

American involvement in Vietnam

Why did the Americans fight in Vietnam?

Vietnam had been part of the French colonies until it was captured by the Japanese in 1941. After the Japanese defeat in the Second World War, the French tried to regain their old territory, but they were defeated by the Viet Minh, the armed forces of the Vietnamese independence movement. Vietnam was freed from French rule in 1954, but was divided into two separate countries. North Vietnam was run as a communist country and led by Ho Chi Minh. South Vietnam was anti-communist and led by Ngo Dinh Diem.

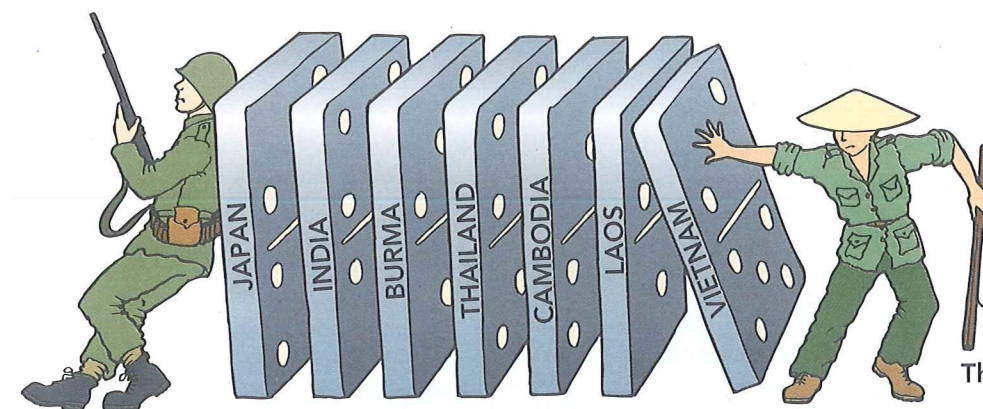
Diem's government in the south was hated by many of its people. He was a Catholic who ruled a largely Buddhist population in a corrupt and repressive way. Many Vietnamese peasants gave their support to the Vietcong, a group of communist guerrillas in South Vietnam who wanted to overthrow Diem. The Vietcong received supplies from the government in North Vietnam.

Diem's government, however, received aid from the Americans. They based their policy on the 'domino theory'. They believed that the Vietcong were trying to spread communism into South Vietnam. If the Vietcong were successful, the Americans believed that other countries in Asia would fall to communism like a row of dominoes. It was vital that the South Vietnamese government was supported, so Vietnam became part of the USA's Cold War containment policy.

How was help given?

Between 1954 and 1960, the USA sent equipment and 'military advisers' into South Vietnam. Meanwhile, the Vietcong and North Vietnam were being supplied by China and the Soviet Union. From 1961 President Kennedy began increasing the number of advisers in South Vietnam until there were more than 11,000 Americans in the country.

By 1963 the Americans had decided that Diem was too corrupt to support, and he was deposed and replaced by anti-communist army generals. Despite American aid, the Vietcong had managed to take over about 40 per cent of the countryside of South Vietnam by 1963.



The domino theory.



SOURCE J

An aerial view of US bombing in North Vietnam.

SOURCE K

We fight this war because we must fight if we are to live in a world where every country can shape its own future. And only in such a world will a future be safe. We are in Vietnam because we have a promise to keep. Since 1954 every American president has offered support to the people of South Vietnam. We have helped to build and we have helped to defend. Over many years we have made a national pledge to help South Vietnam defend its independence. To dishonour that pledge, to abandon this small and brave nation to its enemies, and to the terror that must follow, would be an unforgivable wrong.

President Johnson talking to the American people in 1965.

After Kennedy's assassination in 1963, President Johnson decided to increase American involvement in Vietnam. When North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked American torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, it gave Johnson the excuse he wanted to take direct military action. As a result of the 'Tonkin incident' (in which no serious damage was done), Congress gave Johnson the authority to 'take all necessary steps, including the use of force' to defend South Vietnam.

Johnson's first move was to launch 'Operation Rolling Thunder' against North Vietnam, to stop it supplying the Vietcong. The USA bombed factories, supply lines, ports and military bases. The idea was for the bombing to be so heavy that troops would not be needed. However, the bombing was unsuccessful, so in July 1965 180,000 American troops were sent to Vietnam. Soon the number had risen to over half a million. The bombing of North Vietnam continued until more bombs had been dropped on it than had been dropped in the whole of the Second World War.

War in Vietnam

- 1 2 August 1964. North Vietnamese ships attack a US destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin. US Congress passes the Tonkin Resolution giving President Johnson wide military powers.
- 2 7 February 1965. Operation Rolling Thunder - bombing of targets in North Vietnam.
- 3 14 November 1965. US Army fights North Vietnamese in La Drang Valley.
- 4 22 January - 7 April 1968. Siege of Khe Sanh: 6000 American troops evacuated after 77 days.
- 5 Tet Offensive, 30 January - 26 February 1968. Vietcong attack Hue, Saigon and other towns.
- 6 1 May - 29 June 1970. USA invades Cambodia.



- 7 30 March 1972. North Vietnamese begin conventional invasion of the south.
- 8 30 April 1975. North Vietnamese troops take Saigon. South Vietnam surrenders. (The last US troops had left Vietnam on 29 March 1973.)

→ Ho Chi Minh Trails - a network of tracks for bicycles, trucks and tanks. It was the supply route from the north to the south

■ Demilitarised zone

■ Areas controlled by the Vietcong in 1973

American difficulties

The American troops in Vietnam had vastly superior weapons to those used by the Vietcong. American soldiers had mortars, machine guns and rocket launchers and were supported by tanks, armoured vehicles and helicopters. Yet they could not win the war. Why was this?

The main reason for the American failure is that the way the war was fought gave an advantage to the Vietcong. The Americans could easily win any pitched battle, but the Vietcong avoided this and instead fought a guerrilla war. They came out of the jungle to carry out acts of sabotage and sudden ambushes, and then quickly returned into the jungle. As they had the support of most of the local population, they could easily be absorbed back into village life and the Americans could not tell the difference between ordinary peasants and Vietcong members.

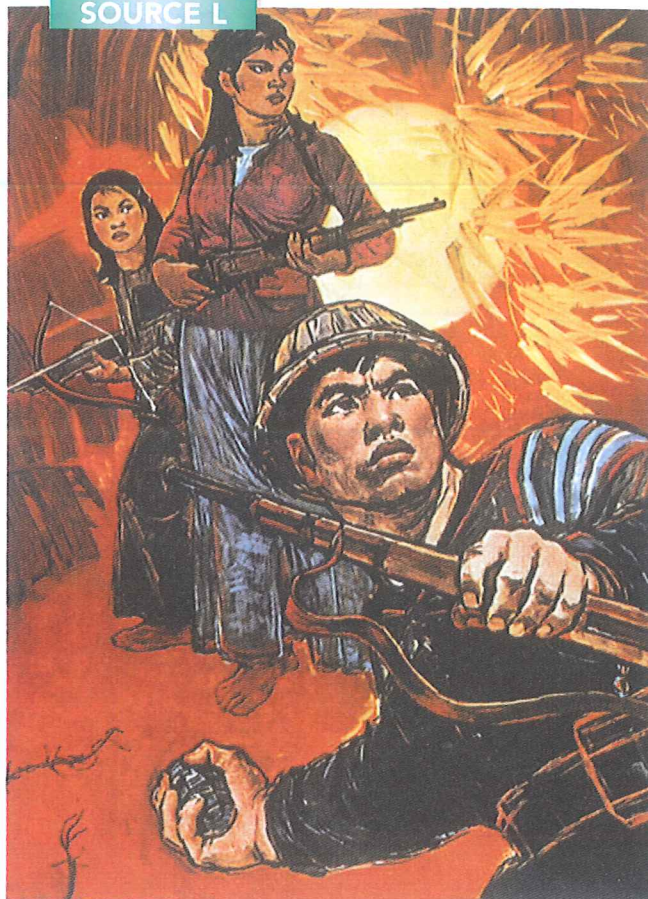
The soldiers in Vietnam, who had an average age of just 19, found the war extremely frustrating. They might be victims of an ambush or a booby trap in which their comrades were killed or maimed. Yet when they went off in pursuit of the Vietcong who had attacked them, they were met by a wall of silence from villagers. Under these circumstances, soldiers sometimes lost control and carried out terrible atrocities. One of the most infamous of these occurred at My Lai in March 1968. A group of American soldiers landed by helicopter to search for Vietcong. When they could not find any, they rounded up the inhabitants of the village and massacred them all. The officer in charge, Lieutenant William Calley, was tried for the murder of 109 civilians. He was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment. But he was released after serving only three days on the instructions of President Nixon.

New tactics

The Americans adopted a variety of tactics to try to defeat the Vietcong guerrilla warfare.

- Strategic villages were set up. Whole villages were moved to new sites behind barbed wire. Careful control was kept on who entered and left the villages. Special aid was given to villagers to try to win their support.
- As the Vietcong could hide easily in the jungle,

SOURCE L



A Chinese poster showing the Vietnamese people resisting the Americans in South Vietnam.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why did the Americans become involved in Vietnam?
- 2 Explain how American military involvement increased in the period 1954–65.
- 3 a What difficulties did the Americans have in Vietnam?
b How did they attempt to overcome those difficulties?

An American soldier taking a member of the Vietcong prisoner.

the Americans carried out a policy of defoliation. The leaves were removed from the trees by dropping Agent Orange (a strong chemical) from the air. The jungle was destroyed, but even today some areas are unfit for human habitation.

- Napalm, a type of petroleum jelly that burns fiercely and sticks to the skin, was dropped from aircraft to burn jungle or set fire to villages. Thousands of innocent villagers received terrible burns.

The new tactics did not work. The Vietcong continued to receive supplies from North Vietnam down a series of jungle tracks called the Ho Chi Minh Trails. Lorries, bikes and human backs carried millions of tons of supplies provided by North Vietnam and China. In the jungle, the Vietcong built an extensive network of tunnels where they had storehouses, workshops, kitchens and even hospitals. No amount of Agent Orange would destroy such a system.

The cost of the war in civilian lives was enormous. It has been estimated that 300,000 South Vietnamese civilians were killed in 1968. These deaths occurred in a war that the Americans were fighting to 'save the people from the evils of communism'. No wonder so many South Vietnamese hated the Americans and so many American soldiers began to wonder what they were doing in Vietnam.

SOURCE N

The problem with the American strategy was that, though the suffering of the enemy was great, it was not enough to make them concede. Throughout the war, the capacity of the North Vietnamese to absorb pain outstripped that of the Americans to inflict it. For the Americans, the war was a 'limited one' far from home. For the North Vietnamese it was total: they were fighting to defend their homeland.

A modern historian's view of the reasons why the Americans did not win the Vietnam War.

SOURCE M



SOURCE O

We were sitting in this wretched little outpost one day when a sergeant of mine said to me, 'You know, Lieutenant. I don't see how we are ever going to win this.' And I said, 'Well, Sarge, I'm not supposed to say this to you as your officer – but I don't either!' So there was this sense, at least in my platoon and maybe in the whole company in general, that we just couldn't see what could be done to defeat these people.

A Marine Corps platoon commander remembering a conversation he had with one of his sergeants in Vietnam in 1966.

The Tet Offensive

Although the Vietcong largely stuck to guerrilla warfare, they did carry out some major offensives. One of these was the Tet Offensive of 1968, when communist troops attacked major South Vietnamese towns and American bases. They even carried out an attack on the American embassy in Saigon. At first the Americans were pushed into retreat, but they soon hit back and regained all the towns and bases that had been captured. By the end of the offensive, 50,000 communist troops had been killed. The Vietcong had hoped that the offensive would result in a revolution in South Vietnam, but it did not.

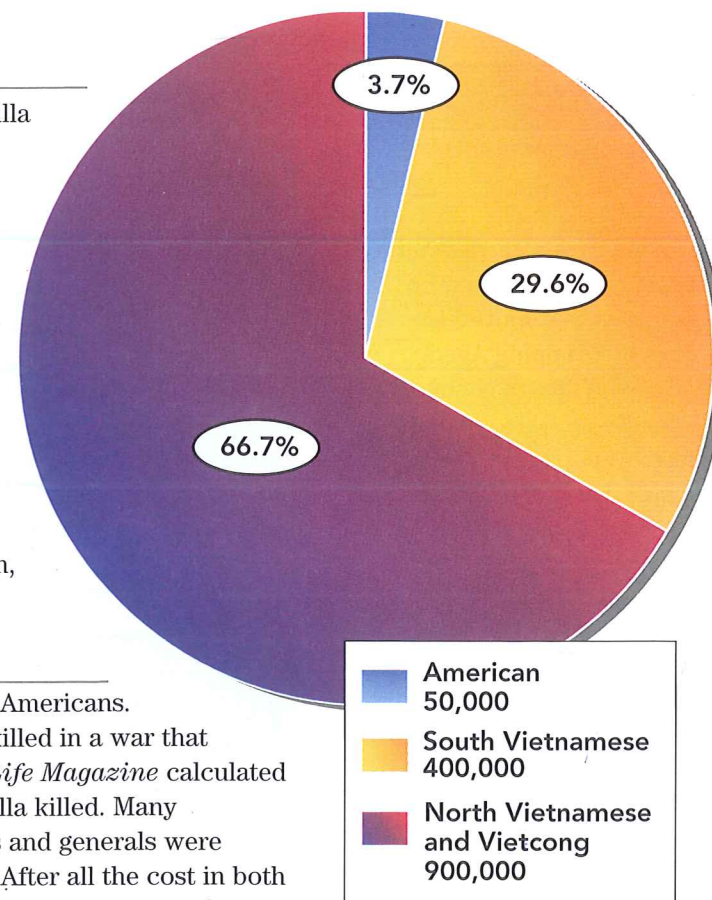
Time to get out

The offensive did have a major effect on the Americans. By 1968, 300 Americans a week were being killed in a war that was costing \$30,000 million a year. In 1967, *Life Magazine* calculated that it cost \$400,000 for each Vietcong guerrilla killed. Many Americans now realised that their politicians and generals were wrong when they said that victory was near. After all the cost in both money and lives, the Vietcong could still attack South Vietnam's capital, Saigon. The time had come to get out.

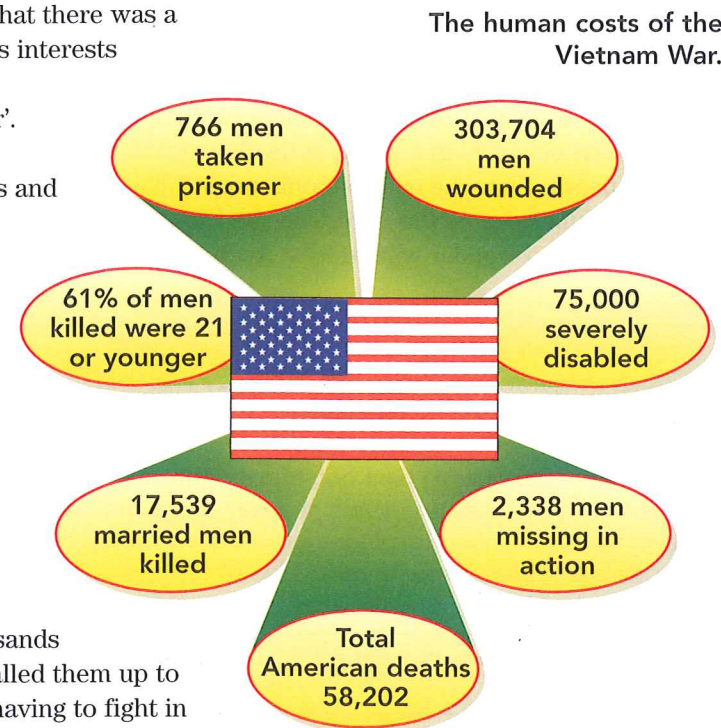
Protest at home

Most Americans supported their government's decision to send troops to Vietnam. They genuinely believed that there was a communist threat and that it was in the USA's interests to fight it. But as the war went on, attitudes changed. Vietnam was the first 'televised war'. Night after night, pictures could be seen of villages being napalmed, of civilian casualties and of American soldiers killed before they were out of their teens. Stories soon reached home of widespread drug addiction and indiscipline in the army. When the My Lai atrocity was reported in 1969, some Americans were shocked that their own troops could do such a thing.

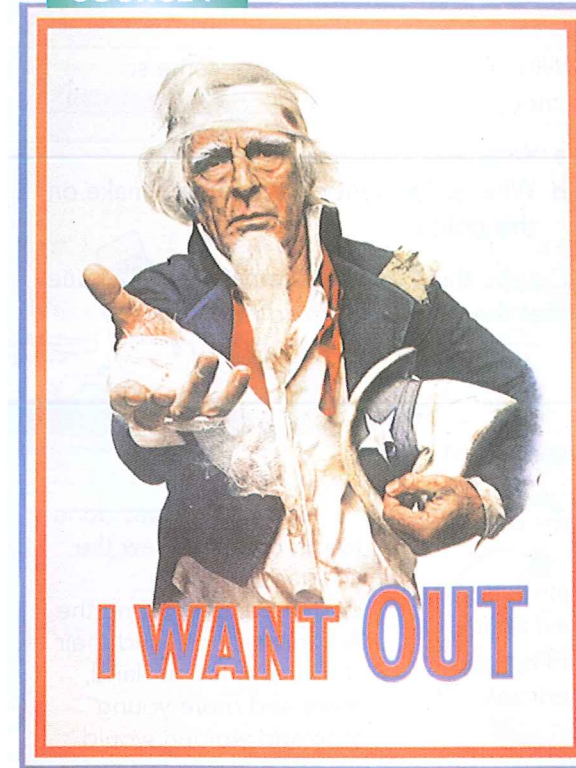
As more and more sons and brothers returned either in body bags or maimed for life, public opinion began to turn against the war. There were increasing numbers of demonstrations in American cities, and thousands of young men burned the 'draft cards' that called them up to fight in Vietnam. Some fled abroad to avoid having to fight in



Deaths in Vietnam.



SOURCE P



An American anti-war poster. It is based on a recruiting poster from the First World War. But on this occasion, Uncle Sam is wounded and wants to get out of the war.

a war of which they disapproved so much. President Johnson came under enormous criticism and across the USA students taunted him with chants of 'Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?' Johnson decided to end the bombing of North Vietnam and not to stand for re-election in 1968. It was left to the next president, Richard Nixon, to find a way to get American troops out of Vietnam.

Vietnamisation

President Nixon had a difficult task in taking the USA out of the Vietnam War. He could not just say that the Americans had decided that it was all too much trouble and they were going to leave. Since 1965 American governments had been persuading people at home and abroad that the war was both just and vital to American interests. Thousands of Americans had died fighting for their country and it

would be an insult to their memory merely to withdraw the troops and admit defeat.

But the American people had turned against the war and Nixon had promised that he would bring it to an end. His solution was to introduce a policy of 'Vietnamisation'. The Americans would give the war back to the South Vietnamese.

SOURCE Q



On 4 May 1970, 3000 students gathered at Kent State University to protest about the Vietnam War. At midday National Guardsmen fired tear gas to break up the demonstration. Some students threw the tear gas canisters back and hurled stones at the troops, who opened fire. Four students, none of whom was involved in the demonstration, were killed. President Nixon later called the student protestors 'bums'.

SOURCE R

I don't give a damn
For Uncle Sam
I ain't going
To Vietnam.

An anti-war protest chant from the late 1960s.

Obviously the South Vietnamese army was not strong enough to fight the war on its own, so the Americans would help build it up and would train and equip it. Then American troops could withdraw. While this policy was being put in place, peace talks would be held with North Vietnam to try to end the war.

The communists triumph

The Americans slowly withdrew and at first the new policy appeared to be working well. Soon half the male population of South Vietnam was in the army and a major offensive by the North Vietnamese was successfully resisted. Then, in February 1973, a cease-fire was agreed with North Vietnam and the Vietcong. By the end of the year, all American troops had left Vietnam and the war appeared to be over.

The reality was something different, however. The Americans had suspected that the cease-fire might not last and had promised South Vietnam further support if fighting broke out again. They did not keep this promise. When the war restarted in 1974, the Americans sent supplies, but no troops.

During 1975 communist troops over-ran much of South Vietnam, and Saigon fell in April. Neighbouring Laos and Cambodia were also captured by communist forces. In 1976 North and South Vietnam were united in a single communist country under the rule of Ho Chi Minh. The American policy of containment in south-east Asia had failed.

QUESTIONS

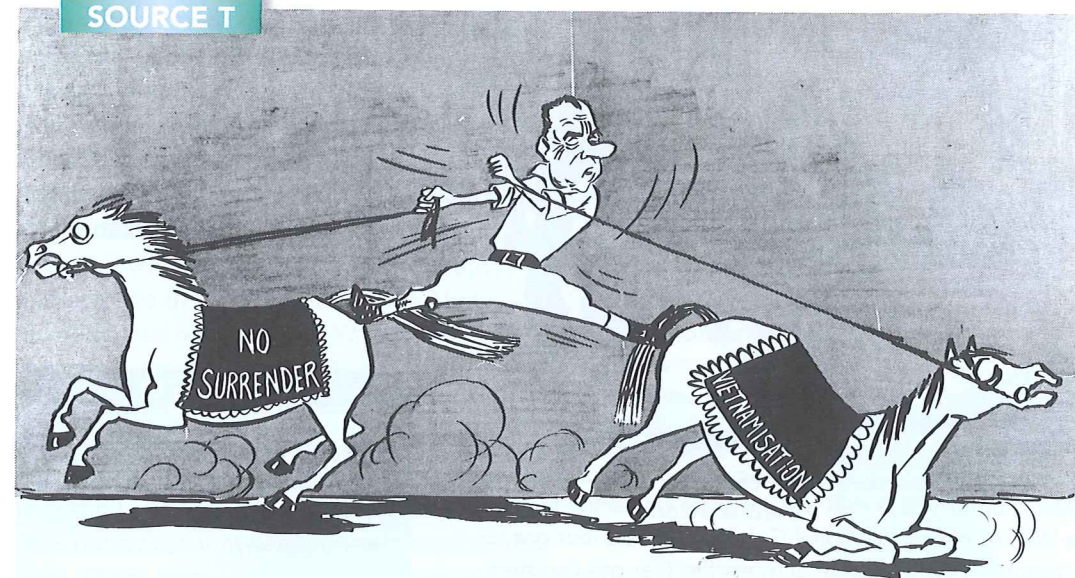
- 1 Why did the Vietnam War become so unpopular in the USA?
- 2 a What was Vietnamisation?
b What judgement does Source T make on this policy?
- 3 Do you think that the Vietnam War was one that the Americans could never win?

SOURCE S

I saw the terrible destruction that was done to our country. I saw the villages and fields destroyed. Every time the Americans increased their destruction of our land, more and more young men and women would rally to our side to join us in our fight for freedom.

A member of the Vietcong explaining the effects of the American tactics in Vietnam.

SOURCE T



Ronald

A British cartoon showing the problems facing President Nixon in 1969.