

# Vietnam War

## 2 Page History

### Origins of the conflict

- 1939, Vietnam part of **French Indochina**. Japan occupies this area during WWII.
- 1941, **Ho Chi Minh** sets up **Vietminh – communist** movement aimed at achieving independence.
- 1945 – Japan forced to leave Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh declares independent, united Vietnam.
- Within weeks, **50,000** French troops re-occupy French Indo-China.
- 1949 – **China becomes communist**. China begins supporting Ho Chi Ming against French. U.S.A. fearful of communism – in 1950 Truman sends **\$15 million** worth of supplies to French powers.
- 1954 – French and Vietnamese battle at **Dien Bien Phu**. Only **3000 French troops survive out of 16,500**. French agree to leave area.
- Policy of **containment** means America fearful of French leaving Vietnam.
- **1954 Geneva Agreement** – Agreed that Vietnam to be split in 2 along **17<sup>th</sup> parallel** Ho Chi Minh to lead North. Ngo Diem to lead south. **Elections to be held in 1956**.
- **Eisenhower** fearful Ho Chi Minh will win elections and communism will take over Vietnam. Develops **Domino Theory** – belief that if Vietnam falls to communism, other surrounding countries will, too.
- Diem, supported by U.S.A., refused to allow **1956 elections to take place**. U.S.A. begin sending advisors to help train the South Vietnam army.

### Weakness of Diem government

- He persecuted **Buddhists** e.g. **Thich Quan-Duc**. (**self-immolated in 1963**).
- Diem took land from former Vietminh supporters and gave to his supporters. Also forced **peasants to pay high taxes**.
- Diem's government very weak by end of 1950s. in **1959, 4000 officials assassinated**.
- 1960 – former members of Vietminh living in the South set up **National Liberation Front (NLF)** nicknamed the **Vietcong**. Organisation intended to work with Vietminh to complete communist overthrow of Diem.
- Many in south wanted to see united Vietnam under **Ho Chi Minh**.

### Involvement under Kennedy

- Continued to prop-up Diem. Continued to send advisors to train army of South Vietnam (called **Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)**). **16,000** advisors sent in Kennedy administration.
- 1961 – USA spent \$270 million in military support
- 1963, Kennedy supports **coup** to overthrow Diem (viewed as too unpopular by USA). Leadership in South v. weak following this.
- By end of 1964, support for Vietcong increased from **23,000 to 176,000**.

### Strategic Hamlet Programme

- Introduced by Kennedy. **ARVN struggling to defeat Vietcong**. Vietcong using **guerrilla tactics** and hiding in villages.
- Kennedy creates **strategic hamlets** to provide greater security in countryside. **3000** troops used to guard these villages.
- Forced movement of villagers to these hamlets causes resentment (many Hamlets **poorly supplied**.)
- Communist supporters moved to strategic hamlets spread their ideas to new supporters. **NLF membership increases**.

### Escalation of conflict under Johnson

- By end of 1964 – **60,000 Vietcong** soldiers in South. **35%** of South controlled by VC
- South supplied by **Ho Chi Minh** trail
- 1964 – **Gulf of Tonkin incident**. U.S.S. **Maddox** fired at by North Vietnamese patrol boats – some suggest this didn't happen. Congress used it as excuse to pass **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution** – Permitted U.S.A. to send troops to Vietnam.
- Johnson used resolution to increase air support etc.
- 1965 – VC **guerrillas** destroyed **ten U.S. helicopters**.
- March 1965 – **3,500 troops arrive in Vietnam**. By end of year – **200,000 troops in Vietnam**.
- 1968 – **500,000 troops in Vietnam**.

### Guerilla Tactics

- Vietcong used guerrilla tactics due to – strength of U.S. resources and equipment. NVA and Vietcong no match for U.S.A. and ARVN.
- Guerilla tactics
  - **Tunnels**. Originally used as air-raid shelters. Provided safe haven for VC soldiers. Tunnels around **Saigon ran for 320km**. Tunnels often rigged with traps.
  - **Booby traps**. **11% of U.S.** casualties were booby traps (e.g. **punji sticks**).
  - **Hide in plain sight**. VC would dress as **village peasants** and would often wear peasant clothing. Some wore sandals designed to trick American's into thinking they were walking in the other direction.
- Vietcong prepared to kill villagers when necessary (when villagers not responding to their propaganda). **27,000** civilians killed by VC 1966-1971.

### U.S. methods

- U.S. methods mainly based on air-power, killing large numbers of the enemy, and trying to use artillery to engage in open war (destroy VC hiding places).
  - **Rolling Thunder**. American bombing campaign 1965-1968. Bombing targeted at Industrial bases in the North. **USA drop more bombs than whole of WWII**. Rolling Thunder was ineffective – not many VC deaths.
  - **Chemical Weapons** – America used chemicals to destroy jungles. E.g. **Agent Orange**. USA used **82 million litres** to spray thousands of square kms. **Napalm** also used – burned skin at **800** degrees.
  - **Search and Destroy** – **General Westmoreland** used tactics to uncover hiding VC. U.S. would search villagers (and often burn them – nicknamed **zippo raids** after the lighters used to burn huts). VC as well as villagers killed. US v unpopular.
  - **Tactics on the Ground** - U.S. troops patrolled 80kmaround VC bases. Wanted to draw VC out into **pitched battle**.

### Tet Offensive

- VC launch attack on Tet Holiday 1968 – attack **100 towns and cities**. VC attacked on public holiday as **ARVN** were on leave.
- VC make rapid advances – **hold U.S. embassy hostage**. Event broadcast on U.S. TV. **4,500** VC fighters kept much larger U.S. and ARVN fighters at bay for **2 days in Saigon**.
- VC captured major northern city of **Hue**. They held it for **25 days before U.S. recaptured it**. During these 25 days, VC murdered **3000** opponents within city.
- **4500 VC are killed. U.S. casualties only 1,500.**
- **Offensive convinced many in U.S. that war could not be won**. Humiliating incident at embassy broadcast on national TV and drew criticism.
- **USA and ARVN forced to use artillery** to defeat VC.

### Nixon's policies

- By 1969, 36,000 members of US military killed in war.
- Nixon wanted ARVN to take bigger hand in war – policy known as **Vietnamization**. June 1969, Nixon announces withdrawal of **25,000** U.S. troops.
- Nixon promised to give financial aid to president Thieu's government in the South. U.S. would also train ARVN.
- Nixon was advised the Vietnamization would not work – **ARVN too weak compared to NLF**.
- **Madman Theory** – Nixon aware that ARVN would not survive without U.S. support. Developed madman theory at **Paris Peace Talks**. Theory stated that Nixon was prepared to use **nuclear weapons** to defeat the North.
- **Nixon Doctrine** – Stated that U.S. would honour its current defensive commitments, but begin to withdraw and would **not commit any more troops**.

### Escalation of War

- Nixon attacked neighbouring **Cambodia and Laos**. Aim was to bomb the **Ho Chi Minh** trail.
- 1970 Nixon sent **ARVN and U.S.** troops into Cambodia.
- Cambodian campaign caused anger at home in U.S.A. **U.S. dropped 3 million tons** of bombs on Cambodia. **100,000 Cambodians killed, 2 million left homeless**.
- **1971**, ARVN troops invaded **Laos** with U.S. air support. They were defeated by well-prepared North Vietnamese Army.
- Nixon escalated bombing campaign – **Operation Line-backer II**. Biggest aerial attack in the war. **1,600 civilians died. 70 U.S. pilots captured or killed**.

### Opposition to the war

- U.S. government keen to give the impression that there was only opposition to the war from vocal minority of young students. In reality, opposition came from a number of areas.
  - Politicians against corrupt regime in the south
  - Returning U.S. troops
  - Black Americans who felt their country did not protect them and viewed attaining civil rights as more important than the war
  - Women of all backgrounds
- There was opposition to the war as it undermined President Johnson's promise of a **Great Society** – election promise to improve American public services (impossible with war costs at **\$20 billion**.)

### Reasons for growth of opposition

- **Political** – people questioned reasoning behind U.S. involvement (U.S. was propping up unpopular military dictatorship in the South).
- **Casualties** – opposition grew as casualties also increased. 1965, fewer than **200 casualties**. By 1968 – **14,000 casualties**.
- **Media coverage** – war was televised in great detail (and colour). Conflict was shown in people's homes on a daily basis.
- **U.S. methods of warfare** – chemical warfare destroyed environment, bombing seemed unnecessary and deadly to civilians more than anyone else, search and destroy resulted in atrocities.
- **Draft system** – young men were conscripted into U.S. army through draft system. There were exemptions from the system that favoured the wealthy over the working class. A higher proportion of poor, black people were called up. **Draft Resistance Movement** was formed in protest, giving advice on how to avoid conscription. By end of 1969, there were **34,000 draft dodgers**. **250,000** men in total avoided conscription.

### My Lai Massacre

- Massacre took place on **16<sup>th</sup> March 1968**. U.S. search and destroy mission carried out after Tet Offensive. **Lieutenant Calley** and his platoon wiped out the whole village of **My Lai, killing 347 women, children and babies**. Some women had been **raped first**.
- U.S. military tried to cover up massacre – boasted of killing **90 VC fighters**.
- November 1969, U.S. press got hold of truth – **Life Magazine** published full details.
- **Calley and other officers** charged with murder of 109 people. Military placed all blame on Calley. Calley given **20 years' hard labour in 1971. He was released in 1974**.
- Following massacre, **half a million** people protested against war in Washington in 1969.
- U.S. also introduced **Operation Phoenix**. Aim was to identify **3000 VC fighters** a

### Kent State Shootings

- Protests growing since 1970 – many incensed by escalation of war into Cambodia.
- Protest organised in **Kent State University**.
- **National Guardsmen** called to disperse students protesting – students refused and **4 were shot**.
- Public were horrified – **400 Universities across American shut down. 2 million** went on strike in protest of this.
- Nixon referred to students as **'Campus Bums.'**

### Support for the War

- In 1964 – **85% of Americans supported** U.S. government in the war.
- Much of U.S. public concerned with spread of **communism**. This fear had grown following WWII and **communist revolution in China**. Incidents like **Gulf of Tonkin** confirmed fears of many people in the United States.
- **Silent Majority** – Phrase used by Nixon to describe the people who did not take part in anti-war demonstrations. Nixon believed opponents of the war dominated the **U.S. media**.
- **Hard Hats** – Reference to the members of the construction community who supported the war. **Peter J. Brennan** was head of **Building and Construction Trades Council**. Vocal supporter of the war.
- 8<sup>th</sup> May 1970 – **Anti-war protesters** held rally in support of dead students of Kent State. **Hard Hats** protested against this. **200 hard hats** attacked peaceful protest. More than **70 people** were injured, but no arrests were made.

### Peace Process

- Following **Tet Offensive**, Johnson suggested negotiations should begin for peace. For months, no progress was made.
- July 1969 – efforts made to move peace talks forward. Nixon authorised **Henry Kissinger** to begin peace talks.
- Protest movement in U.S.A. hindered progress in peace talks. North Vietnam followed movement closely and knew its impact on U.S. government.
- Nixon visited China 1972. Period of **détente** led to possible breakthrough in peace negotiations.
- **Paris Peace Agreement 1973** –Provisional agreements had been agreed in 1972. This stated North Vietnam would drop its demand to replace Thieu as president of south. Nixon and Kissinger allowed NV to stay in its current areas. A ceasefire would take place.

### Paris Peace Agreement

- President Thieu rejected terms of 1972 agreement between Nixon and North Vietnam. He felt the South were being abandoned by America.
- **January 1973 – ceasefire agreed that mirrored the 1972 agreement**. Despite Thieu's protestations, the peace agreement was signed.
- All parties agreed to 'respect independence and sovereignty of Vietnam.' U.S.A. agreed to withdraw troops by end of **1973**.
- **Kissinger given Nobel peace prize** for formalising peace.
- Shortly after U.S. withdrew, **ceasfire ended**. North Vietnam launched attack on south in 1974. President Thieu **asked for \$300 million from U.S. congress but was denied**.
- North won key victory over South in 1975. Surrender came a month later.
- Thieu stepped down **April 1975**.
- **1976 – Vietnam united into one single country. Socialist Republic of Vietnam.**

### Cost of War

- **Economic Cost**
  - **1968 cost to taxpayer was \$26.5 million.**
  - War led to rising inflation and ultimate U.S. debt.
- **Human Cost**
  - **50,000 American deaths** in Vietnam.
  - **300,000 soldiers wounded**.
  - Many U.S. soldiers became addicted to **opioids**. Official army estimates put U.S. drug use at **%30** during the war.
  - More than **3 million** men and women served in the war
- **Relatives of soldiers**
  - Relatives of soldiers were greatly affected by the war and the damage it had done. The **League of American Vietnam Prisoners** was set up to look after the wives of servicemen lost in war.
- **Treatment of Veterans**
  - American soldiers returning home were often treated as criminals. Medical treatment for returning soldiers was poor.
  - Many found it difficult to get their old job back.
  - **More Americans committed suicide following the war than were killed in the war itself.**
  - Soldiers felt betrayed by the country they had been fighting for – many were not supported or looked after.

### Strengths and weaknesses of North Vietnam/ Vietcong

- **Weaknesses**
  - Lacked powerful air support and military that the USA possessed.
  - Some in the North were not prepared to die in the name of uniting the country – **not everyone favoured a united Vietnam**.
- **Strengths**
  - North used **conscription** to maintain strength of army. Every year they were able to send **100,000 soldiers to the south**.
  - They were prepared to accept a huge body count. **Between 500,000 and 900,000 died in the war**.
  - They knew the terrain well and were skilled in jungle and guerrilla warfare.
  - They won the support of the peasants in the South and VC membership grew (In 19656 the VC had **170,000 soldiers**).
  - Well supplied by Russia and China. 1965-1968, assistance from both countries totalled **\$2 billion**.

### Strengths and weaknesses of U.S.A.

- **Weaknesses**
  - No knowledge of guerrilla warfare.
  - By 1967, many troops were not soldiers but young men who had been **drafted**.
  - Some troops started using **recreational drugs**. **1971 – 5000 troops treated for sounds, 20,000 treated for drug abuse**.
  - U>S. public not prepared to accept a high body count.
- **Strengths**
  - Unlimited resources – strong economy, military expertise, and manpower at their disposal.
  - U.S.A. had control of the air.

### Impact of protest movement

- Politicians knew they had to pledge to reduce involvement in Vietnam to **win elections. (E.g. Nixon)**
- U.S. public had become divided.
- Some people argue the impact was not so great. Even as late as 1970, **50% of Americans did not oppose invasion of Cambodia**.
- **Only %10 of universities had serious anti-war protests.**

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