

American Involvement in Vietnam

Why the Americans got involved

Before WW II Vietnam was a French Colony. It was occupied by the Japanese during the war. A strong anti-Japanese movement (the Vietminh) was led by Ho Chi Minh who was communist. When it ended the Vietminh controlled the north of the county and wanted an independent Vietnam. The French came back in 1945 wanting to rule Vietnam again.

War broke out with the Vietminh. As China sent more aid to the Vietminh the US began to worry about the communists dominating all South East Asia. It sent aid to France and helped the French set up a non communist government in the south. In 1954 the French were defeated and the peace treaty recognized a communist north and a non communist south. American influence stopped national elections being held in the south because they were afraid that the Communist would win.

1. Who were the Vietminh?
2. What did they want?
3. Who were their allies?
4. How was the Marshall plan put in action in Vietnam?
5. What did the Americans do in following the policy of containment?

How and why American intervention increased.

Ho Chi Minh, upset that elections had not been held, started a guerilla warfare against the government in the south. An increasing amount of money, military equipment and advisers were sent to help the government the south from the USA. It made very little difference to the Vietcong. The southern communist group fought a very effective guerilla war. By 1963 the South government was about to collapse.

Johnson became president after Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963. He agreed with the views of his advisers. They accepted the 'Domino Theory'. This assumed that a Communist victory in Vietnam would lead to Communist takeovers in Indo-China and across South East Asia where the US had important military, political and commercial interests.

1. What is Guerilla warfare?
2. What did the Americans do in response?
3. Who were the Vietcong?
4. Explain the Domino Theory in the Asian context.

- Many companies did well out of the war and many Americans thought it vital that they did not lose access to the raw materials and markets of South East Asia
- Some historians say the presidents can not be given all the blame. Their advisors, the CIA and the Defence Department must they say, share the blame. Some claim congress who voted the money, the public who voted for them and the press who kept people informed all bear some responsibility for American involvement.
- Domestic policies also dictated government decisions to become more involved. The electorate was perceived to be fiercely anti communist and this informed the decisions of Truman and Eisenhower. Johnson felt he had to continue Kennedy's policies. The first time he bombed North Vietnam just before the 1964 election his public approval rose 30% from 42% to 72%
- Johnson also underestimated Vietnam. Johnson called Vietnam "*a raggedy ass little fourth rate country*" The US air force claimed it could defeat it within a month. He also believed that "*America wins all the wars she undertakes*"
- In 1965 the majority of the press and public were still behind Johnson
 - 70% supported the escalation
 - 80% believed the Domino theory
 - 80% favoured sending in US soldiers to stop South Vietnam falling

Why couldn't they win

The Vietcong were expert guerrilla fighters and the Americans had no answer to this type of warfare. The Vietcong copied the tactics the Red Chinese had used. The tactics can be summarised:

- the enemy attack, we retreat

- the enemy camps, we raid
- the enemy tires, we attack
- the enemy retreats, we pursue.

It was almost impossible to win a battle against a guerrilla army because you could never find out where it was. It attacked you then disappeared into the jungle. The Viet Cong had the support of many of the peasants on whose land they were fighting. They could move freely around the country sheltered by villagers. One Viet Cong leader said: "The people are the water; our armies are the fish." The only way to win against a guerrilla army was to win the support of the local population. The British had done this in Malaya in the later 1940s and had defeated a Communist rebellion. The military couldn't distinguish Vietcong from non communist Vietnamese. This led to the killing of many innocents. My Lai stands out as an example of American brutality

Bombing suspected Communist villages naturally alienated the Southerners even more. An American officer explained we had to destroy the village of Ben Tre to save it. That about sums up why the Americans could never engage the sympathies of the locals

The casualties that the South Vietnamese farmers and villagers suffered because of the over-use of American weapons did not encourage them to side with the USA. The US did not understand the patriotism of the Vietnamese people. It could not understand the desire for a united Vietnam and for freedom from foreign interference. There was a failure to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese and an inability to understand them and their culture. In 1964 Robert Mac Namara toured South Vietnam. He painstakingly learned how to say "Long Live South Vietnam" but what he actually shouted to the people was "*the Southern duck wants to lie down*"

Facing these men were US soldiers who served a one year tour of duty young inexperienced men far from home unsure why they were there and thrown into fighting which was more vicious than they could have imagined. Time was on the side of the Vietnamese

In April 1965 Johnson was convinced that Ho would agree to his terms if promised economic aid *Old Ho can't turn me down* Americans never considered that a people might actually want a communist

government When this was put to Johnson he replied "*I don't believe that Does anyone believe that*"

Failure of American Bombing

The Vietnam War quickly sapped the morale of the American soldiers. Many of them were raw recruits who had just left school or college. Conscription fell heavily on the blacks and uneducated because those going to college were able to delay joining-up or even avoid it altogether e.g. Bill Clinton. It was perhaps unrealistic to expect American blacks to fight for 'freedoms' in Vietnam which they did not enjoy at home. As American casualties rose, the Americans launched huge bombing raids which devastated North Vietnam and Viet Cong bases in neighbouring Cambodia. Chemicals were used to destroy the jungle in which the guerrillas sheltered. Tens of thousands of South Vietnamese civilians were killed. The Viet Cong losses in military equipment, raw materials and vehicles were more than made up by increased aid from the USSR and China.. The North Vietnamese showed great ingenuity in coping with the bombing. They relocated industries in remote places and hid them effectively. They stored arms in caves and underground. Tens of thousands of North Vietnamese women and children worked full time in keeping transport routes open.

The end of the War

By 1969 the question was not whether America would get out of Vietnam but how it could do it without appearing defeated. Nixon, the new American President, came up with the policy of Vietnamisation. This involved building up South Vietnamese forces and providing money, training and equipment so they could replace American soldiers. The Americans also entered peace talks with Ho Chi Minh and in January 1973 agreed a ceasefire which allowed the last American soldiers to leave. However, the ceasefire was meaningless. The Viet Cong continued their assault against South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese Army were unable to stop them without American help and in April 1975 Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, had fallen to the Communists, After almost 30 years of warfare the Communists controlled Vietnam

Results of the war

- The American policy of containment was in tatters. It had failed militarily. The war had shown that even America's vast military might could not stop the spread of Communism. The US had lost its first war in History.
- It had also failed politically. Not only did the USA fail to stop South Vietnam going Communist, but the heavy bombing of Vietnam's neighbours Laos and Cambodia actually helped the Communist forces in those countries to win support. By 1975 both Laos and Cambodia had Communist governments.
- It was also a propaganda disaster. The Americans had always presented their campaign against Communism as a moral crusade. But the My Lai Massacre and the herbicides used on the forests damaged America's reputation.
- The whole campaign was shown to be flawed. The Americans were propping up a government which did not have the support of its own people. One million Vietnamese may have died as well as nearly 60, 000 Americans.
- The failure greatly affected the USA's policies towards the Communist states. After the war the Americans tried to improve their relations with China. They ended their block on China's membership of the UN, and the President made visits to China. They entered into a greater period of understanding with the Soviet Union. In fact during the 1970s both the Soviet Union and China got on better with the USA than they did with each other. The Americans became very suspicious of involving their troops in any other conflict which they could not easily and overwhelmingly win..
- Americans and Vietnamese suffered emotionally, physically and economically 58,000 American and 1.5 million Vietnamese dead Limbless war veterans and war memorials can be seen in both countries
- America realised there was limits to American power abroad
- Congress passed the war powers Act in 1973 which required that they be informed of the use of force within 48 hours unless congress had declared war
- Tropical forests have not grown back in Vietnam
- So many Vietnamese immigrated to America that an area in Los Angeles is known as Little Saigon