

11 VIETNAM

Key Issue

- Why did the United States get involved?

THE DOMINO THEORY

In the nineteenth century, the French had added a huge part of South East Asia to their empire. This area was known as Indo-China. During the Second World War, Japanese troops occupied the area. Local people did not want to be ruled by foreigners so they organised resistance groups. One of them was the Vietminh. It was a mainly communist group, led by Ho Chi Minh.

Japan surrendered on 15 August 1945; in September, Ho Chi Minh announced that Vietnam was an independent republic. The Second World War was over – but the twentieth century's longest war was about to begin.

The French wanted to keep Vietnam in their empire and French troops returned to southern Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh was not going to let the French re-take Vietnam without a fight. In 1946, war broke out between the French and the Vietminh.

The USA did not approve of France fighting to get its colony back. However, between 1946 and 1954, the USA gave over \$1 billion to France to help them win. The USA gave all this money because they were afraid that **communism** would spread through South East Asia. This idea was known as the 'domino theory' (see Source A).

Despite all the money, the French lost. In 1953, they tried to trap the Vietminh by setting up a camp at Dien Bien Phu. The Vietminh surrounded it and set up gun positions on the nearby hills: the French could not get supplies into the camp.

From March to May 1954, the Vietminh besieged Dien Bien Phu in North Vietnam. After two months, the French were defeated and the survivors were put in prison camps. Another two months later, an armistice was signed and the French agreed to leave Indo-China. There had been 16,500 French troops at Dien Bien Phu; only 3000 lived to tell the story.

VIETNAM DIVIDED

The peace talks were held at Geneva. It was agreed that Vietnam would be split into two parts, along the

line of the 17th parallel. The north became a communist republic, controlled by the Vietminh. In 1955, southern Vietnam, too, became a republic, with Ngo Dinh Diem as president. The plan was that an election for the whole country would be held two years later and the country would be united.

However, many of the South Vietnamese also supported Ho Chi Minh. An election would turn the whole of Vietnam into a communist country. So the USA promised to support the South Vietnamese government, despite the fact that it refused to take part in an election.



South East Asia, showing Vietnam divided.

WHY DID THE USA GET INVOLVED?

Ho Chi Minh wanted a united, communist Vietnam. The USA believed that he was being supported by the Chinese to turn the whole of South East Asia communist. President Eisenhower (1953–61) believed in the domino theory: if South Vietnam became communist, Laos and Cambodia might be the next targets.

So the USA supported Diem's government of South Vietnam, based in Saigon. It was mainly made up of rich Roman Catholic landowners. Diem's rule was harsh and his government was unpopular with the peasants, many of whom were Buddhists.

His government was also corrupt. The Americans sent money to help Diem's government; much of it was used to bribe Diem's friends. The USA sent arms, too: some were even sold to the communists.



Buddhists were persecuted by Diem's government and tried to draw the world's attention to Vietnam. This Buddhist monk chose to protest by committing suicide (1963).

1960–3

By 1960, whole areas of South Vietnam were in open rebellion. That same year, the National Liberation Front (NLF) was set up to oppose Diem; its members were mostly communist and received help from North Vietnam. The South Vietnamese government called them the Vietcong. A civil war was developing between the government and its peasant opponents.

President Kennedy (1961–3) became very concerned. American money and arms had not saved the South Vietnamese government. So he decided to send more advisers, as well. By November 1963, about 10,000 US advisers were helping South Vietnamese troops.

Meanwhile, the South Vietnamese army tortured and executed thousands of peasants in an attempt to destroy the NLF. This made the peasants even more determined to fight back. In November 1963, Diem's hated government was overthrown and Diem was killed. Outside the palace in Saigon, crowds celebrated.

FULL-SCALE US WAR

Later that month, Kennedy himself was assassinated. The new president was Lyndon Johnson. He decided to increase American help to the South Vietnamese. The US Navy patrolled the Vietnamese coast on the look-out for NLF soldiers. In August 1964, the North Vietnamese retaliated and attacked an American destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin.

THE TONKIN RESOLUTION (1964)

Johnson already had secret plans to escalate the war but could not carry them out unless he could show there was a reason to do so. The Tonkin incident gave him the excuse he needed. The US Congress passed

a resolution which allowed Johnson to fight a war against the North Vietnamese. It was a decision which many Americans would later regret.

The Tonkin Resolution opened the floodgates for US involvement in Vietnam. It allowed President Johnson to use US troops to defend any SEATO country (see Source B). It allowed US aircraft to bomb North Vietnamese naval bases and oil refineries; Johnson believed it allowed him to fight a full-scale war in Vietnam and that is what he did.

The first US marines arrived in South Vietnam early in 1965; by the end of the year, there were 150,000 US troops in the country. By 1969, the number had risen to half a million.

A SOURCE

The domino theory: what the USA feared would happen in South East Asia.



B SOURCE

President Johnson, speaking in 1965.

Most of the non-communist nations of Asia cannot, by themselves, resist the growing might and ambition of Asian communism. If we are driven from the field in Vietnam, then no nation can ever again have the same confidence in American promises or American protection. In each land the forces of independence would be weakened. An Asia so threatened by communist domination would [endanger] the security of the United States itself.

Question

Which was more important as a reason for the development of the Cold War in the years 1965–73:

- The war in Vietnam; or
- Events in Czechoslovakia in 1968?

You must refer to both reasons when explaining your answer. [10 marks]

AMERICAN TACTIC: BOMBS

Johnson believed that he had to stop the North Vietnamese supplying weapons to the NLF. Therefore, the US air force bombed strategic targets in North Vietnam. They included army bases, factories, railways and bridges. By early 1966, US planes were flying an average of 164 flying missions a day. The bombs often missed their target: school children and hospital patients were among those killed.

AMERICAN TACTIC: STRATEGIC HAMLETS

The second strategy had been introduced by President Kennedy. The USA knew that the NLF was supported by most of South Vietnam's peasants. Advisers believed the USA had a better chance of winning if they could stop the peasants from keeping in touch with the NLF.

So US troops turned the peasants out of their own villages and put them in 'strategic hamlets'. These were areas surrounded by barbed wire and controlled by the Americans. About 40 per cent of the Vietnamese population was moved in this way. The scheme made the Vietnamese hate the Americans even more.



US marines in Vietnam.

NLF TACTIC: GUERRILLA WARFARE

The USA believed it could win because it had the most modern fighting equipment. The NLF had no aircraft, no tanks and no artillery. What they had instead was experience in fighting a guerrilla war against the French from 1946–54. They used the same tactics against the Americans.

The NLF avoided fighting the US troops in open battle because the Americans were better armed. Instead, they hid in the jungle or mingled with peasants in the rice-fields.

It was impossible for American troops to know who was a guerrilla and who was not. The NLF wore no uniform so they looked just like the peasants; they spoke the same language so they sounded just like peasants. Indeed, many of them had been peasants so they knew every detail of the jungle.

NLF guerrillas hid in a system of tunnels which stretched for 200 miles under South Vietnam. They launched hit-and-run raids from one tunnel, just 20 miles from Saigon. There was even an underground hospital system. The doctor in charge amputated limbs without anaesthetics and carried out brain surgery with an electric drill.

AMERICAN TACTIC: CHEMICALS

Both the USSR and China supplied money and weapons to the NLF. The North Vietnamese brought these weapons through the jungle at night on foot or by bicycle. The most famous route was nicknamed the Ho Chi Minh Trail. One problem for the Americans was that they could not see the people supplying the NLF because the jungle was too dense.

So the Americans dropped chemical bombs to destroy the trees. The result was defoliation – the leaves were stripped from the trees, thus allowing US helicopters to spot the enemy more easily. Napalm was also used in fire bombs and flame-throwers. It is a thick liquid, which usually contains petrol. It cleared the undergrowth but it also stuck to human beings and burned away their flesh. Ho Chi Minh reminded Johnson of America's use of these rather vicious weapons (see Source A).



The Ho Chi Minh Trail.

OPPOSITION TO WAR

In South Vietnam, innocent men, women and children were burned by napalm and civilians began to doubt whether the USA was really on their side. Increasingly, South Vietnamese people saw the NLF as friends and their own government as the enemy. US troops became more and more unpopular.

Opposition also grew in the United States. At first, most protests had been from students. But a draft law forced young men to go and fight in Vietnam. Black Americans were against it because draft laws hit them hardest. About 12 per cent of Americans were black, but the percentage of draftees who were black was 16 per cent. Many middle-class Americans were also against the war. By 1967, the death rate had risen to 160 American deaths a week. American parents did not want their sons to die far from home in a war they did not understand.

THE TET OFFENSIVE

In January 1968, the NLF launched the Tet Offensive, capturing 75 per cent of the main towns in South Vietnam. Even the American Embassy in the capital Saigon was captured for a few hours. In the end, the Offensive failed but the campaign had two important effects.

First, it convinced the Americans that this was a war they could not win. By 1968, more Americans opposed the Vietnam War than supported it. So, second, President Johnson stopped bombing North Vietnam in return for peace talks in Paris. Nevertheless, the number of American dead passed 30,000 by the end of the year.



This Vietnamese woman is touching the remains of her husband, killed during the Tet Offensive (1968).

A SOURCE

Ho Chi Minh wrote to President Johnson in 1967.

The US government has committed war crimes, crimes against peace and against mankind. Half a million US troops have [used] the most inhuman weapons and the most barbarous methods of warfare, such as napalm, chemicals and gases, to massacre our [countrymen], destroy crops and raze villages to the ground.

B SOURCE

These children were victims of a US napalm bomb (June 1972).



Questions

- Study Source B. Explain the importance of this photograph. Support your answer by referring to details of the photograph and your own knowledge. [6 marks]
- Explain the reasons for America's involvement in Vietnam. [9 marks]

Explain US attempts to contain communism outside Europe. Write a few sentences under each of the following headings:

- The Korean War
- Castro's revolution in Cuba
- The Bay of Pigs conflict
- The Cuban Missiles Crisis
- The consequences of the Crisis
- The division of Vietnam
- Early US involvement in Vietnam.

THE END OF THE WAR

The war made President Johnson so unpopular that he decided not to stand for re-election in 1968. The following year, the new president, Richard Nixon, introduced a new policy called Vietnamisation. What this meant was that he would go on supplying arms and money to South Vietnam – but the South Vietnamese would do the fighting. As a result, many US troops were pulled out of the country. By 1971, the number had been halved.



This picture shows the execution of an NLF officer. It created a big impact in the USA in 1968.

THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL

However, Nixon did not want the communists to win so he began bombing North Vietnam once more. In 1969, he even began secretly bombing Cambodia to stop supplies being sent to the NLF down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. These bombing raids were kept secret even from the US Congress: military records showed 'nil' raids on Cambodia and bombing records were burned. In 1970 US forces invaded Cambodia for two months. In the following year, Laos also became an American target. During Christmas 1972, the US dropped 100,000 bombs on Haiphong in North Vietnam: it was the largest bombing raid in history.

'PEACE WITH HONOUR'

Nixon wanted a way out of the war but he wanted 'peace with honour'. The man who supplied it was his foreign affairs adviser, Dr Henry Kissinger. He held secret talks with the North Vietnamese, even while the bombing and fighting continued. Indeed, the bombing was partly to persuade Americans that North Vietnam was being forced to give up.

It took four years before the two sides could agree. An armistice was finally signed at Paris in January 1973 and American troops went home. Thousands of South Vietnamese went with them,

including many politicians who knew they were wanted by the communists. Kissinger's reward was the 1973 Nobel Peace Prize, which he shared with a Vietnamese delegate at the peace talks.

1973-5

There had been peace talks; there had been an agreement. But there was little peace. The fighting dragged on for two more years, with the communists gradually winning. In April 1975, the NLF captured Saigon. They renamed it Ho Chi Minh City in honour of their leader who had died in 1969.

US advisers left the city in such a rush that there was no time to burn the files which listed their Vietnamese secret agents. To the outside world, it did not look like 'peace with honour'.

THE WAR'S EFFECTS

1 THE DOMINO THEORY

President Kennedy had been afraid that, if Vietnam became communist, so would the rest of South East Asia. This happened in both Laos and Cambodia. However, it did not happen in Thailand, Burma or Malaysia. The domino theory had been proved wrong.

2 VIETNAM

Vietnam was united in 1976 but the country had been destroyed by bombing. Tropical rainforest had been reduced to scrubland; large areas of farming land were little more than a wasteland.



Since the war, thousands of refugees have left Vietnam.

Vietnam's economy was also destroyed. It went from being a major rice exporter to a country that could not feed its own people. After Vietnam was invaded by the Chinese in 1979 it relied on aid from the Soviet Union. Many professional Vietnamese fled the country, looking for safety abroad. Their departure caused more damage to the country's economy.

3 THE COST

No one knows how many people died in the Vietnam War: the total Vietnamese death toll might have been two million. Nearly 58,000 US troops died and another 300,000 were wounded. The war cost the USA \$120 billion. There has also been another type of cost – a psychological one to the survivors (see Source A).

When the peace talks were over, prisoners-of-war were exchanged. But 2400 US troops were still reported as missing in Vietnam. Some Americans believed that some of them were being used as slave labour, 20 years later. One French prisoner was kept like this for 12 years.

4 US BITTERNESS

The small state of North Vietnam had beaten one of the world's superpowers. It was a war that many Americans wished to forget. Long afterwards, many relatives of dead GIs still blamed the politicians for sending their sons and husbands to Vietnam in the first place. They were also bitter about the 'draft dodgers' – the well-off young men who managed to avoid going to fight. Not a single member of the US Congress lost a son in the war.



The remains of a crashed US B-52 bomber in Vietnam (1993).

HISTORIANS LOOK BACK

As more sources become available, modern historians are reaching new conclusions about the war. In 1968, people believed that the Tet Offensive was a North Vietnamese success. It convinced many Americans that they could not win the war. Today, we know that the NLF themselves thought it was a

failure. They lost many of their key fighters during the campaign.

Some historians doubt whether American public opinion really had a major impact on what the government did. When the build-up of troops was slowed down in 1969, the government was more worried about the cost of the war than what Americans thought. The American public generally still thought that the country should keep fighting, as long as there was a chance of winning.

Finally, people used to think that the USA's military could not win against the NLF's guerrilla tactics. But there is evidence that the USA's position improved between 1968 and 1972. As so often in history, it is not what happened that mattered. What counted was what people *thought* was happening.

A SOURCE

From *Superpower Rivalry* by S Judges (1994).

Some 700,000 veterans, women as well as men, have suffered psychological effects: it has been shown that they are far more likely than the rest of the population to experience panic attacks, depression, drug addiction and to be divorced or unemployed.

Questions

- What was the importance of the Tonkin resolution? [4 marks]
- Why did the war become unpopular in the United States? [6 marks]
- Explain how the following together contributed to the defeat of the USA in Vietnam:
 - The tactics of the NLF
 - The tactics of the United States
 - Public opinion in the United States.[10 marks]