

Name: _____ Class: _____

Introduction to the Vietnam War

By USHistory.org
2016

The Vietnam War began on November 1, 1955, and ended on April 30, 1975. It was fought between North Vietnam (supported by the Soviet Union, China and other communist allies), and the government of South Vietnam (supported by the United States, the Philippines and other anti-communist allies). As you read, identify why the United States entered into the Vietnam War and what effects U.S. involvement had.

- [1] The Vietnam War was the longest and perhaps most unpopular war in United States history. It lasted twenty years, from November 1, 1955 to April 30, 1975. Despite the decades of resolve,¹ billions of dollars, nearly 60,000 American lives and many more injuries, the United States failed to achieve its objectives.



"U.S. Marines in Operation Allen Brook in 1968" by U.S. Marines (Official Marine Corps Photo #371490) is in the public domain.

The U.S. Enters the War

The Vietnam War was fought between the pro-Communist North Vietnamese² and the anti-Communist South Vietnamese.³ The United States entered the war to support South Vietnam in order to stop the spread of communism⁴ and the threat of the communist revolutionary Ho Chi Minh. At the time the United States decided to enter the war, Ho Chi Minh had risen to become a popular leader in North Vietnam. He used his army to defeat the French, which had colonized Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh declared that he wanted to push out the French and unite all of Vietnam under Communist rule. He got the support of the Soviet Union, an enemy of the United States.

1. **Resolve (noun):** a firm determination to do or accomplish something
2. This is a reference to the inhabitants of North Vietnam, officially known as The Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The DRV was a state in Southeast Asia that existed from 1945 to 1976. The state began when Vietnamese revolutionary Ho Chi Minh declared independence from France on September 2, 1945, and announced the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.
3. This is a reference to the inhabitants of South Vietnam, officially known as the Republic of Vietnam. The Republic of Vietnam was a state governing the southern half of Vietnam from 1955 to 1975. It received international recognition in 1949 as the "State of Vietnam" (1949–55), and later as the "Republic of Vietnam" (1955–75).
4. Communism is a way of organizing a society in which the government owns everything that is used to make and transport products (such as land, oil, factories, ships, etc.) and there is no privately owned property. Many Americans saw communism as a threat to capitalism – in which individuals own their own property – and thus their way of life. Many Americans feared that if communism spread, it would make capitalism less powerful, therefore undermining Americans' power and influence in the world.

On August 2, 1964, gunboats of North Vietnam allegedly fired on ships of the United States Navy stationed in the Gulf of Tonkin.⁵ When reports came in that further firing occurred on August 4, President Johnson quickly asked Congress to respond. At the time, the United States subscribed to the “Domino Theory” of communism — a communist victory in Vietnam might lead to communist victories in Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Such a scenario was unthinkable to American diplomats.

So, with nearly unanimous consent, members of the Senate and House told Johnson to “take all necessary measures” to repel North Vietnamese aggression. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution⁶ gave the President a “blank check” to wage the war in Vietnam as he saw fit.

A Difficult Battlefield

- [5] Between 1965 and 1968, the fighting escalated. Thousands of American soldiers were sent to fight in the unforgiving jungles of Vietnam, which had been booby-trapped by the Viet Cong, a pro-communist guerilla⁷ force led by Ho Chi Minh. The Viet Cong was hard to identify because they were not a conventional army force. They blended in with the native population and struck American forces by ambush, often at night.

Operation Rolling Thunder

In February 1965, the United States began a long program of sustained bombing of North Vietnamese targets known as Operation Rolling Thunder. At first only military targets were hit, but as months turned into years, civilian⁸ targets were also hit.

The United States also bombed the Ho Chi Minh trail, a supply line used by the North Vietnamese to aid the Viet Cong. The trail meandered⁹ through Laos and Cambodia, so the bombing was kept secret from the Congress and the American people. More bombs rained down on Vietnam than the Allies used on the Axis powers during the whole of World War II.

The United States used defoliating agents such as Agent Orange and napalm (essentially gasoline in gel form) to remove the jungle cover. However, this intense bombardment did little to deter¹⁰ the communists. They continued to use the Ho Chi Minh trail despite the grave risk. They burrowed underground, building 30,000 miles of tunnel networks to keep supply lines open.

-
5. The Gulf of Tonkin is a body of water located off the coast of northern Vietnam and southern China.
 6. The resolution granted President Lyndon B. Johnson the authority to assist any Southeast Asian country whose government was considered to be jeopardized by “communist aggression.”
 7. A guerilla is a member of an usually small group of soldiers who do not belong to a regular army and who fight in a war as an independent unit.
 8. **Civilian (noun):** a person who is not a member of the military, police, or firefighting force
 9. **Meander (verb):** to move in a direction with a lot of curves instead of going in a straight or direct line
 10. **Deter (verb):** to cause someone to decide not to do something or to prevent something from happening

An Unpopular War

One factor that influenced the failure of the United States in Vietnam was lack of public support. Night after night, Americans turned on the news to see the bodies of their young flown home in bags. Young men were drafted¹¹ to fight in the war, many of them having to defer a college education. The average age of the American soldier in Vietnam was nineteen. As the months of the war became years, the American public became impatient for a resolution. Some young people took to the streets to protest the war, and others — although only a very small percentage — came to sympathize with the Viet Cong.

- [10] By the late 1960s, many began to feel it was time to cut losses and leave Vietnam. Even the iconic CBS newscaster Walter Cronkite questioned aloud the efficacy¹² of pursuing the war. He said, “We should be very careful believing that what we think is right in America is necessarily right for the rest of the world.”

The End of the War

President Nixon signed a ceasefire in January 1973 that formally ended the hostilities. In 1975, communist forces from the north overran the south and unified the nation. Neighboring Cambodia and Laos also became communist dictatorships.

At home, returning Vietnam War veterans struggled to readjust to normal life; many suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).¹³ Tens of thousands of Vietnamese people lost their homes and were shipped to refugee camps in the United States. In Vietnam, those that survived the war struggled to overcome the effects of Agent Orange, which, according to the Red Cross of Vietnam, caused health problems, disabilities, and birth defects in nearly 1 million people. The use of Agent Orange also destroyed 5 million acres of forests and crops, contributing to widespread famine and leaving hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese people malnourished or starving.

"Introduction to the Vietnam War" by USHistory.org is licensed under CC BY 4.0.

11. Drafting is when a person is ordered to serve in the armed forces, versus signing up voluntarily.
12. **Efficacy (noun):** the power to produce a desired result or effect; effectiveness
13. PTSD is a mental health condition triggered by experiencing or seeing a terrifying event. Symptoms include anxiety and flashbacks.

1. Who were the participants in the Vietnam War?
2. What was the cost of the Vietnam War for the US (include monetary, human, and philosophical/ethical costs)?
3. Who was Ho Chi Minh?
4. Describe the incident that happened in the Gulf of Tonkin and explain how it led to war? (Make sure to read a little further down so you can incorporate The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution into your answer.)
5. What is the Domino Theory?
6. What factors made fighting in the jungle of Vietnam so difficult?
7. Explain what Operation Rolling Thunder was and make sure you describe your purpose?
8. What is Agent Orange? Why was it used? What are the problems associated with this chemical?
9. How did public support (or lack of public support) contribute to the outcome of the Vietnam War?
10. How did the war end?
11. What were the ramifications of fighting in this war for the veterans who represented our country? For the US? For Vietnam?

Due: April 24th, 2020