

Introduction



This unit is about the Vietnam War, one of the longest and most controversial wars in modern history. This war continues to raise issues and questions that are still researched and analysed by historians, filmmakers, novelists and anybody else who is interested in the basic question: why do countries and human beings engage in war?

You will see why a large and powerful 'superpower' became involved in a conflict that started out as a civil war in a much smaller and less powerful country. You will consider the different types of military strategy used by both sides in this conflict and make judgements about how successful those methods were.

Modern warfare impacts not only on the combatants but also on civilians, and you will see why this aspect became such a controversial part of the conflict. You will also see why both sides found it such a difficult conflict to win, and the part that anti-war protest played in the final outcome.

You are about to research and make judgements about one of the most fascinating and horrific wars in recent history.

Part A of this book covers:

- the reasons for US involvement in Vietnam
- the nature of the conflict and reasons for US defeat
- the impact of the war on civilians and the military, in the USA and in North and South Vietnam
- the growth of protest in the USA and the end of the conflict.






For your controlled assessment in this unit, you will learn how to carry out an enquiry (Part A) and how to analyse and evaluate representations of history (Part B). Later sections of this book cover the skills you will need to be successful in unit 4.

Your Part A enquiry will focus in detail on one key question. In Part B you will focus on representations of history: how to analyse, compare and evaluate different views of the growth of protest.




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Vietnam 1960–75

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Part A Carry out a historical enquiry

A1 The reasons for US involvement in Vietnam

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Learning outcomes

By the end of this topic, you should be able to:

- explain why Vietnam became a country in conflict
- explain why the USA became involved in Vietnam
- make judgements about the importance of the domino theory.

In March 1965 the US President, Lyndon Baines Johnson, gave the order to send 3,500 marines to South Vietnam. By June of that year that had increased to 82,000. He also instructed the air force to start bombing North Vietnam. This was regarded as a significant escalation of US involvement in Vietnam, which, up to this point, had been based upon sending economic assistance and military 'advisers'. To understand why the USA got involved in Vietnam, we need to find out more about Vietnam's history.

- For centuries, Vietnam was divided into two main parts, the North and the South. There were many wars between the two.
- At the start of the nineteenth century, a leader called Gia Long led a rebellion against Chinese invaders and united the country. He called the country Vietnam.
- Vietnam was not independent for long. Soon the French took control. Vietnam became part of France's overseas empire.
- Vietnam was split up again and, together with its neighbours Laos and Cambodia, became part of a colony called French Indochina.

Map of South East Asia. Up until the Second World War, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were part of French Indochina.



- During the Second World War, Japan took control of Vietnam. It stripped the country of food. Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese starved to death.
- When Japan was defeated, the French returned but North Vietnam was determined to fight for independence.
- Ho Chi Minh led the **Vietminh** against the French, fighting for an independent Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh was a communist and wanted Vietnam to be communist.
- French forces were defeated at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954.
- The country was divided into North and South Vietnam at the Geneva Conference in 1954.

Vietnam after the Geneva Conference of 1954.



The USA and Vietnam

After the Second World War, US leaders felt they had to do everything they could to stop the spread of **communism**. The USSR had taken huge parts of Europe as it defeated the Nazis. Then China also became a communist state. China and the USSR wanted other countries to become communist. If that happened, the USA would lose its powerful position as 'the leader of the free world'.

Vietnam was an interesting case:

- Ho Chi Minh was a communist with strong links to China. He wanted a communist Vietnam.
- Ho Chi Minh was fighting for freedom from France as the Americans had once fought for independence from the British Empire.

At first the USA supported Ho Chi Minh against the French; then the USA supported the French, giving them huge amounts of money for their fight against communism.

The battle of Dien Bien Phu

The French thought they could beat Ho Chi Minh's forces, the Vietminh, with superior military skills and technology. They completely underestimated the Vietminh. This is why the French lost the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The French set up a massive camp around the village of Dien Bien Phu, hoping to lure the Vietminh out of the jungle and into an open fight. The Vietminh did come, but instead of marching straight into battle they dug trenches and tunnels so they could get close to the French while still being protected. Vietminh soldiers kept arriving from all over Vietnam. By the time the battle began there were 70,000 Vietminh surrounding the village – five times as many as the French. For 56 days the Vietminh pushed the French back until they occupied only a very small part of the village. The French surrendered on 7 May 1954 and announced that France wished to withdraw from Vietnam.

Communism: a system of organising society so that all property belongs to the community in general and not to individuals. Everything is controlled by the state and a single political party.

Vietminh: a national liberation movement formed to fight against French and Japanese control of Vietnam.

Activities

1. Imagine you lived in a country ruled by another power. Would you want to fight for your nation's freedom or would you just get on with life as best you could? Explain why.
2. The USA switched from supporting Ho Chi Minh to supporting his enemy, France. Explain why the USA did this. How do you think Ho Chi Minh felt about the USA after this happened?
3. Research the military strategies used by the Vietminh in the war against the French. What lessons could the USA have learnt from this conflict about a conventional army (the French) fighting a 'guerrilla' army (the Vietminh)?

The Geneva Conference (May–July 1954)

After the battle of Dien Bien Phu, representatives from the USA, USSR, Britain, France, China and Vietnam met in Geneva, Switzerland. Their aim was to settle the problem of Vietnam.

- The Vietminh wanted early elections. Having defeated the French, they were sure the Vietnamese people would elect them to form a communist government.
- The USA, Britain and France wanted elections delayed, as they thought the Vietnamese people needed time to consider the type of government they wanted and the type of country they wanted Vietnam to be.

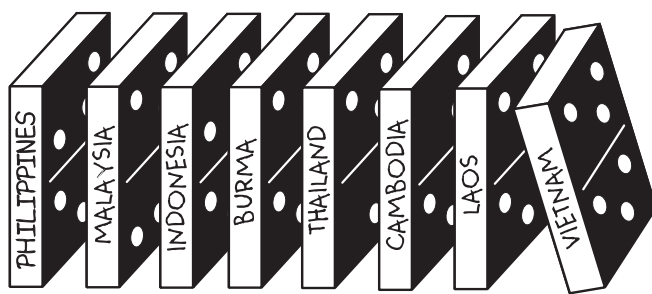
The result of the conference was the Geneva Agreement:

- Vietnam would be divided (temporarily) into North and South (see the map on page 5).
- North Vietnam would be ruled by Ho Chi Minh.
- South Vietnam would be ruled by Ngo Dinh Diem (an anti-communist).
- French troops would fully withdraw from Vietnam.
- The Vietminh would withdraw from South Vietnam.
- The Vietnamese could freely choose to live in the North or the South.
- A general election, for the whole of Vietnam, would be held before July 1956, under the supervision of an international commission.

The domino theory

Ho Chi Minh was sure he would win the election – and so was the USA. If that happened, then Vietnam would become another communist country. The US leaders were very worried that Vietnam would be just the start of a chain of communist take-overs in the whole region. If Vietnam became communist, then it might topple a whole row of countries. This theory was called the ‘domino theory’.

The domino theory



To some people this theory was convincing – it had happened before:

- In the 1930s none of the powerful nations had stood up to Hitler. First the Nazis took control of Austria, then Czechoslovakia, then part of Poland, Denmark, Norway, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium and France.
- From 1945 to 1948 the USSR had spread and established communism in the states of Eastern Europe.

However, some people were not convinced:

- If Vietnam became communist it was not automatically the case that Laos and Cambodia would become communist.
- There was little evidence at the time to support the idea that places like Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines would become communist.

Activity

4. How convincing is the domino theory to you? Do you think Ho Chi Minh would have agreed with it?

Follow up your enquiry

What was the importance of the domino theory?

- Think about its effect on US actions.
- Find evidence from other resources, for example books and websites, to support your opinion.

The Diem government

US President Eisenhower was determined not to let communism spread into South Vietnam. His strategy was to build up South Vietnam so it was strong enough to stand against the North. The USA made sure the newly created Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) was led by someone who was strongly anti-communist. This was Ngo Dinh Diem.

Eisenhower decided to send military 'advisers' to support Diem. These advisers were to help Diem to train a South Vietnamese army. The USA also started a propaganda campaign against North Vietnam. It claimed that Vietminh and Chinese communists had entered South Vietnam and were killing innocent civilians.

Also, the North Vietnamese government was accused of killing thousands of Vietnamese, living in the North, who were said to be political opponents of communism. The USA had started a 'psychological war' against communism in Vietnam.

Unfortunately for the USA, Diem ran a corrupt government and was not a popular leader in the South.

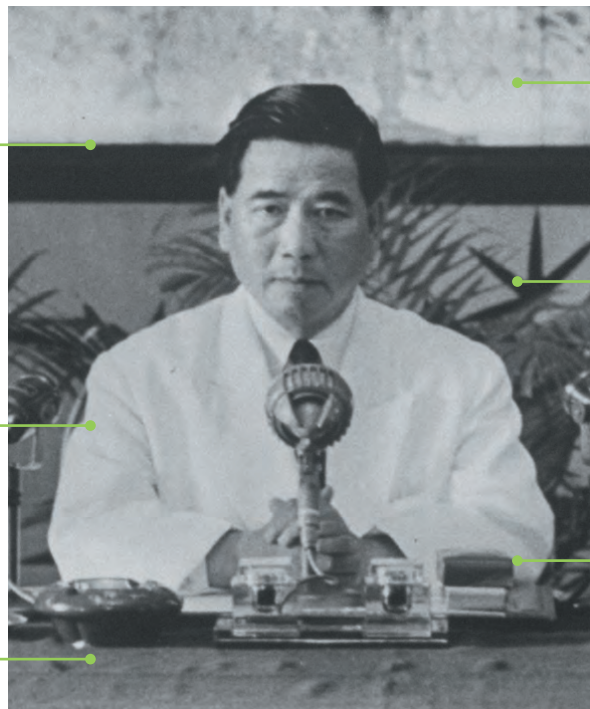
Activities

5. In 1954 the USA needed a leader to defend South Vietnam against communism. Imagine you are responsible for drawing up a job description for the ideal candidate for the job. What would be on your list? Here are some starting points:

- the candidate needs to appeal to the public: should have a lot in common with voters
- the candidate should be anti-communist and a supporter of the USA
- the leader will represent democracy and freedom
- most Vietnamese are poor farmers – someone who gave them more land would make them very happy
- there are plenty of Vietminh left in the country – is a strong hand needed to control them?

6. How does Ngo Dinh Diem rate against your ideal candidate list?

Source A: Ngo Dinh Diem



His election as president was a sham – the vote was rigged. Diem claimed 605,000 votes in Saigon (the capital of South Vietnam), but only 450,000 people were actually allowed to vote.

Diem was a rich Catholic, unlike most Vietnamese, who were mostly poor and Buddhist. He supported rich landowners and persecuted Buddhists.

While Ho Chi Minh gave out land to poor farmers, Diem let rich landowners raise rents so their peasant farmers had to work harder than ever.

Diem hunted down Vietminh supporters and executed them if they did not support him.

Diem gave important official positions to his relatives and friends.

With the backing of the USA, he allowed the election date deadline set by the Geneva Conference (before July 1956) to pass and refused to allow any election to do with the reunification of Vietnam.

The National Liberation Front and civil war, 1959

Vietminh supporters in South Vietnam started the National Liberation Front (**NLF**) to fight against Diem's government and for Ho Chi Minh's united Vietnam. Diem called them the **Viet Cong**, which means 'Vietnamese communist'. The US government also used this term rather than Vietminh. That term was associated with patriotism and nationalism but Viet Cong seemed simple – Vietnamese communists = bad guys. Most commentators still use this term today.

Diem told the USA that he needed many more troops to defend South Vietnam against Viet Cong attacks. It is estimated that approximately 12,000 South Vietnamese government officials were assassinated by the Viet Cong in the first few years of the civil war. In October 1957, US bases in South Vietnam were attacked.

The Viet Cong's aim was to overthrow what they saw as a corrupt and unfair government that Diem (and the USA) had created, and to reunite Vietnam (as the Geneva Agreement had proposed). The Viet Cong thought communism was the best political solution for all of Vietnam. Many of those who joined the Viet Cong were poor, but professional people like teachers and doctors also joined. Peasants and workers (whether they were communist sympathisers or not) supported the organisation, sometimes because the Viet Cong forced them to.

Source B: John F. Kennedy giving his inaugural speech as President of the United States, January 1961.



President John F. Kennedy and Vietnam

When John F. Kennedy became president in January 1961, he spoke of a 'New Frontier' for the USA. For Americans he promised peace, freedom, civil rights and improved living conditions. However, he also spoke about the USA's place in the world. Kennedy had inherited many problems, both at home and abroad, that were complex and not easy to solve.

On the one hand Kennedy wanted the USA, and the world, to think he was tough on communism. But on the other hand he realised that direct military action against communism would be terribly dangerous because the USSR had nuclear weapons that could reach the USA.

This difficult balancing act applied to Vietnam, too. One of his first actions as president was to agree to increase the number of military advisers training the South Vietnamese Army (now known as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam: **ARVN**). There were 16,000 'advisers' in Vietnam by 1963 – so many that it was hard to see them just as 'advisers' any more. But Kennedy was not keen to send US combat troops to Vietnam. That would be getting the USA very heavily involved indeed.

Activities

7. Summarise the factors that led to increased US involvement in the problems of Vietnam in the 1950s. Create a table with the headings:

- The defeat of the French
- The domino theory
- The weakness of Diem's government
- The actions of the North Vietnamese government.

Decide which factor you think was the most important.

8. Find out more about the roles and responsibilities of US military 'advisers' in Vietnam. Was sending in thousands of 'advisers' really the same as sending in US troops, or not?

Source C: An aerial photograph of a strategic hamlet, showing a group of houses surrounded by barricades.



Strategic hamlets

Kennedy inherited a very unpopular policy in South Vietnam called the 'strategic hamlets' approach. This had started in 1960, led by Diem's government and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and was designed to stop the Viet Cong winning over South Vietnamese villages.

If a village was seen to be in danger of Viet Cong 'influence', the villagers were 'relocated' to an 'agrovillage' or fortified camp, with enclosed ditches, barbed wire fences or sharp bamboo fences. Each of these new villages or 'strategic hamlets' was guarded by local non-communists. Diem and the USA presented this policy as villagers helping and defending themselves.

However, it was difficult to decide which villagers might support the Viet Cong and which did not. Every time ARVN soldiers and US advisers relocated a village (more often than not against residents' wishes), they had no idea if it contained Viet Cong supporters. Equally, as they relocated the village, they had no idea if they were really moving it away from Viet Cong control or moving Viet Cong influence to a new area. Realistically, the South Vietnamese government and the USA had no way of knowing if the policy was working. To make matters worse, relocated peasants were forced to pay for the relocation and the rebuilding of their homes.

The strategic hamlet policy was supposed to 'win the hearts and the minds' of the South Vietnamese people towards Diem's government and the USA. Instead, for many South Vietnamese peasants it was no different from living in a form of prison.

NLF: National Liberation Front – North Vietnamese supporters in South Vietnam.

Viet Cong: The US and South Vietnamese governments' term for NLF fighters.

ARVN: Army of the Republic of Vietnam – South Vietnamese Army.

NVA: North Vietnamese Army.

Activities

9. The strategic hamlets approach was designed to 'win hearts and minds'. In pairs, take on the role of advisers to the US president. One of you should be a military adviser explaining why the policy is a good idea and what it will achieve. The other adviser should explain the problems it is causing and what the effects are on support for Diem's regime.
10. Kennedy denied that combat troops were involved in Vietnam, but US jet pilots were bombing Viet Cong positions in South Vietnam and US helicopter pilots were carrying ARVN troops to areas controlled by the Viet Cong. Why do you think he did not want this to be made public?

Part A: Carry out a historical enquiry

The overthrow of Diem and his government

From late 1961 it is believed that Kennedy was torn between conflicting advice on both the military and political situation in South Vietnam. Was the US military commitment in South Vietnam really working? Was Diem's government really in control of the situation in South Vietnam? He was not sure. The main US military adviser to the South Vietnamese Army, Lieutenant Colonel Vann, was convinced that the ARVN commanders were making a mess of the situation.

One thing did seem increasingly clear: Diem was not effective at ruling South Vietnam or dealing with the increasing problem of the Viet Cong. Diem could not unite Vietnam against communism (he was not even succeeding in South Vietnam). Kennedy knew that there had been several attempts from within South Vietnam to remove Diem, but he had always instructed the US advisers and CIA to protect Diem. But in 1963 Kennedy removed Diem's protection.

Kennedy agreed to a CIA operation that gave a group of South Vietnamese army generals \$40,000 to overthrow the Diem government – a **coup**. Although this was not in Kennedy's plans, Diem and his brother were killed by the generals. Kennedy was shocked by what had happened.

Source D: Christine Bragg, *Vietnam, Korea and US Foreign Policy 1945–75*, 2005.

With the coup, the US now [took on] direct responsibility for the South Vietnamese government, a situation far more dangerous than the one [President] Kennedy had inherited from [President] Eisenhower.



Students often confuse the ARVN and the NVA. Remember that NVA = North Vietnamese Army.

Source E: Geoff Stewart, *Ideology, Conflict and Retreat: The USA in Asia 1950–1973*, 2009.

Kennedy appears to have been unclear [about] what it was necessary to do. He had repeatedly shown a deep reluctance to commit US ground troops and talked the day before he died of setting up a study group to examine every option, 'including how to get out of there'. Nevertheless, he had stated in public, on many occasions, his commitment to keeping South Vietnam out of communist control... In one of his last press conferences he stated: 'In my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort, would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam but South East Asia, so we are going to stay there.'

Source F: Ben Walsh, *GCSE Modern World History*, 2001.

Diem's regime was... extremely corrupt... The Americans were concerned and frustrated by his actions, but as [US Secretary of State] Dulles said, 'We knew of no one better.' The USA supported Diem's regime with around \$1.6 billion in the 1950s. Diem was overthrown by his own army leaders in November 1963, but the governments that followed were equally corrupt. Even so, they also received massive US support.

Activity

11. Study Sources D–F and use them to answer the following questions:

- If the US leaders knew Diem was so corrupt and ineffective, why did they support him?
- What were the consequences of the coup against Diem?
- Was Kennedy determined to defend South Vietnam against communism?

Coup: a sudden overthrow of an existing government and seizure of political power, often carried out by the army.

President Lyndon Baines Johnson

After Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, Johnson took over as president. He had been Kennedy's vice-president. President Johnson immediately introduced the policy of 'Great Society', which promised economic and social improvement for all Americans. However, he could not avoid the situation in Vietnam.

Source G: From a speech made by President Johnson in 1964.

If we quit Vietnam, tomorrow we'll be fighting in Hawaii and next week we'll have to fight in San Francisco.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (USA key military personnel) advised Johnson that US combat troops were now needed in South Vietnam. Military advisers were not enough. By 1963 the Viet Cong numbered 23,000. By the end of 1964 estimates suggested this had risen to 60,000. While most of the new Viet Cong recruits came from the South, some were from the North Vietnamese army (**NVA**).

Johnson told his US military chiefs that he would do all he could to prevent a Viet Cong victory in South Vietnam. However, like Kennedy, he was concerned about US public opinion if he started to send US combat troops to South Vietnam. The military chiefs convinced him that if he bombed North Vietnam he might cut off supplies to the Viet Cong along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But Johnson realised that convincing the US public and world opinion that bombing North Vietnam was justified could be difficult. He was also worried that an unprovoked attack would bring China into the conflict, which the USA was very keen to avoid.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail

The Ho Chi Minh Trail kept the Viet Cong supplied with soldiers, weapons and supplies. The Trail was a supply route which stretched along the border with Laos and Cambodia and re-entered South Vietnam above Saigon (see map opposite). The Trail wasn't just one road or path; it was a very complex network of tracks. Although trucks were used to ferry resources on some parts of the Trail, vast amounts of supplies were transported on foot by peasant farmers, in return for generous payments (in rice) by North Vietnam.

Activities

- 12.** Read Source G carefully. What is the link between Johnson's words and the domino theory?
- 13.** Explain why Johnson was concerned about public opinion in the USA and the world. Why would anyone care if he bombed North Vietnam?
- 14.** Which of the following sources would be best for researching what US presidents Kennedy and Johnson really felt about the situation in Vietnam: personal diaries, TV interviews, Wikipedia, books about them by close friends and colleagues? Explain your answer.

A map of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.



Part A: Carry out a historical enquiry

The Gulf of Tonkin incident

Even though Johnson expressed personal doubts about the conflict in South Vietnam, when the opportunity came to escalate the war, he seized it. This happened in the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

The Gulf of Tonkin, in North Vietnam, was a busy waterway. The US and South Vietnamese forces carried out several secret missions there against the North Vietnamese. For example, OPLAN 34A, a sabotage and intelligence-gathering mission, was carried out by South Vietnamese forces, the CIA and US Special Forces all working together.

On the night of 31 July 1964, commandos of the South Vietnamese army attacked a North Vietnamese radar station in the Gulf of Tonkin. A US warship, the *USS Maddox*, was involved in monitoring the North Vietnamese radar stations. On 2 August 1964, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked the US warship – it was hit by a torpedo which did not explode. The *USS Maddox* fired on the torpedo boats and US fighter planes sank one of them and damaged two more.

On 4 August 1964 the *USS Maddox* and the *USS Turner Joy* reported that they had been fired upon and attacked by torpedo boats. It was later revealed that no sailor on board the ships, or jet fighter pilots in the air, saw any evidence of this second attack. But in the USA it was reported without doubt that US ships had been attacked again. As a consequence, Johnson ordered the air force to attack North Vietnamese gunboat bases, and many were destroyed.

Source H: Television address by President Johnson to the US public on the night of 4 August 1964.

Repeated acts of violence against the armed forces of the United States must be met not only with alert defence, but with positive reply. That reply is being given as I speak to you tonight.

The USA was outraged by what was reported as an unprovoked attack by North Vietnam. Johnson seized his chance and proposed the 'Gulf of Tonkin Resolution'. This gave the president the power to defend US forces and South Vietnam in whatever

way he thought best. The US Congress believed that the second attack had taken place, and agreed.

Having taken over as US President after Kennedy's assassination in 1963, in November 1964 Johnson was elected in a 'landslide' victory over his opponent Barry Goldwater. Goldwater had called for an escalation of the war against North Vietnam and suggested that combat troops should be sent to Vietnam. Johnson appeared to want a more peaceful solution and stated that he was unsure about the need to send combat troops. Once he was elected, though, his attitude seemed to change.

Activity

15. Why did the Gulf of Tonkin incident lead to increased US involvement in the Vietnam conflict?

Follow up your enquiry

Research the Gulf of Tonkin in more detail. Make sure your notes cover what happened in the incident, what the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution contained, and what the consequences were for the escalation of US involvement in Vietnam.

Source I: A photograph of the *USS Maddox*, the US warship involved in the Gulf of Tonkin incident.



The Part A skills section of this book (pages 44–53) focuses on the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

Operation Rolling Thunder

Within three months of his election, Johnson approved an operation codenamed 'Rolling Thunder' – regular air attacks on North Vietnam. The aim was to bomb key positions in North Vietnam, in order to cripple its economy and make it difficult for it to supply the Viet Cong. Viet Cong in the South were also regularly bombed. Operation Rolling Thunder was supposed to last for eight weeks, but it lasted for three years: from March 1965 to November 1968. Over one million tons of bombs were dropped on Vietnam.

The new leader of the US military advisers in South Vietnam, General Westmoreland, told Johnson that his current force of 23,000 men was not enough to deal with the Viet Cong threat. On 8 March 1965, 3,500 US marines were sent to South Vietnam to strengthen the US effort.

Source J: A photograph of a US air force bomber during Operation Rolling Thunder.



Johnson presented these actions to the US public as necessary, but more importantly, as 'short-term' measures. At this point US opinion polls showed that about 80% of the US public supported these actions.

Activity

16. Plot a graph to show the escalation of the conflict.

- Put years along the x-axis (horizontal) starting at 1945 and ending at 1968.
 - On the y-axis (vertical) put 'US commitment' – a scale of 0 to 100% would be useful here.
 - For each of the following events, plot where it happened in time and estimate how much it committed the USA to war in Vietnam:
 - 16,000 'advisers' now in Vietnam
 - the assassination of Diem
 - the Gulf of Tonkin incident
 - Operation Rolling Thunder starts
 - 3,500 marines sent to Vietnam.
- You can add in other events too if you like.

Did you know?

US troops often called their enemy in Vietnam 'Charlie'. This was because the term Viet Cong got shortened to the initials V.C., and the letters V.C. in US radio communication were called 'Victor Charlie'.



Your conclusion so far

From this topic, we have seen:

- The Vietnam War had deep roots, including the decision by the USA to prevent South Vietnam from becoming communist.
- The USA became involved in Vietnam in a step-by-step way, each new development making it harder to get out again.
- The domino theory was the basis for US involvement in Vietnam, but Ho Chi Minh's struggle was more about achieving independence than communism.

From what you have learned in this topic, what were the reasons why the USA became more involved in Vietnam by 1965?

To answer this question, create a spider diagram of all the factors in this section that contributed to the USA becoming more involved. Include, for example, the domino theory, the collapse of the Diem regime, underestimating North Vietnam and the Viet Cong.

Consider:

- how the factors link to each other – show this with arrows
- which were the most important factors – mark these in red.

Compare your judgements with those of other people in your group.

Part B Representations of history

How did people in the US react to the Vietnam War?

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- describe a range of reactions to the Vietnam War in the US
- understand the key issue of 'the vocal minority' and 'the silent majority'
- explain why historians disagree about reactions to the war.

In Part B of your controlled assessment you are exploring different ideas about the way people in the US reacted to the Vietnam War. Reactions varied a lot, and some people's reactions also changed as the war went on for years.

Historians are interested in these different reactions. They agree that the way people in the US reacted to the war had a major impact on the war and on America as a nation. But they disagree about what this impact was. For example:

- How much opposition was there?
- What were people opposing: the war or how it was handled?
- Did the protestors turn US opinion against the war, or were the protesters seen as unpatriotic by 'public opinion', which stayed in favour of the war for longer?

How do we know how people reacted to the Vietnam War?

The Vietnam War is often called 'the first televised war'. Every night on TV, people in the US saw the war for themselves, and they read about it every day in newspapers and magazines. Reactions were strong.

Compared to earlier conflicts, we have a lot of source material about what happened and what people thought about it: from tape recordings of presidents' private conversations to letters from mothers to their sons serving in the war.

So, do we know for sure how people in the US reacted to the Vietnam War? There are three main issues with this question.



People reacted in lots of different ways and so the evidence points in lots of different directions.



Most of the evidence about reactions relates to a relatively small number of people: we don't know much about what most people thought.



What politicians, journalists and campaigners said about the public's reactions was influenced by their own values and beliefs.

How do you think the evidence we have might be affected by people's personal beliefs?

Activities

1. What sort of things would turn public opinion against a war (e.g. deaths of soldiers)?
2. Why do you think democratic governments worried about public opinion?
3. What do democratic governments do to encourage public support for their wars?

Source A: Photo of an anti-Vietnam War demonstration in New York, 15 April, 1967.



Source B: A quote from Senator John Stennis about an anti-Vietnam War march in October 1967.

It is clear from the evidence that I have that this is a part of a move by the Communists, especially of North Vietnamese government, to divide the American people, disrupt our war effort, discredit our government before the entire world. The leaders of North Vietnam consider the March on the Pentagon tomorrow as much of their war effort as the guerrilla warfare in South Vietnam and the North Vietnamese army assaulting our troops on the battlefield. Those who participate in these demonstrations tomorrow will be, in effect, cooperating with and assisting our enemy.

Did you know?

You can watch the newsreel of the march from Source B on YouTube. Search for 'Vietnam War peace march, MLK leads procession'.

Activities

4. Study Source A. What does the photo show about the make-up of this crowd? Investigate these categories:
 - men and women
 - old and young
 - black and white
 - military personnel (look for uniforms).
5. Which words would you use to describe the impression this photograph gives you of the demonstration (for example: huge, peaceful)?
6. Do you think Source B is positive or negative about the demonstrators?
7. What about Source A: is it positive or negative? Can a photo express a view?

A range of reactions

In the USA, those who strongly supported America winning the war were known as 'hawks' and those who wanted to find a peaceful solution in Vietnam as quickly as possible were called 'doves'. So we can think about reactions to the war being divided into pro-war and anti-war reactions.

As you will also have seen in Part A, there were different reasons why people were for or against the war. So you also need to search the source for clues about which particular point of view it is coming from. Again, sometimes this is fairly easy, at other times you are going to need **context**.

Context: the background information that helps you understand a source.

Activities

The badges in Source C are all from the Vietnam War era. People wore them to show what they thought about the war – and maybe for other reasons, like fashion, too.

8. Which badges are pro-war and which are anti-war? Write a list showing your choices.
9. What reactions to the war are shown by the badges? Use the following list to help you classify them. Match each badge against one of the items in the list (some badges can be used more than once).

Pro-war:

- the US should go all-out to win the war
- patriotic: support America!
- the war is right because it is against communism.

Anti-war:

- choose peace not war
- don't bomb North Vietnam
- messages linking the war to civil rights issues: equal treatment for women, black Americans, etc.
- messages telling people to do something specific.

Source C: Badges from the Vietnam War era.



Did you know?

Badges are called pins or buttons in the US, so if you are planning to research more badges from the Vietnam era, use these terms in your search to get the best search results.

Decoding the message

Some of these badges rely on symbols to deliver their message. The peace symbol is a good example. The symbol originally came from the anti-nuclear weapons campaign, but over time it came to stand for 'peace, not war'. You can see the peace symbol combined with other symbols on some of the badges. For example, it is combined with the symbol for female (see badge k). When they are put together these two symbols mean 'women against the Vietnam War'. It is also combined with the characteristic silhouette of a B52 bomber (see badge b) to stand for an end to US bombing campaigns in Vietnam.

Activity

10. List the symbols used on the badges and your ideas about their meaning. Collaborate with the rest of your class to build up a complete list of symbols and ideas about meanings.

President Nixon believed the 'silent majority' supported his actions in continuing the war in Vietnam, unlike a tiny but noisy minority of protestors. Was that true, or was opposition much stronger and more significant? This is a key issue for you to explore, and we'll look at it in more detail on the next page.



A silent majority?

When Nixon became president he said he had a secret plan to end the war. By October 1969, with no sign of the war ending, around two million people took part in the 'Peace Moratorium': the largest demonstration in US history. On 3 November 1969, Nixon made a speech on TV about the war. He called for support from the 'great silent majority' of American people.

Source D: Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam, 3 November, 1969. The pledge that Nixon refers to is his promise to bring peace.

In San Francisco a few weeks ago, I saw demonstrators carrying signs reading: 'Lose in Vietnam, bring the boys home.' Well, one of the strengths of our free society is that any American has a right to reach that conclusion and to advocate that point of view. But as President of the United States, I would be untrue to my oath of office if I allowed the policy of this Nation to be dictated by the minority who hold that point of view and who try to impose it on the Nation by mounting demonstrations in the street...

And so tonight – to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans – I ask for your support... The more support I can have from the American people, the sooner that pledge can be redeemed; for the more divided we are at home, the less likely the enemy is to negotiate... North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.

A Gallup poll straight after the speech on 3 November 1969 showed that 77% of Americans supported Nixon's approach to the war. The White House received 50,000 telegrams and 30,000 letters that reinforced this support. Nixon quoted one letter in a speech, shown in Source E.

Source E: A letter read out by President Nixon in a speech to the US House of Representatives, 13 November 1969.

Dear President Nixon:

As a registered Democrat who did not vote for you in 1968, and a father with a son in Vietnam, I want you to know that I am in back of you 100 per cent in your stand on this crisis. I feel like you are acting like an American and you can count on me telling other people that I feel this way.

Did you know?

You can watch a clip of Nixon making the speech in Source D on YouTube. Search for 'Nixon 3 November 1969'.

Activities

11. Consider the words Nixon used to describe the demonstrators in his speech of 3 November. What impression does he give of the anti-war movement?
12. Study Source E. Why do you think Nixon quoted this particular letter? ('I am in back of you' means 'I back you up'.)

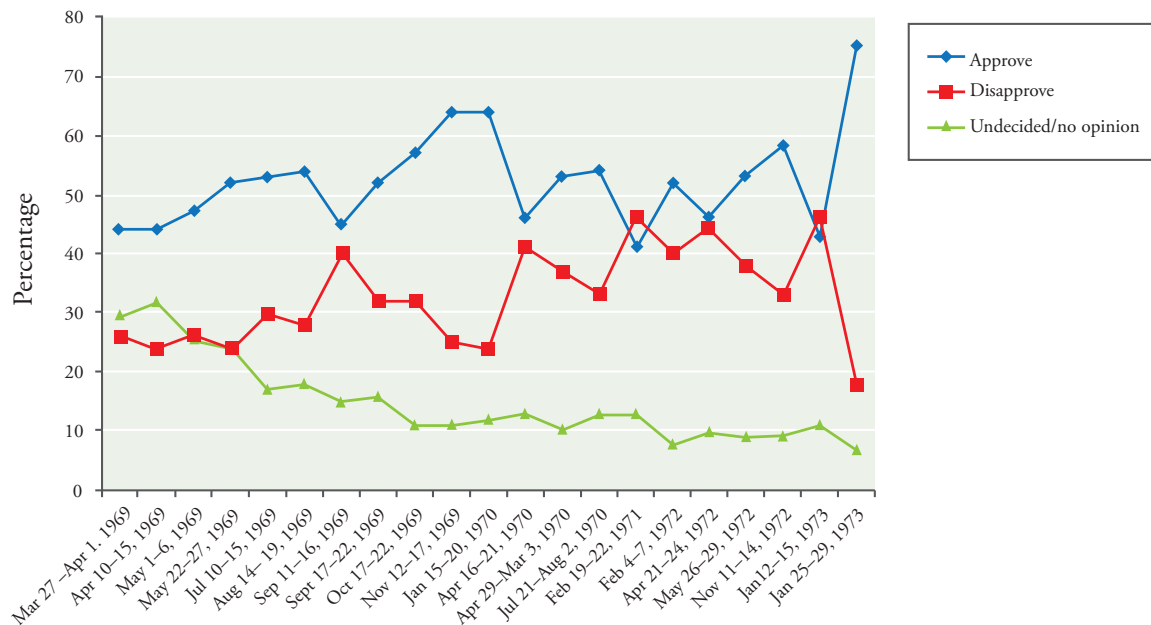
Source F: Nixon explaining policy in Vietnam during a TV broadcast in April 1970.



Opinion polls

On 15 November 1969, 500,000 people demonstrated against the war in Washington DC. But the president felt confident that the overwhelming majority of the American people supported him and he dismissed the demonstration as irrelevant. Was he right?

Source G: Richard Nixon's approval ratings on handling of the Vietnam War, data from *The Gallup Poll 2004: Public Opinion* by George H. Gallup.



Nixon based his confidence on opinion polls. The polling organisation Gallup regularly did a national poll on the president's handling of the Vietnam War. You can see data from these polls in Source G.

While Nixon might have been pleased with his approval ratings in November 1969, Source G shows that opposition to the way the war was handled increased from 1970 through to the middle of January 1973. You can see that when the US pulled out of Vietnam at the end of January 1973, the polls showed a great surge in approval.

There are two things to remember about people's reactions to the war: there were lots of different reactions, and, as the war continued, many people's reactions also changed over time.

Activities

- 13.** Do the data in Source G support or undermine Nixon's claims about a 'silent majority' who supported his handling of the war?
- 14.** Approval dipped and disapproval rose at four main points in Nixon's presidency. Why do you think these events had these impacts?
 - September 1969: My Lai case brought to trial
 - April 1970: incursion into Cambodia
 - February 1971: incursion into Laos
 - April 1972: massive escalation of US bombing in North Vietnam
- 15.** What are Source G's strengths and weaknesses in helping us decide how Americans reacted to the Vietnam War?

Summary

- There were many different opinions about the war. This means evidence needs to be investigated to find out which point of view it shows.
- It is difficult to obtain evidence about the 'silent majority'.
- People could have several different reactions, for example they might have approved of a president's handling of the war, but still wanted the war to end.
- People's reactions changed over time.



Part A Carry out a historical enquiry

In this task, you are required to carry out an enquiry; the enquiry focus will be set by Edexcel. The task is worth 20 marks and you should aim to spend about an hour writing it up. The mark scheme below shows how your teacher will mark your work for this task. Remember that in this task you are also assessed on the quality of your written communication: use historical terminology where appropriate, organise the information clearly and coherently, and make sure your spelling, punctuation and grammar are accurate.

Level	Answers at this level...	Marks available
Level 1	Make simple comments. There are few links between them and few details are given. Only one or two sources have been used in the enquiry.	1–5 marks
Level 2	Make statements about the enquiry topic. Information is included that is mostly relevant and accurate, but it is not well organised to focus on the point of the enquiry. A range of sources has been consulted and information taken from them.	6–10 marks
Level 3	Are organised to focus mainly on the point of the enquiry. Accurate and relevant information is given to support the points the student makes. A range of sources has been found and well-chosen material taken from them.	11–15 marks
Level 4	Focus well on the point of the enquiry. A well-supported conclusion is reached, for example about: the nature of change OR whether one factor was more important than the others OR the inter-relationship between two or more of the factors depending on the enquiry focus. A range of sources appropriate to the enquiry has been identified and material from the sources has been well deployed.	16–20 marks

Let's look at an extract from one student's response to the following enquiry:

- The reasons for increasing US involvement in Vietnam from 1954 to 1964

Student's answer

The period of 1954 to 1964. This was after the French were defeated in Vietnam. France was defeated in WW2 and the Japanese took over Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh fought them and then fought the French. In 1945 they came back wanting to rule Vietnam again. However, Ho had not fought the Japanese only then to hand over power to the French. The US liked Ho then and supported his fight against the French. But when the Communists took over in China and began to give help to Ho Chi Minh. Now the Americans was worried. They feared a Communist plan to dominate all of south-east Asia. The USA poured \$500 million a year into the French war effort and helped the French to set up a non-Communist government in the south of the country. But in 1954 the French was beaten again at Dien Bien Phu. That is what happened before 1954 and in 1954 then the USA was worried even more. They believed in the Domino Theory. The Domino Theory was the reason the US got involved in Vietnam but it was wrong because it never happened. After 1954 the US helped the South Vietnam government with money even though they were not a good government and the South Vietnam people didn't like them.



The Viet Cong also were a problem. They started a guerrilla war against the South Vietnamese government. Using the Ho Chi Minh trail (see Source 31). President Kennedy who was assassinated later send military advisers to fight the Viet Cong. Even though they were soldiers he called them advisers so that the US wouldn't get in trouble for fighting in Vietnam. Kennedy did not want America to get into a big war. He went step by step and maybe would have pulled out of Vietnam. His successor, Lyndon Johnson, was more prepared than Kennedy to commit the USA to a full-scale conflict in Vietnam to present the spread of Communism (Walsh). In 1964 there was an attack on US ships in the Gulf of Tonking, or the US said there was anyway. It was a turning point. And so there was an excuse or a reason to get more involved, And that is what the US did, even though loads of people in the US thought Americans should not be dying to protect a country most of them had never even heard of.

Moderator's comment

This extract indicates that the response would gain a mark in level 2.

The student does make statements that link to the enquiry topic. Most of the key reasons for increased US involvement are listed. Comments are made that explain why some of these reasons were significant – the USA 'feared a Communist plan to dominate all of south-east Asia', the USA started to be involved militarily via advisers following the start of the Viet Cong's attacks in the south, President Kennedy's fears of over-commitment led to his 'step by step' approach, which is contrasted with President Johnson's bolder approach and the Gulf of Tonkin incident is described as a turning point and some explanation is given of the controversy over how justified the incident was as a reason for a massive increase in involvement.

However, there are problems: the student starts with discussion of events before 1954, which the enquiry question does not ask for, and although sources are used, the student only references the source once: Ben Walsh's *GCSE Modern World History*. This is a very well-known textbook and it is obvious that the student has copied chunks of text out of this book without referencing them. The sources are not well integrated into the student's answer and it does not look like the student has been very careful about using them: some have spelling mistakes in them, others do not fit the sense of the sentence and there is one point where the student has copied out the phrase '(see Source 31)' from the book even though there is no Source 31 in the answer. This means that the student cannot be given high marks in level 2 for quality of written communication.

To improve the response, the student should focus more centrally on the precise enquiry by looking at:

- just the period asked for in the enquiry
- which reasons the enquiry has identified for increased US involvement
- whether there is any disagreement over reasons
- which reasons the student thinks are most significant.

Additionally, the material should be better organised in the student's own words rather than simply joined together from notes.

**ResultsPlus**

Maximise your marks

Extract from student's improved answer

The USA's involvement in Vietnam had a long build up. Starting with the defeat of the French by Ho Chi Minh's forces in 1954, the US government tied itself to supporting the South Vietnamese against the North Vietnamese. The USA did this even though they had supported Ho Chi Minh as a freedom fighter. They did it after Communist China started to support Ho Chi Minh. The underlying reason behind all US involvement in Vietnam was fear of a Communist takeover of south-east Asia: the Domino Theory (Walsh)...

US involvement in Vietnam grew step by step. First there was what Wiest and other historians call the 'undeclared war'. The South Vietnamese government was a bad government. It was corrupt and it killed its own people for religious reasons. But the USA still supported it with money because it wasn't Communist. When the Viet Cong started a guerrilla war in South Vietnam, President Kennedy sent military 'advisers' to help fight against them. This was an important increase in involvement. Kennedy called the soldiers 'advisers' because he didn't want to get into trouble with opinion at home or internationally. And he didn't want the USA to get in too deep in Vietnam...

As Walsh says, Lyndon Johnson, was 'more prepared than Kennedy to commit the USA to a full-scale conflict in Vietnam to prevent the spread of Communism'. Historians do not all agree on why Johnson increased US involvement in this way. He had big changes he wanted to make in America, so maybe he just wanted Vietnam done with and finished so he could get on with those big changes. He also hated Communism. So the reasons here are a bit unclear. But one thing is clear: Johnson used the Gulf of Tonkin incident as his reason for increased involvement. He said North Vietnam had made an unprovoked attack on the USA, and the US government was very happy to give the president all the powers and money he needed to escalate the war to first large-scale bombing and then, when that didn't work (Carrington), to sending in the troops.

So, although generally the USA went step by step into the Vietnam War, underneath it all was the Domino Theory and that is what I think was the most important reason.