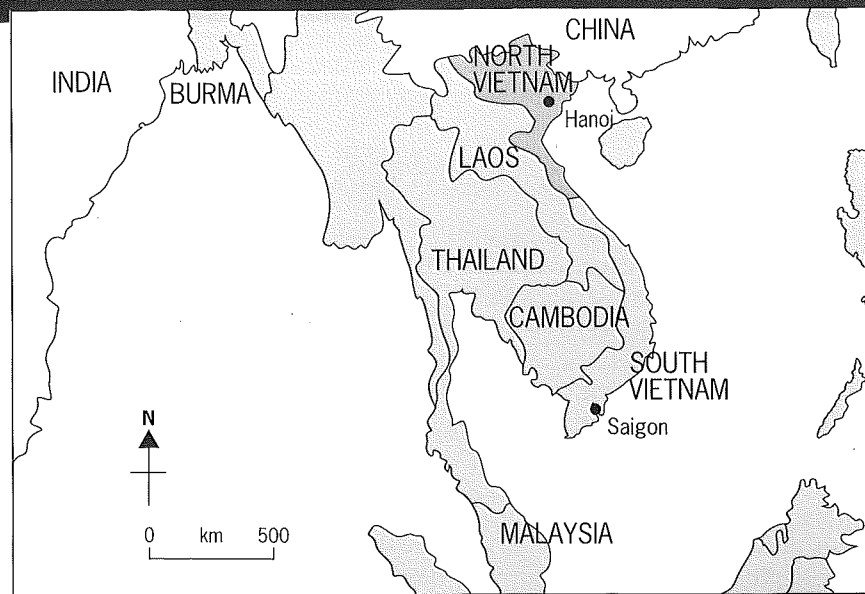


Why was the USA fighting in Vietnam?

The Vietnam War began as a struggle by ordinary Vietnamese people for freedom from foreign rule. First, they fought against Japanese soldiers, who had invaded Vietnam during the Second World War. Next, they fought against the government of France, which had ruled Vietnam as a colony for many years (see time chart). The freedom-fighters in Vietnam were led by Ho Chi Minh. He was a communist, and most of his followers were communists, too. They fought bravely, and many ordinary Vietnamese people admired them. They supported them – even if they did not really agree with communist ideology – because it was the best way of helping to drive foreigners from their land. In its early stages, the war in Vietnam had nothing to do with the USA. So how did the USA get involved? America and France were allies. France was fighting to retain its colonial power against Ho Chi Minh and his communists (now backed by communist China). The French government asked America for help. The Americans agreed. They disapproved of French colonialism, but they feared communism more.

The 'Domino Theory'
The Americans had another reason for getting involved in Vietnam. They believed in the 'domino theory'. They thought the governments of South-East Asia (South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma and India) were unsteadily balanced between communism and capitalism, like a set of dominoes balanced on one edge. They feared that if South Vietnam – the first 'domino' – toppled over into communism, then all the other countries would overbalance and become communist, too. This would create a third superpower BLOC, centred on communist China, which might ally with the USSR. Together they could defeat America.

The war gets worse
After 1954, when French rule ended, Vietnam was divided into two rival states with different ideologies – communist North Vietnam and capitalist South Vietnam (Source 32). The rivals soon



▲ SOURCE 32
Vietnam and its neighbours: the 'Domino Theory'.

SOURCE 33 ▶
Many ordinary Vietnamese were victims of the fighting and, like this family, forced to leave their homes.



▲ SOURCE 34
US troops in action in the jungles of Vietnam, 1967.

became outright enemies. Ho Chi Minh encouraged communist guerrilla fighters (called the 'Vietcong') to attack the government of the South. The Vietcong were very successful. To try and defeat them, the American government sent helicopter gunships, landmines and bombs. By 1964, US planes were averaging 164 bombing raids a day. By 1969, there were over half a million American troops (Source 34) fighting the Vietcong in South Vietnam.

The war devastated a fertile and very beautiful land. It killed around 2 million soldiers (from both sides), plus an unknown number of Vietnamese civilians. The Americans used weapons such as napalm (a burning mixture which sticks to human flesh) to destroy villages and farms, and poisonous chemicals, such as 'Agent Orange', to remove the lush green leaves from rainforests where the Vietcong were hiding. These tactics caused outrage worldwide, but continued until 1969.

By 1969, the USA realised that it could not win. Over 50,000 US troops had been killed in action, and over 150,000 had been injured. American deaths were now averaging 300 per week, but the Vietcong seemed as strong as ever. There were anti-war riots and protests at home. So peace talks began, and US President Nixon (elected 1968) started to 'bring the boys home'. A formal peace treaty was agreed in 1973, but, within two years, troops from North Vietnam had invaded and conquered the south.

Hearts and minds

The Americans lost the war. Why?

- The government of South Vietnam (which the USA supported) was inefficient, and, some said, corrupt. It was not trusted by many Vietnamese people. They did not support it with their hearts or their minds.
- Although the Vietcong often fought brutally, the communists were still respected.
- The Vietcong were experienced, committed and dedicated; they had already been successful against two foreign powers: Japan and France.
- The Vietcong used guerrilla tactics – sudden ambushes, bombs and raids; they had secret jungle hide-outs; they fought by night. They were almost impossible to defeat.
- American soldiers found fighting in Vietnam very scary: they were far from home, in hot, unhealthy jungles, and in constant danger of attack. They had no way of knowing which Vietnamese people were friendly, and which supported the Vietcong.
- As the war became increasingly brutal, many American soldiers were appalled by all the suffering they saw – among their comrades and among the Vietnamese.

Time chart

War in Vietnam

- 1943–45** Ho Chi Minh, leader of the Vietnamese communists, fights against Japanese invaders.
- 1945** War against Japan ends; French refuse independence. Ho Chi Minh starts war against French colonial rulers.
- 1954** Rebels defeat French at Dien Bien Phu. French colonial rulers leave.
- 1954–55** Indo-China is divided into four parts: North and South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Ho Chi Minh becomes ruler of communist North Vietnam; rulers opposed to communists and friendly with USA lead South Vietnam; Cambodia and Laos become independent states.
- 1956** Democratic elections in South Vietnam cancelled by anti-communist government; communist rebels – called the Vietcong – begin to fight against government.
- USA sends army advisers, but Vietcong become increasingly powerful.
- 1964** All known communists in South Vietnam and their Buddhist supporters imprisoned without trial. US Congress grants US President Johnson powers to take military action.
- 1965** 125,000 American troops land in South Vietnam to support South Vietnam government. US planes bomb North Vietnam.
- 1967** American troops in South

- Vietnam now total over half a million. They are joined by soldiers from America's Cold War allies: South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and Thailand.
- Widespread protests in America and Europe against American action in Vietnam.
- 1968** Tet Offensive. Attack by Vietcong plus communist troops from North Vietnam is driven back, but thousands of American soldiers killed and injured. US President Johnson begins to think America cannot win the Vietnam War.
- At home in USA, American public shocked by scale of killing, and by daily TV pictures of war. Anti-war protests increase.
- Peace talks between North and South Vietnam begin in Paris.
- 1968** Fighting spreads to Cambodia and Laos. US planes bomb Cambodia.
- 1969** President Johnson retires. New US President Nixon starts to withdraw US troops from Vietnam.
- 1971–72** Fighting continues. American public opinion increasingly against the war.
- 1973** Ceasefire agreed between North and South Vietnam. Last American troops leave Vietnam.
- 1974** Peace talks collapse; war begins again.
- 1975** North Vietnam invades and conquers South Vietnam.

- People at home in the USA were also shocked by the deaths and the violence – especially when it began to be reported every night on their TV screens. Soldiers' families never knew, when they watched the TV news, whether they would see their own sons and brothers being blown up by a Vietcong bomb. Massive protests called for an end to the war and forced President Johnson not to seek re-election in 1968.