

## Lecture 2.17: Vietnam War and US Politics

### JFK's Cold War:

- One of the things that are shaping convo is cold war
- JFK is D → thinking about the 1950s → his has fear that if he does not take strong stance on communism, he will be accused of being soft on communism
  - Political ramifications
- So, before he's in office → Fidel Castro/Che Guevarra overthrow US dictator of Cuba 1959
  - End up with communist cuba, aligns with USSR
  - First thing that JFK does as president, he starts
- 1961 Bay of Pigs Invasion
  - JFK authorizes CIA trained agents (Cubans with US military support) to invade cuba
  - Fails miserably, doesn't get anything done
- Same year that Berlin Wall is being built
  - Taking a strong stance
  - Families being divided, hardening cold war conflict
- Next year → Cuban missile crisis 1962
  - Framed to the public: US has found reconnaissance photos that soviet union is building missile sites in Cuba
  - People afraid of missiles on cuba
  - JFK has to respond quickly, puts military blockade around island of cuba to try and force soviet union to stop and take missiles away from cuba
  - This October, closest world has come to nuclear war
  - Someone going to press red button? People genuinely afraid
  - JFK good at negotiation, comes to agreement that USSR will withdraw missiles if US decides to not \_\_\_\_ cuba
  - Wasn't public info for 25 years: one of things USSR was responding to was US putting missiles in Turkey → missiles in turkey was lot closer to USSR → but people didn't know this
  - Problem maybe wouldn't have existed if we hadn't [put missiles in turkey in the first place

### 1954 Geneva Convention:

- Before WWI → ho chi minh went to paris peace conference and says hey we want vietnam to be independent of French Indochina → US ignores him, he becomes more radical
- End of WWII → he returns to Vietnam, says he will fight against French colonizers here
  - From 1945-54, he leads insurgency against French colony/gov in French Indochina
  - In 1954, gives crushing blow to french military, leads to french saying we have to figure smth out
  - Bunch of international countries get together in Geneva to figure out way to solve this bc french aren't handling this

- Geneva convention says ok lets split Vietnam in half → north (Viet Minh) goes to ho chi minh (communist military/leadership), South goes to US and french and for people not interested in being part of communist leadership
- Also tried to set up elections → S. Vietnam not communist, should have elections for democratic gov
- They think if we have free election, what if people vote for communism? Instead they back S. Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem and put him in power without elections
- Decide to just cancel elections altogether
- He's not very popular, runs oppressive gov, not aligned with the people → creates lots of unrest → in US's mind, what if you become communist bc gov isn't working?? Uh oh
- US solves problem by supporting coup against Ngo, in nov 1963 he's assassinated and new gov led by S. Vietnamese military is established with JFK support
- Fear of communism making all the decisions here
- And then, couple days later, JFK assassinated → so now who deals with this? VP LBJ
- Johnson stuck solving problem he wasn't ready to solve

#### Gulf of Tonkin Resolution:

- Other element of this: new S. Vietnamese gov isn't any better than the \_\_ gov
- This pushes people towards more communist approaches bc it isn't working
- Leads to creation of national liberation front in S. Vietnam → comm. Org to oppose new military gov → political organization
  - Viet Cong → military branch of this
  - Both groups gaining members, gaining support, bc communism does look better than this
  - Support for comm. In s. Vietnam is growing
- In aug 1964 → Johnson goes to congress, says US ships have been attacked by n. Vietnamese torpedoes (twice in last 2 days) (also not clear that anything actually happened) → I'm asking you for permission to take all necessary military actions to combat comm. In Vietnam
  - Doesn't ask for declaration of war, just military power
  - Congress response → Gulf of Tonkin Resolution
    - House 414-0, senate 88-2
    - Winning by such a clear majority shows fear of communism, fear of being accused of being soft on communism
    - This is considered official start of V war

#### Operation Rolling Thunder:

- Johnson runs for reelection in 1964
- Promises no escalation in V
- But, early in 1965 approves operation rolling thunder to bomb NV
- Bombing becomes central strategy in V → over next 10 years, US drops two times number of bombs as all the allies did in WWII
- Strategy backfires for couple reasons:

- When Vs lose homes and villages in bombings, it strengthens resistance to the US
  - This gives democracy a bad rep! US is bombing them!
  - Democracy bombing you, but communism isn't → increasing resentment towards US bc you are losing family, homes, etc
- HO chi minh and NV are very organized, so even as things are destroyed, they rebuild
  - Don't keep NV out of commission for very long
- Ho Chi Minh trails
  - He sends supplies + soldiers through Laos and Cambodia → if we bomb NV, not actually bombing supply lines, still able to get supplies to SV? uninterrupted

#### Guerilla War:

- Johnson sends first troops into V war in 1965
- 300k by 1966, 485k by 1967 → getting people from draft
- Can only get out of draft by medical exemptions, in college → people who can do this are richer people, who are rich
- People in draft are disproportionately Black, low income, or other minority groups
- HCM aware he was smaller numbers and fewer supplies, so he cautions SV to not go head to head with US military
- Lets work with Guerilla war tactics
  - Small regional units coming together for surprise attacks
    - Hit and run, night attacks, then disappearing into general pop. → similar to Philippine American war
  - Some of things that allowed them to do this:
    - Viet Kong created sophisticated tunnel network so they could move around underground → had first aid, supplies, water, generated electricity, could pop up in middle of village too
    - Land mines → going out and gathering the bombs that don't explode, harvesting explosive material, and creating land mines with the explosive material
    - Go hand in hand with booby traps
      - Safer, cheaper, can operate independently
      - Can't be detected by mine detector
- Put all these tactics together → US scared, no like → very easy turn to racist mentality

#### US Tactics:

- How US responds? Turn to brutal tactics that start in basic training
- Many testimonies that in basic trainings that teachers were reinforcing dehumanization of V people
  - Stressed on killing aspect instead of the rules of war and such
  - Reduced V people to representation of letter that represented Viet Kong
  - Term "guk?" used to reference V enemy, another racial slur like "gugu" in PS war
- US turns to getting rid of the jungle bc it provides
  - Drop a lot of Napalm and Agent Orange → jelly herbicide that they use to explode the jungle

- Covers 25% of V after the war
- Makes water undrinkable, long lasting impacts in terms of illnesses + birth defects in later generations
- US veterans also get sick from Agent Orange
- Forced relocations → pick up whole village, and force them to go live somewhere bc don't know if they are enemy? But tell them that we are protecting them
- Body counts
  - How to tell if you are winning the war or not? One of thins that military turns to → body counts
  - Killed 100k V soldiers this week, we are doing well
  - But nobody is checking whose bodies they are → encourages more indiscriminate killing
- Search and destroy missions:
  - Search for anybody who is comm. Ally or Viet Kong related person and kill them
  - One mentality → burn village to save village

#### The Credibility Gap:

- Beginning of war → strong support for war
- Pretty quickly, popularity starts to disappear
- Public opinion shifts bc of credibility gap
- People afraid tha tJohnson was concealing bad news from them in V war
- One of things is reality → first really televised war
  - Journalists recording with video, photograph in V war
  - Being broadcasted to Americans
  - Makes things a lot more real, lot more uncomfy
  - Journalists point to discrepancy between what Johnson says and what is actually happening
  - Johnson says we're winning, but doesn't seem like it
  - Comes to head in early 1968: when SV and NV comm forces combine together with massive coordinated attack on US in provincial areas WHILE people are doing lunar new year celebrations in a country that celebrates lunar new year
  - Tech. US fights back, but people say this shouldn't have happened in the first place if US was doing well
  - So johnson, why are you not telling us the truth? Credibility gap so big and such an issue that Johnson decides to not run for reelection
  - Steps down bc he is so discredited by credibility gap