnam's independence.

'All men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.'

This immortal statement was made in the Declaration of Independence of the United States in 1776. In a broader sense, this means: All the peoples on earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, to be happy and free ...

Nevertheless for more than eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, have violated our Fatherland and oppressed our fellow citizens ...

The French have fled, the Japanese have capitulated, Emperor Bao Dai has abdicated. Our people have broken the chains which for nearly a century have fettered them and have won independence for the Fatherland ...

For these reasons, we, members of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, solemnly declare to the world that Vietnam has the right to be a free and independent country — and in fact is so already. The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their independence and liberty.

- How did Ho Chi Minh justify Vietnamese independence?
- Do you think the United States would have been sympathetic towards his reasons?

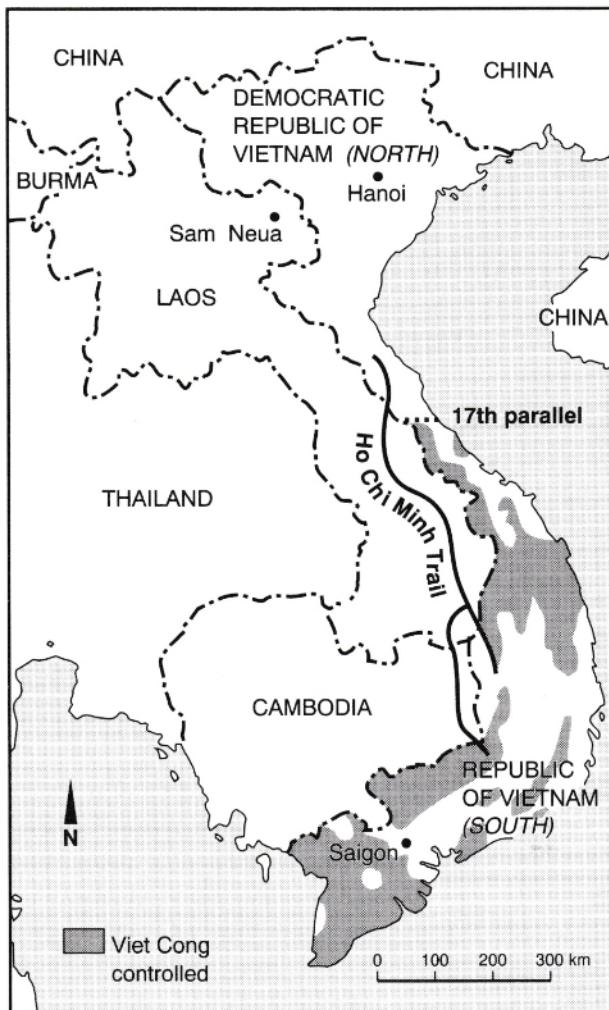
In the agreement that concluded World War II the Allies had insisted on handing back at least part of Vietnam to the French. Ho Chi Minh was now confined to the North and the French had been re-established as the rulers of the South.

Ho Chi Minh led another rebellion to once again eliminate the foreign rulers. The French resisted and a bloody war dragged on for several years. The United States provided the French with increasing support, and, in response, the Chinese and the Soviets began to supply the North Vietnamese. In 1953 American support was worth over \$60 million and by 1954 the United States was bearing 80 per cent of the cost of the war. In 1954, 12 000 French troops were besieged in Dien Bien Phu, and when they were forced to surrender the French agreed to negotiate a peace settlement in Geneva. The outcome of the talks was that the French would leave, but the country would remain divided until after elections were held in the North and South to elect a government.

The United States, realising that Ho Chi Minh would win the election, and that communist influence in the country would increase, decided to support the establishment of a government led by Ngo Dinh Diem which refused to hold elections. Ho Chi Minh called for the 1954 Geneva Agreement to be respected and for democratic elections to take place. When this call was unsuccessful, a National Liberation Front (NLF) was formed in South Vietnam (with the support of the North and therefore, indirectly, the Soviets and the Chinese) to fight for the overthrow of the government backed by the United States.

By 1963 Diem's government, despite receiving munitions and aid from the United States (15 500 military personnel to that time), was losing ground to the NLF. In November his government was overthrown, not by the NLF but by a military coup. The old leaders were executed. The United States was now faced with a choice: whether to continue to support the new military-based government, or withdraw and let it fight it out with the NLF.

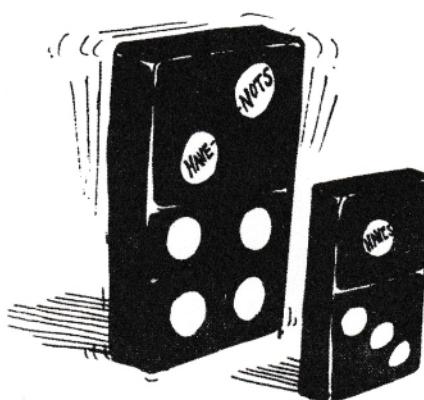
Figure 19.6
Vietnam in 1965



The domino theory

The decision-makers in the United States Government and military, still fearing the spread of communism, were worried that if Vietnam became communist, it might cause a chain reaction, with other Asian countries in the region following suit. They likened this reaction to a long line of dominoes standing end on end: if the first one fell, the rest inevitably followed. Their concept became known as the 'domino theory'.

Figure 19.7
'The Domino Theory.'
Cartoon by Bruce Petty



- What alternative interpretation of the domino theory is suggested by this cartoonist?

Because of it, the United States argued that it had to make a stand in Vietnam, despite the fact that it was backing a 'suspect' government which had not yet established that it had the support of the people.

In 1964 President Lyndon B. Johnson announced increased United States' involvement with the unconsciously ironical words that the reinforcements would protect United States' forces already in Vietnam and 'prevent further aggression'.

From 1964 onwards the United States steadily increased its commitment until in 1968 there were over 540 000 soldiers in the country. Between February 1965 and July 1968 the United States Air Force dropped 2.5 million tons of bombs on North Vietnam and by the end of the war had dropped as many bombs on Vietnam as it had on Nazi Germany in World War II. Despite this mobilisation, the United States and its Allies (who included Australia), were largely unsuccessful in defeating the NLF and its guerilla arm the Viet Cong. In 1968 the Viet Cong seized large parts of South Vietnam including parts of the capital Saigon. Struggle over these areas continued until the end of the war.

In 1965 Ho Chi Minh tried to explain to the western press what those in Vietnam thought they were fighting for.

We are fighting for a perfectly comprehensible and definable thing, which is our independence, exactly as set down in the Geneva Agreement of 1954. You know as well as I do that this demanded the removal of all foreign armies from both the North and South. Today there are 170 000 American soldiers in the South of Vietnam. How many Russian soldiers have you seen here? Not one. You've been over the country; how many Chinese soldiers have you seen? Not one.

Ho Chi Minh in an interview with British correspondent James Cameron, *New York Times*, 11 December 1965

- According to Ho Chi Minh what were the Viet Cong fighting for?
- How did the Americans' involvement in Vietnam differ from that of the Soviets and the Chinese?

As the government in South Vietnam proved increasingly feeble the United States took on a greater role in the battle against the Viet Cong. It was faced with a task of fighting an increasingly popular nationalist movement rather than an identifiable army. The Viet Cong gained the support of the ordinary villagers in their fight against the 'foreign invader'. Villages were used for meetings and hiding places, as well as to store arms. Underneath the houses, complex tunnels were dug to hide both fighters and munitions, and the jungles and fields surrounding villages often became battlefields. Because much of the activity happened underground, or was not immediately obvious, it was extremely difficult for the United States' soldiers to determine which villages were neutral, which supported the American-backed government and which were Viet Cong allies.

Thus to the soldiers, everyone in South Vietnam became a potential enemy and every building in every village, a potential arms storage site or entrance to a tunnel system. The United States Army and the Government in Washington came to believe that the only way to make sure of eliminating the enemy in an area was to eliminate the local people. They therefore adopted the strategies of saturation bombing, bulldozing settlements, and chemical defoliation of fields and jungles.



Figure 19.8 Vietnamese refugees



Figure 19.9 Cartoon '... and we're winning the hearts and minds of what's left' by Bruce Petty

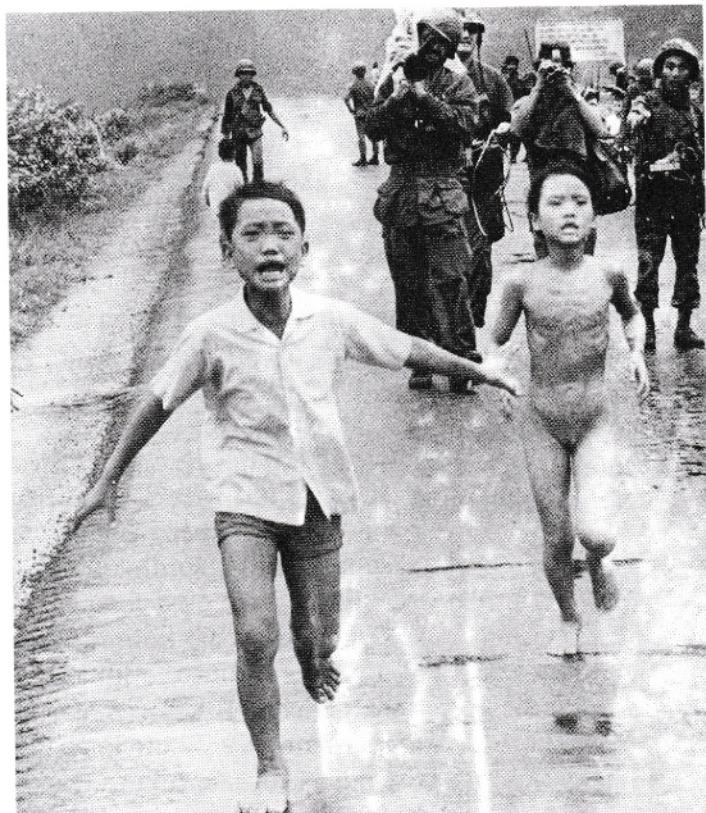


Figure 19.10 Children running from a napalm attack

Napalm, a highly inflammable jelly, was dropped in bombs over villages, setting everything, including the people, on fire.

Because of these tactics, which caused massive numbers of deaths and destruction of property, the United States became increasingly unpopular in Vietnam, at home, and with many sections of the world community.

In the end it admitted defeat and withdrew in 1975. It had been the longest war the United States had ever been involved in, and had cost it at least \$200 000 million, over 55 000 deaths and 300 000 wounded. It had divided the country and its lack of success had been a huge blow to its national pride and belief in its role as protector of smaller nations.

REVIEW

- Why did the United States become involved in Vietnam?
- Outline how it went about achieving its aims.

Response to the Vietnam War at home

One of the major reasons for the United States' withdrawal from Vietnam had been the reaction to the war at home. Since the first days of American involvement there had been protests against the war. These protests often reached a peak on college and university campuses around the nation as the youth of America found its voice.

Confrontations between protestors and those who claimed to be keeping the peace were often violent and bloody. In 1968, as delegates to the Democratic Convention in Chicago met to nominate their next presidential candidate and debate whether to include an anti-war platform in their policy, anti-war protestors clashed with police. America watched on television as police attacked United States' citizens with tear gas and clubs in an attempt to disperse them. In the process hundreds of protestors were injured and the nation was forced to review the effect the war in Vietnam was having on the country.



Figure 19.11 The Buddhist ritual of self-immolation, in protest against the war, occurred in both Vietnam and the United States. This photo shows the charred body of Nguyen Thi Mai, Saigon, 1967.

This was not the end of the violence. In 1970 four students were shot dead and nine others wounded when the National Guard opened fire on anti-war protestors at Kent State University in Ohio. Only ten days later police killed two student protestors at Jackson University in Mississippi.

Figure 19.12

A student shot dead by the National Guard, Kent State University, May 1970



The United States' force in Vietnam consisted largely of conscripted troops and many young Americans burnt their draft cards and refused to go. Those who avoided the draft ('draft dodgers' they were called) were relentlessly pursued by the Government and usually jailed when caught. Their trials provided a further forum for the protest movement.

While Vietnam was of particular concern to the youth of America, hundreds of thousands of people of all ages took part in demonstrations against the war in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In New York in 1967, 300 000 marched and a crowd estimated at over 100 000 tried to close the Pentagon (United States' military headquarters) in protest against continued American involvement.

**Figure 19.13** Protest march outside the White House, 1965

Figure 19.14
Some returned soldiers joined those who protested against the war.



Returned soldiers and even sections of the senior military joined the rising chorus of protest against the war.

The protest movement continued for nearly a decade. The divisions caused by the war not only left scars on society in general, but also affected the willingness of the United States Government and military to be involved in future overseas activities. The nation emerged chastened from its experience in Vietnam which forced it to begin questioning whether its post-World-War-II foreign policy of world leadership, intervention and anti-communism was worth the cost.

REVIEW

What effect did the Vietnam War have on American society? Give examples to support your views.

United States' foreign policy in the Middle East in the '70s and '80s

Despite its experience in Vietnam, the United States continued to involve itself in the affairs of other nations into the 1970s and 1980s. The Middle East had been a world trouble spot for centuries but the creation of the Jewish state of Israel in 1948, in the middle of an Arab, Muslim-dominated area, had caused more problems.

The United States had supported the founding of Israel but in the late 1960s America had become dependent on the Arab states in the Middle East for oil to supply its economy.

When, in 1973, Egypt and Syria attacked Israel and reoccupied the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights (taken by Israel in the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict), the United States decided to support Israel and began an extensive airlift operation to supply it with arms. In response, the Arab countries stopped the shipment of oil to America and in the winter of 1973–1974 the nation faced its first petrol shortage. The pressure was mounting for the United States to reassess its foreign policy.

In the late 1970s it took on the role of international peace-maker when it organised a series of meetings between Arab and Israeli representatives to resolve their problems. This culminated in the main protagonists in the Middle East — Israel and Egypt — signing a formal peace treaty in 1979 in which Egypt recognised Israel's right to exist and Israel agreed to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt.

Lebanon

In 1982, in an effort to bring peace to Lebanon, racked by civil war and invaded by Israeli forces, United States' Marines were sent to Beirut as part of a multinational peace-keeping force. The United States was seen by many Arabs as strongly pro-Israeli and representative of a growing threat to Muslim nations from western countries. In an attempt to drive the United States from the area, the American Embassy and Marine headquarters in Beirut were both attacked by cars filled with explosives and driven by suicide bombers. Hundreds of United States' citizens were killed or wounded. The following year, when the Lebanese Government that the peace-keepers were supporting broke up, the United States decided to withdraw its troops rather than become involved in another drawn-out confrontation. It had learnt that one of the costs of being a world leader and intervening in areas such as the Middle East was to make itself the subject of terrorist attacks.

The Cold War thaws

Their experience in Vietnam and the Middle East, had combined to make United States' administrations more cautious in committing themselves in international affairs. In 1984 Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger announced six criteria which would have to be fulfilled before the United States would consider sending troops overseas again.

1. The United States should not commit forces to combat overseas unless the particular engagement or occasion is deemed vital to our national interest or that of our allies.
2. If we decide it is necessary to put combat troops into a given situation, we should do so wholeheartedly, and with the clear intention of winning.
3. If we decide to commit forces to combat overseas, we should have clearly defined political and military objectives. And we should know precisely how our forces can accomplish those clearly defined objectives. And we should have and send the forces needed to do just that.

4. The relationship between our objectives and the forces we have committed ... must be continually reassessed and adjusted if necessary.
5. Before the USA commits combat forces abroad, there must be some reasonable assurance we will have the support of the American people and their elected representatives in Congress.
6. The commitment of US forces to combat should be a last resort.

V. Brittain, ed., *The Gulf Between Us*, Virago Press, London, 1991, pp. 58–9

- To which events in the previous twenty years do you think these criteria were a response?

Relations with the USSR

Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to leadership of the Soviet Union in 1985 signalled a new era in understanding and mutual tolerance, if not respect, between the United States and the Soviet Union. Gorbachev encouraged all communist countries to go their own way, independent of the USSR. In 1987 the United States and the USSR signed a treaty which not only limited the expansion of but actually marked the first stage in the destruction of the huge arsenal of nuclear weapons each had compiled. The treaty required the two superpowers to destroy all their intermediate-range missiles and included a joint supervision process to ensure fulfillment of the conditions.

The Wall comes down

In response to the new spirit engendered by Mikhail Gorbachev, a breakthrough occurred between communism and capitalism in Berlin. On 9 November 1989, the gates in the wall between East and West were thrown open, allowing the people of Berlin to once again travel freely throughout their city. People danced on the structure which had once represented the barrier between two opposing systems. Within days holes were smashed in the wall by the celebrating population and within four years of its opening, East and West Germany had united as one country with a single currency. The new Germany re-established itself as a central force economically and politically in Europe.

A new world order

A side-effect of the more liberal attitudes adopted by Mikhail Gorbachev was internal turmoil in the Soviet Union. In 1992 the states which had made up the USSR began to split and were torn by protests and political strife. This disorder and division left the United States as the sole military superpower in the world. Although countries such as Japan and Germany have become significant economically, and other countries continue to have nuclear weapons and large armies, the United States has come to dominate the international scene.

The Gulf War

In August 1990, the Middle East once again erupted in bloodshed when Iraqi forces invaded the neighbouring nation of Kuwait. The Middle East and its oil was still of vital importance to the United States and Kuwait had been one of its major suppliers. Its oil supply was now threatened. The Iraqi invasion was the first test of how the United States would respond, now that a new world order had been established.

Learning from its previous experience, the United States sought to enlist the support of the American public and other nations in repelling Iraq by acting through the United Nations. Urged on by the United States, the UN Security Council in November 1990 passed Resolution 678 which authorised the use of all necessary means to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait. An ultimatum was issued: Iraqi forces must withdraw from Kuwait by 15 January 1991, or face the consequences.

As the deadline approached, a multinational force gathered in Saudi Arabia, on the border of Iraq. It included troops and aircraft from a wide range of western and Arab countries including Saudi Arabia, France and Britain. However, the UN force was led by, and consisted overwhelmingly, of troops and weapons from the United States.

The deadline expired and nineteen hours later the Coalition began its attack. Before the conflict was over, 88 500 tons of explosives had been dropped on the Iraqi forces in an air bombardment that continued around the clock for days. After the initial bombardment the Coalition's ground troops moved in, accompanied by continual air support. The Iraqi Army was forced to retreat from Kuwait towards Iraq's capital, Baghdad, before the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, agreed to peace. It is estimated that at least 100 000 Iraqis died at the hands of the American-led UN forces. The Coalition with its overwhelming power, technological and air superiority had suffered less than one per cent of its opponent's casualties.

The United States — Still a world leader

In the early 1990s the United States had 395 military bases in 35 countries and 40 per cent of its military personnel on active duty, serving overseas. It had chosen not to revert to its policy of isolationism, but the United States Government appeared to have learnt that if it was to be successful as a world leader it needed the support of the world community and its own people.

United States' business and foreign policy

One of the major aims of United States' post-World-War-II foreign policy was to promote liberal capitalism as a preferable economic system to communism. In achieving this aim, United States' business has played a major role in establishing capitalist 'beachheads' in the most communist of environments.

Businesses have been urged to invest overseas to build up United States' influence, just as they were during the Taft Administration. United States' companies, through their advertising arms, have sold their products and their