## **Vietnam - What Was It Good For?**

Why has a war in a small country in South East Asia become one of the most heavily researched wars of all time? It is difficult to say why, but there is no doubt that the Vietnam War raises a range of vital issues for historians:

- It was a war in which a giant superpower
- was unable to defeat a small, poor country.
- It was part of a wider pattern of Cold War conflict.
- It was covered by the media in great detail, so people knew more about this war than any previous one.
- It devastated Vietnam and divided the USA.



### **VIETNAM WAR STATISTICS**

- Longest war in US history (11 years)
- "War" was never officially declared by the United States
- A Cornell University study placed the over-all total U.S. cost
  - of the Vietnam war at \$200 Billion
- Total U.S. bomb tonnage dropped during:
  - World War II = 2,057,244 tons Vietnam War = 7,078,032 tons (3-1/2 times WWII tonnage)
- Bomb tonnage dropped during the Vietnam War amounted to
  - 1,000 lbs. for every man, woman and child in Vietnam.
- An estimated 70,000 draft evaders and "dodgers" were living in Canada by 1972.
- An estimated 3 million people were killed by the war, and over 1 million were wounded.

#### **Background**

The roots of the Vietnam conflict went back a long way. The whole area of Indochina (see map) had been ruled by France before the Second World War. During the war Japan took control of the area. Vietnamese Nationalists (who wanted an independent Vietnam run by Vietnamese people), led by Ho Chi Minh, fought the Japanese invaders. They used guerrilla tactics - ambushes, hit and run raids etc.

When the Japanese pulled out of Indochina in 1945 Ho declared Vietnam to be an independent republic. However, the French did not accept this and tried to re-establish their control. Ho Chi Minh's forces (Viet Minh) then used the same tactics against the French, eventually defeating them in 1954. Peace talks followed, and in 1954 the country was divided into

- North Vietnam ruled by Ho Chi Minh
- South Vietnam, hostile to Ho and supported by the USA.

### The USA and Vietnam

Ho Chi Minh defeated the French even though the USA had provided massive support in money and equipment.

They did this because Ho Chi Minh was a Communist. America saw this as another example of Communism trying to spread its influence. Ho Chi Minh saw the conflict as a struggle to get foreigners out of his country, but the USA did not accept his viewpoint.

Throughout the 1950s American thinking was based on the Domino Theory. This meant that if one Asian state fell to Communism the rest would follow. So, the USA had to stop the process. In 1954 the USA and numerous allies formed SEATO - an Asian equivalent of NATO. From 1954 onwards they poured money and resources into South Vietnam, determined that it would not become a Communist state.

South Vietnam was not an easy state to support. The South Vietnam government was corrupt and unpopular. As a result, antigovernment forces called the National Liberation Front (also called Viet Cong) gained support among ordinary Vietnamese. Ho Chi Minh supported these rebels and soon South Vietnam was a state under siege.

In the early 1960s President Kennedy sent increasing numbers of US military 'advisers' to help South Vietnam to fight the Viet Cong. US forces in the region grew steadily, but the South Vietnamese were unable to defeat the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong attacked

government targets and officials, and soon began to attack US targets and personnel as well.

In 1964 North Vietnamese boats attacked US warships in the Gulf of Tonkin. President Johnson got the approval of the US Congress to take any necessary action. It was the first step to war. In 1965 Johnson ordered US Marines ashore at Da Nang and the Vietnam War officially began.



# WHY DID THE U.S. FIND IT SO HARD TO GET OUT OF VIETNAM?

In a way, the answer to this question is simple. A major reason was that the USA and its South Vietnam ally were not able to beat their enemy. However, there were other factors as well.

#### The Vietnam War

When US President Johnson sent troops to Vietnam in 1965, he did not expect Vietnam to turn into a long drawn out conflict. But it did.

 US military power was awesome. It held back the Viet Cong and their allies in North Vietnam. But it could not defeat them. For American soldiers the war became a nightmare. They were up against formidable enemies. The Viet Cong used hit and run tactics, hid in underground bunkers and knew the countryside extremely well. They had the support of many of the ordinary peasants. They were helped by the North

- Vietnam Army. North Vietnam received enormous aid from Communist China and the USSR.
- The war killed and ruined the lives of millions of civilians in South and North Vietnam. This was especially true of bombing and the use of chemical weapons.
- The USA's international reputation was badly damaged, because of its tactics and because it was unable to win.
- The US economy was badly damaged by the war.
- Media coverage of the war turned people in the USA against it. The younger generation in the US were especially hostile.

### **Getting out**

America was looking for a way out of Vietnam almost as soon as it got in. Behind the scenes there were talks going on between the USA and North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh. All too often they resulted in stalemate. The US would not talk until the Viet Cong withdrew from South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong would not talk unless America stopped bombing North Vietnam. The political and military stalemate continued until 1972, but there were changes in US policy during that time. In 1968 Richard Nixon became President. He was anxious to get out of Vietnam and developed the policy of Vietnamisation. This meant building up and supporting South Vietnam forces to resist the Viet Cong. By 1973 US forces had virtually pulled out of Vietnam. However, without the USA the South Vietnam state was not able to hold back the Viet Cong and North Vietnam.

In 1975 North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam. America had to intervene or accept that Vietnam would fall to Communism. America chose to accept the fall of Vietnam. Not surprisingly, the USA has been extremely cautious ever since about sending forces into any of the world's trouble spots.

### **DISCUSSION POINT:**

For much of the Vietnam War, young soldiers, not too much older than you, were, by law, required to serve their country. Thousands declined the kind offer of their government to go overseas to a foreign land and kill for the United States of America. Famous draft-dodger, Muhammed Ali declared that he had no problem with the people of Vietnam, stating that, "**No** VietCong Ever Called Me Nigger".

- 1. In today's circumstances, what would be your response to the following:
  - An official and legal request that you fight overseas in a war, say Iraq...
  - The idea of killing another person in a conflict.
- 2. In your opinion, is America repeating history with the Afghanistan Conflict? Explain your thoughts.

# ...Absolutely Nothing!