The Vietnam War

Between 1965 and 1973 US troops fought a disastrous war against communists in South Vietnam. In the end, the wealthiest country in the world was unable to defeat the Vietnamese fighters.

Why did the USA fight and lose the Vietnam War?

Vietnam divided

Vietnam had been a French colony. After the Second World War, Vietnamese nationalists and communists, led by Ho Chi Minh, fought against the French. In 1954 the French decided to pull out and Vietnam was divided in two. Communists took power in North Vietnam. South Vietnam was ruled by an anti-communist leader called Ngo Dinh Diem. In 1959 the communist government of the North decided to encourage a revolution in the South. Southern communists, who had fled North, returned to fight. These forces were known as the Vietcong.

From 1954 South Vietnam depended on aid from the USA. American policy was based on the ‘domino theory’: the belief that, because neighbouring states are so interdependent, the collapse of one will lead to the collapse of others. The Americans used this theory as a justification of their involvement in foreign states, particularly in South-East Asia, which they felt were likely to be taken over by the communists. In November 1961 President Kennedy began providing wide-ranging support for the army of the South, including some American soldiers as ‘combat advisers’. He hoped that with this help Diem would be able to defeat the communist rebels. This did not happen. The Americans became increasingly unhappy with Diem. In 1963 Diem’s government further annoyed the USA by clashing with local Buddhists. With American approval, a group of South Vietnamese generals overthrew Diem in a coup in November 1963.

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident

In 1964 regular North Vietnamese forces marched south along what became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail to support the Vietcong. Without outside help South Vietnam looked doomed. American involvement increased dramatically after a clash at sea between North Vietnam and the USA in August 1964. An American destroyer near the coast of North Vietnam was attacked by North Vietnamese ships. No serious damage was done in this so-called Gulf of Tonkin Incident. However, the new American President, Johnson, ordered the bombing of Northern naval bases in retaliation. Congress passed a resolution giving the President power to ‘take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force’ in order to defend South Vietnam. After this Johnson felt he had full authority to step up American involvement in the war.
The arrival of US ground troops

By early 1965 American bombers were regularly attacking targets in the North. Johnson did not think that this was enough. He decided that the South Vietnamese needed the help of large numbers of American soldiers on the ground. In July 1965 President Johnson took a fateful step: he agreed to send 180,000 American troops to Vietnam. The number of US troops increased over the next three years until there were 540,000 American soldiers in Vietnam.

**SOURCE A**

*An American B-52 bomber attacks a target near Hanoi, 1966. The US tried to use its massive firepower to force the communists to retreat.*

**SOURCE B**

*Robert McNamara, US Secretary of Defense, March 1964:*

We seek an independent, non-communist South Vietnam. Unless we can achieve this objective in South Vietnam, almost all of South-East Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance. Thailand might hold for a period with our help, but would be under grave pressure. Even the Philippines would become shaky, and the threat to India to the west, Australia and New Zealand to the south, and Taiwan, Korea and Japan to the north and east would be greatly increased.

**SOURCE C**

*President Johnson, August 1964:*

The challenge that we face in South-East Asia today is the same challenge that we have faced with courage and that we have met with strength in Greece and Turkey, in Berlin, Korea and in Cuba.

**SOURCE D**

*The US government State Department reviewed its policy on Vietnam in February 1965.*

South Vietnam is fighting for its life against a brutal campaign of terror and armed attack directed by the Communist regime in Hanoi. This aggression has been going on for years, but recently the pace has quickened and the threat has now become acute. The war in Vietnam is a new kind of war. A totally new kind of aggression has been loosed against an independent people who want to make their own way in peace and freedom. The war in Vietnam is not a spontaneous and local rebellion against the established Government. In Vietnam, a Communist Government has set out deliberately to conquer a neighbouring state.

The people of South Vietnam have chosen to resist this threat. At their request, the United States has taken its place beside them in their defensive struggle. The United States seeks no territory, nc military bases, no favoured position. But we have learned the meaning of aggression elsewhere in the post-war world and we have met it. The United States will not abandon friends who want to remain free. It will do what must be done to help them.

>>> Activity

What can you learn from Sources B–D about why the USA got involved in Vietnam?
The fighting intensifies

The arrival of large numbers of American soldiers stopped the collapse of South Vietnam and strengthened the position of the new South Vietnamese leader, General Thieu. Between 1965 and 1967 there was heavy fighting. The Americans regularly bombed North Vietnam. According to one calculation, more bombs were dropped on North Vietnam than on Germany in the Second World War. American involvement was widely criticised, and many people in the USA were unhappy about the war.

American tactics brought little success. The US forces had the technology to win straightforward battles between tanks or massed infantry. However, the Vietcong and the soldiers of North Vietnam refused to fight this kind of war. Instead they relied on guerrilla tactics: sabotage and sudden ambushes. The American response was to use:

> massive firepower to try to bomb supply lines.

> chemical defoliants to destroy areas of the countryside where communist soldiers might be hiding.

Neither of these methods worked; they simply angered the ordinary people of the Vietnamese countryside and increased support for the Vietcong and Ho Chi Minh.

The Tet Offensive

In January 1968 North Vietnam launched a massive attack at the time of Tet, a religious festival. Communist troops attacked towns all over the country. They struck right in the middle of the Southern capital of Saigon, with attacks on the American embassy. The communists hoped that the Tet Offensive would spark a popular revolution in the South. This did not happen. The losses on the communist side were enormous. About 50,000 communist troops were killed between January and March. The Americans used great force and won back the towns. American guns destroyed the historic centre of the ancient city of Hue, killing many civilians.

What were the results of the Tet Offensive?

The Tet Offensive was a turning-point in the war. Although in the short term it was a failure for the communists, in the long run it helped the North to win the war. The sight of communist fighters in the grounds of the American embassy in Saigon made a mockery of the idea that Americans were close to victory. As a result of the violence of the attack and the clear determination of the communists, many American politicians and people became disillusioned with the war. The anti-war movement in the USA grew in strength. Leading figures in the government began to think that they could not win the war in Vietnam.

SOURCE E

A Vietcong fighter lies dead in the grounds of the US embassy, Saigon, during the Tet Offensive, 1968. This was a turning-point in the war.
Activity

Look at the following quotations from the American adviser, Dean Acheson, made before and after the Tet Offensive. What difference is there between the two statements?

SOURCE F

Dean Acheson in November 1967:

We can and will win. We must not have negotiations. When these fellows decide that they can't defeat the South, then they will give up. This is the way it was in Korea. This is the way the Communists operate.

SOURCE G

Dean Acheson in March 1968:

Neither the effort of the Government of South Vietnam nor the effort of the US government can succeed. Time is limited by reactions in this country. We cannot build an independent South Vietnam. The issue is: can we by military means keep the North Vietnamese off the South Vietnamese? I do not think we can.

Johnson bows out and peace talks begin

At the end of March 1968 Johnson admitted that he had failed in Vietnam. Presidential elections were due later in the year; Johnson declared that he would not be seeking re-election. He reduced the level of bombing in the North. He called for peace talks. North Vietnam agreed to negotiate and talks began in Paris in May 1968.

The peace talks got nowhere, but it was clear by the summer of 1968 that the American government was looking for a way out. A new President was elected in November 1968 - Richard Nixon - and he was determined to end the war.

Nixon searches for peace with honour

The challenge for Nixon was to find a way out of Vietnam without humiliation or the clear abandoning of South Vietnam. Nixon tried a number of methods:

1. At the Paris peace talks he tried to persuade North Vietnam that North Vietnamese soldiers should withdraw from the South at the same time as American troops. He threatened a massive attack on the North if they refused to compromise. Nixon was bluffing, and the government of North Vietnam called his bluff. They refused to make a deal but Nixon did not launch an attack.

2. Nixon tried to persuade the USSR and China to use their influence over the government of the North. He told the Soviets and the Chinese that if they helped him over Vietnam the Americans would help them in other areas. This approach did not work. The USSR and China saw no reason to try to help the Americans over Vietnam.

3. Nixon decided to put more of the burden of the war on the shoulders of the government of South Vietnam. He reduced the number of American soldiers and insisted that more of the fighting should be done by South Vietnamese. In April 1969 there were 543,000 American troops in Vietnam. By 1971 the number had gone down to 157,000. This policy of passing responsibility to South Vietnam was known as 'Vietnamisation'.

SOURCE H


> What point is the cartoonist trying to make?
Atrocities at My Lai

The American war effort was hit by another devastating blow in 1969. It became known that US troops had carried out an appalling atrocity against Vietnamese civilians. On 16 March 1968 American soldiers massacred the villagers of a place called My Lai. The American officer, Lieutenant William Calley, was eventually court-martialed for the murder of 109 civilians. The story of what happened at My Lai horrified many Americans. They had seen their action in Vietnam as a fight against wicked communists. In My Lai all the wickedness was American.

SOURCE 1

In 1969 Time Magazine reported a series of interviews with American soldiers who had fought at My Lai.

Varnado Simpson: ‘Everyone who went into the village had in mind to kill. We had lost a lot of buddies and the village was a VC [Viet cong] stronghold. We considered them either VC or helping the VC. As I came up on the village there was a woman, a man and a child running away. I told them in their language to stop. They didn’t, and I had orders to shoot them down and I did this. This is what I did. I shot them: the lady and the little boy. He was about two years old.

Jay Roberts: ‘Just outside the village there was this big pile of bodies. This really tiny kid – he had only a shirt on, nothing else – he came over to the pile and held the hand of one of the dead. One of the GIs behind me dropped into a kneeling position thirty metres from this kid and killed him with a single shot.’

Paul Meadlo: ‘We ran through My Lai herding men, women, children and babies into the centre of the village. Lieutenant Calley came over and said, “You know what to do with them, don’t you?” And I said, “Yes.” and he left and came back about ten minutes later, and said, “How come you ain’t killed them yet?” And I told him that I didn’t think he wanted us to kill them, just to guard them. He said, “No, I want them dead.” So he started shooting them. And he told me to start shooting. I might have killed ten or fifteen of them.’
Protests against the war

News of the atrocities at My Lai fuelled the anti-war feelings of many Americans. The war was shown on American television and this also caused many people to question why their country was fighting in Vietnam. As the peace talks made little progress in Paris there were increasing numbers of demonstrations in America calling for an end to the war.

SOURCE K

The British journalist, John Pilger, described the scene on 25 April 1971 when a huge demonstration of veterans, or former soldiers, protested in Washington against the war.

'The truth is out! Mickey Mouse is dead! The good guys are really the bad guys in disguise!' The speaker is William Wyman, from New York City. He is nineteen and has no legs. He sits in a wheelchair on the steps of the United States Congress, in the midst of 300,000, the greatest demonstration America has ever seen. He has on green combat fatigues and the jacket is torn where he has ripped away the medals and the ribbons he has been given in exchange for his legs. Along with hundreds of other veterans of the war, he has hurled his medals on the Capitol steps and described them as shit. And now to those who form a ring of pity around him, he says, 'Before I lost these legs, I killed and killed and killed! We all did Jesus, don't grieve for me!'

Never before in this country have young soldiers marched in protest against the war in which they themselves have fought and which is still going on.

Did Vietnamisation work?

The South Vietnamese forces were not strong enough to defeat the communists. The government of General Thieu lacked the support and loyalty of the Vietnamese people. Thieu had the backing of landlords and Catholic Church leaders but crucially he had little support from the ordinary Vietnamese people in the countryside.

SOURCE M

When Nixon later wrote his memoirs he recognised the weakness of Vietnamisation.

The real problem was that the enemy was willing to sacrifice in order to win, while the South Vietnamese simply weren't willing to pay that much of a price in order to avoid losing.

As part of Vietnamisation the USA stepped up the bombing of the supply lines of the Viet Cong. This had the effect of spreading the conflict into neighbouring countries of Laos and Cambodia. The attacks on these countries did little to stop the supplies to the communist troops but did manage to encourage local communists. Between 1969 and 1973 the US dropped over half a million tons of bombs on Cambodia. This contributed to the support for the ruthless Cambodian communists, known as the Khmer Rouge. Communists won control of Cambodia in 1975. Similarly, the communist force known as Pathet Lao gained support in Laos and took control of the whole country in 1975.
The cease-fire: 1973

The peace talks in Paris dragged on for years without achieving anything. By 1972 the communists felt strong enough to launch another all-out attack on the cities of the South, similar to the Tet Offensive. This attack was more successful than the Tet Offensive but the communists were still not able to conquer the main centres of population. After the offensive of the summer of 1972, neither side could see any hope of victory and the peace talks started to make some progress. At last in January 1973 a cease-fire was agreed and the Americans started to take their troops home.

The fall of the South: 1975

The American forces pulled out soon after the cease-fire agreement was signed. This ended US involvement but it did not end the war. Fighting soon resumed between the communists and the Southern forces. Two years after the agreement in Paris the North launched another major offensive against South Vietnam in March 1975. This time, relying only on South Vietnamese troops and without American air support, the Saigon government was not able to resist. The Vietcong and the army of the North swept victoriously through the South. The war effectively ended on 29 April 1975 when the communists captured the southern capital of Saigon. American TV viewers watched in horror as thousands of south Vietnamese people fought to get on the last US helicopters out of Saigon.

After Vietnam: détente and a loss of confidence

American failure to contain communism in Vietnam led to a deep re-assessment of policy towards the communist world. American leaders had been shocked by their failure in Vietnam. The cost had been enormous: 55,000 dead American soldiers and billions of dollars spent. This huge commitment had achieved nothing. Communist governments had taken power not only in North and South Vietnam but also in the neighbouring states of Cambodia and Laos. In addition, Americans had lost the confidence in their mission as the world’s leading nation.

The American President who took the US out of the war was Richard Nixon. Together with his adviser, Henry Kissinger, Nixon developed a new foreign policy for the post-Vietnam world. This became known as ‘détente’ and it involved striving for agreement and peace with the communist world.

>> Activity

Explain why the USA lost the war in Vietnam. In your answer describe:

a) American military tactics,

b) the impact of the Tet Offensive,

c) atrocities such as My Lai,

d) opposition to the war in the USA.

SOURCE N

Desperate scenes as the last US helicopters leave Saigon, just before the communist victory in 1975. A US embassy official punches a Vietnamese man who is trying to board the helicopter.