



# Vietnam War Basics

1950s – 1975

- Vietnam – along with neighboring Laos and Cambodia – was France’s colony called French Indochina.
- The Vietnamese, led by Ho Chi Minh, tried to fight off French rule.
  - Ho Chi Minh felt the way was through a Communist revolution.
- During WWII, Japan drove the French out of Indochina.
- When the war was over, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam independent.
  - France insisted Vietnam was still a colony.
  - Vietnam warned France to leave them alone.
- France ignored Vietnam’s warning and moved to retake Vietnam; fighting broke out.
  - President Eisenhower gave money to support France. Why?
    - Domino theory → If Vietnam falls to Communism, all of SE Asia might fall.
  - The Vietminh, the Vietnamese fighting force, had many victories.
  - France surrendered on May 7, 1954.

## Vietnam’s History



# Geneva Accords

- Geneva Accords
  - The day after fighting stopped, an international conference addressed the future of Indochina; they created the Geneva Accords, which temporarily divided Vietnam into two.
    - North Vietnam → Communist state led by Ho Chi Minh
      - Ended up being very popular with his people
    - South Vietnam → Democracy led by Ngo Dinh Diem
      - Ended up being very dishonest, brutal, and despised
  - Free elections were supposed to happen in July 1956 to reunite the two.



<https://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.amazonaws.com/public/uploads/photos/54c3754f27h-parallel.jpg?1475066492>

## Then, It Gets Complicated...

- In 1956, the elections that were supposed to take place never happened. Why?
  - South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem was afraid he would lose to the Communist government in North Vietnam; he refused to let South Vietnam take part in the elections.
  - The US backed his decision.
- Diem then tried to squash support in SV for NV by arresting thousands of SV citizens; by this point, many SV citizens were joining a group – called the National Liberation Front – to fight Diem’s government.
  - This group of SV citizens was backed by a SV communist fighting group called the Vietcong.

Vietminh	Vietcong
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• North Vietnamese Communist force</li><li>• Loyal to Ho Chi Minh</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A Vietnamese force (supplied/funded by North Vietnam) that fought the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem</li><li>• Against any of Diem’s supporters (ex: the US)</li></ul>

# The US Gets Even More Involved

- As fighting between the Vietcong and Diem's forces grew worse, President Eisenhower sent more aid and advisers to South Vietnam.
  - By the end of 1960, about 900 US military advisers were stationed in South Vietnam.
- When John F. Kennedy became president, he sent additional advisers as well as 400 Special Forces soldiers in May 1961.
  - By the end of 1963, about 16,000 US military personnel were serving there.



<https://thevietnamwar.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/16.png>

# Diem Loses Even More Vietnamese Support

- Diem's government was losing power despite the US's help.
- Diem's popularity dropped further when his soldiers fired on Buddhist demonstrators; some monks then set themselves on fire as protest.
  - These images appeared on TV and helped turn many Americans against Diem.
- Believing Diem's unpopularity was hurting the war effort, a group of SV generals took over the government in November 1963 and killed Diem.
  - The situation in South Vietnam grew worse from there.



<https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/The-burning-monk-3963-small.jpg>

# Continuing US Involvement

- Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963; Lyndon B. Johnson became president.
- LBJ met with advisers and expressed concern that the Communists would think that with Kennedy gone that the US would lose its commitment and show it was giving in.
  - LBJ ended up sending increased military support for South Vietnam.
  - LBJ heard that some new South Vietnamese leaders wanted to work out an agreement with the Communists but LBJ refused to accept the possibility of a Communist South Vietnam.



<https://static01.nyt.com/images/2017/02/25/opinion/25updegroveWeb/25updegroveWeb-articleLarge.jpg?quality=75&auto=webp&disable=upscale>

# Gulf of Tonkin Resolutions

- On August 2, 1964, it was reported that a US Navy vessel exchanged fire with North Vietnamese vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin off the NV coast.
- US ships reported that the NV had launched torpedoes at them; the ships were not damaged, though.
- LBJ declared this attack an act of war and ordered air strikes against the NV bases.
- Gulf of Tonkin Resolutions (Tonkin Gulf Resolutions)
  - Passed by Congress on August 7, 1964
  - Gave the president the power “to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States” (aka basically a blank check)
  - This enabled LBJ to greatly increase US military involvement, which he did.
- But there’s one key detail about this whole situation...
  - Investigators later found out that there had been a mistake and no attacks had been made by the NV on the US ships; by then, though, the GTR had already been passed.



<http://www.americanhistory.org/pages/gulf-of-tonkin-soth-china-sea.html>



# Combat Troops Arrive in Vietnam

- In March 1965, the first US combat troops arrived in Vietnam.
- Operation Rolling Thunder was ordered that same month.
  - Series of air strikes meant to destroy war industries in North Vietnam
  - A way to destroy the Ho Chi Minh Trail
    - A network of paths, small roads, and tunnels leading from NV through neighboring Laos and Cambodia into SV
    - Major supply route for the Vietcong (though they had a massive underground tunnel system)
    - Hoped this was a way for the US to win the war
- Bombings lasted until late 1968.
  - 1 million+ tons of explosives had been dropped, much on SV
  - Many Vietnamese soldiers and civilians killed
  - US efforts did not stop the Communists' ability to fight



[http://global.oup.com/us/companion\\_websites/rdcontent/us/companion/us/static/companion\\_websites/g780xgq38q315/maps/ch38/map38\\_00200.jpg](http://global.oup.com/us/companion_websites/rdcontent/us/companion/us/static/companion_websites/g780xgq38q315/maps/ch38/map38_00200.jpg)

# Napalm and Agent Orange

- Vietnam was covered with thick jungles.
- In order to better see the Ho Chi Minh Trail, US planes dropped:
  - Napalm → a highly incendiary jellied gasoline that causes burns, unconsciousness, and death
  - Agent Orange → a chemical poison that killed vegetation and trees
- These two substances caused environmental damage.
- Later, health problems for Vietnamese civilians and US veterans occurred due to the use of napalm and Agent Orange.
- The use of these tactics were/are controversial.



<https://www.thephoblographer.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Napalm-Girl-770x432.jpg>



<http://s33076.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Agent-Orange-Vietnam-300x198.jpg>

# Escalation

- In the mid-1960s, LBJ sent more ground forces to Vietnam.
  - Between 1965 and 1967, the number of US soldiers increased due to a policy of escalation; most soldiers are being drafted.
- At the same time, the NV Army (NVA) became more involved, sending more of its regular army to fight alongside the Vietcong.
- US tried a new fighting strategy: search-and-destroy missions.
  - US patrols searched for enemy camps and supplies hidden in the jungle
  - Soldiers destroyed them with massive air power and air raids
  - “The solution is more bombs, more shells, more napalm.” –US general
  - Didn’t work as easily as everyone hoped. Why not?
    - Vietcong and NVA compensated for the lack of firepower with guerilla tactics
    - Vietcong and NVA had a better knowledge of the local geography (set traps, mines, etc.)

U.S. Troops in Vietnam, 1966–1973

Year	Number U.S. Troops	U.S. Military of Personnel Killed in Action
1966	385,300	6,008
1967	485,600	9,377
1968	536,000	14,589
1969	475,200	9,414
1970	334,600	4,221
1971	156,800	1,381
1972	24,000	300
1973	50	—

In mid-1967, more than 300 US soldiers were dying each week in combat; as the war dragged on, support for it began to drop.

It is also important to remember all the nurses and doctors who served as well.

# Pacification

- SV villagers were caught in the middle of the fighting.
- US and SV officials tried to win their support with the policy of pacification.
  - US and SV set aside civilians areas guarded by government troops.
  - Despite this, the villagers were still not safe.
    - The troops stayed in their own camp at night.
    - The Vietcong would then come out of hiding and attack people because they believed the villagers were helping the SV government.
- Even with this policy, sometimes US troops caused the damage and suffering.
  - Troops destroyed villages and crops of innocent people, believing they belonged to the Vietcong.
  - Some believed “they are probably feeding the NVA with rice anyway, so therefore they are the enemy”.

# Tet Offensive & My Lai Massacre

- Tet → the Vietnamese New Year
  - In prior years, a cease-fire would occur during Tet.
- Tet Offensive → January 30, 1968 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsboBgKbjdE> - Video
  - NV and Vietcong soldiers launched a surprise attack on US forces across southern Vietnam.
  - US and SV troops defeated most of the Communists quickly.
  - Attack shocked the Americans and changed many people's opinions on the war
    - Most Americans supported the war until 1968; despite seeing the realities of war on TV, the feel/impression was we were winning/could win and it would all be over soon.
    - The Tet Offensive, though, showed that the Communist forces still had a lot of strength to fight.
    - Many Americans began to feel that officials were not telling the public the truth about the fighting and claims of successes.
    - When a main general asked for 206,000 more troops (to add to the 525,000 already in Vietnam), people questioned whether the increase was necessary and if we were truly winning; the request was denied.
- My Lai Massacre/"Pinkville" → March 1968
  - One of the lowest points in the Vietnam War, US troops killed hundreds of unarmed civilians... and the army tried to cover it up.



American soldiers during the Tet Offensive

<http://www.ohwy.com/history%20pictures/amertet.gif>

# Vietnamization

- Richard Nixon becomes president in 1969; he said he wanted to “end the war as quickly as honorably possible” but without appearing defeated, saying, “I will not be the first President of the United States to lose a war.”
- Nixon and his national security adviser Henry Kissinger came up with a policy to bring about “peace without victory” through “Vietnamization”.
  - Fighting would gradually be turned over to the SV army
  - US would continue to provide supplies and training to SV troops even as US troops left
  - US potentially would threaten NV with the use of atomic weapons
- Ho Chi Minh died in September 1969, but the NV and Vietcong did not lose their determination; they vowed to keep fighting to reunite Vietnam.
- US troops began to come home.



[https://www.thoughtco.com/thmb/zWysNxoceV8QKl8HhMwz2Nwa7268co/f/https://api.alexi0.com/bytes/1500001-str/p\\_kclj/todays-weather->66323-ca830030cc042e0027daee53.jpg](https://www.thoughtco.com/thmb/zWysNxoceV8QKl8HhMwz2Nwa7268co/f/https://api.alexi0.com/bytes/1500001-str/p_kclj/todays-weather->66323-ca830030cc042e0027daee53.jpg)

## Meanwhile in Cambodia...

- Nixon ordered the bombing of Communist bases in Laos and Cambodia without telling Congress or the American public.
  - Nixon's goal was to cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which had parts in Cambodia.
  - Cambodia was also a place where the NV could escape American and SV troops.
  - NV responded to this by giving more support to the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian Communist army.
- On April 30, 1970, Nixon said he would send US troops to protect Cambodia's new pro-US government, and ground attacks were made.
  - This announcement of an invasion sparked outrage because it looked like the war was expanding, not leading towards a peaceful end.
- Cambodians took sides, which led to a civil war, won by the Khmer Rouge.
  - Cambodians suffered under a brutal reign of terror, forcing millions to work exhaustive hours, and killing or starving to death over a million people.
- In 1979, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and set up a new Communist government.

# Protests & the Pentagon Papers

- Demonstrations, protests, sit-ins, etc. began popping up across the country.
  - Kent State was the location of a protest turned deadly.
- In December 1970, Congress overturned the Gulf of Tonkin Resolutions.
- Pentagon Papers
  - The *NYT* published secret US government documents obtained from Daniel Ellsberg, a former Pentagon official.
  - The Pentagon Papers showed that US officials had been lying to the public about the progress of the war for years.
  - After the report, some Congressmen wanted to cut off all funds for the Vietnam War.
- Nixon was up for re-election in 1972 and he changed his Vietnam strategy.
  - Ended the invasion of Cambodia
  - Became more open to compromise
- Secret peace negotiations began in 1972 between Kissinger and the NV leaders.





# Trying to Make Peace

- Nixon won re-election and peace talks continued but slowed.
- Meanwhile, the US began large-scale bombing of NV in December 1972.
- Peace talks finally began on January 27, 1973. Who's at the table?
  - National Liberation Front, North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, South Vietnam, and the US
- A cease-fire was signed, known as the Paris Peace Accords.
  - Called for the removal of all US troops and the return of all US POWs
  - Set up a demilitarized zone between NV and SV to maintain peace on both sides
  - Communists in SV could participate in politics
  - Other decisions about unification were put off until later
- War Powers Act was passed in 1973 by Congress.
  - Required president to get Congressional approval before sending US troops to an armed struggle; the goal was to prevent undeclared wars, such as Vietnam



<https://2.wp.com/militarymedals.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/hc-this-day-in-history-36c-pictures-096.jpg>

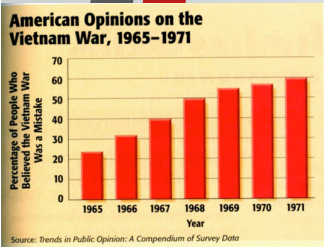
# Fall of Saigon

- In late 1974, fighting broke out again between NV and SV.
  - The US made it clear it would not send troops back to SV.
- In August 1974, Gerald Ford became the first unelected president.
- In 1975, large numbers of NV troops invaded SV; resistance rapidly collapsed.
- By the end of April 1975, the NV had captured the SV capital of Saigon.
  - Panic gripped Saigon and people fled.
  - On April 30<sup>th</sup>, the US radio station in Saigon began playing “White Christmas” on repeat, which was the prearranged signal for Americans to report to evacuation points.
  - A heroic airlift with hundreds of helicopter runs and flights of cargo planes got about 6,000 Americans and 50,000+ SV allies out of the country.
  - NV tanks smashed through the gates of SV’s presidential palace and got into the US embassy, where helicopters were taking off.
  - America had lost.



# The War Is Over

- On July 2, 1976, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was proclaimed; NV and SV were reunited officially under a Communist government.
- When the Vietnam Veterans came home, unlike in previous wars, they were not given the respect they should have been.
  - People who were angry about the war often expressed their hostile feelings at the veterans.
    - Veterans called being sworn and spit at by people who found out they fought in Vietnam.
  - Though returns home and deployment were staggered throughout the 10 years of fighting, there were no welcome home parades, even at the end.
  - GI benefits and services that were promised were almost nonexistent.
  - “Lost war” mentality lingered.
- It took almost 20 years to start to shift this situation.
  - Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated in 1982.



<https://assessablesource.com/media/WallSouth.jpg>