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See Also: *A Vietnam Diary's Homecoming Video produced by the PBS Series History Detectives*
Detailed bibliography of Vietnam War
Documents Relating to American Foreign Policy–Vietnam primary sources on U.S. involvement
Fallout of the War from the Dean Peter Krogh Foreign Affairs Digital Archives
Glossary of Military Terms & Slang from the Vietnam War
Impressions of Vietnam and descriptions of the daily life of a soldier from the oral history of Elliott Gardner, U.S. Army
Stephen H. Warner Southeast Asia Photograph Collection at Gettysburg College
Timeline US – Vietnam (1947–2001) in Open-Content project
The U.S. Army in Vietnam the official history of the United States Army
The Vietnam War at The History Channel
UC Berkeley Library Social Activism Sound Recording Project: Anti-Vietnam War Protests
Vietnam war timeline comprehensive timeline of the Vietnam War
Virtual Vietnam Archive – Texas Tech University
1965–1975 Another Vietnam; Unseen images of the war from the winning side – Mashable

Vietnam War

The Vietnam War was a long, costly and divisive conflict that pitted the communist government of North Vietnam against South Vietnam and its principal ally, the United States. The conflict was intensified by the on-going Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. More than 3 million people (including over 58,000 Americans) were killed in the Vietnam War, and more than half of the dead were Vietnamese civilians. Opposition to the war in the United States bitterly divided Americans, even after President Richard Nixon ordered the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1973. Communist forces ended the war by seizing control of South Vietnam in 1975, and the country was unified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam the following year.

Roots of the Vietnam War

Vietnam, a nation in Southeast Asia on the eastern edge of the Indochinese peninsula, had been under French colonial rule since the 19th century.

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During World War II, Japanese forces invaded Vietnam. To fight off both Japanese occupiers and the French colonial administration, political leader Ho Chi Minh—inspired by Chinese and Soviet communism—formed the Viet Minh, or the League for the Independence of Vietnam.

Following its 1945 defeat in World War II, Japan withdrew its forces from Vietnam, leaving the French-educated Emperor Bao Dai in control. Seeing an opportunity to seize control, Ho's Viet Minh forces immediately rose up, taking over the northern city of Hanoi and declaring a Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) with Ho as president.

Seeking to regain control of the region, France backed Emperor Bao and set up the state of Vietnam in July 1949, with the city of Saigon as its capital.

Both sides wanted the same thing: a unified Vietnam. But while Ho and his supporters wanted a nation modeled after other communist countries, Bao and many others wanted a Vietnam with close economic and cultural ties to the West.

When Did the Vietnam War Start?

The Vietnam War and active U.S. involvement in the war began in 1954, though ongoing conflict in the region had stretched back several decades.

After Ho's communist forces took power in the north, armed conflict between northern and southern armies continued until a decisive the northern Viet Minh's decisive victory in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. The French loss at the battle ended almost a century of French colonial rule in Indochina.

The subsequent treaty signed in July 1954 at a Geneva conference split Vietnam along the latitude known as the 17th Parallel (17 degrees north latitude), with Ho in

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control in the North and Bao in the South. The treaty also called for nationwide elections for reunification to be held in 1956.

In 1955, however, the strongly anti-communist politician Ngo Dinh Diem pushed Emperor Bao aside to become president of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN), often referred to during that era as South Vietnam.

The Viet Cong

With the Cold War intensifying worldwide, the United States hardened its policies against any allies of the Soviet Union, and by 1955 President Dwight D. Eisenhower had pledged his firm support to Diem and South Vietnam.

With training and equipment from American military and the CIA, Diem's security forces cracked down on Viet Minh sympathizers in the south, whom he derisively called Viet Cong (or Vietnamese Communist), arresting some 100,000 people, many of whom were brutally tortured and executed.

By 1957, the Viet Cong and other opponents of Diem's repressive regime began fighting back with attacks on government officials and other targets, and by 1959 they had begun engaging the South Vietnamese army in firefights.

In December 1960, Diem's many opponents within South Vietnam—both communist and non-communist—formed the National Liberation Front (NLF) to organize resistance to the regime. Though the NLF claimed to be autonomous and that most of its members were not communists, many in Washington assumed it was a puppet of Hanoi.

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Domino Theory

A team sent by President John F. Kennedy in 1961 to report on conditions in South Vietnam advised a build-up of American military, economic and technical aid in order to help Diem confront the Viet Cong threat.

Working under the "domino theory," which held that if one Southeast Asian country fell to communism, many other countries would follow, Kennedy increased U.S. aid, though he stopped short of committing to a large-scale military intervention.

By 1962, the U.S. military presence in South Vietnam had reached some 9,000 troops, compared with fewer than 800 during the 1950s.

Vietnam War Protests

By November 1967, the number of American troops in Vietnam was approaching 500,000, and U.S. casualties had reached 15,058 killed and 109,527 wounded. As the war stretched on, some soldiers came to mistrust the government's reasons for keeping them there, as well as Washington's repeated claims that the war was being won.

The later years of the war saw increased physical and psychological deterioration among American soldiers—both volunteers and draftees—including drug use, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mutinies and attacks by soldiers against officers and noncommissioned officers.

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Why Were Vietnam War Vets Treated Poorly When They Returned Home

Between July 1966 and December 1973, more than 503,000 U.S. military personnel deserted, and a robust anti-war movement among American forces spawned violent protests, killings and mass incarcerations of personnel stationed in Vietnam as well as within the United States.

Bombarded by horrific images of the war on their televisions, Americans on the home front turned against the war as well: In October 1967, some 35,000 demonstrators staged a massive Vietnam War protest outside the Pentagon. Opponents of the war argued that civilians, not enemy combatants, were the primary victims and that the United States was supporting a corrupt.

Tet Offensive

By the end of 1967, Hanoi's communist leadership was growing impatient as well, and sought to strike a decisive blow aimed at forcing the better-supplied United States to give up hopes of success.

On January 31, 1968, some 70,000 DRV forces under General Vo Nguyen Giap launched the Tet Offensive (named for the lunar new year), a coordinated series of fierce attacks on more than 100 cities and towns in South Vietnam.

Taken by surprise, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces nonetheless managed to strike back quickly, and the communists were unable to hold any of the targets for more than a day or two.

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Reports of the Tet Offensive stunned the U.S. public, however, especially after news broke that Westmoreland had requested an additional 200,000 troops, despite repeated assurances that victory in the Vietnam War was imminent. With his approval ratings dropping in an election year, Johnson called a halt to bombing in much of North Vietnam (though bombings continued in the south) and promised to dedicate the rest of his term to seeking peace rather than reelection.

Johnson's new tack, laid out in a March 1968 speech, met with a positive response from Hanoi, and peace talks between the U.S. and North Vietnam opened in Paris that May. Despite the later inclusion of the South Vietnamese and the NLF, the dialogue soon reached an impasse, and after a bitter 1968 election season marred by violence, Republican Richard M. Nixon won the presidency.

Vietnamization

Nixon sought to deflate the anti-war movement by appealing to a "silent majority" of Americans who he believed supported the war effort. In an attempt to limit the volume of American casualties, he announced a program called Vietnamization: withdrawing U.S. troops, increasing aerial and artillery bombardment and giving the South Vietnamese the training and weapons needed to effectively control the ground war.

In addition to this Vietnamization policy, Nixon continued public peace talks in Paris, adding higher-level secret talks conducted by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger beginning in the spring of 1968.

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The North Vietnamese continued to insist on complete and unconditional U.S. withdrawal—plus the ouster of U.S.-backed General Nguyen Van Thieu—as conditions of peace, however, and as a result the peace talks stalled.

My Lai Massacre

The next few years would bring even more carnage, including the horrifying revelation that U.S. soldiers had mercilessly slaughtered more than 400 unarmed civilians in the village of My Lai in March 1968.

After the My Lai Masscre, anti-war protests continued to build as the conflict wore on. In 1968 and 1969, there were hundreds of protest marches and gatherings throughout the country.

On November 15, 1969, the largest anti-war demonstration in American history took place in Washington, D.C., as over 250,000 Americans gathered peacefully, calling for withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam.

The anti-war movement, which was particularly strong on college campuses, divided Americans bitterly. For some young people, the war symbolized a form of unchecked authority they had come to resent. For other Americans, opposing the government was considered unpatriotic and treasonous.

As the first U.S. troops were withdrawn, those who remained became increasingly angry and frustrated, exacerbating problems with morale and leadership. Tens of thousands of soldiers received dishonorable discharges for desertion, and about

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500,000 American men from 1965-73 became "draft dodgers," with many fleeing to Canada to evade conscription. Nixon ended draft calls in 1972, and instituted an all-volunteer army the following year.

When Did the Vietnam War End?

In January 1973, the United States and North Vietnam concluded a final peace agreement, ending open hostilities between the two nations. War between North and South Vietnam continued, however, until April 30, 1975, when DRV forces captured Saigon, renaming it Ho Chi Minh City (Ho himself died in 1969).

More than two decades of violent conflict had inflicted a devastating toll on Vietnam's population: After years of warfare, an estimated 2 million Vietnamese were killed, while 3 million were wounded and another 12 million became refugees. Warfare had demolished the country's infrastructure and economy, and reconstruction proceeded slowly.

In 1976, Vietnam was unified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, though sporadic violence continued over the next 15 years, including conflicts with neighboring China and Cambodia. Under a broad free market policy put in place in 1986, the economy began to improve, boosted by oil export revenues and an influx of foreign capital. Trade and diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the U.S. resumed in the 1990s.

In the United States, the effects of the Vietnam War would linger long after the last troops returned home in 1973. The nation spent more than $120 billion on the conflict in Vietnam from 1965-73; this massive spending led to widespread inflation, exacerbated by a worldwide oil crisis in 1973 and skyrocketing fuel prices.

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Psychologically, the effects ran even deeper. The war had pierced the myth of American invincibility and had bitterly divided the nation. Many returning veterans faced negative reactions from both opponents of the war (who viewed them as having killed innocent civilians) and its supporters (who saw them as having lost the war), along with physical damage including the effects of exposure to the toxic herbicide Agent Orange, millions of gallons of which had been dumped by U.S. planes on the dense forests of Vietnam.

In 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was unveiled in Washington, D.C. On it were inscribed the names of 57,939 American men and women killed or missing in the war; later additions brought that total to 58,200.