

Background to the Vietnam War

Vietnam had been a French colony before it was occupied by the Japanese during World War Two. After World War Two it was returned to French control but many Vietnamese people wanted independence. As a result, in the 1950s the French found themselves fighting a war against the Viet Minh - an organisation dedicated to getting rid of foreign imperialist powers from Vietnam. Worried about the spread of communism in South East Asia, the USA began to bankroll the French war effort in Vietnam. Halting the spread of communism was an idea that President Truman had said he was committed to as part of his Truman Doctrine, which was announced in 1947 during the early days of the Cold War.

INDO-CHINA

- 1- The old name for the region of south east Asia controlled by the french during their occupation
- 2-it was made up of Vietnam ,Laos & Cambodia
- 3-the term INDO-CHINA refers to intermingling of Indian and Chinese cultures
-ruled by France from 1887 till the 1940
- 4-the Japanese took over the Tonkin region and the rest of Vietnam in 1940, Laos and Cambodia joined Japanese ally Siam(Thailand)but during the time of Japanese occupation a resistance group known as the Viet minh fought a guérilla war with them and by August 1945 they reached Hanoi and declared independence
- 5) the French returned after WW2 in 1946 wanting rule but the Viet minh were not going to let this happen and the first INDO -CHINA WAR began in 1946
- 6) The war ended in 1954 and the French had lost the war and the French left which resulted in the region of indo china being split into North Vietnam,South Vietnam,Laos and Cambodia

In 1954, the French were finally defeated by the Viet Minh at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. This defeat was formalised in the Geneva Agreement and temporarily separated Vietnam into two zones: a northern zone to be governed by the Viet Minh, and a southern zone to be governed by an anti-communist government led by Ngo Dinh Diem. The Geneva Agreement spelled the end of French control in Vietnam and the beginning of a major dilemma for American political and military leaders.

Why did a communist regime in Vietnam worry the USA?



- 1) Vietnam was divided into North and South at the 17th Parallel as agreed at the Geneva accord, with the Viet Minh in control of North Vietnam, and a non-communist government in control of South Vietnam.
- 2) The North Vietnamese government, led by Ho Chi Minh, declared the country to be a socialist state in 1954. Under the Geneva Accords which granted Vietnam independence from France, there was to be an election in 1956 to decide whether the country would be reunified (restoring the political unity) or remain divided into North and South. Ho Chi Minh's government attempted to remain neutral and socialist but ended up allying itself with communist China. To the USA this was proof that North Vietnam was communist.
- 3) America was operating a policy of containment and feared if Vietnam fell to communism, other countries in South East Asia would fall too. This was known as domino theory. Consequently, the USA supported the anti-communist South

Vietnamese dictator, Ngo Dinh Diem, who refused to hold elections to unify the country. Many South Vietnamese who supported reunification joined an armed uprising against Diem.

The USA sent military advisors to support Diem, because they believed that if Vietnam reunified under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh and fell to communism, all the surrounding countries would become communist too. Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, the eastern province of Pakistan (now known as Bangladesh) , Burma and India would all fall to communism just like dominoes - one after the other.

Geneva accord of 1954

1)the first peace talk between France US and Vietnam

2)it was agreed that French troops would leave vietnam and Vietnam would be granted independence from France

3)the country would be split into north and south vietnam until elections took place in 1956

4)it was the first legal document showing vietnams independence

5)the country would be divided by the 17th parallel

6)the north would be run under a communist regime led by Ho Chi Minh

And the south under Ngo dinh diem who was backed and supported by the US

Domino effect

The foreign policy theory that vulnerable nations without help would fall one after another into like dominoes to external communist aggression

A look at Ngo Dinh Diem

- Ngo Dinh Diem was an unpopular leader with the majority of the South Vietnamese people.
- He had removed the previous leader in a fraudulent election, in which he had won 600,000 votes in a country with only 450,000 people eligible to vote!
- Diem believed Vietnam needed 'democratic one man rule', which is considered an **oxymoron**.
- He was a rich landowner in a country of poor peasant farmers.
- He was a **Catholic** and openly discriminated against **Buddhists** (the majority religion in Vietnam at the time). Some Buddhists, for example the Buddhist monk Quang Duc, burnt themselves to death in protest at Diem's government.
- He was a staunch anti-communist and the USA was operating a strategy of containment.



The Vietcong

Ngo Dinh Diem's government was unpopular with ordinary people in South Vietnam, and so it was no surprise when they began to give their support to an opposition organisation - the National Liberation Front, also known as the Vietcong.

The Vietcong



The Vietcong was aided and supplied by communist North Vietnam and its leader Ho Chi Minh.

The Vietcong's message of independence from foreign control and ending the concentration of land owner loop

ship among rich landlords made it popular with Vietnamese peasant farmers.

Ngo Dinh Diem's Strategic Hamlets policy had been introduced in 1962. It was meant to create 'safe villages', and was supposed to stop the Vietcong from getting their supplies and soldiers from villages. In practice, it meant destroying peasant villages near areas held by the Vietcong and forcefully relocating the people. This made him very unpopular with the ordinary people and may have increased support for the Vietcong.

In 1959 Ho Chi Minh declared a war to overthrow the South Vietnamese government and unite Vietnam under communist rule with the support of the Vietcong.

The Vietcong begin to fight a guerrilla war against the government of South Vietnam.



The non-communist government of South Vietnam looked in danger of being overthrown by the communist-backed Vietcong guerrillas.

The USA was operating a policy of containment and they feared the domino effect - that if one country fell to communism there could be a knock-on effect in neighbouring countries. Vietnam was a wobbly domino!

Under Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy, the USA had given millions of dollars to prop up the French in Vietnam, and had sent military advisers to support Ngo Dinh Diem's corrupt, anti-communist government. The failure of these two policies had shown that providing money and military advisers to train the army of South Vietnam was not enough to stop communism. Force was needed and this meant American soldiers in a combat role.

Ngo Dinh Diem was assassinated in November 1963. South Vietnamese forces overthrew his government the day before he and his brother were captured and killed. This opened the door for the USA to get involved in order to ensure 'stability' and beat back the communist threat.

In August 1964 the destroyer USS Maddox, an American naval vessel, was attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin, just off the coast of North Vietnam, by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. This provoked President Johnson into retaliating with military attacks in North Vietnam.

The USA's tactics under President Johnson

BEAST is an acronym for 'Bombing, Escalation, Air and Artillery, Search and Destroy, and Technology' an easy way to remember President Johnson's tactics in Vietnam. American tactics in Vietnam can be summed up by the acronym BEAST.

Bombing - President Johnson ordered the bombing of strategic military targets in North Vietnam, including air raids on the capital city, Hanoi, and bases and supply routes for the Vietcong. This was code-named Operation Rolling Thunder. The USA would ultimately drop

3 million tonnes of bombs in Vietnam - more than all the bombs dropped in Europe during World War Two. However, bombing was highly inaccurate due to the jungle landscape and the lack of industrial targets in North Vietnam.

Escalation - President Johnson slowly increased the number of American troops on the ground in Vietnam. In 1965, two battalions of US Marines were deployed to protect military bases at Da Nang. This represented a shift away from 'military advisors' to combat troops. In July 1965, Johnson sent another 100,000 troops, and a further 100,000 in 1966.

Air and artillery - American troops were sent on patrols, to be supported by air and artillery if attacked by the Vietcong. This demoralised soldiers, who realised they were being used as bait to draw out the enemy.

Search and Destroy - From 1965, the American military began a policy of sending soldiers into the jungle and villages of Vietnam to 'take the war to the enemy'. This often meant soldiers were easy targets for Vietcong guerrilla attacks as the Vietcong were far more adept in the jungle than the American soldiers. This tactic also led to a high number of civilian casualties, destruction of villages and atrocities like the My Lai Massacre all of which damaged the USA's reputation.

Technology - The USA relied on high altitude bombers to drop heavy bombs in North Vietnam. They used jets to dump napalm, a chemical that burnt skin to the bone, on suspected Vietcong strongholds. They used Agent Orange, a powerful defoliant, to destroy jungle cover. Helicopters were used to deploy (search for) and destroy guerrilla combatants. Television propaganda was used in the USA to report the 'body count' of estimated Vietcong casualties.

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Why US tactics failed in the Vietnam War



Failures for the USA

Failure of Operation Rolling Thunder

The bombing campaign failed because the bombs often fell into empty jungle, missing their targets. The North Vietnamese guerrillas knew the jungle and made use of elaborate underground bases and tunnels to shelter from US bombs, and often re-used unexploded American bombs against US soldiers.

Failure of Search and Destroy (My Lai Massacre)

Search and Destroy missions were often based on poor military intelligence. The brutal tactics used by US troops often drove more Vietnamese civilians to support the Vietcong. In 1968 US soldiers, searching for Vietcong guerrillas, raided the village of My Lai, killing around 300 civilians, including children. The My Lai Massacre severely damaged America's reputation and undermined support for the war at home.

Role of the media

Events like the My Lai Massacre were reported in the US press leading many ordinary Americans to question the war. Film footage of US soldiers burning homes and of the effects of napalm all turned public opinion against the war.

Lack of support back home

As the war dragged on more and more Americans began to oppose the war in Vietnam. Many people began to oppose the draft, and public figures, like the boxer Muhammad Ali, risked prison rather than go to Vietnam. In 1970, officers from the National Guard shot at anti-war protestors at Kent State University, killing four students. More people questioned the lengths their government would go to in support of this unpopular war.

Vietcong successes

Guerrilla warfare

The Vietcong used the cover of the jungle, which they knew well, to their advantage. They fought a hit-and-run guerrilla war against inexperienced American soldiers, many of whom were young conscripts. The threat of an invisible enemy and hidden traps like punji sticks – sharpened sticks of bamboo which were laid in traps - had a demoralising psychological impact on US troops.

Ho Chi Minh trail

Vietcong guerrillas were kept well supplied by a constant stream of food and arms “from the North. These were carried on foot, by bicycle and mule along the Ho Chi Minh Trail - a jungle trail which wound through the neighbouring countries of Laos and Cambodia and which was bombed by the US Army but never fully disrupted.

Tet Offensive

In 1968, the Vietcong used the cover of the Buddhist New Year (Tet) celebrations to change tactics and launch a massive attack on US-held areas across South Vietnam, including the US Embassy in Saigon. The attack was a success for the Vietcong and although ultimately they were driven back by the US Army, it showed the Americans that despite all the soldiers, bombs, and money spent in Vietnam, they were not making progress against the Vietcong or communism.

Ending the war in Vietnam

In 1968, with mounting criticism of the Vietnam War at home and abroad, President Johnson announced that he would stop the bombing of North Vietnam and that he would not run for re-election the following year. He was succeeded in January 1969 by Richard Nixon as President of the USA.

Vietnamisation

Nixon was a staunch anti-communist, but he was concerned about the growing risk of nuclear war and wanted to ease the tensions of the Cold War. He set out improving relations with China and the USSR.

In 1971 the US table tennis team visited China for a friendly game of table tennis and were followed in 1972 by Nixon himself. Trade between the US and China improved and tensions were eased. This strategy became known as 'ping pong diplomacy'.

These efforts to 'manage' the Cold War and to improve relations with the communist powers (Nixon also visited the USSR in 1972), along with the growing number of American casualties in Vietnam, may have shaped Nixon's attitude to the war in Vietnam.

Several figures carrying Vietnam War supplies through the jungle in North Vietnam

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Several figures carrying Vietnam War supplies through the jungle in North Vietnam
Vietnam War Supplies being carried through jungle routes from North Vietnam to the South on the Ho Chi Minh trail

He introduced a policy of Vietnamisation, also known as the Nixon Doctrine, in a speech on 25th July 1969. This meant building up the capacity of the armed forces of America's allies in Vietnam until they could take responsibility

And to force north Vietnamese to negotiate after initial peace talks

From early 1969 onwards which broke down

The Paris Peace Accords

The increasing level of public criticism of the war was one of the reasons for the growing pressure to find a peaceful solution. The financial cost was also a factor, as were world politics – the Nixon Doctrine (1969) showed the President was less interested in containment and would only use US troops if the USA was directly threatened. Nixon was also increasingly trying to work better with the USSR and Chinese – anti-communist battles were less of a pressing concern than they had been when the Vietnam War started.

Date	January 1973
Location	Paris
USA negotiator	Henry Kissinger, US National Security Advisor
Vietnam negotiator	Le Duc Tho, Member of the Vietnamese Communist Party Politburo
Aim	To negotiate an end to the war in Vietnam

Negotiations

Negotiations were not straightforward. In October 1972, Henry Kissinger had worked out a peace agreement with the North Vietnamese. However, fearing the Americans were going to

abandon his country, Nguyen Van Thieu, the President of South Vietnam refused to sign the agreement and the South Vietnamese pulled out of the talks.

Kissinger and Nixon acted as good cop and bad cop throughout the negotiations. Kissinger offered peace terms to the North Vietnamese, while Nixon threatened to launch massive airstrikes if they refused. Nixon then mounted bombing raids on North Vietnam until, in Paris, the North Vietnamese were forced to sign. This is a bit like punching someone while telling them that you want to be friends!

Nixon then ordered the South Vietnamese President to sign the peace accord, whether he agreed with it

Outcomes

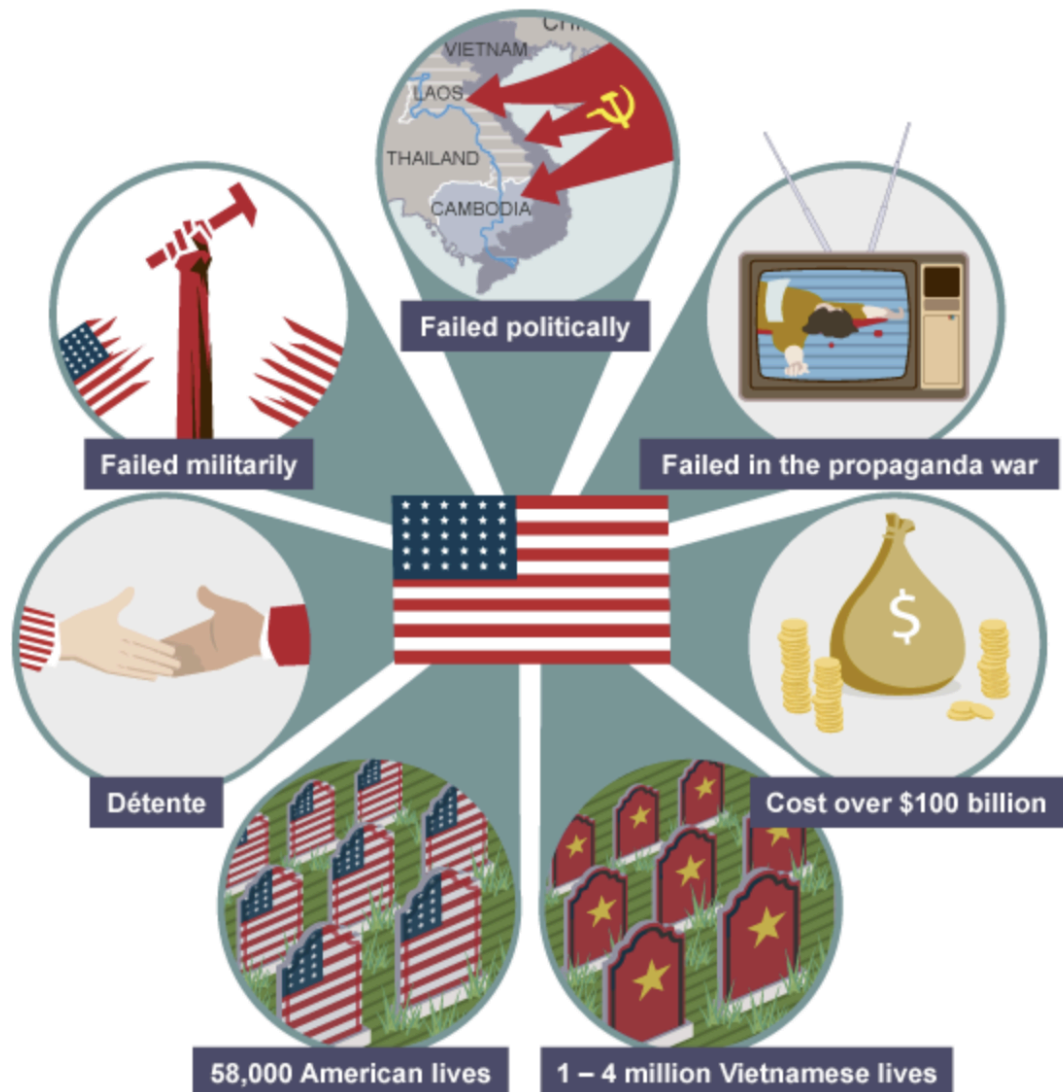
Image of Henry Kissinger shaking hands with Le Duc Tho at the Paris Peace Accords, January 1973

US National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger (R) shakes hand with Le Duc Tho, leader of North Vietnam delegation, after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords on 23 January 1973 in Paris, France.

A ceasefire was agreed, and American forces would leave Vietnam. The city of Saigon fell to the communists on 30 April 1975. The final hours of the American presence in Vietnam were a mad scramble to evacuate US personal and South Vietnamese civilians to US navy ships in the South China Sea. The signal to head for the helicopters was White Christmas by Bing Crosby playing over the speakers of the US Embassy.

Once American forces were out of Vietnam, the way was open for a communist takeover of the South. In April 1975, the forces of North Vietnam entered the southern city of Saigon and the country was unified under communist leadership.

Consequence of the US 'defeat' in Vietnam



The policy of containment had failed militarily: despite the USA's superior military strength it could not stop the spread of communism.

The policy of containment had failed politically: not only had the USA failed to stop Vietnam falling to communism, but their actions in the neighbouring countries of Laos and Cambodia had helped to bring communist governments to power there too.

The policy of containment had failed in the propaganda war: having presented the war in Vietnam as a moral crusade against communism, the atrocities committed by the US military in Vietnam in terms of the number of civilian deaths and the use of chemical weapons, had tarnished America's image at home and abroad.

The war had cost 58,000 American and 1-4 million Vietnamese lives, affected 700,000 American veterans; cost America over one hundred billion dollars, and damaged reputation and morale at home.

After Vietnam, the policy of containment was replaced by a period of détente, a thawing in the tensions of the Cold War and gradually relations between the USA and the USSR/China improved.