

American involvement in Vietnam

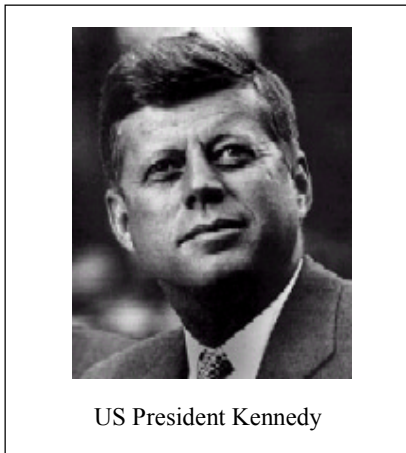
How the Americans became involved

Before the World War 2 Vietnam had been a French colony. Vietnam was occupied by the Japanese during the war. A strong anti-Japanese movement (the Vietminh) was led by Ho Chi Minh who sympathised with Communist ideas. When the war ended, the Vietminh controlled the north of the country 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 recognised a Communist north and a non-Communist south. American influence stopped national elections being held in the south because they were afraid that the Communists would win.



Ho Chi Minh (Vietminh leader)

How and why American intervention increased



US President Kennedy

Naturally Ho Chi Minh was upset that elections had not been held. He started guerrilla warfare against the government in the south. The US knew that it could not get the UN to intervene because Russia would veto any action. An increasing amount of money, military equipment and advisers were sent to help the government of the south. It made very little difference. The Viet Cong fought a very effective guerrilla war. By 1965 the South's government was about to collapse. The USA decided to send its own troops. 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 take-overs in Indo-

China and across South-East Asia where the US had important military, political and commercial interests.

Why the Americans lost the Vietnam war

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 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.

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.

Loss of American public support

For war on such a scale, America had to have the support of the American public. The Vietnam War was a media war. Thousands of television, radio and newspaper reporters sent back to America and Europe reports and pictures of the fighting. Under this barrage of images and stories support for the war was wavering by 1967. There were anti-war protests all over the country. American troops started treating Vietnamese civilians roughly, believing, often rightly, that they were helping the Vietcong. At My Lai in March 1968 about 400 civilians were killed. The army tried to cover the massacre up but one sickened soldier reported it to Congress. Photographs were found. Only Lieutenant William Calley, the officer in charge, was put on trial. He was found guilty, sentenced to 20 years in prison but released after a few years. The news of the massacre deeply shocked American public opinion

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

How the Vietnam War affected the policy of containment

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. In later conflicts such as in Iraq, Yugoslavia and Afghanistan the American military have relied upon massive air attacks to weaken the enemy. American leaders have been determined that there would be 'no more Vietnams'.

