

Ending the war in Vietnam

After the Tet Offensive President Johnson concluded that the war could not be won militarily. He reduced the bombing campaign against North Vietnam and instructed his officials to begin negotiating for peace with the Communists. In March 1968 a peace conference began in Paris.

Johnson also announced that he would not be seeking re-election as President. It was an admission of failure. In the election campaign both Republican and Democrat candidates campaigned to end US involvement in Vietnam. The anti-Vietnam feeling was so strong that if they had supported continuing the war they would have had no chance of being elected anyway. It was no longer a question of 'could the USA win the war?' – now it was 'how can the USA get out of Vietnam without it looking like a defeat?'

In November 1968 Richard Nixon was elected President. From 1969 to 1973 he and his National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger worked tirelessly to end US involvement in Vietnam. This was not easy because the bigger question of how to contain world Communism – the one that had got the USA into Vietnam in the first place – had not gone away. They did not want to appear simply to hand Vietnam to the Communists. They used a range of strategies.

SOURCE 53

Pressure on the USSR and China

In 1969 the USSR and China fell out. Indeed, late in 1969, it seemed possible that there would even be a war between these two powerful Communist countries. As a result, both the USSR and China tried to improve relations with the USA.

- In 1970 Nixon began Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) with the USSR to limit nuclear weapons. He asked Moscow to encourage North Vietnam to end the war.
- Nixon also started to improve relations with China. In February 1972 Nixon was invited to China. As with the USSR, he asked China to pressure North Vietnam to end the war.

Peace negotiations with North Vietnam

From early 1969, Kissinger had regular meetings with the chief Vietnamese peace negotiator, Le Duc Tho.



'Vietnamisation' of the war effort

In Vietnam Nixon began the process of Vietnamisation – building up South Vietnamese forces and withdrawing US troops. Between April 1969 and the end of 1971 almost 400,000 US troops left Vietnam.

Bombing

Nixon increased bombing campaigns against North Vietnam to show he was not weak. He also invaded Viet Cong bases in Cambodia, causing outrage across the world, and even in the USA.

SOURCE 54

- 1 Immediate cease-fire. = truce
- 2 Release of all prisoners of war within 60 days.
- 3 Withdrawal of all US forces and bases.
- 4 Full accounting of missing in action. MIA
- 5 Self-determination for South Vietnam.

US strategies to extricate US troops from involvement in Vietnam.

In 1972, the North Vietnamese launched a major offensive but were unable to conquer South Vietnam. In Paris in January 1973, Le Duc Tho, Nixon and the South Vietnamese President Thieu signed a peace agreement (see Source 54). Nixon was jubilant. He described the agreement as 'peace with honour'. Others disagreed (see Source 56), but the door was now open for Nixon to pull out all US troops. By 29 March 1973, the last American forces had left Vietnam.

The main points of the peace agreement of January 1973.

SOURCE 55**WHO LOST VIET NAM?**

"NOT I," SAID
IKE. "I JUST
SENT MONEY."



"NOT I," SAID JACK.
"I JUST SENT AD-
VISORS."



"NOT I," SAID LYNDON.
"I JUST FOLLOWED JACK."



"NOT I," SAID DICK. "I JUST
HONORED JACK AND LYNDON'S
COMMITMENTS."



"NOT I," SAID JERRY.
"WHAT WAS THE
QUESTION?"



"YOU LOST
VIETNAM," SAID
HENRY, "BECAUSE
YOU DIDN'T
TRUST YOUR
LEADERS."

**SOURCE 56****FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS**

... the nation began at last to extricate itself from a quicksand war that had plagued four Presidents and driven one from office, that had sundered the country more deeply than any event since the Civil War, that in the end came to be seen by a great majority of Americans as having been a tragic mistake.

... but its more grievous toll was paid at home — a wound to the spirit so sore that news of peace stirred only the relief that comes with an end to pain. A war that produced no famous victories, no national heroes and no strong patriotic songs, produced no memorable armistice day celebrations either. America was too exhausted by the war and too wary of peace to celebrate.

Reaction to the agreement of January 1973 in the American magazine Newsweek,
5 February 1973.

- 1** Describe the attitude of Sources 55 and 56 to the agreement of January 1973.

- 2** Identify each person in this cartoon (Source 55).

Ike =
Jack =
Lyndon =
Dick =
Jerry =
Henry =

1 quicksand = a situation that is dangerous or difficult to escape from
2 to sunder = to split or break apart
3 price, count, casualties
4 ceasefire (Waffenstillstand)
5 wary, cautious, reluctant

ACTIVITY**Why isn't the USA celebrating the end of the Vietnam War?**

It is 1973. Peace has been secured in Vietnam and the final US troops have left. You have to write an article for a British newspaper explaining why the USA is not celebrating. You are trying to convey the mood of the American people. Use the evidence on pages 354–63.

Remember that you are writing for a British audience. They will know about the Vietnam War. However, they will not be clear on how it has affected Americans.

The fall of South Vietnam, 1973–75

It is not clear whether Nixon really believed he had secured a lasting peace settlement. But within two years it was meaningless and South Vietnam had fallen to the Communists.

Nixon had promised continuing financial aid and military support to Vietnam, but Congress refused to allow it. They did not want to waste American money. The evidence was that the South Vietnamese regime was corrupt and lacked the support of the majority of the population. Even more important, Nixon himself was in big political trouble with the Watergate Scandal (see pages 394–95). In 1974 Nixon was forced to resign over Watergate, but the new President, Gerald Ford, also failed to get the backing of Congress over Vietnam.

Without US air power or military back-up and without the support of the majority of the population, the South Vietnamese government could not survive for long. In December 1974 the North Vietnamese launched a major military offensive against South Vietnam. The capital, Saigon, fell to Communist forces in April 1975.

One of the bleakest symbols of American failure in Vietnam was the televised news images of desperate Vietnamese men, women and children trying to clamber aboard American helicopters taking off from the US embassy. All around them Communist forces swarmed through Saigon. After 30 years of constant conflict, the struggle for control of Vietnam had finally been settled and the Communists had won.

FOCUS TASK A

Why did the USA lose the Vietnam War?

Look back at your answers to Focus Task B on page 355. You will find them very useful for this summary activity.

The Americans did not lose purely for military reasons. There were other factors as well.

- 1 In the centre of a large sheet of paper put the question: Why did the USA lose the Vietnam War?
- 2 Around the question, draw six boxes. In five boxes write an explanation or paste a source which shows the importance of the following factors:
 - US military tactics in Vietnam
 - the unpopularity of the South Vietnamese regime
 - the experience of the Viet Cong and the inexperience of the American soldiers
 - opposition to the war in the USA
 - Chinese and Soviet support for the Viet Cong.
- 3 In the sixth box write: 'But did they really lose?' and summarise the argument put forward in Source 57, and your view on it.
- 4 Add other boxes if you think there are factors you should consider.
- 5 Add lines to connect the factors and write an explanation of the connection.

SOURCE 57

The American military was not defeated in Vietnam –

The American military did not lose a battle of any consequence. From a military standpoint, it was almost an unprecedented performance. This included Tet 68, which was a major military defeat for the VC and NVA. Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army

The United States did not lose the war in Vietnam, the South Vietnamese did –

The fall of Saigon happened 30 April 1975, two years AFTER the American military left Vietnam. The last American troops departed in their entirety 29 March 1973. How could we lose a war we had already stopped fighting? We fought to an agreed stalemate. deadlock, tie, draw

The Fall of Saigon –

The 140,000 evacuees in April 1975 during the fall of Saigon consisted almost entirely of civilians and Vietnamese military, NOT American military running for their lives.

There were almost twice as many casualties in Southeast Asia (primarily Cambodia) the first two years after the fall of Saigon in 1975 than there were during the ten years the US was involved in Vietnam.

An extract from a website, 'Vietnam War Statistics', by an American ex-serviceman.

1 shreds, bits and pieces

2 stop, hold, hold back

3 act of barbarity/ brutality, war crime

FOCUS TASK B

How successful was the USA's policy of containment?

- 1 Look back at your chart from page 341. Make and complete a similar chart for the Vietnam War.
- 2 You have now looked at three very different case studies of the USA's attempts to contain Communism. Using the work you have done for the tasks on pages 341, 352 and this page, explain:
 - how successful you feel the American policy was
 - what the main reasons were for its success or failure.

How did the Vietnam War affect the policy of containment?

The American policy of containment was in tatters.¹

It had failed militarily. The war had shown that even the USA's vast military strength could not stem the spread of Communism.²

It had also failed politically. Not only did the USA fail to stop South Vietnam going Communist, but the heavy bombing of Vietnam's neighbours, Laos and Cambodia, actually helped the Communist forces in those countries to win support. By 1975 both Laos and Cambodia had Communist governments. Instead of slowing it down, American policies actually speeded up the domino effect in the region.

It was also a propaganda disaster. The Americans had always presented their campaign against Communism as a moral crusade. But atrocities committed by American soldiers and the use of chemical weapons damaged the USA's reputation. The whole campaign was shown to be flawed. The Americans were propping up a government that did not have the support of its own people.³

The failure greatly affected the USA's policies towards Communist states. After the war, the Americans tried to improve their relations with China. They ended their block on China's membership of the UN, and the President made visits to China. They entered into a period of greater understanding with the Soviet Union. In fact, during the 1970s both the Soviet Union and China got on better with the USA than they did with each other. The Americans became very suspicious of involving their troops in any other conflict which they could not easily and overwhelmingly win. This was an attitude that continued to affect American foreign policy into the twenty-first century.

What were the consequences of the Vietnam War?

Thirty years of war leaves its mark on a country. War is not a game. After a war you don't just pack up your kit, have a shower and get on with life. The diagram below summarises some of the consequences of the war on Vietnam and the USA.

FOCUS TASK

- 1 Study this diagram.
- 2 Are there other consequences that you have studied on pages 353–64 which should be added to it?
- 3 Compare the impact of this war with the impact of another conflict you have studied. Do you think it was lesser or greater? Give your reasons.

EFFECTS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

Chemical warfare

- Damaged crops which led to food shortages
- Destroyed 5.4 million acres of forest areas and the animals and plants living there
- Poisoned streams and rivers

EFFECTS ON VIETNAMESE CITIZENS

- Chemical warfare meant that South Vietnamese citizens had in their bodies levels of dioxin (a powerful poison used in Agent Orange) three times as high as US citizens
- Large numbers of unexploded mines and bombs caused death and injury to adults and children for years to come
- Napalm caused horrific burns which killed or disfigured victims, often civilians caught in crossfire

EFFECTS ON US TROOPS

Drug addiction

Hard drugs were available easily and cheaply in Vietnam from neighbouring Laos and Cambodia – official US army estimates put heroin use by American troops at 30 per cent

Confusion and bitterness

US forces were not welcomed home in the same way as victorious troops in the Second World War. Many found it difficult to adjust to civilian life

Stress

Strains of war led to post traumatic stress

Cancer

Some troops who handled Agent Orange contracted cancer

WHAT WERE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE VIETNAM WAR?

EFFECTS ON VIETNAMESE SOCIETY

Morals

- Fighting drove thousands of peasants ¹ into shanty towns near US bases – poverty, prostitution and drug abuse were common
- US forces were supplied with vast amounts of luxuries as well as military supplies – this created a huge black market with corrupt South Vietnamese government officials
- Buddhist priests protested about the effects of the American presence in Vietnam in the late 1960s

Refugees

- Around 5 million South Vietnamese were displaced from their homes. Towns and villages in North and South Vietnam were devastated by bombing and ground fighting
- Vietnam took well over 20 years to start recovering from the war. Poverty, Communist policies and the hope of a better life led thousands of Vietnamese to become 'boat people' in the late 1970s onwards. They tried to sail to Malaysia and Hong Kong in makeshift ² boats. Around 1 million refugees escaped to the West (mainly USA). At least 50,000 were drowned or murdered by pirates. In the mid 1990s the USA finally ended its trade ban with Vietnam and the World Bank was allowed to invest in the country

¹ shanty town = an area where poor people in cheap housing live

² makeshift = provisional, improvised; temporary and low quality