

## COLD WAR POLICY AND THE VIETNAM WAR



American Forces in the Mekong Delta: 1967

### Unit Overview

As the Cold War extended to Southeast Asia, Vietnam became a foreign policy dilemma for Presidents Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy; for Lyndon Johnson, it was a political disaster. The Vietnam War was costly, long and controversial. As Americans witnessed the carnage of war on the evening news, many began to question the purpose and the necessity of the U.S. involvement. Antiwar sentiment grew, the conflict escalated and the military achieved only limited success. Was America obligated to prevent the communist takeover of South Vietnam? Was the Vietnam War a blunder or a necessity? How did American public opinion affect the conduct of the war? Form your own answers to these and other questions as we study the Vietnam War.

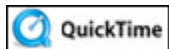
## The Demise of French Indochina

By the late nineteenth century, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam had become colonial possessions of France and were referred to collectively as French Indochina. Governors, who were appointed by the French government, concentrated on increasing profits, and the native people worked for the benefit of their French overlords rather than themselves. Eventually, this led the nations of French Indochina to pursue independence. In Vietnam, the **League for the Independence of Vietnam**, generally known as the **Viet Minh**, was organized as a political party in 1941; its aim was to free the country from colonial rule. Less than a month after the Japanese surrendered in World War II, **Ho Chi Minh**, leader of the Viet Minh, formally declared Vietnam's independence. The Viet Minh had a strong base of popular support in northern Vietnam and became an openly communist organization in the mid-1950s.



The French refused to relinquish their control of Indochina and denied the recognition of Vietnam as a free state unless it remained in the French Union. Fighting between the French and the Viet Minh broke out in 1946 and continued until the French lost the **Battle of Dien Bien Phu** in 1954. When an international conference in **Geneva** negotiated a cease-fire, the Vietnamese that had fought under French command moved south of the **17th parallel**, and the Viet Minh went north of the 17th parallel. This established a military demarcation line surrounded by a demilitarized zone (DMZ). Based on this decision, thousands of people abandoned their homes to move north or south, and the French began their final departure from Vietnam. The agreement left the communist-led Viet Minh in control of the northern half of Vietnam, which came to be known as **North Vietnam**, while the noncommunist southern half became **South Vietnam**. **Ngo Dinh Diem** became South Vietnam's Prime Minister during the armistice negotiations; Ho Chi

Minh headed the government of North Vietnam. This arrangement and American determination to avoid the spread of communism led to another Cold War clash.



The Siege of Dien Bien Phu: A French Military Disaster

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## The Diem Regime

The agreement reached in Geneva in 1954 also stipulated that free elections were to be held throughout Vietnam in 1956 under the supervision of an International Control Committee. The goal was to unify North and South Vietnam under a single government chosen by popular election. North Vietnam expected to win this election thanks to the broad political organization that it had built up in both parts of Vietnam. Diem, who had solidified his control over South Vietnam, refused to hold the scheduled elections. The United States, following its policy of containment, supported his position. In response, the North Vietnamese decided to merge the two Vietnams through military force rather than by political means.



ARVN Soldiers with an American Advisor

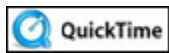
U.S. Secretary of State **John Foster Dulles**, fearing the spread of communism in Asia, persuaded the U.S. government to provide economic and military assistance to the Diem regime. However, the prime minister became increasingly unpopular with the people of South Vietnam. Diem replaced the traditionally elected village councils with Saigon-appointed administrators and aroused the anger of the Buddhists by selecting Roman Catholics for top government positions. Guerrilla warfare spread as the **Viet Cong**, Viet Minh soldiers who were trained and armed in the North, raided South Vietnam. The Diem government requested and received more American military advisers and equipment to build up the **Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)**, but it could not halt the growing presence of communist forces. U.S. President **John F. Kennedy** sent more non-combat military personnel after the South Vietnamese communist insurgents formed an organization called the **National Liberation Front (NLF)** in December of 1960. By the end of 1962, the number of U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam had increased from 900 to 11,000, and Kennedy authorized them to fight if they were fired upon.

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## The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

Popular dissatisfaction with Diem continued to grow, even within his army, and Diem was assassinated during a military coup on November 1, 1963. A series of unstable administrations followed in quick succession, and the lack of political stability encouraged the Viet Cong to increase their activities while the South Vietnam. On August 2, 1964, North Vietnamese patrol boats fired on the U.S. destroyer **Maddox** in the **Gulf of Tonkin**. The **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**, endorsed almost unanimously by the U.S. Congress, gave the president the formal authority for full-scale American intervention in the Vietnam War. **Lyndon Johnson** used this power to order the bombing of North Vietnam by U.S. naval planes. After 1965, U.S.

involvement escalated rapidly in response to the growing strength of the Viet Cong and to the inability of the ARVN to suppress the Viet Cong on its own. The determination to maintain the independence of South Vietnam and to preserve American credibility continued to draw the United States more deeply into the conflict. Support for the **domino theory**, the concept that one nation succumbing to communism in a region of the world would be quickly followed by others, encouraged the Johnson administration's stance on Vietnam.



### Responding to Threat: President Johnson Speaks to the American People

On the night of February 7, 1965, the Viet Cong attacked the U.S. base at Pleiku, killing eight soldiers and wounding 126 more. Johnson ordered a reprisal of the bombing of North Vietnam. Three days later, the Viet Cong raided another U.S. military installation at Qui Nhon, and this time, Johnson ordered aerial attacks against **Hanoi**, the capital of North Vietnam. On March 6, two battalions of Marines landed on the beaches near Da Nang to relieve that embattled city. By June of 1965, 50,000 U.S. troops had arrived to assist the ARVN, but small contingents of the North Vietnamese army joined the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, which they reached by following the **Ho Chi Minh Trail** west of the Cambodian border. President Johnson authorized the bombardment of this supply line, but it extended the war into both Laos and Cambodia.



U.S. Marines destroying bunkers and tunnels used by the Viet Cong

The government in Saigon was now headed by Air Vice-Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, but he was unable to check the rapidly deteriorating military situation. NLF forces were gaining control of

more and more areas of the countryside, and a communist victory seemed imminent. President Johnson pledged the United States to defend South Vietnam and to send more troops. By the end of 1965, 180,000 Americans were serving in South Vietnam under the command of General **William C. Westmoreland**. After mid-1966, the United States and the ARVN initiated a series of new tactics in their intensifying counterinsurgency effort, but their intent to drive the Viet Cong from the countryside and to separate them from their civilian supporters were only partly successful. The U.S. troops depended heavily on superior firepower and on helicopters for rapid deployment into targeted rural areas. The Viet Cong, on the other hand, depended on concealment, surprise attacks, and ambushes.

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## **The Tet Offensive**

U.S. troop strength in South Vietnam rose to 389,000 men in 1967, but, despite their sophisticated weapons, the Americans could not eradicate the skillful and determined insurgents. More North Vietnamese troops arrived to bolster the NLF forces in the South. A presidential election, in which all candidates who favored negotiating with the NLF were banned, was held in South Vietnam in September. General Nguyen Van Thieu became president, and Ky as vice president. On Jan. 30, 1968, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong launched a massive surprise offensive during a Vietnamese festival to celebrate Tet, the lunar new year. They attacked thirty-six major South Vietnamese cities and towns. The fighting at this time was especially fierce in **Saigon**, South Vietnam's capital, and in the city of Hue, which the NLF held for several weeks. The NLF suffered heavy losses (33,000 killed) in the Tet Offensive, and the ranks of the Viet Cong were also decimated by the fighting. Although it represented a defeat for the communist forces, the **Tet Offensive** stunned the U.S. military and the American public because both groups had been convinced that the opposition was not capable of a sustained, simultaneous attack.



President Johnson meeting with General Westmoreland

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## The Impact of Public Opinion

Although the general uprising that the NLF expected had not materialized, the offensive brought about an important strategic effect. It convinced a number of Americans that, contrary to their government's claims, the insurgency in South Vietnam could not be crushed and the war would continue for years to come. In the United States, sentiment against U.S. participation in the war mounted steadily from 1967 on and expressed itself in peace marches, demonstrations, and acts of civil disobedience. Growing numbers of politicians and ordinary citizens began to question whether the U.S. war effort could succeed; other Americans wondered if it was morally justifiable to intervene in a Vietnamese civil war. The U.S. **Selective Service System**, also known as the draft, generated controversy on U.S. university campuses by abolishing automatic deferments for college students in 1967. As a result, some young men applied for conscientious objector status, enlisted in the National Guard or left the country to avoid military service. Opponents of the draft picketed induction centers and burned their draft cards in protest.

General Westmoreland requested more troops to widen the war after the Tet Offensive, but the shifting balance of American public opinion now favored a de-escalation of the conflict. On March 31, 1968, President Johnson announced in a television address that bombing north of the 20th parallel would cease and that he would not seek reelection to the presidency in the fall. The communist leadership in Hanoi responded to the reduction in bombing by curtailing its military efforts; In October, Johnson ordered a total bombing halt. During the interim, the United States and Hanoi had agreed to begin preliminary peace talks in Paris. General Creighton Abrams



became the new commander of U.S. forces in South Vietnam and replaced General Westmoreland.



**Vietnam War Protest at the Pentagon: 1967**

Go to Questions 18 through 20.

## **What's Next?**

The escalation of the Vietnam War and its seemingly endless peace process continued to divide Americans as the antiwar movement rapidly spread. This spirit of rebellion went beyond the war and inspired the counterculture, which defied tradition and conventional thought. In the next unit, you will explore the effects of these changes. Review the terms and names found in this unit; then, answer Questions 21 through 30.

Go to Questions 21 through 30.