

AP United States History
Unit 8: The Superpower
Topic- The Vietnam War, 1945-1980

The Vietnam War

Explain the causes and effects of the Vietnam War.

Postwar decolonization and the emergence of powerful nationalist movements in Asia led both sides in the Cold War to seek allies among new nations, many of which remained non aligned.

The Vietnam War was one of the most controversial conflicts in American history. It divided Americans as no other conflict had before. It is important to understand that Vietnam became a part of the colony of French Indochina (along with Cambodia and Laos), a territorial possession of the French Empire that was seized in 1886. At the conclusion of World War I, a Vietnamese nationalist by the name of Ho Chi Minh traveled to Paris, France to witness the Treaty of Versailles and to advocate for the independence of Vietnam. During his early life, Ho Chi Minh traveled to France, the United States, and even to the Soviet Union. In World War II, after the French surrendered to Nazi Germany, Vietnam and the rest of French Indochina was invaded by the Japanese. In fact, it was the invasion of French Indochina by the Japanese which led to the American oil embargo that was the reason for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, which brought the United States into World War II. Throughout the war, the Vietnamese fought back against the Japanese occupation, going underground in a series of caves and tunnels to torment their captives day and night. With some U.S. assistance, the Vietnamese were able to struggle to expel the Japanese. But, at the end of the war, Ho Chi Minh and his rebel freedom fighters who had been supplied by the United States now wanted a free and independent Vietnam. The French, allied to the United States, wanted French Indochina, and therefore Vietnam to remain a French colony. In 1946, war broke out between Ho Chi Minh's freedom fighters and the French. At first, the United States stayed neutral in the conflict, and refused to provide Ho Chi Minh's forces badly needed military assistance because of his growing ties to communism. By 1950, the United States was backing the French and Ho Chi Minh's forces were firmly being backed by both the Soviet Union and Communist China. With the United States involved in the Korean War, France was forced to fight a war half a world away in the jungles of Vietnam— it was a losing proposition. In 1954, the French were defeated, though there were still major pockets of resistance against the communists in the South, therefore at the Geneva Convention, Vietnam was divided into a communist North, and a democratic South, now with backing from the United States. In 1957, the United States denied the process of elections in South Vietnam and instead placed Ngo Dien Diem, as the head of state. Diem was a staunch anti-communist, but he was also a Catholic and ruled the majority-Buddhist population with an iron fist. By 1963, a civil war had erupted between the forces of South Vietnam and communist-backed guerillas, the Viet Cong on the ground. In November, 1963, the CIA had Diem assassinated. But, the situation in South Vietnam grew continually unstable. In order to stabilize the situation on the ground the United States began sending military advisors and creating air bases from which they could support the South Vietnamese on the ground. It was these actions which brought the United States directly into one of the costliest, controversial, and most divisive conflicts in American history by the fall of 1964.

Concerned by expansionist Communist ideology and Soviet repression, the United States sought to contain communism through a variety of measures, including major military engagements in Vietnam.

In the fall of 1964, LBJ was locked in an election battle with Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, who often accused the Democratic presidential candidate of being soft on communism. Goldwater, who had been dismissive of the Civil Rights Movement and who advocated for more military force to be used in places such as Southeast Asia to contain communism, was painted by the Johnson campaign as being reckless— going so

far to say, “ (Well) In your heart you may think he is right, but in your guts, you know he’s nuts.” LBJ who had announced his Great Society initiatives to enhance education, foster healthcare solutions, provide for caring for the environment, and to promote civil rights did not want to become more involved in the growing situation on the ground in South Vietnam. However on August 2, 1964, a US Navy destroyer was attacked by North Vietnamese patrol boats in the Gulf of Tonkin off of the coast of North Vietnam. This series of events led the Johnson administration to call for an escalation of American military involvement in Vietnam. If Johnson wanted to appear to be tough on communism, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed on August 7, 1964, gave him the power to take any measures he believed were necessary to retaliate and to promote the maintenance of International peace and security in Southeast Asia– in other words, an open-ended commitment to use military force to stabilize the situation in South Vietnam. After winning the election, the Johnson administration authorized Operation Rolling Thunder, on March 2, 1965, in which American fighter bombers in an effort to stabilize the situation in South Vietnam began attacking targets in North Vietnam in order to bring the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table and bring a quick end to the conflict by demonstrating American firepower. It did not work. Instead, attacks on American air bases in South Vietnam escalated, necessitating troops to be sent to South Vietnam from the United States to protect them. On March 8, 1965, the first American troops arrived in Vietnam. For the next eight years, American troops would fight in the most protracted military conflict in the nation’s history.

The Vietnam War was fought using two differing strategies. The American strategy for fighting the war in Vietnam was based on the idea that it would be a war of attrition. What this meant, of course, was that Americans would use their superior firepower and numbers to overwhelm the North Vietnamese– backed by both China and the Soviet Union (in weapons and financial assistance), and kill them in such large numbers that it would demoralize them and force them to the negotiating table. It was a strategy that from the beginning, would involve killing on a mass scale. It played right into the hands of the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong allies, who wanted to exhaust the Americans and to weaken their resolve to continue to wage the war. American military commanders would send out patrol missions which would find sanctuaries of North Vietnamese or Viet Cong troops, and then commit ground troops to try to destroy them. Typically, the North Vietnamese or the Viet Cong would try to lure American ground troops into these pitched battles, surround them, and if possible, annihilate them. For the American ground troops, it was a difficult task at best, for the following reasons: no one could tell the Viet Cong (who dressed like villagers) from rural villagers who might have been sympathetic, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Viet Cong (VC) seemed to be everywhere (this is because during World War II, the Vietnamese created an elaborate system of tunnels so that they could fight from underground and simply pop-up to attack their enemies from anywhere (it also meant that bombing these positions would have very little effect, too), fighting in the jungle meant limited visibility and unsuitable terrain, it was difficult and expensive to supply army corps units 3,000 miles from home, and everyone in the Vietnamese society fought– which often meant killing women and children, who could be used as suicide attackers. With their underground network of tunnels and trails, which interconnected both North and South Vietnam, not the Vietnamese pop up and ambush their adversaries, but they could also live in them for long periods of time and use them as a network for moving both troops and supplies. And of course, the Vietnamese could use them to escape. American military units would exhaust themselves trying to take a position and when they had finally done so, they would discover, in many cases, that the Vietnamese defenders had simply moved onto another position. The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong had another distinctive and inherent advantage– they were fighting at home. In other words, American forces had to virtually annihilate their opponents to be able to win.

It was not a conventional war in the sense that taking cities, or even destroying armies was the goal. An added dimension to the war was that it was the first conflict in which the major television networks brought live footage from the conflict every night into American homes. Due to the way in which the conflict was fought, whoever lost the will to continue it would lose. For the Americans, a war of attrition meant that a lot of boots would have to be put on the ground in Vietnam, which meant that large numbers of young men would have to both volunteer and be drafted to accrue the numbers necessary to sustain a war of attrition. By 1968, as the war

entered its fourth year of fighting, almost 500,000 American troops were fighting on the ground in South Vietnam— in a war that had never been declared by Congress, which was being fought in a place that most Americans could not find on a map, and which held no real strategic importance to the national interest. For Americans who had been told for four years that victory was within reach, the war experience was about to fray their social fabric at home in a way that no other conflict had done since the Mexican War and the War of 1812.

On January 30, 1968, or the Lunar New Year, known to the Vietnamese people as Tet, the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong allies— 70,000 strong, launched coordinated attacks in more than 100 locations throughout South Vietnam, including an attack on the U.S. Embassy in the capital city of Saigon. As those who were sympathizers to the Americans were often murdered while sleeping in their beds, the U.S. military— caught completely by surprise— fought back valiantly, but it took months, and with American television cameras catching the brutal, shocking, and bloody fighting, especially near the ancient capital city of Hue, public opinion about the war began to shift. As American forces regained the momentum, the Tet Offensive sputtered and the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong allies withdrew with extremely high casualties. But, at home, it was a public relations nightmare for the Johnson administration who for four years had been telling the American people that victory was just around the corner. The Tet Offensive made it clear that the war was not going to be over at any point in the near future— and to some Americans, it appeared to be a situation that was unwinnable. In fact, another incident, revealed the frustration that even American military units fighting on the ground felt about the war, as an entire unit, swept through the village of My Lai on March 16, 1968, searching for a Viet Cong sanctuary, instead they found a village of unarmed civilians and in frustration— promptly massacred them— all of them that were within firing range. A few villagers survived thanks to the actions of a young officer who witnessed a war crime being committed and risked both his life and his military career to stop it. On March 31, 1968, a beleaguered President Johnson announced live on television that he was suspending his reelection campaign, throwing the presidential race into disarray. Seeing an opportunity, Robert F. Kennedy, or Bobby, stepped into the race and was on his way to winning the greatest prize of all, the state of California, when on June 3, 1968, he was assassinated. His death was a tremendous blow to the American psyche as the nation had just endured the assassination of the beloved (by many) civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (on April 4, 1968) which had led to violent riots throughout the major cities in America. With the death of Kennedy, the Democratic Party was in disarray and when Johnson's Vice President, Hubert Humphrey was nominated on a platform to continue the war in Vietnam (which Kennedy had opposed), riots broke out in Chicago, Illinois, where the party's nominating convention was being held. The Republican nominee, Richard Nixon, who had narrowly lost to John F. Kennedy in 1960, seized on an opportunity to win. In an act of treachery that has only recently been uncovered by historians— as Johnson was negotiating with the North Vietnamese on a peace settlement, the Nixon campaign had been secretly reaching out to the South Vietnamese to reject it— which would prolong the war for almost another five years, and lead to the deaths of tens of thousands of Americans soldiers and perhaps a million of the Vietnamese people. As 1969 dawned, a new president was taking the reins to conduct the war, Richard Nixon, and an anti-war movement was growing that would become very influential in shaping American public opinion.

When Richard Nixon became president, America was at the height of its involvement in the Vietnam War. There were almost 540,000 American troops on the ground in Vietnam, the draft and the war were becoming increasingly unpopular, and the same strategy of attrition was still in place for waging the war. During the 1968 presidential campaign, Nixon had a secret plan for ending America's involvement in the Vietnam War, as he referred to it, "Peace with honor." As 1969 unfolded, it became apparent that Nixon's strategy and the ideals of his foreign policy adviser, Henry Kissinger, were to continue to wage war in Vietnam, while slowly scaling back American troops and training and equipping the South Vietnamese to assume more of the combat role on the ground— a process known as "Vietnamization." In the spring of 1970, the Nixon administration ordered the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and an invasion of Cambodia, in an effort to end the flow of troops and supplies from North Vietnam into the South. Despite being close to completing their objectives, American troops were pulled out of Cambodia as the anti-war movement staged protests, against what appeared to be the Nixon administration widening the war, not attempting to bring it to an end as he had promised during his

campaign two years earlier. During one of the protests, four students at Kent State University in Ohio were killed when the National Guard opened fire on them. A few days later, another riot occurred in downtown New York City, as blue-collar workers wearing hardhats beat a number of college student protesters almost to death in the streets. As the American public continued to unravel and the war became increasingly unpopular and divisive by 1971, the Nixon administration continued the process of Vietnamization. Also, in 1971, the Pentagon Papers were released. This release showed that from 1945-1967, the federal government had kept the public largely in the dark about our involvement in Vietnam and that there had never been a cohesive strategy for winning the conflict. It dismayed an already disillusioned American public. Though the Nixon administration was not involved in the content of the documents, it angered Nixon to the point that he began wiretapping those that he had suspected of leaking government secrets. His paranoia led directly to the Watergate Scandal and his downfall by 1974. However, in 1972, the Nixon administration opened-up relations with both China and the Soviet Union in order to bring the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong allies to the negotiating table. By the fall of 1972, just before he was re-elected to the presidency in a landslide victory, the Nixon administration (through Henry Kissinger) announced that peace with honor had been achieved and in the spring of 1973, the final American troops left South Vietnam. Throughout 1974, as the Nixon administration became mired in the Watergate Scandal, the situation on the ground in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate. In the spring of 1975, the North Vietnamese captured the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon and in doing so, brought the Vietnam War to an end. Vietnam became a communist country unified under a single ruler. For the United States, it meant that the policy of containment had failed and as American troops returned home, they found a nation that was both deeply embittered and divided by the experience of the Vietnam War.

Americans debated the appropriate power of the executive branch in conducting foreign and military policy.

Though America's involvement on the ground in the war in Vietnam came to an end in 1973, the impact of the conflict was felt for years afterward. Almost immediately, Congress passed the War Powers Resolution of 1973, which defined the length of time that a President could commit troops into a war zone, before Congress would have to declare war. Over 58,000 Americans died during the Vietnam War, hundreds of thousands were wounded and every person who served in the conflict was impacted by the experience— some bore the physical scars of it, while others suffered from the psychological effects of a war that was fought mostly by a generation of young working-class men and women. But, there was also the impact that the anti-war movement had on those who fought. As Vietnam veterans came home from an unpopular war, many were not welcomed by their own fellow Americans— especially those of the anti-war movement who came to view the soldiers as the problem, not those who had sent them into the war (we must remember that many of the Americans who fought in Vietnam were draftees who did not have a choice about whether or not to go and fight in the war). Since 1976, America has maintained a Selective Service System, but has not instituted a draft. Most of the anti-war activists were college students who could both afford to go to college on the one hand, but who could also defer their service. In late 1969, a lottery system was instituted which changed the deferment process. Now whether or not you were drafted for military service depended on your number and how many young men were being taken in each round— for example, if you born on February 9, 1951, your number would have been 187 and at the time, the highest number that was called for service in 1971 (the first year you would have been eligible for the lottery) was 125, so a person who had that birthdate would not have been called to go into the military during the Vietnam War. As a consequence, the anti-war movement was particularly active in 1970 and 1971, as the draft lottery system came into place, but as our involvement in the war was diminishing. The war was seen as a rich man's war, but a poor man's fight, until the lottery system was put into place. But, once the system was put into place, a war that was already very unpopular with the American public became that much more so. However, we tend to discuss the anti-war movement, but do not often mention that there were Americans who wanted the American mission in the Vietnam War to succeed and those who took tremendous pride in their service during the war. The parents of working-class young men and women also took part in counter-protests and were angered by the member of the anti-war movement for blaming their son and daughters for their service in the conflict and were also embittered by the fact that some in the American public did not have an appreciation for their service and the sacrifices that were made by them. As a result, while the

conflict may have been divisive while it was being fought, it also engendered a liberal vs. conservative divide that still, in some respects, continues to this very day.

But, while the Vietnam War divided the nation, the events of the 1970s, including the setback in the war, led to a sense of disillusionment for many Americans. During the 1970s, as we have already discussed, Americans dealt with an economic crisis and problems in the Middle East. Americans also dealt with major environmental issues. A major political scandal, Watergate, dismantled what was left of the confidence Americans had in their government which had already been severely shaken by the experience of the Vietnam War. By 1980, a majority of Americans were ready to put civil rights, the setback in the Vietnam War, the nasty environmental issues, and the struggling economy behind them. During the presidential election of 1980, Ronald Reagan asked the American people a defining question, "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?" A clear majority of the American people believed in 1980 that they were not. In 1981, Ronald Reagan would take the oath of office as the new President of the United States. His election would make a new chapter in American history and the rise of conservatism in America.