

Module 10: The Cold War Topic 2 Content: The Vietnam War



Background

Colonial History



During the Age of Imperialism, France ruled over Indochina, a colony in Southeast Asia made up of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. This region was an important source of raw materials such as iron and rubber, and Vietnam was the largest source of these materials for France.

When France was conquered by the Germans in World War II, Indochina was ruled by the Vichy French government, which collaborated with the Nazis. In reality, the colony was occupied and ruled by the Japanese, who were looking for other ways to attack China and additional colonial territories.



Post WWII



After World War II ended, France sought to regain control of Indochina. Within Vietnam, however, a number of pro-independence groups that were opposed to colonial rule had been established during the war. One such movement was a communist insurgency. It was led by Ho Chi Minh who was educated in France and the Soviet Union. During the war, he led many military campaigns against the Japanese and Vichy France rulers to try and drive them out of the country.

After Japan lost the war and left Vietnam, the communists established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in September of 1945. The communists would have to defeat the French before the country was truly independent.



War

French Defeat



Ho Chi Minh and his communist insurgents used hit-and-run guerilla tactics making it difficult for the French to win any significant battles. It also made the war costly and unpopular at home in France.

In 1950, China and the Soviet Union recognized the communists as the legitimate government of Vietnam and started to support the insurgents. In 1954, after the French were soundly defeated at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, France was ready to end the war. Both sides agreed to a peace settlement that divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel with the communists in control of North Vietnam. Free elections would be held at a later date to reunify the country.

Having recently concluded the Korean War, the U.S. was firmly committed to its policy of containment. With French assistance, America supported a government in South Vietnam to counter the communist one in the North. The situation was looking very similar to Korea which was divided between a communist North and a non-communist South.



Diem Becomes President



In 1955, Ngo Dinh Diem held a controversial election in South Vietnam, after which he declared South Vietnam to be an independent country and himself as president.

Diem was Roman Catholic and strongly anti-communist in a country that was mostly Buddhist. Shortly after the election, Diem directed a campaign against some Buddhists and suspected communists, imprisoning and killing many. Diem was supported by President Eisenhower who saw Diem as a crucial part of America's strategy to contain communism in North Vietnam.



U.S. Military Buildup

U.S. Military Buildup				
Diem's government unpopular Viet Cong - communist insurge 1960 • Communists try to overthrow • U.S. starts sending military ad 1963 • Diem overthrown 1964 • U.S. sends troops and starts b	nts from North South Ivisors			
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Unfortunately for the U.S., Diem's government lacked popular support among the Vietnamese due to many of his dictatorial actions.

In 1960, the North began a campaign to overthrow the South using Viet Cong soldiers and guerilla attacks against the government. The Viet Cong won support among some in the South, especially the peasants.

U.S. leaders strongly supported their containment policy and President Kennedy sent military advisors to help Diem's government. In 1963, as Diem became even less popular, he was overthrown by the South Vietnamese military with the unspoken support of the American government.

In 1964, after North Vietnam attacked an American battleship, the U.S. began sending troops to South Vietnam and began bombing runs against the North. This made South Vietnam's military government even less popular.



Long War



North Vietnam realized that it couldn't win if it fought the U.S. directly, so it adopted guerilla tactics. Despite being the best-equipped army in the world, the U.S. couldn't defeat the North Vietnamese and their guerilla army.

As the war continued, many people in the United States began protesting against the war. Since there was a shortage of people volunteering for the military, President Johnson was forced to reinstate the draft. This made the war even less popular in America.



President Nixon



As the war dragged on, Richard Nixon won the 1968 American presidential election, partly on his promises to end the war. His Vietnamization strategy was based on the idea that the South Vietnamese were not doing enough to fight the war, and that South Vietnamese soldiers would be used in greater numbers as American troops were brought home.

In 1968, at the height of the war, there were over 543,000 American military personnel in Vietnam. In order to make up for the American troops that being withdrawn from the country, Nixon ordered more bombing campaigns against the North.

As American troops dropped more bombs on Vietnam, as well as neighboring countries, and images of atrocities from the war made it to the front pages of newspapers around the world, support for the war continued to diminish in the U.S.



End of War

End of War

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 Withdrawal of U.S. troops Fall of South Vietnam in 1975 				
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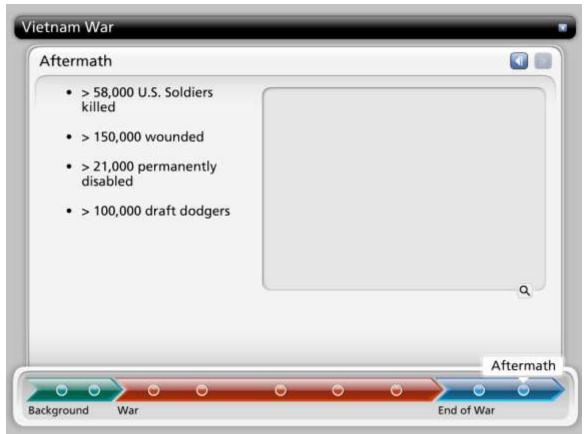
Realizing that the U.S. was fighting a losing battle, President Nixon slowly tried to get the U.S. out of the war while maintaining the South Vietnamese government as a non-communist ally.

From 1973 until the fall of Saigon in 1975, America withdrew its troops while turning over the country to the South Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese kept pushing into the South and finally won the war as the Americans hurried to evacuate remaining personnel.

[Photo courtesy Meutia Chaerani - Indradi Soemardjan]



Aftermath



The Vietnam War was the deadliest conflict of the Cold War. Over fifty-eight thousand American servicemen lost their lives and others remain missing in action. The war also showed that America could not always stop the spread of communism through military means.

The war had a huge effect on American society. Over one hundred thousand men fled to Canada to avoid the draft. In 1977, United States President Jimmy Carter granted a full, complete, and unconditional pardon to all Vietnam-era draft dodgers.

