The Vietnam War
1954–1975

SECTION 1  Going to War in Vietnam
SECTION 2  Vietnam Divides the Nation
SECTION 3  The War Winds Down

American soldiers march up a hill in Vietnam in 1968, as fires behind them send smoke into the air.

1954
• France leaves Indochina; Geneva Accords divide Vietnam in two

1955
• U.S. military aid and advisers are sent to South Vietnam

1958
• U.S. troops land in Lebanon

1960
• U-2 spy plane is shot down

1964
• Congress passes Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

1965
• U.S. combat troops arrive in Vietnam

1961–1963
Johnson 1963–1969
1953–1961
Eisenhower

Kennedy

U.S. PRESIDENTS

U.S. EVENTS

WORLD EVENTS
MAKING CONNECTIONS

Should Citizens Support the Government During Wartime?

During the Cold War, the United States sent troops to Vietnam to stop the spread of communism. Winning in Vietnam proved to be difficult and, as the war dragged on, many Americans began to protest. Eventually, the United States pulled out of Vietnam.

- Why do you think the United States sent troops to Vietnam?
- Why do you think Vietnam divided Americans?

Defining Vietnam Terminology

Make a Vocabulary Book Foldable to aid your review of the Vietnam War. Select terms for a 10-tab Vocabulary Book. Example terms include: Ho Chi Minh, Containment, and Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Define the terms under the appropriate tab.

1968
- Tet Offensive begins
- Anti-war protest in Chicago

1970
- Nixon 1969–1974
- National Guard troops kill student protesters at Kent State
- Nixon orders invasion of Cambodia

1973
- Last U.S. troops leave Vietnam

1975
- Saigon falls to North Vietnamese invasion

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In the late 1940s and early 1950s, most Americans knew little about Indochina, France’s colony in Southeast Asia. During the Cold War, however, American officials became concerned the region might fall to communism. Eventually, American troops were sent to fight in Vietnam.

**American Involvement in Vietnam**

**MAIN Idea** The Cold War policy of containment led the United States to become increasingly involved in events in Vietnam.

**HISTORY AND YOU** Have you met anyone who was born in Vietnam? Do you know why he or she left? Read to learn about Vietnam’s complicated and tragic history.

In 1940, the Japanese invaded Vietnam. The occupation was only the latest example of foreigners ruling the Vietnamese people. The Chinese Empire had controlled the region for hundreds of years. Then, beginning in the late 1800s and lasting until World War II, France ruled Vietnam as well as neighboring Laos and Cambodia—a region known collectively as French Indochina.

**The Growth of Vietnamese Nationalism**

The Vietnamese did not want to be ruled by foreigners, and by the early 1900s, nationalism had become a powerful force in the country. The Vietnamese formed several political parties to push for independence or for reform of the French colonial government. One of the leaders of the nationalist movement for almost 30 years was Nguyen Tat Thanh—better known by his assumed name, **Ho Chi Minh**. At the age of 21, Ho Chi Minh traveled to Europe where he lived in London and then Paris. In 1919 he presented a petition for Vietnamese independence at the Versailles Peace Conference, but the peace treaty ignored the issue. Ho Chi Minh later visited the Soviet Union where he became an advocate of communism. In 1930 he returned to Southeast Asia, helped found the Indochinese Communist Party, and worked to overthrow French rule.

Ho Chi Minh’s activities made him a wanted man. He fled Indochina and spent several years in exile in the Soviet Union and China. In 1941 he returned to Vietnam. By then, Japan had seized control of the country. Ho Chi Minh organized a nationalist group called the Vietminh. The group united both Communists and non-Communists in the struggle to expel the Japanese forces. Soon afterward, the United States began sending aid to the Vietminh.
America Aids the French

When Japan surrendered to the Allies in 1945, it gave up control of Indochina. Ho Chi Minh quickly declared Vietnam to be an independent nation. France, however, had no intention of allowing Vietnam to become independent. Seeking to regain their colonial empire in Southeast Asia, French troops returned to Vietnam in 1946 and drove the Vietminh forces into hiding in the countryside.

The Vietminh fought back against the French-dominated regime and slowly gained control of large areas of the countryside. As the fighting escalated, France appealed to the United States for help. The request put American officials in a difficult position. The United States opposed colonialism. It had pressured the Dutch to give up their empire in Indonesia and supported the British decision to give India independence in 1947. In Vietnam, however, the independence movement had become entangled with the Communist movement. American officials did not want France to control Vietnam, but they also did not want Vietnam to be communist.

Two events convinced President Truman to help France—the fall of China to communism and the outbreak of the Korean War. The latter, in particular, seemed to indicate that the Soviet Union had begun a major push to impose communism on East Asia. Shortly after the Korean War began, Truman authorized military aid to French forces in Vietnam. President Eisenhower continued Truman’s policy and defended his decision with what became known as the domino theory—the idea that if Vietnam fell to communism, the rest of Southeast Asia would follow:

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

“You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. . . . Asia, after all, has already lost some 450 million of its peoples to Communist dictatorship, and we simply can’t afford greater losses.”

—President Eisenhower, quoted in *America in Vietnam*

Defeat at Dien Bien Phu

Despite aid from the United States, the French continued to struggle against the Vietminh, who consistently frustrated the French with hit-and-run and ambush tactics. These are the tactics of *guerrillas*, irregular troops who blend into the civilian population and are difficult for regular armies to fight.
The mounting casualties and the inability of the French to defeat the Vietminh made the war very unpopular in France. Finally, in 1954 the struggle reached a turning point when the French commander ordered his forces to occupy the mountain town of Dien Bien Phu. Seizing the town would interfere with the Vietminh’s supply lines and force them into open battle. Soon afterward, a huge Vietminh force surrounded Dien Bien Phu and began bombarding the town. On May 7, 1954, the French force at Dien Bien Phu fell to the Vietminh. The defeat convinced the French to make peace and withdraw from Indochina.

**Geneva Accords**

Negotiations to end the conflict were held in Geneva, Switzerland. The Geneva Accords divided Vietnam along the 17th parallel, with Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh in control of North Vietnam and a pro-Western regime in control of the South. In 1956 elections were to be held to reunite the country under a single government. The Geneva Accords also recognized Cambodia’s independence. Laos had gained independence in the previous year.

Shortly after the Geneva Accords partitioned Vietnam, the French troops left. The United States became the principal protector of the new government in the South, led by a nationalist leader named Ngo Dinh Diem (NOH DIHN deh•EHM). Like Ho Chi Minh, Diem had been educated abroad, but, unlike the North Vietnamese leader, Diem was pro-Western and fiercely anti-Communist. A Catholic, he welcomed the roughly one million North Vietnamese Catholics who migrated south to escape Ho Chi Minh’s rule.

The elections mandated by the Geneva Accords never took place. In a special referendum, Diem became president of the new Republic of Vietnam in the South. He then refused to permit the 1956 elections, fearing Ho Chi Minh would win. Eisenhower approved Diem’s actions and increased American aid to South Vietnam.

**Summarizing** Why did Ho Chi Minh lead a resistance movement against France?
America Becomes Involved in Vietnam

**MAIN Idea** Political pressures in the United States led the nation to become deeply involved in the civil war in Vietnam.

**HISTORY AND YOU** Do you have a relative or family friend who fought in the Vietnam War? Read on to find out why the United States got involved in this complicated conflict.

After Ngo Dinh Diem refused to hold national elections and began to crack down on Communist groups in South Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh and the Communists began an armed struggle to reunify the nation. They organized a new guerrilla army of South Vietnamese Communists, which became known as the Vietcong. As fighting began between the Vietcong and South Vietnam’s forces, President Eisenhower sent hundreds of military advisers to train South Vietnam’s army.

Despite American assistance, the Vietcong continued to grow more powerful because many Vietnamese opposed Diem’s government. The Vietcong’s use of terror was also effective. By 1961, the Vietcong had assassinated thousands of government officials and established control over much of the countryside. In response Diem looked increasingly to the United States for help.

**Kennedy Takes Over**

On taking office in 1961, President Kennedy continued the nation’s policy of support for South Vietnam. Like Presidents Truman and Eisenhower before him, Kennedy saw the Southeast Asian country as vitally important in the battle against communism.

In political terms, Kennedy needed to appear tough on communism, since Republicans often accused Democrats of having lost China to communism during the Truman administration. From 1961 to late 1963, the number of American military personnel in South Vietnam jumped from about 2,000 to around 15,000.

American officials believed that the Vietcong continued to grow because Diem’s government was unpopular and corrupt. They urged him to create a more democratic government and to introduce reforms to help Vietnam’s peasants. Diem introduced some limited reforms, but they had little effect.

One program Diem introduced, at the urging of American advisers, made the situation worse. The South Vietnamese created special fortified villages known as strategic hamlets. These villages were protected by machine guns, bunkers, trenches, and barbed wire. Vietnamese officials then moved villagers to the strategic hamlets. The program proved to be extremely unpopular. Many peasants resented being uprooted from their villages, where they had worked to build farms and where many of their ancestors lay buried.

**The Overthrow of Diem**

Diem made himself even more unpopular by discriminating against Buddhism, one of the country’s most widely practiced religions. In the spring of 1963, Diem, a Catholic, banned the traditional religious flags for Buddha’s birthday. When Buddhists took to the streets in protest, Diem’s police killed 9 people and injured 14 others. In the demonstrations that followed, a Buddhist monk poured gasoline over his robes and set himself on fire, the first of several Buddhists to do so. Images of their self-destruction horrified Americans as they watched the footage on television news reports. These extreme acts of protest were a disturbing sign of the opposition to the Diem regime.

In August 1963 American ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge arrived in Vietnam. He quickly learned that Diem’s unpopularity had so alarmed several Vietnamese generals that they were plotting to overthrow him. When Lodge expressed American sympathy for their cause, the generals launched a military coup. They seized power on November 1, 1963, and executed Diem shortly afterward.

Diem’s overthrow only made matters worse. Despite his unpopularity with some Vietnamese, Diem had been a respected nationalist and a capable administrator. After his death, South Vietnam’s government grew increasingly weak and unstable. The United States became even more deeply involved in order to prop it up. Coincidentally, three weeks after Diem’s death, President Kennedy was assassinated. The presidency, as well as the growing problem of Vietnam, now belonged to Kennedy’s vice president, Lyndon Johnson.
Johnson and Vietnam

Initially, President Johnson exercised caution and restraint regarding the conflict in Vietnam. “We seek no wider war,” he repeatedly promised. At the same time, Johnson was determined to prevent South Vietnam from becoming communist. “The battle against communism,” he declared shortly before becoming president, “must be joined … with strength and determination.”

Politics also played a role in Johnson’s Vietnam policy. Like Kennedy, Johnson remembered that many Republicans blamed the Truman administration for the fall of China to communism in 1949. Should the Democrats also “lose” Vietnam, Johnson feared, it might cause a “mean and destructive debate that would shatter my Presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy.”

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

On August 2, 1964, President Johnson announced that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had fired on two American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. Two days later, the president reported that another similar attack had taken place. Johnson was campaigning for the presidency and was very sensitive to accusations of being soft on communism. He insisted that North Vietnam’s attacks were unprovoked and immediately ordered American aircraft to attack North Vietnamese ships and naval facilities.

Johnson then asked Congress for the authority to defend American forces and American allies in Southeast Asia. Congress agreed to Johnson’s request with little debate. Most members of Congress agreed with Republican representative Ross Adair of Indiana, who defiantly declared, “The American flag has been fired upon. We will not and cannot tolerate such things.”

On August 7, 1964, the Senate and House passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing the president to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” With only two dissenting votes, Congress had, in effect, handed its war powers over to the president.

The United States Sends in Troops

Shortly after Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the Vietcong began to attack bases where American advisers were stationed in South Vietnam. The attacks began in the fall of 1964 and continued to escalate. After a Vietcong attack on a base at Pleiku in February 1965 left eight Americans dead and more than 100 wounded, President Johnson decided to respond. Less than 14 hours after the attack, American aircraft bombed North Vietnam.

After the air strikes, one poll showed that Johnson’s approval rating on his handling of Vietnam jumped from 41 percent to 60 percent. Further, nearly 80 percent of Americans agreed that without American assistance, Southeast Asia would fall to the Communists. An equivalent number believed that the United States should send combat troops to Vietnam.

Should America Fight in Vietnam?

As the war in Vietnam dragged on, Americans became increasingly divided about the nation’s role in the conflict. In January 1966, George W. Ball, undersecretary of state to President Johnson, delivered an address to indicate “how we got [into Vietnam] and why we must stay.” George Kennan, a former ambassador to the Soviet Union, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in that same year, arguing that American involvement in Vietnam was “something we would not choose deliberately if the choice were ours to make all over again today.”
to prevent that from happening. The president’s actions also met with strong approval from his closest advisers, including Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy.

Some officials disagreed, chief among them Undersecretary of State George Ball, who initially supported involvement in Vietnam but later turned against it. He warned that if the United States got too involved, it would be difficult to get out. “Once on the tiger’s back,” he warned, “we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount.”

Most of the advisers who surrounded Johnson, however, firmly believed the nation had a duty to halt communism in Vietnam, both to maintain stability in Southeast Asia and to ensure the United States’s continuing power and prestige in the world. In a memo to the president, Bundy argued:

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

“The stakes in Vietnam are extremely high. The American investment is very large, and American responsibility is a fact of life which is palpable in the atmosphere of Asia, and even elsewhere. The international prestige of the U.S. and a substantial part of our influence are directly at risk in Vietnam.”

—quoted in *The Best and the Brightest*

In March 1965, President Johnson expanded American involvement by beginning a sustained bombing campaign against North Vietnam code-named Operation Rolling Thunder. That same month, the president also ordered the first combat troops into Vietnam. American soldiers would now fight alongside South Vietnamese troops against the Vietcong.

**Describing** How did politics play a role in President Johnson’s Vietnam policy?

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**YES**

**George W. Ball**

Undersecretary of State

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

“[T]he conflict in Viet-Nam is a product of the great shifts and changes triggered by the Second World War. . . . [T]he Soviet Union under Stalin exploited the confusion to push out the perimeter of its power and influence in an effort to extend the outer limits of Communist domination by force or the threat of force. . . .

The bloody encounters in [Vietnam] . . . are thus in a real sense battles and skirmishes in a continuing war to prevent one Communist power after another from violating internationally recognized boundary lines fixing the outer limits of Communist dominion. . . .

In the long run our hopes for the people of South Vietnam reflect our hopes for people everywhere. What we seek is a world living in peace and freedom.”

—Speech delivered January 30, 1966

**George F. Kennan**

Former Diplomat

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

“Vietnam is not a region of major military-industrial importance. . . . Even a situation in which South Vietnam was controlled exclusively by the Vietcong, . . . would not present, in my opinion, dangers great enough to justify our direct military intervention.

And to attempt to crush North Vietnamese strength to a point where Hanoi could no longer give any support to Vietcong political activity in the South would . . . have the effect of bringing in Chinese forces at some point. . . .

Our motives are widely misinterpreted; and the spectacle of Americans inflicting grievous injury on the lives of a poor and helpless people . . . produces reactions among millions of people throughout the world profoundly detrimental to the image we would like them to hold of this country.”

—Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, February 10, 1966

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1. **Summarizing** Why does Ball believe that the United States is justified in fighting in Vietnam?

2. **Explaining** What are the three main points of Kennan’s argument?

3. **Contrasting** What is the fundamental difference between the views of Ball and Kennan?

4. **Evaluating** With which position do you agree? Write a paragraph to explain your choice.
A Bloody Stalemate

MAIN Idea The failure of United States forces to defeat the Vietcong and the deaths of thousands of American soldiers led many Americans to question the nation’s involvement in Vietnam.

HISTORY AND YOU Have you ever heard people compare a contemporary military conflict to the Vietnam War? Read on to find out why some people fear becoming involved in a similar conflict today.

By the end of 1965, more than 180,000 American combat troops were fighting in Vietnam. In 1966 that number doubled. Since the American military was extremely strong, it marched into Vietnam with great confidence. “America seemed omnipotent then,” wrote Philip Caputo, one of the first marines to arrive. “We saw ourselves as the champions of a ‘cause that was destined to triumph.’”

Lacking the firepower of the Americans, the Vietcong used ambushes, booby traps, and other guerrilla tactics. Ronald J. Glasser, an American army doctor, described the devastating effects of one booby trap:

PRIMARY SOURCE

“Three quarters of the way through the tangle, a trooper brushed against a two-inch vine, and a grenade slung at chest high went off, shattering the right side of his head and body. . . . Nearby troopers took hold of the unconscious soldier and, half carrying, half dragging him, pulled him the rest of the way through the tangle.”

—quoted in Vietnam, A History

The Vietcong also frustrated American troops by blending in with the general population and then quickly vanishing. “It was a sheer physical impossibility to keep the enemy from slipping away whenever he wished,” explained one American general. Journalist Linda Martin noted, “It’s a war where nothing is ever quite certain and nowhere is ever quite safe.”

The Vietnam War, 1965–1973

Analyzing GEOGRAPHY

1. Places What countries were invaded during the Vietnam War?
2. Movement Why was it difficult to seal South Vietnam’s border?
“Search and Destroy”

To counter the Vietcong’s tactics, American troops went on “search and destroy” missions. They tried to find enemy troops, bomb their positions, destroy their supply lines, and force them out into the open for combat.

The Vietcong evaded American forces by hiding out in the thick jungle or escaping through tunnels dug in the earth. To take away the Vietcong’s ability to hide, American forces literally destroyed the landscape. American planes dropped napalm, a jellied gasoline that explodes on contact. They also used Agent Orange, a chemical that strips leaves from trees and shrubs, turning farmland and forest into wasteland. For those South Vietnamese still living in the countryside, danger lay on all sides.

United States military leaders underestimated the Vietcong’s strength. They also misjudged the enemy’s stamina and the support they had among the South Vietnamese. American generals believed that continuously bombing and killing large numbers of Vietcong would destroy the enemy’s morale and force them to give up. The guerrillas, however, had no intention of surrendering, and they were willing to accept huge losses to achieve their goals.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail

In the Vietcong’s war effort, North Vietnamese support was a major factor. Although the Vietcong forces were made up of many South Vietnamese, North Vietnam provided arms, advisers, and leadership. As Vietcong casualties mounted, North Vietnam began sending North Vietnamese Army units to fight.

North Vietnam sent arms and supplies south by way of a network of jungle paths known as the Ho Chi Minh trail. The trail wound through the countries of Cambodia and Laos, bypassing the border between North and South Vietnam. Because the trail passed through countries not directly involved in the war, President Johnson refused to allow a full-scale attack on the trail to shut it down.

North Vietnam itself received military weapons and other support from the Soviet Union and China. One of the main reasons President Johnson refused to order a full-scale invasion of North Vietnam was his fear that such an attack would bring China into the war, as had happened in Korea. By placing limits on the war, however, Johnson made it very difficult to win. Instead of conquering enemy territory, American troops were forced to fight a war of attrition—a strategy of defeating the enemy forces by wearing them down. This strategy led troops to conduct grisly body counts after battles to determine how many enemy soldiers had been killed. The U.S. military began measuring “progress” in the war by the number of enemy dead.

Bombing from American planes killed as many as 220,000 Vietnamese between 1965 and 1967. By the end of 1966, more than 6,700 American soldiers had been killed. The notion of a quick and decisive victory grew increasingly remote. As a result, many citizens back home began to question the nation’s involvement in the war.

Describing What tactics did the United States adopt to fight the Vietcong?