

Some History

SAT Prep Class 8

The Vietnam War: Part 1

Web resource: <https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-history>

Vietnam War was a long, costly and divisive conflict that pitted the communist government of North Vietnam against South Vietnam and its principal ally, the United States. The conflict was intensified by the ongoing Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. More than 3 million people (including over 58,000 Americans) were killed in the Vietnam War, and more than half of the dead were Vietnamese civilians. Opposition to the war in the United States bitterly divided Americans, even after President Richard Nixon ordered the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1973. Communist forces ended the war by seizing control of South Vietnam in 1975, and the country was unified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam the following year.



Roots of the Vietnam War

Vietnam, a nation in Southeast Asia on the eastern edge of the Indochinese peninsula, had been under French colonial rule since the 19th century.

During World War II, Japanese forces invaded Vietnam. To fight off both Japanese occupiers and the French colonial administration, political leader Ho Chi Minh—inspired by Chinese and Soviet communism—formed the Viet Minh, or the League for the Independence of Vietnam.



Roots of the Vietnam War

Seeking to regain control of the region, France backed Emperor Bao and set up the state of Vietnam in July 1949, with the city of Saigon as its capital.

Both sides wanted the same thing: a unified Vietnam. But while Ho and his supporters wanted a nation modeled after other communist countries, Bao and many others wanted a Vietnam with close economic and cultural ties to the West.



When Did the Vietnam War Start?

The Vietnam War and active U.S. involvement in the war began in 1954, though ongoing conflict in the region had stretched back several decades.

After Ho's communist forces took power in the north, armed conflict between northern and southern armies continued until a decisive battle at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 ended in victory for northern Viet Minh forces. The French loss at the battle ended almost a century of French colonial rule in Indochina.



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The subsequent treaty signed in July 1954 at a Geneva conference split Vietnam along the latitude known as the 17th Parallel (17 degrees north latitude), with Ho in control in the North and Bao in the South. The treaty also called for nationwide elections for reunification to be held in 1956.

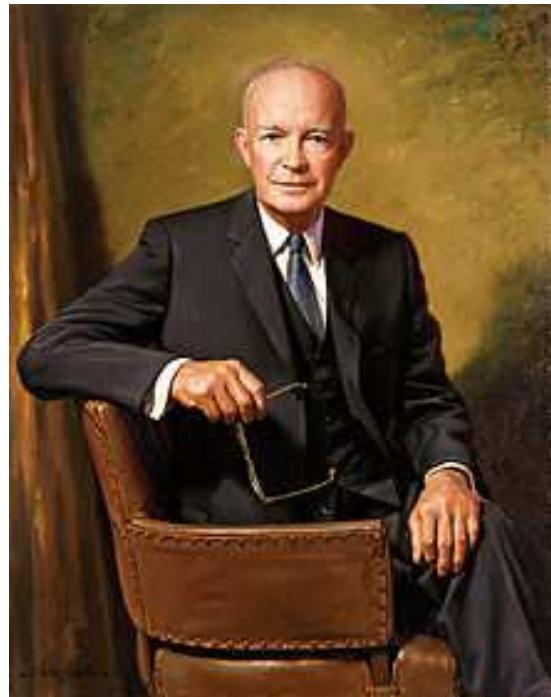
In 1955, however, the strongly anti-communist politician Ngo Dinh Diem pushed Emperor Bao aside to become president of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN), often referred to during that era as South Vietnam.



The Viet Cong

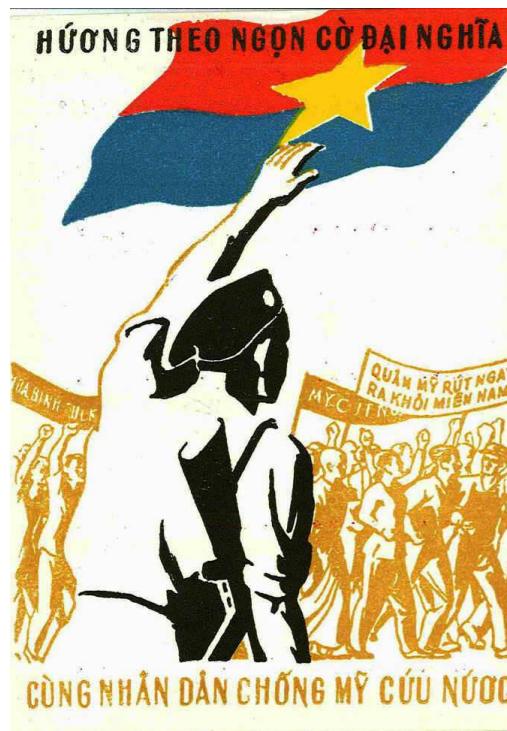
With the Cold War intensifying worldwide, the United States hardened its policies against any allies of the Soviet Union, and by 1955 President Dwight D. Eisenhower had pledged his firm support to Diem and South Vietnam.

With training and equipment from American military and the CIA, Diem's security forces cracked down on Viet Minh sympathizers in the south, whom he derisively called Viet Cong (or Vietnamese Communist), arresting some 100,000 people, many of whom were brutally tortured and executed.



By 1957, the Viet Cong and other opponents of Diem's repressive regime began fighting back with attacks on government officials and other targets, and by 1959 they had begun engaging the South Vietnamese army in firefights.

In December 1960, Diem's many opponents within South Vietnam—both communist and non-communist—formed the National Liberation Front (NLF) to organize resistance to the regime. Though the NLF claimed to be autonomous and that most of its members were not communists, many in Washington assumed it was a puppet of Hanoi.



Domino Theory

A team sent by President John F. Kennedy in 1961 to report on conditions in South Vietnam advised a build-up of American military, economic and technical aid in order to help Diem confront the Viet Cong threat.

Working under the “domino theory,” which held that if one Southeast Asian country fell to communism, many other countries would follow, Kennedy increased U.S. aid, though he stopped short of committing to a large-scale military intervention.

By 1962, the U.S. military presence in South Vietnam had reached some 9,000 troops, compared with fewer than 800 during the 1950s.



Gulf of Tonkin

A coup by some of his own generals succeeded in toppling and killing Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, in November 1963, three weeks before Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

The ensuing political instability in South Vietnam persuaded Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to further increase U.S. military and economic support.



In August of 1964, after DRV torpedo boats attacked two U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, Johnson ordered the retaliatory bombing of military targets in North Vietnam. Congress soon passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave Johnson broad war-making powers, and U.S. planes began regular bombing raids, codenamed Operation Rolling Thunder, the following year.

In March 1965, Johnson made the decision—with solid support from the American public—to send U.S. combat forces into battle in Vietnam. By June, 82,000 combat troops were stationed in Vietnam, and military leaders were calling for 175,000 more by the end of 1965 to shore up the struggling South Vietnamese army.



Despite the concerns of some of his advisers about this escalation, and about the entire war effort amid a growing anti-war movement, Johnson authorized the immediate dispatch of 100,000 troops at the end of July 1965 and another 100,000 in 1966. In addition to the United States, South Korea, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand also committed troops to fight in South Vietnam (albeit on a much smaller scale).



William Westmoreland

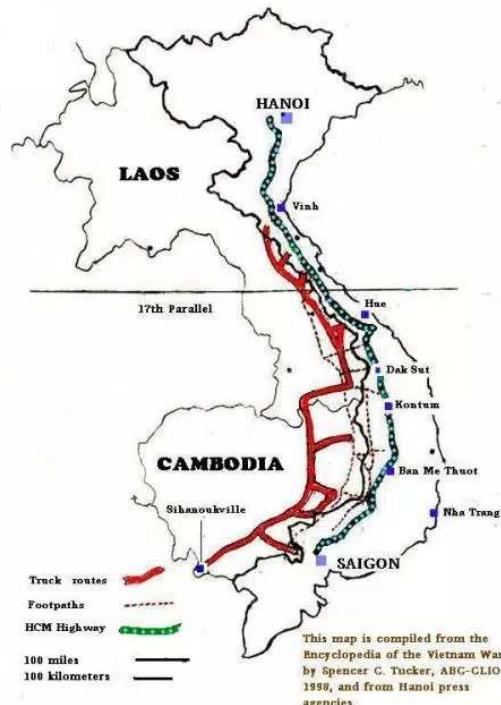
In contrast to the air attacks on North Vietnam, the U.S.-South Vietnamese war effort in the south was fought primarily on the ground, largely under the command of General William Westmoreland, in coordination with the government of General Nguyen Van Thieu in Saigon.



Westmoreland pursued a policy of attrition, aiming to kill as many enemy troops as possible rather than trying to secure territory. By 1966, large areas of South Vietnam had been designated as “free-fire zones,” from which all innocent civilians were supposed to have evacuated and only enemy remained. Heavy bombing by B-52 aircraft or shelling made these zones uninhabitable, as refugees poured into camps in designated safe areas near Saigon and other cities.



Even as the enemy body count (at times exaggerated by U.S. and South Vietnamese authorities) mounted steadily, DRV and Viet Cong troops refused to stop fighting, encouraged by the fact that they could easily reoccupy lost territory with manpower and supplies delivered via the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Cambodia and Laos. Additionally, supported by aid from China and the Soviet Union, North Vietnam strengthened its air defenses.



Next Class: Vietnam War Protests

