

The United States in Vietnam

based on The Almanac of American History (1983), Arthur Schelsinger Jr., ed.

The United States first became involved in Vietnam when Harry Truman was President from 1949-1953. President Truman supported French efforts to take control over Vietnam again after World War II. The U.S. government was worried that a victory in Vietnam by the nationalist and pro-communist forces led by Ho Chi Minh would lead to an expansion of communist power all over the world. However, even with help from the United States, France was defeated in 1954.

With the defeat of the French, Vietnam was divided into two countries. Under President Eisenhower (1953-1961), the United States supported a non-communist government in South Vietnam with its capital at Saigon. A communist government was established in the north with its capital at Hanoi. In the 1960's, communist Viet Cong started a terrorist campaign to destroy the Saigon government in the south. President Kennedy (1961-1963) sent financial aid and military advisors to help the South Vietnamese resist attacks by the communists.

In 1964, North Vietnamese boats attacked two U.S. ships in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of Vietnam. President Johnson(1963-1969) wanted the United States to respond by increasing its military involvement in this war. The United States Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which allowed the President to take whatever steps he felt were necessary to prevent further North Vietnamese aggression against U.S. forces. When seven U.S. soldiers died in a Viet Cong attack in February, 1965, President Johnson ordered the U.S. air force to bomb North Vietnam and in March, 1965, the United States began a massive troop build up. By 1968, over a half a million U.S. soldiers were fighting in Vietnam.

President Johnson and his supporters defended the U.S. role by arguing that it was necessary to stop aggression by North Vietnam and its Soviet and Chinese allies before communist power expanded in South East Asia and threatened the United States. Until 1968, President Johnson maintained that the communist forces were steadily being defeated. However, in January, 1968, a major communist offensive forced the United States to reevaluate its policies. In March, 1968 the President decided the U.S. should stop bombing North Vietnam and called on Hanoi to begin peace talks. He also announced his decision not to run for reelection.

When Richard Nixon (1969-1974) was elected President in 1968, he promised to end U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam. His plan was called "Vietnamization" and was designed to gradually withdraw U.S. ground forces from the war. To achieve "peace with honor", President Nixon resumed the bombing of North Vietnam and also attacked communist bases in Cambodia and Laos.

Despite reelection in 1972, President Nixon faced growing pressure from the anti-war movement in the United States to stop the bombing of North Vietnam, sign a peace treaty, and withdraw U.S. troops. In January, 1973, the United States signed an international agreement providing for the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops. Without U.S. troops to support them, the South Vietnamese army was rapidly defeated by the north. In April, 1975, the Saigon government surrendered to communist forces as the last U.S. representatives were evacuated from the city.

The United States in Vietnam: A Timetable of Events

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- March 26, 1953- President Eisenhower pledges financial support for France's efforts to maintain control over Indo-China.
- April 7, 1954- President Eisenhower declares that if French is defeated in Vietnam, all of Southeast Asia would become communist like a "falling row of dominoes."
- May 7, 1954- French forces are defeated at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam.
- July 21, 1954- The Geneva agreement is signed. France troops will withdraw from Indo-China. A temporary cease fire line divides northern and southern Vietnam. Elections will be held to unify the country.
- September 8, 1954- The United States and Great Britain organize a military alliance called SEATO to stop communist aggression in Southeast Asia.
- January 1, 1955- The United States begins sending military aid to South Vietnam.
- May 11, 1957- President Eisenhower and South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem meet and discuss the fight against the spread of world communism.
- July 9, 1959- Two U.S. soldiers are killed by communist guerillas at Bienhoa, Vietnam.
- November 2, 1963- South Vietnamese Generals overthrow the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem.
- August 2-5, 1964- Two U.S. destroyers patrolling in the Gulf of Tonkin off North Vietnam are attacked by North Vietnamese boats.
- August 7, 1964- Congress passes the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorizing President Johnson "to take any necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression."
- March 8, 1965- First U.S. Marines land in Vietnam.
- May 9, 1965- 42,200 U.S. soldiers are in Vietnam.
- July 27, 1965- U.S. troops in Vietnam will increase to 125,000 soldiers.
- January 31, 1966- The U.S. will resume bombing North Vietnam.
- June 29, 1966- 285,000 U.S. soldiers are in Vietnam.
- January 5, 1967- 5,008 Americans were killed and 30,093 were wounded in Vietnam in 1966. 380,000 U.S. soldiers are in Vietnam.
- January 30, 1968- Communists launch a major offensive on the eve of Tet, the lunar new year.
- March 31, 1968- President Johnson announces that the U.S. will stop bombing North Vietnam.
- May 10, 1968- Peace talks begin in Paris, France.
- June 8, 1969- President Nixon announces that 25,000 U.S. troops will leave Vietnam.
- November 4, 1969- Under policy called Vietnamization, 110,000 U.S. troops are withdrawn from Vietnam.
- April 30, 1970- U.S. troops invade Cambodia to attack communist bases.
- November 12, 1971- 139,000 U.S. soldiers are in Vietnam. 70,000 scheduled to withdraw in January, 1972.
- January 25, 1972- Nixon announces new peace talks with North Vietnam.
- March 30, 1972- Communists launch major new attacks in South Vietnam.
- August 12, 1972- Last U.S. ground forces leave Vietnam.
- December 18, 1972- U.S. resumes bombing of North Vietnam.
- January 27, 1973- U.S. signs peace treaty. Agrees to withdraw all forces within 60 days.
- April 30, 1975- Communist complete the defeat of the South Vietnamese government. U.S. evacuates Saigon.