

# Vietnam 1963-75



# Reasons for the US involvement in Vietnam

## What was the background to the Vietnam War?

- Vietnam was ruled by the French till 1954. Then it was divided into two countries.
- The communist ruler of North Vietnam, **Ho Chi Minh**, wanted to unite the North and South under his control. He supported the **Vietcong** in South Vietnam.
- **President Diem** ruled South Vietnam. He was strongly anti-communist, but was also a brutal and unpopular leader.

## Who were the Vietcong?

- The Vietcong (or the National Liberation Front) were the communist **guerrilla** soldiers fighting to overthrow President Diem and his government.
- By 1964, there were over 100,000 Vietcong in the South and they were killing thousands of South Vietnamese officials every year. Diem's army could not get rid of them.

## Why did the Americans get involved?

- America wanted to contain communism and it saw the North Vietnamese as trying to spread it to the South
- The USA wanted to support non-communist governments which it believed were threatened by communists. It knew that the USSR and China, both communist countries, were sending aid to communist North Vietnam.
- The Americans also believed in the "**domino theory**". If Vietnam became communist, they were sure that neighbouring countries (e.g. Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia) would follow.
- Diem was a corrupt and brutal leader, who was very unpopular. He was a Catholic ruling a mainly Buddhist country and gave Catholics all the best jobs. This meant lots of South Vietnamese people did not like him and were more likely to start supporting the Vietcong.

## What did the Americans do to help Diem?

- At first, **military advisers** were sent to train the **ARVN** (the South Vietnamese army).
- The US also provided money and modern weapons to South Vietnam.
- By November 1963, when Johnson took over as President, there were 16,000 military "advisers" (but many were by now involved in fighting, for example as helicopter pilots).
- The Americans encouraged Diem to force the peasants in areas dominated by the Vietcong to live in "**strategic hamlets**" (villages that were heavily defended against attack). This policy did not work. By 1963, the Vietcong controlled about 40% of the rural areas of South Vietnam.
- Diem was very unpopular because of his corrupt and repressive government. He was assassinated in 1963, but the leaders who followed were not much better.

## How did Johnson escalate the war after 1963?

- At first he just continued the policy of using military "advisers", but then Ho Chi Minh sent units of the **NVA (the North Vietnamese Army)** into the South to back up the Vietcong. Johnson now decided to escalate (increase) American involvement.
- The **Gulf of Tonkin incident** in August, 1964, (when US ships were allegedly attacked by North Vietnamese ships) gave him the excuse to attack the North. He also persuaded the US Congress to give him a free hand in Vietnam.
- In 1965, he ordered the bombing of North Vietnam.
- He then ordered US combat troops into action to back up the weak ARVN. Johnson believed that they would lead to a quick defeat of the Vietcong.
- In March, 1965, 3,500 marines arrived at Danang. From now on, **General Westmoreland** directed the war in Vietnam. By 1968 there were well over 500,000 US troops in South Vietnam.

# Vietcong Tactics

## How did the North Vietnamese try to fight back against the American bombers?

- They used anti-aircraft guns, surface-to-air missiles and fighter planes (Mig jets supplied by the USSR).
- Over 1,400 US planes were shot down between 1965 and 1968.
- They also built miles of tunnels and shelters to protect themselves from the bombs.

## How did the Vietnamese use guerrilla warfare?

- Guerrillas fight in small units, avoiding face-to-face fights with their enemy.
- The Vietcong guerrillas used ambushes, planted mines and booby traps, targeting isolated US and ARVN units.
- They were experts at camouflage, blending into the countryside. They did not wear a uniform.
- They dug 250 km of tunnels to hide in; the tunnels contained kitchens, weapons stores, hospitals and living quarters.
- Vietcong guerrillas were helped by local people, but most of their supplies came down the **Ho Chi Minh Trail**. It was actually many different paths. Thousands of people organised it, enduring terrible conditions.
- The Vietcong tried to win over the peasants in the South, but they did not hesitate to torture and murder government officials and spies.
- The Vietcong also carried out sabotage operations (usually bombs) in South Vietnamese cities, especially Saigon and even inside US bases.

# US Tactics

## What methods of fighting did the Americans use?

They fought a "**high-tech**" war relying on the latest technology, including B-52 bomber planes, helicopters and chemical warfare. They also used "search and destroy" operations.

## What was "Operation Rolling Thunder" and why was it begun?

- It was a bombing attack on North Vietnamese military and industrial targets (e.g. bridges, army barracks, railway lines, roads and arms depots).
- Operation Rolling Thunder started in February, 1965. The aim was to end the North Vietnamese support for the Vietcong. Bombing did not cost as many American lives as ground warfare.
- At first, cities like Hanoi and Haiphong were not bombed because Johnson did not want to anger the USSR and China too much by targeting civilians. But, later, this policy changed and the USA began **saturation bombing** (bombing everything in sight).

## What is meant by "search and destroy"?

- Army units were sent out into the villages and countryside to search for and kill any Vietcong they could find.
- This led to much **brutality** against the Vietnamese, partly because the US soldiers were so afraid and angry when their friends were killed by the Vietcong.
- The US Army High Command measured the success or failure of a search and destroy mission by the **"body count"**, meaning the number of Vietcong killed.
- Search and destroy missions were backed up by helicopters, which were used to carry troops, arms and supplies. Helicopters were the best form of transport in the thick rainforests and swamps of Vietnam.
- Helicopters were also used as gunships armed with rocket launchers and machine guns

## What did General Westmoreland mean by a "war of attrition"?

- He planned to kill so many Vietcong and NVA personnel that the Communists would give up.
- US casualties were always much **smaller** than those suffered by the Vietcong and NVA, which was why Westmoreland thought the USA would win.
- However, the North Vietnamese leaders were willing to accept massive casualties and planned to wear down the US for as long as necessary.

## What types of bombing did the Americans carry out during the war?

- In 1965, **selective** bombing was carried out during Operation Rolling Thunder, but as the war intensified this was replaced by **saturation** bombing - meaning dropping bombs on everything. Three times as much explosive was dropped on Vietnam as was dropped on Germany and Japan during the whole of the Second World War.
- The Americans also used chemical weapons. They used **Napalm** (jellied petrol) and **Agent Orange** (a weed killer) to burn off leaves and vegetation.
- Napalm could also injure people horribly and Agent Orange contained dioxin, which poisoned the environment and caused long-term effects, such as **cancers** and **deformities**.

## The Tet Offensive and My Lai Massacre

### What happened in the Tet Offensive?

- The **Tet Offensive** started on 31<sup>st</sup> January, 1968. It was an attack by the Vietcong and NVA on more than 100 cities, towns and military bases throughout South Vietnam, including Saigon.
- It was totally **different** to the guerrilla fighting they had used before and was a surprise attack.
- The Communists expected the people to join them, but the uprisings they hoped for did not happen.
- Over 100,000 people were killed during the battle.

## Tet Offensive: a failure or success?

A failure because;

- 47% of the people killed during the Tet Offensive were Vietcong, 24% were NVA and 22% were civilians. Just 5% were ARVN and 2% were US troops. This seems to show it was a massive success for the Americans (but see below!).
- As a result of what they saw as a failure, the North Vietnamese agreed to **peace talks** soon after the Tet Offensive ended.
- From now on, the NVA did most of the fighting, as the **Vietcong never recovered** from the setback of Tet.

A success because;

- It marked a huge turning point and was a major reason why more and more Americans turned against the war.
- Before the Tet Offensive, the Americans had been quite confident - maybe complacent - about the way the war was going. The US media had given the Americans back home the impression that the war would soon end.
- But, when the news of Tet appeared, many Americans felt that they had been deceived by the army. Vietcong troops were shown inside the US embassy in Saigon, which seemed to show that the war could not be won, or at least not for a long time.
- Most Americans became convinced that the war had to be ended as soon as possible. General Westmoreland, who saw Tet as a victory over the Vietcong and NVA, was refused more troops.
- Tet also played a large part in Johnson's decision to give up hopes of standing as President again. Richard Nixon, the Republican candidate, promised to end the war and was elected s President.

## What was the My Lai massacre and why was it important?

- On 16<sup>th</sup> March, 1968, nine helicopter gunships landed three US platoons near the village of My Lai. The US troops were on a search and destroy mission and My Lai was believed to be a Vietcong stronghold. Over a two-hour period, the Americans killed hundreds of men, women and children - probably 300, but maybe more.
- The truth about the massacre did not come out for eighteen months. Only **Lieutenant Calley** was convicted of war crimes; he only served three years of his life sentence.

- Pictures of the massacre were shown around the world and people were appalled. It was another reason why many Americans began to turn against the war.
- On the other hand, some Americans **refused to believe the story** and some even approved of the massacre.



# The reunification of Vietnam

## What was Vietnamization?

- In 1968, Johnson decided to open peace talks following the Tet Offensive. However, he then stood down as President – sick of the pressure of the War. Nixon won the next election with a promise to end the war.
- Nixon began the policy of **Vietnamization**. This meant taking American troops out of Vietnam and leaving the South Vietnamese troops of the ARVN to do the fighting. The USA would still help by giving arms and money and advice to the ARVN.
- At the same time, Nixon continued peace talks as well as continuing to **bomb** North Vietnam heavily to try to persuade them to give up.

## What happened in 1970-71?

- Nixon ordered the **invasion** of Cambodia in 1970 and then Laos in 1971. The aim was to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh Trail and to destroy Vietcong bases in these countries.
- The ARVN failed in their attempts and this seemed to prove that they could not cope without US troops.
- The invasions also led to more protests against the war back in the USA. It seemed as if Nixon was escalating the war, not trying to bring about peace.
- 4 American students were shot dead by police in a demonstration at Kent State University. This made even more people angry about US involvement in Vietnam.

## How did the war end?

- Eventually, in October 1972, a peace agreement was reached.
- The South Vietnamese President, Thieu, was **furious** because he believed the peace agreement would leave his country at the mercy of North Vietnam.
- A few months later, in 1973, the last American troops left Vietnam, leaving the ARVN to fight the communists on their own.
- The USA had promised to keep providing aid to South Vietnam, but started to decrease the amount they sent. Thieu was even more angry!
- North Vietnam then invaded the South and, by July 1976, Vietnam was one country again – ruled by the communists.

# The impact of the war on the people of Vietnam and the USA

## What was the impact of the war on Vietnam?

- Many villages and communities were **destroyed** during the fighting.
- Civilians suffered **brutal treatment** including torture, rape and murder. About two million Vietnamese are thought to have died during the conflict.
- The war left hundreds of thousands of orphans and wounded civilians and soldiers to be **cared for** after the war.
- The **economic** effects of the war were devastating: fields, animals, crops and forests were destroyed, making a poor country even poorer. The Vietnamese were soon unable to feed their population.
- The **environment** was badly damaged, littered with crashed planes, vehicles and guns and a landscape pitted with unexploded bombs, shells and mines.

## What happened in Vietnam after the war was over?

- After the war ended the new Communist government acted in a very brutal way, imprisoning and "re-educating" the supporters of the old South Vietnamese regime. Peasants became disillusioned when their land was taken from them and collectivised (run by the state). This was much like Communist China, which you have also studied!
- After the reunification of Vietnam in 1976 as a Communist republic, high unemployment and starvation occurred. The economy collapsed.
- Many Vietnamese left their country to emigrate illegally, by boat, to other countries. Many of these "**boat people**" drowned or were attacked and murdered by pirates.

## What were the effects of the war on the United States?

- During the fighting, many Americans began to oppose the war. A protest movement started and many young American men avoided or refused the **draft** (conscription into the armed forces). Some fled to Canada or Europe, others tore up or burnt their draft papers.
- There was widespread resentment that many well-off young men managed to avoid the draft, for example by going to university. Poorer Americans, many of them black, did most of the fighting.

## Why did some Americans oppose the war?

- There were **heavy casualties**. A total of 58,000 troops were killed.
- **TV showed pictures** of the horrors of the war - for example the use of napalm. The media played an important part in creating opposition to the war. (There was little media coverage of the war from the Communist side; e.g. North Vietnamese atrocities were rarely shown, My Lai was.)
- Many Americans said that the war was immoral. The US government had no right to impose its views on a poor nation like Vietnam.
- Don't forget, though, that many Americans did still support the war and the fight against communism.

## How did Americans protest against the war?

- The protest movement started in 1964, grew quickly after 1965 and became bigger after the bombing of **Cambodia** in 1970.
- Marches and demonstrations were common, especially on university campuses. The worst incident took place at Kent State University in May, 1970, when National Guardsmen shot four students dead.
- Young people were especially critical of the war. The late 1960's and early 1970's were a period of rebellion and "dropping out". Hippies told people to "make love, not war".
- Some war veterans opposed the war, too. At the Veterans' March in Washington in 1971, some ex-soldiers threw away the medals they had won for bravery during the war.

## What effects did the war have on Americans who fought in it?

- Some suffered illness, or had deformed children, if they had handled **Agent Orange**.
- Many veterans had serious **mental problems** and tens of thousands committed suicide after the war.
- Vietnam veterans were often treated as **second-class citizens**, not returning heroes. Returning soldiers were more likely to turn to crime, alcohol, drug addiction, suicide or suffer broken marriages.

## What other effects on the USA were there?

- The war cost billions of dollars. This led to cut-backs in Johnson's Great Society programme and caused increased taxes, price rises and inflation.
- Some blamed the war for increasing racism in the USA, as many blacks, rightly or wrongly, believed that a disproportionate number of their young men had fought in the war.

- The USA was blamed for war crimes in Vietnam.
- Large numbers of books, films, TV shows, plays, etc. were produced during and after the war.
- Some people thought that the Vietnam War led to **less respect for authority** – this was linked to the student movement.

# Reasons for the US defeat

The reasons why the USA lost can be divided into American weaknesses and Vietnamese strengths.

## What were the weaknesses of the USA?

- At the beginning of the war, the USA **underestimated the Vietcong** and the NVA.
- The US generals never found a really effective way to deal with guerrilla warfare. They put **too much faith in technology**, especially bombing. This did not work well against a guerrilla army.
- Many of the **US troops were young, inexperienced and did not want to fight anyway** – they had been conscripted. They did not have the motivation of the Vietcong and NVA.
- The US soldiers couldn't cope with the hardships of the Vietnamese climate or terrain. They were often frightened and could not tell who was an enemy. Sometimes they even killed their own officers in **'fragging'** incidents (throwing fragmentation grenades into their tents while they were asleep).
- Though the ARVN soldiers could fight well, their officers were often corrupt, incompetent and cowardly. They were not much help to the USA.
- The Americans **never won the support of the Vietnamese people**. They did not understand the country or its history and the people would not help them.
- The **South Vietnamese government was brutal and corrupt**, which gave the Vietnamese people even less reason to support the USA.
- **Many Americans did not support the war**, especially after the impact of the Tet Offensive, the My Lai massacre and the Kent State shootings. Gradually more and more people stopped supporting the government.

## What were the strengths of the NVA and Vietcong?

- They used **guerrilla tactics** very successfully.
- They refused to give in to US bombing - it may even have made them more **determined** to win (like in the Blitz during World War Two, which you studied for coursework).
- They were given vital supplies and equipment by the **USSR and China**.
- The Communists received a lot of **support from the people in the South**, especially the peasants.
- The North Vietnamese government was **prepared to accept very heavy casualties**. They were fighting to protect their homeland. Also, because it was not a democracy, the government did not need to worry about what the public thought (unlike President Johnson).

## Consequences for the USA of its failure in Vietnam

- South Vietnam was taken over by North Vietnam and **became communist**. The Americans failed to stop this.
- As the US had feared, **communism spread** to Cambodia and Laos (but not to Thailand).
- Nixon announced the **end of the Truman Doctrine**. The Americans lost confidence in their ability to "contain" Communism and became hostile towards more military involvement abroad.
- Defeat in Vietnam was a **big blow to American pride**. Many people across the world were delighted to view the humiliating defeat of the superpower.