

# THE VIETNAM WAR

## A TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

### *Imperialism and Colonialism*

The Vietnam War has roots in **Vietnam's** centuries of domination by imperial and colonial powers—first **China**, which ruled ancient Vietnam, and then **France**, which took control of Vietnam in the late 1800s and established **French Indochina**. In the early 1900s, nationalist movements emerged in Vietnam, demanding more self-governance and less French influence. The most prominent of these was led by Communist leader **Ho Chi Minh**, who founded a militant nationalist organization called the **Viet Minh**.

### *The First Indochina War*

During **World War II**, when France was occupied by Nazi Germany, it lost its foothold in Vietnam, and **Japan** took control of the country. The Viet Minh resisted these Japanese oppressors and extended its power base throughout Vietnam. When Japan surrendered at the end of World War II in 1945, Ho Chi Minh's forces took the capital of **Hanoi** and declared Vietnam to be an independent country, the **Democratic Republic of Vietnam**. France refused to recognize Ho's declaration and returned to Vietnam, driving Ho's Communist forces into northern Vietnam. Ho appealed for aid from the **United States**, but because the United States was embroiled in the escalating **Cold War** with the Communist **USSR**, it distrusted Ho's Communist leanings and aided the French instead. Fighting between Ho's forces and the French continued in this **First Indochina War** until 1954, when a humiliating defeat at **Dien Bien Phu** prompted France to seek a peace settlement.

### *Divided Vietnam*

The **Geneva Accords** of 1954 declared a cease-fire and divided Vietnam officially into **North Vietnam** (under Ho and his Communist forces) and **South Vietnam** (under a French-backed emperor). The dividing line was set at the **17th parallel** and was surrounded by a demilitarized zone, or **DMZ**. The Geneva Accords stipulated that the divide was temporary and that Vietnam was to be reunified under free elections to be held in 1956.

### *The Cold War and the Domino Theory*

At this point, the United States' Cold War foreign policy began to play a major part in Vietnam. U.S. policy at the time was dominated by the **domino theory**, which believed that the "fall" of North Vietnam to Communism might trigger all of Southeast Asia to fall, setting off a sort of Communist chain reaction. Within a year of the Geneva Accords, the United States therefore began to offer support to the anti-Communist politician **Ngo Dinh Diem**. With U.S. assistance, Diem took control of the South Vietnamese government in 1955, declared the **Republic of Vietnam**, and promptly canceled the elections that had been scheduled for 1956.

### *The Diem Regime*

Diem's regime proved corrupt, oppressive, and extremely unpopular. Nonetheless, the United States continued to prop it up, fearful of the increasing Communist resistance activity it noted in South Vietnam. This resistance against Diem's regime was organized by the Ho Chi Minh-backed **National Liberation Front**, which became more commonly known as the **Viet Cong**. In 1962, U.S. president **John F. Kennedy** sent American "military advisors" to Vietnam to help train the South Vietnamese army, the **ARVN**, but quickly realized that the Diem regime was unsalvageable. Therefore, in 1963, the United States backed a coup that overthrew Diem and installed a new leader. The new U.S.-backed leaders proved just as corrupt and ineffective.

### *Johnson and U.S. Escalation*

Kennedy's successor, **Lyndon B. Johnson**, pledged to honor Kennedy's commitments but hoped to keep U.S. involvement in Vietnam to a minimum. After North Vietnamese forces allegedly attacked U.S. Navy ships in the **Gulf of Tonkin** in 1964, however, Johnson was given carte blanche in the form of the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution** and began to send U.S. troops to Vietnam. Bombing campaigns such as 1965's **Operation Rolling Thunder** ensued, and the conflict escalated. Johnson's "**Americanization**" of the war led to a presence of nearly 400,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam by the end of 1966.

### ***Quagmire and Attrition***

As the United States became increasingly mired in Vietnam, it pursued a strategy of **attrition**, attempting to bury the Vietnamese Communist forces under an avalanche of casualties. However, the Viet Cong's **guerrilla tactics** frustrated and demoralized U.S. troops, while its dispersed, largely rural presence left American bomber planes with few targets. The United States therefore used unconventional weapons such as **napalm** and the herbicide defoliant **Agent Orange** but still managed to make little headway.

### ***The Tet Offensive***

In 1968, the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong launched a massive campaign called the **Tet Offensive**, attacking nearly thirty U.S. targets and dozens of other cities in South Vietnam at once. Although the United States pushed back the offensive and won a tactical victory, American media coverage characterized the conflict as a defeat, and U.S. public support for the war plummeted. Morale among U.S. troops also hit an all-time low, manifesting itself tragically in the 1968 **My Lai Massacre**, in which frustrated U.S. soldiers killed hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians in a small village.

### ***The Antiwar Movement***

Meanwhile, the **antiwar movement** within the United States gained momentum as **student protesters**, countercultural **hippies**, and even many mainstream Americans denounced the war. Protests against the war and the military **draft** grew increasingly violent, resulting in police brutality outside the **Democratic National Convention** in 1968 and the deaths of four students at **Kent State University** in 1970 when Ohio National Guardsmen fired on a crowd. Despite the protests, Johnson's successor, President **Richard M. Nixon**, declared that a "**silent majority**" of Americans still supported the war.

### ***Vietnamization and U.S. Withdrawal***

Nonetheless, Nixon promoted a policy of **Vietnamization** of the war, promising to withdraw U.S. troops gradually and hand over management of the war effort to the South Vietnamese. Although Nixon made good on his promise, he also illegally expanded the geographic scope of the war

by authorizing the bombing of Viet Cong sites in the neutral nations of **Cambodia** and **Laos**, all without the knowledge or consent of the U.S. Congress. The revelation of these illegal actions, along with the publication of the secret **Pentagon Papers** in U.S. newspapers in 1971, caused an enormous scandal in the United States and forced Nixon to push for a peace settlement.

### ***The Cease-fire and the Fall of Saigon***

After secret negotiations between U.S. emissary **Henry A. Kissinger** and North Vietnamese representative **Le Duc Tho** in 1972, Nixon engaged in diplomatic maneuvering with China and the USSR—and stepped up bombing of North Vietnam—to pressure the North Vietnamese into a settlement. This **cease-fire** was finally signed in January 1973, and the last U.S. military personnel left Vietnam in March 1973.

The U.S. government continued to fund the South Vietnamese army, but this funding quickly dwindled. Meanwhile, as President Nixon became embroiled in the **Watergate scandal** that led to his resignation in August 1974, North Vietnamese forces stepped up their attacks on the South and finally launched an all-out offensive in the spring of 1975. On April 30, 1975, the South Vietnamese capital of **Saigon** fell to the North Vietnamese, who reunited the country under Communist rule as the **Socialist Republic of Vietnam**, ending the Vietnam War.