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Why did the United States become involved in the Vietnam war?

To understand the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War, it is necessary to consider the period of time starting from 1941 and ending in 1965, which corresponds to the entry of the U.S. in WWII to L.B.Johnson's escalation of the conflict. Over those two decades, the position of the U.S. in relation to Indochina oscillated between the support for self-determination and freedom in colonised countries (as expressed, for instance, in the Atlantic Charter in 1941), and the opposition to the Soviet Union and communism, be it defensive through the strategy of containment, or more aggressive as advocated by the 'Truman doctrine' or NSC-68. To a large extent, Johnson's fateful decision of 1965 was shaped by the choices made by the previous administrations of Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy. Each of these presidencies approached Vietnam with a different set of prejudices and objectives. As this essay will try to underline, U.S. foreign policy in Indochina resulted from a series of misinterpretations and missed opportunities: exaggeration of the Soviet or Chinese threat, misunderstanding of the national movement, half-hearted and unwise support of the old colonial masters, unfounded but staunch belief in the 'Domino Theory', the impact of the Korean war, the fears about 'credibility'… This essay will follow a chronological structure and focus on each successive administration's foreign policy in Indochina and Vietnam.

Although one of Roosevelt's wartime objectives, as stated in the Atlantic Charter[1], was self-determination of peoples, and although he considered French Indochina as an example of onerous colonialism that should be turned into a trusteeship, he had to adapt his position to the view of his British allies who, understandably, did not welcome anti-colonialist policies[2]. The U.S. was providing some support to Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh independence movement, especially through the OSS (the CIA's predecessor). Roosevelt had only contempt for the French colonial policy, and advised the U.S. military to keep the French at arm's length[3]. However, as the war progressed, the threat of the Soviet Union started to grow, and it started to become more important to prevent an unfavourable post-war situation in South-East Asia than to dismantle the crumbling colonial empires. As a result, the U.S. provided only very limited support to Ho Chi Minh, but equally little help to the French (and mostly thanks to British insistence)[4]. After Roosevelt's death in April 1945, however, Truman was more favourable to the old colonial masters, and less to the nationalist movements. On 2 September 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared the independence of Vietnam (although his main area of control was limited to North Vietnam) and the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, in terms clearly aimed at attracting American support[5], although the U.S received it coldly. With British help, French military forces were brought to South Vietnam in the same month, and guerrilla warfare ensued, with the U.S.

[1] Third point: 'They respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live[…]'
[2] See *Pentagon Papers*, vol. I, ch. 1: 'Indochina in U.S. wartime policy, 1941-1945'.
[3] See *Approaching Vietnam*, ch 1: 'Roosevelt's Dream'.
[4] Idem.
[5] See *Major Problems*, p.535, 'The Vietnamese Declaration of Independence'. It actually quoted the words from the American Declaration of Independence: 'All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness'.

uninvolved but on the French side[6]. After a short truce in 1946 during which allied occupation of Indochina was officially ended and the region reverted to French control, the Franco-Viet Minh war started again in earnest later this year. The U.S. remained largely neutral in this conflict, only urging France to establish an effective nationalist alternative to Ho Chi Minh.

With the onset of the Cold War, the position of the U.S. towards South-East Asia started to change. The 'loss of China' and the Russian atomic bomb in 1949 changed American perceptions dramatically. Relatively unimportant up to then, Indochina was now a potential prey to Chinese expansionist ambitions. As a major provider of raw resources such as tin or rubber, the region had to remain within the Western sphere of influence. It had also become a part of the Marshall Plan: by supporting financially the French there (the costs of a 100,000 strong army), the U.S. were helping recovery in Europe and guaranteeing open access to trade[7]. Moreover, in March 1950, Truman sent the first major military aid to Indochina[8]. Passive 'containment' was quickly turning into the 'Truman doctrine' and the more aggressive stance recommended in Nitze's NSC-68 paper. The outbreak of the Korean War only made the U.S. even more suspicious of Chinese and Soviet intentions. Dean Acheson did not distinguish between Nationalists and Communists, and considered Ho Chi Minh as a Soviet or Chinese proxy[9], although this was actually not the case[10].

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[6] See *Pentagon Papers*, vol.I, ch.1.
[7] See *Origins of the Cold War*, ch 14: 'From the Marshall Plan to the Third World'.
[8] *American Age*, p.521.
[9] *American Age*, p.520.
[10] See Hunt, M.H. and Levine, S.I., 'Revolutionary Movements in Asia and the Cold War' in *Origins of the Cold War*, ch.15.

When Eisenhower took office in January 1953, with John Foster Dulles, a militant anti-Communist, as his Secretary of State, he abandoned the idea of containment, which he thought ineffective, for a more aggressive strategy based on brinkmanship and the avoidance of stalemates such as the Korean War[11]. By that stage, the U.S. were financing two third of France's war effort in Vietnam[12]. Conscious of the dangers of a big military budget, Eisenhower preferred nuclear weapons and covert operations through the CIA; this tactic was used successfully in Iran in 1953 and in Guatemala in 1954[13]. In a press conference on 7 April 1954, Eisenhower affirmed his belief in the 'Domino Theory': the loss of Indochina to communism would trigger the fall the rest of South-East Asia, and possibly threaten Japan and even Australia, and therefore could not be allowed to happen[14]. A month later, the French surrendered in Dien Bien Phu, and in July, negotiated the Geneva Accords: a temporary division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel, movement of troops and people to their sides, general elections planned in 1956 and the agreement that neither side would join military alliances or allow foreign military bases[15]. The U.S., who had provided $4 billions between 1950 and 1954 to France to fight Ho Chi Minh, refused to recognise the Accords, and started pushing the French out of South Vietnam. At the same time, in September 1954, they created a mutual defence organisation, the SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organisation)[16], which would become a justification for further involvement under the next presidents.

[11] *Approaching Vietnam*, ch.4: 'True Liberation'.
[12] *America, a Narrative History*, p.1319.
[13] *American Age*, pp.545-546.
[14] *Major Problems*, pp.536-537.
[15] *American Age*, p.550
[16] *America, a Narrative History*, pp. 1319-1320.

After Geneva, the U.S. started providing support to Ngo Dinh Diem, a Roman Catholic anti-communist; he took power in 1956 after the departure of the French, with two military advisers: General J.Lawton Collins and Colonel Edward Lansdale; Collins correctly perceived that Diem was a rotten apple and left a year later, but Lansdale encouraged Eisenhower to support him[17]. Contrary to the Geneva Accords, there were no general elections in 1956. The hope was that Diem would be able to create a viable state as an attractive alternative to the despotic DRV, with a little help from America: U.S. advisers were training the South Vietnamese army in conventional warfare, and U.S. financial aid was provided[18]. But Diem was a weak ruler, unwilling to implement necessary reforms, alienating the South Vietnamese public opinion through his effort to eliminate any opposition by labelling it 'communist', and antagonizing the Buddhist majority. Around the same time, the Communist sphere seemed to be expanding: invasion of Hungary in 1956, first satellite in 1957 (threat of ICBMs), victory of Castro in Cuba on 1 January 1959, confrontations over Berlin… In 1960, in South Vietnam, the anti-Diem forces coalesced into the National Liberation Front, a mix of Communists and non-Communists, and guerrilla warfare increased, with support from Hanoi. It was becoming increasingly apparent that Diem's regime was now a liability and was not an effective bulwark against North Vietnam.

After a narrow victory in the November 1964 elections against Nixon, J.F.Kennedy arrived in January 1961 with a grand vision for foreign policy: to commit

[17] *American Age*, p.551.
[18] Idem, p.552.

America to the defence of liberty, anywhere in the world[19], as if to answer Kruschchev's offer, in the same month, to help third-world countries to achieve their independence. He gathered around him a team of close advisors, the "whiz kids": McNamara as Secretary of Defence, Dean Rusk in the Department of State and McGeorge Bundy in the National Security Council[20]. Having used during his campaign the argument than a 'missile gap' existed with the USSR (which actually was in America's favour, as he later learned), he felt compelled to increase the military budget (13% from 1961 to 1964) against the advice of Eisenhower[21]. Like Eisenhower, however, he was interested by the potential of covert operations. At the same time as South Vietnam was sinking more and more into civil war, several crisis were happening: first the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs in Cuba (17 April 1961), then the stand-off in Berlin (leading to the construction of the Wall in August 1961) and the Cuban missile confrontation in October 1962. For American (and Allies) public opinion, it seemed that the world was close to conflagration, but this actually proved that neither side was willing to up the ante and risk nuclear war[22]. As Logevall argues[23], despite his rhetoric, J.F.K was more cautious, as he demonstrated in the Laotian crisis: in 1961, the local Communists, the Pathet Lao seized power in Laos, ousting the U.S.-backed regime. Kennedy sent the 7th Fleet, but was reluctant to intervene militarily there and provoke China (as had happened in Korea); after negotiations, a Communist-leaning government was installed in Laos in1962, but the CIA remained

[19] *America,a Narrative History*, p.1345: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and success of liberty."
[20] Idem, p.1345.
[21] *America since 1945*, p.99.
[22] See *America since 1945*, ch.5: 'Kennedy, Johnson and the Crisis of American Liberalism'.
[23] *Choosing War*, ch.1: 'The Kickoff".

involved in the country[24]. During the same period, Special Forces had started to operate in Laos and Vietnam (around 1000 all in all), although J.F.K., in public, would deny any American military involvement in the region.

By 1963, the regime of Diem was sinking fast, despite increasing U.S. aid: the brutality of his repression of the Buddhist protests shocked the American public opinion, and the South Vietnamese army was pathetically inefficient against the NLF. Between a withdrawal and a massive commitment, Kennedy had finally opted for the middle way: by 1963, there were 16,000 American soldiers in Vietnam, and military aid had tripled ($185 millions)[25]. In August 1963, De Gaulle had publicly warned the U.S. of the risks of entanglement in Indochina, and recommended a negotiated peace similar to Laos, but in September 1963, Kennedy reaffirmed on television the necessity for the U.S. to stay in Vietnam to protect it from the DRV and China, although both seem to have been willing to reach an agreement[26]. Kennedy may have thought that an accord resulting in an American withdrawal could have been perceived in the same way as the 'loss of China' had been in the 50s, a dangerous predicament so close to the elections of 1964. In November 1963, with the U.S. turning a blind eye, Diem was ousted from power by his generals, and assassinated, a fate that Kennedy would share shortly afterwards.

Lyndon B. Johnson arrived in the White House with great ideas for domestic policy but little in terms of foreign policy, apart from his determination not to be "the president who lost Vietnam", and the help of Kennedy's advisors (McNamara, Rusk and

[24] See *American Age*, p.591.
[25] Idem p.593.
[26] See *Choosing War*, ch.1.

McGeorge Bundy). After Diem's, there was a power vacuum in Saigon, filled by a succession of weak regimes, so U.S. presence there was necessary to prevent collapse[27]. Johnson could not contemplate negotiations with the Viet Minh, which he considered as a Chinese proxy, and especially not from the weak position South Vietnam had then[28]. The fact that he was facing Goldwater, a tough militarist, in the 1964 elections, also forced his hand. According to Logevall[29], for Johnson, even more than for Kennedy, it was a question of credibility: of America, in the eyes of its allies (respect of the SEATO) and its enemies, of the Democratic Party, and perhaps most of all, his own. The role of president had become so important in American politics, and so powerful, that Johnson probably felt he had to act 'in the right way', and that dissenting voices were muted. Progressively, American forces were getting involved in what was in essence a Vietnamese civil war: during 1964, the U.S. was helping South Vietnamese covert operations in North Vietnam, triggering in August a skirmish with Viet Minh vessels. Johnson used this opportunity to push through Congress the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorising the use of force to protect U.S. soldiers. Although Johnson, because of the elections, told the American public that there would be no 'American boys' fighting where 'Asian boys' ought to fight and no bombing raids in North Vietnam, all the elements were in place at this stage for a major escalation of the conflict[30]. Once elected, Johnson would start Operation Rolling Thunder (February 1965), a bombing campaign against North Vietnam, and by the end of 1965 there would be about 160,000 U.S. soldiers in Vietnam[31].

[27] *America since 1945*, pp.107-108.
[28] See *The American Age*, p.606.
[29] See *Choosing War*, ch.12.
[30] *America, a Narrative History*, pp.1370-1373.
[31] *The American Age*, p.610.

In his book, *In Retrospect*, McNamara lamented the failure of the U.S. in Vietnam: "We were wrong, terribly wrong"[32]. It can be argued that the involvement of the U.S. was due to a series of strategic miscalculations. Vietnam was never as important as any of the successive presidents felt. Neither the Soviet Union nor China was willing to risk a global confrontation with the U.S. because of it. The Viet Minh was a nationalist revolutionary movement, quite distinct from both Communist powers, with its own local particularities[33]. Like France, the U.S. underestimated the strategic power of guerrilla warfare, and thought that overwhelming conventional military forces would easily win, whereas this was actually playing in the hands of the Viet Minh, as Vo Nguyen Giap later confirmed[34]. Moreover, a large part of U.S. foreign policy was based on ideology rather than proven principles, like the 'Domino Theory', the necessity of 'negotiating from a position of strength', and the assumptions of Oriental duplicity present in Kennan's Long Telegram (and perhaps even, as Borstelmann points out, latent racism[35]). To make matters worse, the power of decision became concentrated in an increasingly tighter circle around the president with each successive administration. In a way, the Vietnam War was the result of the triumph of hubris over reason.

[32] Quoted by Logevall in the preface of *Choosing War*.
[33] See Hunt, M.H. and Levine, S.I. 'Revolutionary Movements in Asia and the Cold War' in *Origins of the Cold War,* ch.15.
[34] *Major Problems*, p.538, 'General Vo Nguyen Giap on People's War, 1961'.
[35] Borstelmann,T. 'The United States, the Cold War and the Color Line' in *Origins of the Cold War*, ch.19.

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