

Question 8

Depth Study 2: The history of the USA, 1944–92

8 'Public opinion lost the USA the Vietnam War.' Evaluate this claim.

[30]

Specimen answer

This question suggests the USA lost the Vietnam War because of the key role of public opinion. It is undoubtedly true that public opinion had an important role in Vietnam, USA and internationally should be considered as well as in the USA. Any war is lost by a wide range of factors and it is also necessary to look at the aims of the USA, the military tactics of both the USA and the Vietcong, the domestic situation in the USA in the later 1960s and early 1970s and the changing international scenario. All these factors had a role to play in the eventual defeat of the USA.

Following the policy of containment, the USA supported the corrupt regime of President Diem and under President Johnson saw a marked escalation of military involvement following the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1965. The US Congress had in effect written the President a blank cheque to pursue the war as he saw fit. The fact that war was never declared by Congress was later to lead to many complaints of an illegal war. It was an embarrassing defeat for the USA and tarnished the USA's international reputation.

The war became increasingly unpopular as it escalated. The introduction of the Selective Service Act, the Draft, meant many young men were forced to serve against their will. Soldiers were more likely to be from lower socio-economic classes as the wealthier were able to dodge the draft and with an over representation of Black Americans, this military service was seen as unfair and discriminatory. Many also felt that money that could have been used for improving the lives of Americans was being diverted by President Johnson to fight an unnecessary war. Regular tax increases to pay for the war were also very unpopular and as the war progressed people increasingly knew people who had been killed or injured in the war meaning they had another reason to feel their money was being wasted. Anti-war protests erupted across university campuses and the Kent State killings of 1970 were a crisis point for President Nixon. Burning draft cards became a recognised form of protest and included famous people, such as Muhammad Ali. This was an illegal act and over 9000 men were prosecuted.

Specimen answer, continued

In the late 1960s The media played a key role in turning public opinion against the war by highlighting events such as the Tet Offensive in 1968, the use of carpet bombing, Napalm and Agent Orange and ultimately convinced US public opinion that the war was being lost. Photos of women and children being killed or maimed, and it got worse by the massacres at My Lai in 1968 which did not help the situation as the USA looked like heartless murderers for no gain. Combined with an increasing death toll public opinion turned against the war leaving the politicians no choice but to seek to end the war, 'with honour', as promised by Nixon.

In Vietnam the excesses of the US troops also resulted in local opposition to the war and to international opposition to the USA's role and tactics. Condemnation came from both East and West, where unsurprisingly China and the Russia criticised the USA's policies but even the United Kingdom refused to support the USA militarily. This was all to add pressure to the movement to withdraw from Vietnam as soon as possible. The war in Vietnam was also lost militarily, a direct cause of the poor public perception of the war. The Vietcong used different tactics that they were hard to fight against. The North Vietnamese used the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the USA was unable to destroy it. Carpet Bombing in Operation Rolling Thunder and the use of Napalm and Agent Orange all failed to destroy the Vietcong and at the same time led to massive civilian casualties. These methods proved impossible to fight against, particularly for an army trained in conventional warfare and confident that their technology would win for them. That the Vietcong were supplied by China and the Russia, enabling them to survive the bombing and other US tactics, didn't help the situation.

The US military was itself unsure about the war and soldiers began to turn against it in organisations such as "Vietnam Veterans Against the War". They argued forcefully that what the USA was doing was immoral and that military discipline was breaking down with drug taking, torture and needless deaths. The inability to cope with unknown terrain, an almost invisible enemy and the infiltration of the South by the Vietcong led the military leadership to expand the war to the bombing of Laos and Cambodia and ever more extreme tactics in Vietnam itself. These desperate methods were a clear sign that the USA was losing and also helps to explain the link between military failure and poor public opinion. In addition, public opinion turned on the US soldiers themselves, reducing military morale. Over 500,000 men deserted and the increasing view that they were dying in vain and in an immoral war grew.

The election of President Nixon in 1968 and that President Johnson did not stand for re-election illustrated the unpopularity of the war. The Democratic Convention in Chicago had

Specimen answer, continued

been disrupted by anti-war protests and students had chanted, "Hey, Hey, LBJ! How many kids did you kill today?" Nixon's promise to end the war "with honour" and to Vietnamise the war was an admission that the war had been lost. In addition, Nixon wanted to open relations with China to isolate the USSR and needed to end the Vietnam War the demands of foreign policy played a role, not just public opinion.

The Vietnam War was lost by the USA on many fronts. Public opinion, at home and abroad, had a key role but it was linked to military defeat with the inability of the USA to crush the Vietcong as well as diplomatic pressure and accusations of illegality. By the 1970s the USA was questioning itself and why they had to follow a policy of containment at such financial and human cost. By 1968 US public opinion was no longer supportive of the war, nor was international public opinion as the tactics became increasingly desperate and extreme the moral condemnation and outright public opposition domestically and internationally and in Vietnam itself could not be avoided. When soldiers who fought in Vietnam were condemning it, it is very difficult to see how the USA could have won.

Examiner comments

This is a Level 5 response. The examiner assesses essays using two Assessment Objectives.

AO1 is the ability to recall, select and deploy historical knowledge appropriately and effectively. In a Level 5 response candidates will demonstrate a high level of relevant detail which is carefully selected, is fully focused on supporting the argument, is wide ranging and is consistently precise and accurate.

In this response there is clearly wide-ranging material and it is always deployed in support of the argument presented to explain the loss of the Vietnam War by the USA. The answer is multi-causal, and the knowledge used is thus from a clear range of factors and over the whole time period. Each factor presented is supported by in-depth factual knowledge.

AO2 is the ability to demonstrate an understanding of the past through explanation, analysis and a substantiated judgement of key concepts: causation, consequence, continuity, change and significance within an historical context, the relationship between the key features and characteristics of the periods studied. In a Level 5 response the candidate must establish valid criteria for assessing the question, be consistently analytical of the key features of the period, provide a focused, balanced argument with a sustained line of reasoning throughout and finally to reach a clear and sustained judgement.

In this response the candidate clearly establishes at the outset the criteria that they will examine and then does so clearly throughout the essay and then there is a sustained and supported conclusion giving a clear judgement. The answer is very good quality as it avoids narrative and focuses on the need for analysis with clear factual support and brings together the various factors already explained in the essay to a summative judgement. It also illustrates how the factors were intertwined, for example that military failure led to poor public opinion about the war.