



American involvement in Vietnam

This is a transcript of the [American involvement in Vietnam](https://www.mrallsophistory.com) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

This podcast approaches the issue of the Vietnam War, and is broadly split into three sections: reasons for the war and America's involvement, the way the war was fought, and reasons for American Withdrawal.

The development of America's involvement in Vietnam can be tracked through the development of 5 key issues: containment, the Domino Theory, the division of Vietnam after the Treaty of Geneva, US support for the South Vietnamese government against the Viet Cong, and the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

To really get a feel for the course of events that brought America into Vietnam, we need to go back to the 19th century. At this time, Vietnam was known as Indochina and was ruled by France. During World War 2, when France was defeated by Germany, the Japanese began to exert control over Vietnam but were met with resistance from the Viet Minh, led by the communist Ho Chi Minh. He successfully secured control of North Vietnam, but was pulled into war against the French when they returned to exert their control again in 1945.

In 1947 President Truman of the USA developed the "Truman Doctrine" which vowed to protect the free peoples of the world...and actively fight to contain Communism wherever it was. This was followed by the "Domino Theory" which stated that if South Vietnam fell to the Communist North then nearby countries would inevitably become Communist as well – just like a line of dominoes. As the Truman Doctrine promised to protect the peoples of the free world, America was obliged to ensure that Communism was contained. They gave \$500 a year to the French, and helped them establish a non-Communist government in South Vietnam.

By 1954 it was clear that the French were losing and so a peace conference was organized in Geneva. At the Geneva Peace Conference, Vietnam was divided into North and South Vietnam along the 17th parallel and it was agreed that free elections would be held to decide the future direction of the country. However, in direct contradiction to their criticism of Stalin for not allowing free elections in Eastern Europe after World War 2, the USA prevented the elections taking place as they feared that the Communists would win. They were actively enforcing Containment in order to prevent the Domino Theory.

The Americans helped to establish the Republic of South Vietnam under the leadership of Diem in 1955. He was bitterly anti-Communist, and despite receiving billions of dollars from the US his government remained deeply unpopular with most Vietnamese people due to his



disrespect for the Buddhist religion of most Vietnamese peasants, and the corruption of his regime. Although he was overthrown and replaced, the successive governments were no better and only encouraged more and more South Vietnamese peasants to begin supporting a movement that became known as the Viet Cong.

As they grew in size, the Viet Cong began a guerilla war against the South Vietnamese government. They used the Ho Chi Minh trail to supply fighters throughout the south with reinforcements and supplies, securing the countryside and beginning to attack American bases. In response, the USA invested more and more money in the South Vietnam regime, and began sending “military advisors” to train the South Vietnamese army.

By the time of John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963, there were more than 16,000 U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam, and more than 100 Americans had been killed. However, rather than pulling out of Vietnam and leaving the country open to a Communist take-over, Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, committed the United States most fully to the war. He was the President who said: "I am not going to be the president who saw South-East Asia go the way China went." This comment clearly shows his decision to carry out a policy of containment and stop Communism spreading.

The biggest factor in increasing US involvement in the war was the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. In August 1964, the American ship USS Maddox claimed to have been attacked by North Vietnamese boats. The American Congress, outraged at the reported attack, passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which allowed President Johnson to “take all necessary measures to prevent further aggression and achieve peace and security”. Johnson did just that – by the end of 1965 the number of American troops in Vietnam had increased from 23,000 to 165,000.

Remember that if you are asked why the USA got involved in Vietnam, you must give evidence and explain why it led to US involvement. It’s no good just listing reasons. The PEE structure – Point Evidence Explanation – is a helpful way to remember to explain your answer. For example, you may choose to give the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution as a reason. Point: American troops were attacked by the North Vietnamese. Evidence: the USS Maddox claimed to have been attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964. Explanation: this led to American involvement in the war because Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that gave President Johnson power to engage in full warfare.



THE WAY THE WAR WAS FOUGHT

Anyone could have been forgiven for thinking that the might of the American war effort would have had no trouble defeating the underground Viet Cong. However, while American technology and firepower were enormously superior to that of the Viet Cong, it became clear that this would not help them win this kind of war.

The Viet Cong were fighting a guerrilla war. Although they were supplied with weapons from the Communist USSR and China, they realized that they could not hope to match the strength of the South Vietnamese forces combined with the Americans in open warfare – as proved by their loss of 2,000 troops to America's 300 in the La Drenng Valley in 1965.

Ho Chi Minh turned, instead, to guerrilla tactics – the same that he had successfully used against the Japanese and French 30 years previously. Guerrilla warfare was underground warfare. Ho Chi Minh's troops were indistinguishable from ordinary peasant villagers as they wore no uniform. As soon as they attacked the American troops, they simply merged in with the locals, disappeared into the jungle, or hid in intricate networks of underground tunnels. They laid ingenious booby traps using limited equipment, and ambushed American troops from hiding places. The US troops lived in constant fear as they never knew when or where they would be attacked.

Ho Chi Minh's troops were also determined. Despite estimates of up to a million North Vietnamese and Viet Cong deaths during the war, they never gave up – and due to the techniques of winning support of the peasants through helping them in their villagers, or ruthlessly dealing with opponents, Ho Chi Minh maintained a continuous supply of troops.

Early in their involvement, the Americans began implementing the Strategic Hamlets Programme: the relocation of villages in South Vietnam, their fortification and imposing of a curfew to cut off guerillas from the people. This policy proved disastrous for a range of reasons. Firstly, moving villages to another location went against the Vietnamese religion which involved ancestor worship and the sacredness of burial grounds. Secondly, the use of American force to ensure cooperation was counter-productive, as it led some Vietnamese peasants to perceive the Americans as the aggressors and consequently make them more sympathetic to the Viet Cong.

In response to the difficulties of fighting against the Viet Cong guerrillas, American tactics tried to use their superior firepower and technology to win the war. Early in 1965, Johnson ordered Operation Rolling Thunder – a massive bombing campaign against military and industrial targets in North Vietnam. It also attempted to destroy the Ho Chi Minh trail supply line. There is little doubt that bombing made things more difficult for the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, but it did not defeat them. Bombing campaigns on Viet Cong strongholds



in the jungle were often fruitless as the Viet Cong simply took shelter in their well-defended tunnels. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was continuously being repaired by a force of up to 40,000 Vietnamese peasants to ensure supplies kept moving.

Agent Orange - a highly toxic defoliant, which stripped the jungle trees of their leaves, was also dispatched by the American bombers in an attempt to see where the Viet Cong were hiding. Napalm – a vicious chemical-weapon that clung and burned everything it touched – was also used to destroy jungle.

On the ground, American troops carried out Search and Destroy missions. They would use helicopters to fly in to villages and destroy any Viet Cong forces they found. Although they did result in the deaths of many Viet Cong, civilians were also the victims of these raids. A body count of up to 6 deaths for every Viet Cong captured did nothing to improve American popularity with the peasants. In fact, tactics such as this only served to win more support for the Viet Cong. The number of civilians killed in the My Lai massacre of March 1968 shocked the American public.

AMERICAN WITHDRAWAL

Although American forces were inflicting massive casualties on the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces, they were no closer to winning the war. In 1968, the Tet Offensive – launched by the Viet Cong against key military targets – served to raise questions about America's continued involvement in the war. Despite the presence of 500,000 US soldiers in Vietnam, and the government spending around \$20 billion a year on the war, the Viet Cong had succeeded in taking the Americans completely by surprise. Although the Viet Cong were quickly pushed back and suffered enormous casualties, many civilians were killed in the South Vietnamese and American counter-offensive. Such events made people at home in America begin to question the war.

Following the Tet Offensive, it became clear to President Johnson that America could not win this war and needed to find a way to make a peaceful withdrawal. Pressure from Americans at home did much to influence this decision – they had had enough. The enormous financial cost could not be justified by a public who wanted the money to be spent at home instead. They were shocked by the images in newspapers and on the television that showed the realities of the war. People became “draft dodgers” by refusing to serve in the army, and millions of people joined anti-war protests all over the country.

Under the new President, Richard Nixon, the South Vietnamese army was given greater control – a policy called ‘Vietnamisation’ – and American troops were pulled out. By 1973 a peace agreement had been signed between North and South Vietnam...but at the end of 1974 the Communists invaded the South and had captured the capital within 5 months.



Americans, meanwhile, were counting the cost of the war. Their failure to stop the Communists had undermined their policy of containment. If anything, the level of destruction caused by the American bombing of Vietnam's neighbours – Laos and Cambodia – while attempting to destroy the Ho Chi Minh Trail strengthened support for the Communists here. Rather than stopping Communism from spreading, the American offensive had sped up the Domino Theory as both countries had Communist governments by 1975.

America wanted to avoid getting involved in other Cold War conflicts and, while still distrusting of Communism, entered a period known as détente where relations with both the USSR and China improved.