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THE AMERICANS IN VIETNAM (1)

From 1945 to 1975 Communists and their opponents fought a war for control of Vietnam, a country in South-East Asia (see map below). For much of that time, the United States was involved in the war; at first by giving money and weapons to the anti-Communists, later by using its own armed forces to fight the Communists.

Origins of American involvement

When the Vietnam War began in 1945, Vietnam was a French colony. Together with Laos and Cambodia, it was known as French Indo-China.

During the Second World War, however, Indo-China had been occupied by the Japanese. When



Vietnam and South-East Asia in 1954

Japan was defeated in 1945, the French returned to take back control of Indo-China. But a communist independence movement called the Vietminh wanted to be free of both Japanese and French control. Led by Ho Chi Minh, they declared in September 1945 that Vietnam was a free republic, and took control of much of the northern part of the country.

The French government did not want to lose this valuable colony – which provided rice, sugar, rubber, and minerals – and sent French forces to get rid of the Vietminh. Although these were some of France's best troops, including the Foreign Legion, they made little progress in the thick jungles and mountains of north Vietnam. Over the next seven years more than 75,000 French soldiers were killed in action against the Vietminh. Finally, in 1954, an entire French army surrendered to them after being cut off in their fortress at Dien Bien Phu. Humiliated and beaten, the French left Indo-China in 1954. By the Geneva Agreements of 1954, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia became independent countries, though Vietnam was divided between the communist-held North and anti-communist South.

The domino theory

In their war against the Vietminh the French received huge amounts of aid from the United States. By 1954, the American government had poured 1.4 billion dollars into the French war effort – a third of the total cost of the war. Why did they do so? Vice-President Nixon of the USA explained why in a speech in 1953:

'Why is the United States spending hundreds of millions of dollars supporting the French in the fight against Communism? If Indo-China falls, Thailand is put in an almost impossible position. The same is true of Malaya with its rubber and tin. The same is true of Indonesia . . .'

In that speech, Nixon was describing what the US government called 'the domino theory'. This was the idea that if one country fell under communist control, the country next to it would soon fall too, followed by the next – like a row of dominoes falling over.

Fearing that the domino effect would lead to all of Vietnam becoming communist, the US government gave aid to South Vietnam and started training a South Vietnamese army. When an anti-communist politician, Ngo Dinh Diem, became the first



A Vietminh regiment marches through a jungle clearing in North Vietnam in 1952

President of South Vietnam in 1955, the USA gave him their full support. Diem received aid totalling 3 billion dollars over the next four years.

Diem's dictatorship

President Diem governed as a dictator. He imprisoned and executed opponents, and he persecuted Buddhists, the country's main religious group. In response to this, communist guerrillas set up a National Liberation Front in South Vietnam in 1960. Known as the Vietcong, they had the backing of North Vietnam. They began an armed struggle against Diem. By 1961 almost 60 per cent of South Vietnam was under their control.

To help Diem fight the Vietcong, the USA sent military 'advisers' to South Vietnam, along with large amounts of equipment including helicopters. The advisers helped the South Vietnamese to fight

but did not take part in combat. While Kennedy was President, from 1961–3, their number grew from 900 to 11,000.

But Diem was a deeply unpopular leader. By 1963 there were widespread demonstrations against his rule, led mainly by Buddhists. This increased support for the communist Vietcong. Hoping that a change of leader would reverse this, the USA cut off aid to Diem and did nothing to stop his generals from murdering him in a coup in November 1963.

Diem's death changed nothing. He was followed by a succession of incompetent generals, and there were six changes of government in 1964 alone. With each change of government, the communists gained support while the South Vietnamese army steadily lost control of the country. Fearing that South Vietnam would fall to the communists if nothing was done, US President Johnson decided that much greater American involvement was needed.

Questions

- A. Look at the photograph above.
 1. Who were the Vietminh?
 2. Why were they at war with the French when this photograph was taken?
 3. Who won the war and what was the result of it?
- B.
 1. Explain in your own words the 'domino theory'.
 2. On a copy of the map opposite, show what the Americans thought would happen in South-East Asia if Vietnam became communist.
- C.
 1. Who were the Vietcong?
 2. Why did the Americans help the South Vietnamese to fight the Vietcong?
 3. Why did they decide to give more help in 1963–4?

THE AMERICANS IN VIETNAM (2)

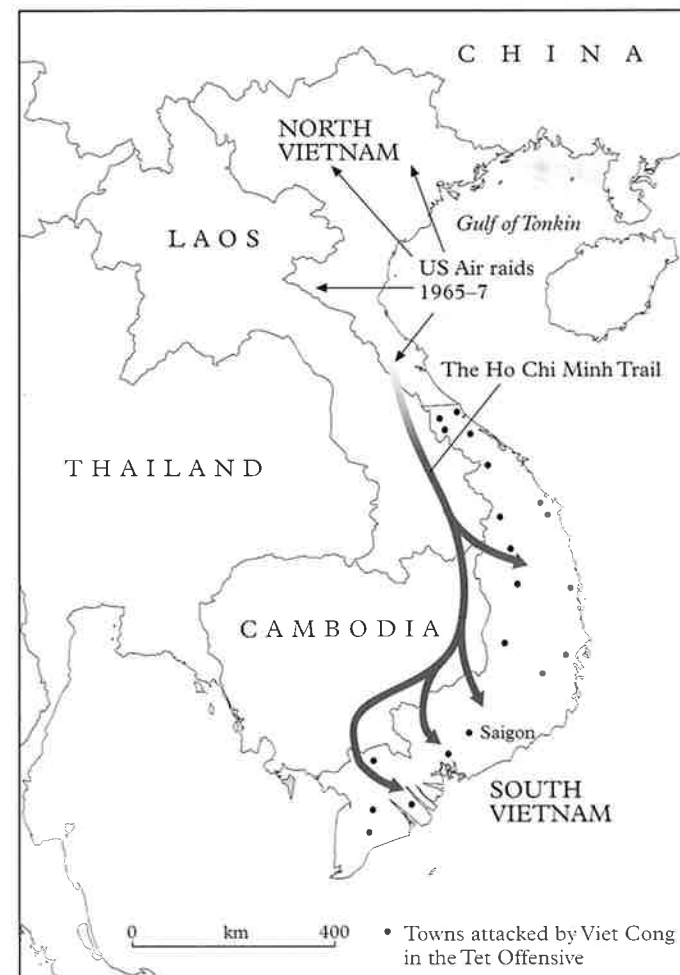
The Tonkin Resolution

American involvement in Vietnam grew rapidly in 1964. It grew after North Vietnamese naval boats fired on an American warship, 'USS Maddox', in the Gulf of Tonkin. In retaliation, President Johnson ordered the US Air Force to bomb targets in North Vietnam. Soon after, Congress passed the Tonkin Resolution, giving Johnson the power to take any action he thought necessary to halt further aggression. Johnson used this power to send combat forces to South Vietnam in March 1965. Soon after, giant B-52 planes began regular bombing raids on the North in 'Operation Rolling Thunder'.

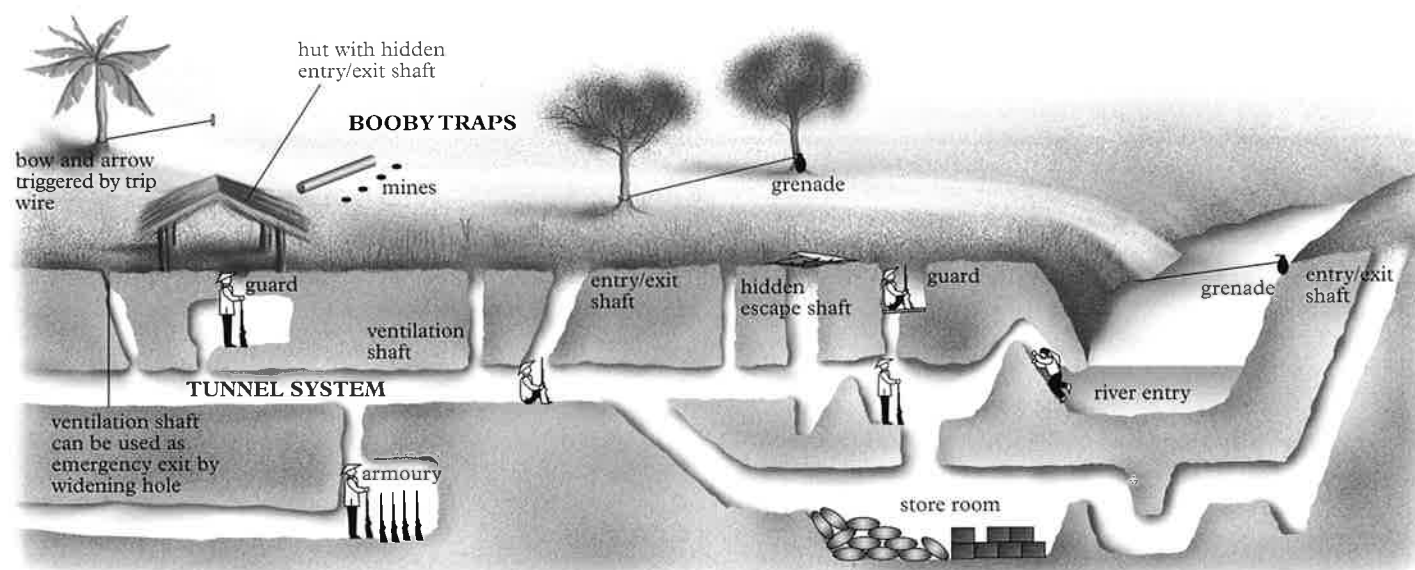
The Americans get bogged down

The number of US troops in Vietnam grew to 380,000 in 1966, and the bombing of the North continued. But the Americans made little progress against the Vietcong, who avoided fighting them in major battles. Based in well-hidden underground shelters like the one pictured below, the Vietcong instead used guerrilla tactics, such as ambushes and sabotage. Although heavily armed, the Americans often found it difficult even to find their enemies, let alone fight them. Moreover, many of the Americans were young conscript soldiers, often led by inexperienced officers.

Just as the United States gave military aid to the South, so Communist China and the Soviet Union gave aid to the North. The Soviet Union, for



The Vietnam War, 1964-75



An artist's impression of a Vietcong tunnel system used for storage and concealment

example, provided the North with anti-aircraft defences against American bombers. Much of this aid found its way to the Vietcong in the South along a network of hidden forest paths known as the Ho Chi Minh trail (see map).

Hearts and minds

Both the Americans and the Vietcong tried to win the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese people with acts of kindness. For example, American army doctors provided medical services in poor villages, while the Vietcong gave land to peasants. But the Americans did more harm than good to the ordinary people. In their search for the Vietcong, they often went on 'search and destroy' missions, burning the homes and possessions of anyone suspected of helping them. They used chemical sprays to uncover Vietcong supply trails in the jungle, but these destroyed rice-crops as well as trees. Their bombs caused massive destruction: more American bombs fell on Vietnam in three years than fell on Europe in the whole of the Second World War. Although the Vietcong also used extreme cruelty on many occasions, it was the Americans who came to be hated most as aggressors.

Anti-war protests

The war also became very unpopular in the United States. By 1967, 160 American soldiers were being killed every week, while the huge cost of the war took money away from much-needed health and housing reforms. Young people especially organised anti-war protests and many young men burned their draft cards.

The Tet Offensive, 1968

By 1968 there were more than half a million American soldiers in Vietnam. Despite this, on 30 January 1968 the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army were able to launch the 'Tet Offensive'. They took control of dozens of towns and cities in South Vietnam. Although the Americans and South Vietnamese eventually drove them back, the US government now began to realise



A US marine sets fire to a Vietnamese hut during a 'search and destroy' mission against the Vietcong

that the war could not be won. A new President, Richard Nixon, decided to bring the troops home.

Vietnamisation

Nixon did not bring the troops home immediately. An immediate withdrawal would be seen as a defeat and harm US credibility around the world. Nixon therefore began a process of 'Vietnamisation' – slowly handing over the fighting to the South Vietnamese army while providing them with air and naval support.

By 1973 the process of Vietnamisation was complete. The US and North Vietnamese signed a peace settlement, ending direct American involvement in the war. But the South Vietnamese army, poorly led and demoralised, was no more able to win the war than the Americans had been. In 1975 the North Vietnamese Army launched another great offensive, captured the southern capital, Saigon, and toppled the government. Ho Chi Minh, the North Vietnamese leader, took control and united North and South as a single country.

The governments of Cambodia and Laos fell to Communists at around the same time: the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the Pathet Lao in Laos. All of Indo-China, as the French had called it, was now communist.

Questions

- Look at the picture opposite. Make a list of difficulties that American soldiers would have faced if they fought the Vietcong in this area.
1. Why did the American soldiers in the photograph above burn the huts?
2. What effect was this likely to have on the 'hearts and minds' of villagers?
- Find three reasons why the Americans decided in 1968 to withdraw from Vietnam.
- From 1947 onwards the policy of the US Presidents was to 'contain communism'. They feared that if they did not contain it, one country after another would fall to communism. How successful was the policy of containment in South-East Asia? Explain your answer.