

‘Wilson, Johnson and British troops in Vietnam’: An Abstract

The Anglo-American ‘Special Relationship’ is perhaps the most famous bilateral relationship between two different respective countries. With the exception of two major anomalies, throughout the twentieth century Great Britain and the United States of America fought side by side in every major conflict the two countries found themselves directly engaged in. The 1965-73 Vietnam War for the United States and the 1982 Falklands War for the United Kingdom are the only two major conflicts in which they did not.

The British attitude to the Vietnam wars were extremely complicated. Great Britain was always especially interested and influenced by the French war, but most especially in the American war in Vietnam. Whilst the Prime Minister was broadly interested in an intervention to some degree, he was always hampered by the growing unpopularity of the war and controlling the left wing both within his party and amongst the wider British population, who at times threatened to take down the Government. Moreover, at the beginning of war, the British Government was led by the Labour Party under Harold Wilson, who was largely preoccupied with economic matters at home than getting involved in an expensive and unpopular war on the other side of the world. The British Government was far more partial to the idea of using their neutral credentials to try and obtain a true ‘peace with honour’ as early as 1964. This policy annoyed the US President intensely, to the point that he considered ‘buying’ British troops to send to Vietnam. However, when it became clear that peace would not be immediately forthcoming, the British sought to make the most of the situation and provided limited aid though war material, intelligence, covert operations and the dispatch of a limited number of advisors. Additionally, the British were keen to learn what lessons could be learnt militarily from this war and so sent observers such as Colonel T.G. Williams to shadow the South Vietnamese, American and Australian forces in Vietnam. Harold Wilson’s unique statesmanship in regard to trying to get an honourable peace during the Vietnam war, and balancing the concerns of his own party with that of Britain’s closest ally, would become one of his most defining qualities.