

reduced a complex struggle for national independence, led by homegrown communists who enjoyed widespread support throughout their country in addition to Soviet backing, to a test of “containment.” As noted in the previous chapter, the Truman and Eisenhower administrations cast their lot with French colonialism in the region. After the French defeat, they financed the creation of a pro-American South Vietnamese government, in violation of the Geneva Accords of 1954 that had promised elections to unify Vietnam. By the 1960s, the United States was committed to the survival of this corrupt regime.

Fear that voters would not forgive them for “losing” Vietnam made it impossible for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson to remove the United States from an increasingly untenable situation. Kennedy’s foreign policy advisers saw Vietnam as a test of whether the United States could, through “counterinsurgency”—intervention to counter internal uprisings in noncommunist countries—halt the spread of Third World revolutions. Despite the dispatch of increased American aid and numerous military advisers, South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem lost control of the countryside to the communist-led Viet Cong. Diem resisted American advice to broaden his government’s base of support. In October 1963, after large Buddhist demonstrations against his regime, the United States approved a military coup that led to Diem’s death. When Kennedy was assassinated the following month, there were 17,000 American military advisers in South Vietnam. Shortly before his death, according to the notes of a White House meeting, Kennedy questioned “the wisdom of involvement in Vietnam.” But he took no action to end the American presence.

Lyndon Johnson’s War

Lyndon B. Johnson came to the presidency with little experience in foreign relations. Johnson had misgivings about sending American troops to Vietnam. But he was an adept politician and knew that Republicans had used the “loss” of China as a weapon against Truman. “I am not going to be the president,” he vowed, “who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went.”

In August 1964, North Vietnamese vessels encountered an American ship on a spy mission off its coast. When North Vietnamese patrol boats fired on the American vessel, Johnson proclaimed that the United States was a victim of “aggression.” In response, Congress passed the **Gulf of Tonkin resolution**, authorizing the president to take “all necessary measures to repel armed attack” in Vietnam. Only two members—Senators Ernest Gruening of Alaska and Wayne Morse of Oregon—voted against giving Johnson this blank check. The nearest the United States ever came to a formal declaration of war, the resolution passed without any discussion of American goals and strategy in Vietnam.