

# THE FIRST INDOCHINA WAR

Hours after Japan's surrender in World War II, Vietnamese communist **HO CHI MINH** declares the independence of Vietnam from France. The proclamation paraphrased the U.S. Declaration of Independence in declaring, "All men are born equal: the Creator has given us inviolable rights, life, liberty, and happiness!" and was cheered by an enormous crowd gathered in Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square. It would be 30 years, however, before Ho's dream of a united, communist Vietnam became reality.



## HO CHI MINH

Born in 1890, Ho Chi Minh moved to France where he became a founding member of the French Communist Party in 1920. He later traveled to the Soviet Union, where he studied revolutionary tactics and took an active role in the Communist International. In 1924, he went to China, where he set about organizing exiled Vietnamese communists. Expelled by China in 1927, he traveled extensively before returning to Vietnam in 1941.

There, he organized a Vietnamese guerrilla organization--the Viet Minh--to fight for Vietnamese independence. Japan occupied French Indochina in 1940 and collaborated with French officials loyal to France's Vichy regime. Ho, meanwhile, made contact with the Allies and aided operations against the Japanese in South China. In early 1945, Japan ousted the French administration in Vietnam and executed numerous French officials.

When Japan formally surrendered to the Allies on September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh felt emboldened enough to proclaim the independent **DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM**. French forces seized southern Vietnam and opened talks with the Vietnamese communists. These talks collapsed in 1946, and French warships bombarded the northern Vietnamese city of Haiphong, killing thousands.

## THE UNITED STATES GETS INVOLVED



In response, the Viet Minh launched an attack against the French in Hanoi on December 19, 1945--the beginning of the First Indochina War. During the eight-year war, **MAO ZEDONG'S** Chinese communists supported the Viet Minh, while the **UNITED STATES** aided the French and anti-communist Vietnamese forces. In 1954, the French suffered a major defeat at Dien Bien Phu, in northwest Vietnam, prompting peace negotiations and the division of Vietnam along the 17th parallel at a conference in Geneva. Vietnam was divided into northern and southern regions, with Ho in command of North Vietnam and Emperor Bao Dai in control of South Vietnam.

In the late 1950s, Ho Chi Minh organized a communist guerrilla movement in the South, called the Viet Cong. North Vietnam and the Viet Cong successfully opposed a series of ineffectual U.S.-backed South Vietnam regimes and beginning in 1964 withstood a decade-long military intervention by the United States. Ho Chi Minh died on September

The Vietnam War  
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2, 1969, 25 years after declaring Vietnam's independence from France and nearly six years before his forces succeeded in reuniting North and South Vietnam under communist rule. Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, was renamed Ho Chi Minh City after it fell to the communists in 1975.

**GUERRILLA WARFARE** is a form of irregular warfare in which a small group of combatants (such as armed civilians) use military tactics including ambushes, sabotage, raids, petty warfare, hit-and-run tactics, and extraordinary mobility to fight a larger and less-mobile traditional military.

### THINGS TO THINK ABOUT:

- WHO WAS HO CHI MINH?
- WHY DID THE UNITED STATES GET INVOLVED?
- WHO WON THE VIETNAM WAR AND HOW DO YOU KNOW?

# LYNDON JOHNSON AND VIETNAM

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

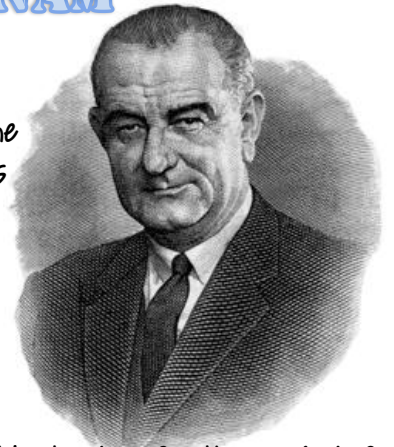
-President Johnson

## INITIAL HESITATION

President Johnson was encouraged by his advisors to take a forceful approach to the Vietnam conflict and to send in US troops to support the South Vietnam Army.

Initially Johnson was not keen to send in

troops to South Vietnam. He knew that politically that this would not be a popular move and that he was facing an election in 1964. Johnson told his advisors that he would do all that was necessary to support South Vietnam but that this would not include sending in US troops until the November 1964 Presidential election was over. This comment was made at the beginning of 1964. They became concerned that the eleven-month gap would be too long for the survival of the South Vietnamese Army.



## THE GULF OF TONKIN INCIDENT



Johnson was not completely against greater US military involvement - he was simply aware that it would not be well received in some parts of America. He gave his support to 'Operation Plan 34B'. This involved sending Asian mercenaries in to North Vietnam to carry out acts of sabotage. As part of a reconnaissance program, the 'USS Maddox' was sent in to the Gulf of Tonkin to examine North Vietnamese naval defenses. **The outcome of this was the attack on the 'Maddox' by three North Vietnamese torpedo boats.**

Johnson was given the reason he needed to order bombing raids on North Vietnam. As president and commander-in-chief he would have been seen as a

weak leader if he had done nothing to counter this - just as his Chiefs of Staff and he, himself, had bargained on. Congress gave Johnson near enough total support for his actions and also authorized him to take whatever measures he deemed necessary against North Vietnam. (Called the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution)

In the lead up to the 1964 presidential election, Johnson was criticized by the Republican candidate, Barry Goldwater, for being too soft in his approach to the North Vietnamese. In response, Johnson told the public that he was not prepared to send US troops thousands of miles overseas to do what the South Vietnamese Army should be doing - protecting its people.

Johnson won the 1964 presidential election with ease. It was not long before US troops were sent to South Vietnam.

In early 1965, Johnson authorized '**Operation Rolling Thunder**', which started on February 24th. This involved extensive bombing of North Vietnam and NLF-held territory in South Vietnam. Initially, 'Operation Rolling Thunder' was meant to last for eight weeks - it lasted for three years. The NLF responded to the bombing by attacking US air bases in South Vietnam. The commander of US advisors in the South, General Westmoreland, informed

Johnson that the men he had in the South were inadequate to defend their bases and that he needed more men. Johnson responded by sending in US troops - this time they were not 'advisors'. On March 8th 1965, 3,500 US Marines - combat troops - arrived in South Vietnam. Johnson sold this deployment to the US public by claiming that they would be in South Vietnam as a short-term measure. In a poll held in 1965, 80% of those Americans polled indicated that they supported Johnson.





# President Nixon and Vietnam



In the 1968 election, Republican Richard Nixon claimed to have a plan to end the war in Vietnam, but, in fact, it took him five years to disengage the United States from Vietnam. Indeed, Richard Nixon presided over as many years of war in Indochina as did Johnson. About a third of the Americans who died in combat were killed during the Nixon presidency.

Insofar as he did have a plan to bring "peace with honor," it mainly entailed reducing American casualties by having South Vietnamese soldiers bear more of the ground fighting—a process he called "Vietnamization"—and defusing anti-war protests by ending the military draft. Nixon provided the South Vietnamese army with new training and improved weapons and tried to frighten the North Vietnamese to the peace table by demonstrating his willingness to

bomb urban areas and mine harbors. He also hoped to orchestrate Soviet and Chinese pressure on North Vietnam.

The most controversial aspect of his strategy was an effort to cut the Ho Chi Minh supply trail by secretly bombing North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia and invading that country and Laos. The U.S. and South Vietnamese incursion into Cambodia in April 1970 helped destabilize the country, provoking a bloody civil war and bringing to power the murderous Khmer Rouge, a Communist group that evacuated Cambodia's cities and threw thousands into re-education camps.

Following his election, President Nixon began to withdraw American troops from Vietnam in June 1969 and replaced the military draft with a lottery in December of that year. In December 1972, the United States began large-scale bombing of North Vietnam after peace talks reach an impasse. The so-called Christmas bombings led Congressional Democrats to call for an end of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. The attacks also led to violent protests in the United States.

## THE PARIS PEACE ACCORDS

In late January 1973, the United States, South Vietnam, the Viet Cong, and North Vietnam signed a cease-fire agreement, under which the United States agreed to withdraw from South Vietnam without any comparable commitment from North Vietnam. Under the provisions of the Accords, U.S. forces were completely withdrawn. Unfortunately, this did not end the war for the Vietnamese and the fighting continued until April 1975 when Saigon fell to the communists.

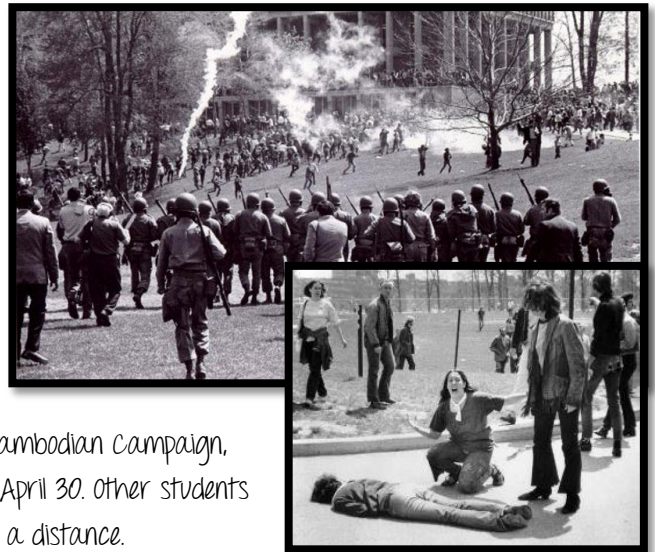
**VIETNAMIZATION:** Under the provisions of this program, South Vietnamese forces would be built up so they could assume more responsibility for the war. As the South Vietnamese forces became more capable, U.S. forces would be withdrawn from combat and returned to the United States.

## Anti-Vietnam Protests

The Kent State shootings (also known as the May 4 massacre or the **KENT STATE MASSACRE**) occurred at Kent State University in the U.S. city of Kent, Ohio, and involved the shooting of unarmed college students by the Ohio National Guard on Monday, May 4, 1970. The guardsmen fired 67 rounds over a period of 13 seconds, killing four students and wounding nine others, one of whom suffered permanent paralysis.

Some of the students who were shot had been protesting against the Cambodian Campaign, which President Richard Nixon announced during a television address on April 30. Other students who were shot had been walking nearby or observing the protest from a distance.

There was a significant national response to the shootings: hundreds of universities, colleges, and high schools closed throughout the United States due to a student strike of four million students, and the event further affected the public opinion—at an already socially contentious time—over the role of the United States in the Vietnam War.



# The Tet Offensive

## GOALS OF THE TET OFFENSIVE

As the celebration of the lunar new year, **TET** was the most important holiday on the Vietnamese calendar. In previous years, the holiday had been the occasion for an informal truce in South Vietnam's long-running conflict with North Vietnam and their Communist southern allies. In early 1968, however, the North Vietnamese military commander chose January 31 as the occasion for a coordinated offensive of **SURPRISE ATTACKS** aimed at breaking the stalemate in Vietnam. He believed that the attacks would cause Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces to collapse and provoke discontent and rebellion among the South Vietnamese population, leading them to rise up against the regime in Saigon. Furthermore, he hoped the offensive would convince American leaders to give up their defense of South Vietnam.

## TET OFFENSIVE BEGINS

On the early morning of January 30, 1968, Viet Cong forces attacked 13 cities in central South Vietnam, just as many families began their observances of the lunar new year. Twenty-four hours later, Viet Cong forces struck a number of other targets throughout South Vietnam, including cities, towns, government buildings and military bases throughout South Vietnam, in a total of more than a hundred attacks. In a particularly bold attack on the U.S. embassy in Saigon, a Viet Cong platoon got inside the complex's courtyard before U.S. forces destroyed it. The attack's boldness, and its initial success, stunned U.S. and international observers, who saw images of the carnage broadcast on television as it occurred.

The toughest fighting occurred at the citadel (fortress), in the city of Hue which the Communists struggled fiercely to hold against superior U.S. firepower. In scenes of carnage recorded on film by numerous television crews on the scene, nearly 150 U.S. Marines were killed in the battle along with some 400 South Vietnamese troops. On the Communist side, an estimated 5,000 soldiers were killed, most of them hit by American air and artillery strikes.



## IMPACT OF THE TET OFFENSIVE



Despite its heavy casualty toll, and its failure to inspire widespread rebellion among the South Vietnamese, the Tet Offensive proved to be a strategic success for the North Vietnamese. Before Tet, representatives of the Johnson administration had been claiming that the end of the war was in sight; now, it was clear a long struggle still lay ahead. Authorities requested more than 200,000 new troops in order to mount an effective counteroffensive, an escalation that many Americans saw as an act of desperation. As antiwar sentiment mounted on the home front, some of Johnson's advisers that had supported past military buildup in Vietnam (including soon-to-be Secretary of Defense

Clark Clifford) now argued for scaling back U.S. involvement.

On March 31, the struggling President Johnson declared that he was limiting the bombing of North Vietnam to the area below the 20th parallel (thus sparing 90 percent of Communist territory) and calling for negotiations to end the war. At the same time, he announced that he would not be running for reelection that November. Though peace talks would drag on for another five years—during which more American soldiers were killed than in the previous years of the conflict—Johnson's decision to halt escalation after the Tet Offensive marked a crucial turning point in American participation in the Vietnam War.





## THE IMPACT OF THE VIETNAM WAR



### AGENT ORANGE

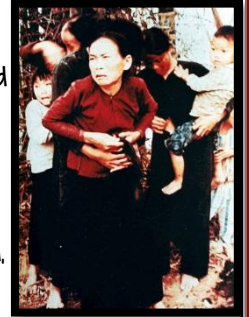
From 1961 to 1972, the U.S. military conducted a large-scale defoliation program aimed at destroying the forest and jungle cover used by enemy North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops fighting against U.S. and South Vietnamese forces in the Vietnam War. U.S. aircraft were deployed to spray powerful mixtures of herbicides around roads, rivers, canals and military bases, as well as on crops that might be used to supply enemy troops. During this process, crops and water sources used by the non-combatant peasant population of South Vietnam could also be hit. In all, Operation Ranch Hand deployed more than 19 million gallons of herbicides over 4.5 million acres of land. Agent Orange, which contained the chemical dioxin, was the most commonly used of the herbicide mixtures, and the most effective. It was later revealed to cause serious health issues—including tumors, birth defects, rashes, psychological symptoms and cancer—among returning U.S. servicemen and their families as well as among the Vietnamese population.

### MY LAI MASSACRE

On March 16, 1968 the angry and frustrated men of Charlie Company, 11th Brigade, America Division entered the Vietnamese village of My Lai. "This is what you've been waiting for -- search and destroy -- and you've got it," said their superior officers. A short time later the killing began.

As the "search and destroy" mission unfolded, it soon deteriorated into the massacre of over 300 apparently unarmed civilians including women, children, and the elderly. Lieutenant Calley ordered his men to enter the village firing, though there had been no report of opposing fire. According to eyewitness reports offered after the event, several old men were bayoneted, praying women and children were shot in the back of the head, and at least one girl was raped and then killed. For his part, Calley was said to have rounded up a group of the villagers, ordered them into a ditch, and mowed them down in a fury of machine gun fire.

When news of the atrocities surfaced, it sent shockwaves through the U.S. political establishment, the military's chain of command, and an already divided American public.



### The Political Impact of Vietnam

The United States paid a high political cost for the Vietnam war. It weakened public faith in government, and in the honesty and ability of its leaders. Skepticism and a high degree of suspicion of and distrust toward authority of all kind characterized the views of an increasing number of Americans in the wake of the war. The military, especially, was shamed for years. Americans after the Vietnam war neither respected nor trusted public institutions.

They were suspicious of official calls to intervene abroad in the cause of democracy and freedom, and the political that had supported American foreign policy since the 1940s dissolved. Congress increasingly emphasized the limits of American power, and the ceiling on the cost Americans would pay in pursuit of specific foreign policy objectives.

**BIG PICTURE:** the United States should use military force only as a last resort; only where the national interest is clearly involved; only when there is strong public support; and only in the likelihood of a relatively quick, inexpensive victory.



### VETERANS COME HOME

Although most Vietnam veterans did succeed in making the transition to ordinary civilian life, many did not. More Vietnam veterans committed suicide after the war than had died in it (over 150,000 since 1975). Even more—perhaps three-quarters of a million—became part of the lost army of the homeless. And the nearly 700,000 draftees, many of them poor, badly educated, and nonwhite, who had received less than honorable discharges, depriving them of educational and medical benefits, found it especially difficult to get and keep jobs, to maintain family relationships, and to stay out of jail. Although a majority of Americans came to view dysfunctional veterans as needing support and medical attention rather than moral condemnation, the Veterans Administration, reluctant to admit the special difficulties faced by these veterans and their need for additional benefits, first denied the harm done by chemicals like Agent Orange and by the posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) afflicting as many as 700,000, and then stalled on providing treatment.

\*The divorce rate among Vietnam veterans is 90%

