

INTRODUCTION

By 1963 the Cold War and all its tensions seemed like a permanent aspect of modern life. Personally, I do not remember any discussions in high school or university about the possible end of the Cold War. It was a fact of life! When I became a History 12 teacher in the early 1970's I confidently told my students the Cold War was a permanent feature of our existence. Similarly, when asked if the Soviet Union could ever experience another revolution I (and I think I had lots of company) just as confidently predicted its permanence. The state was simply too strong, I said. Totalitarian practices in the Soviet Union were too firmly entrenched. Furthermore, I boldly stated, the military machine in the U.S.S.R. was all-powerful and would not allow dissent, let alone revolution. I continued these pronouncements through most of the 1980's only to be proven terribly wrong in a period of about eighteen months. Near the turn of the 1980-1990 decade, not only would the Soviet Union collapse, but communism would disappear from Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R.. This unit will take you through some of the worst years of the Cold War (the Vietnam War), through a period of détente, another phase of the nuclear arms race, and finally to the end of the Cold War.

I. WAR IN INDOCHINA: THE VIETNAM WAR

A. BACKGROUND

The war in Indochina did not begin as a war against communism. It began as a war of decolonization. It began during the Second World War as **Ho Chi Minh** and his Communists began to resist the Japanese occupation. After the Second World War was over, the French somewhat foolishly assumed that Indochina would be theirs again. The Vietnamese had different ideas. Another war of decolonization broke out between the Communists of Ho Chi Minh and the French forces. The French had refused autonomy for Indochina. For the French the war proved to be a drain upon manpower and finances. A major French garrison was surrendered at **Dien Bien Phu** in May, 1954. This was the end of the war between the Vietnamese and the French forces. Formally, the settlement of Indochinese issues was done at Geneva. By the **Geneva Agreement of 1954** Laos and Cambodia were granted independence and Vietnam was divided, temporarily, at the seventeenth parallel. Vietnam was to have elections in 1956 to determine whether it should be reunited. These elections were never held. The war in Indochina marked a Communist victory and a decided loss of face for the French in Asia.

After these 1954 agreements the North was ruled by Ho Chi Minh. The South was ruled by Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic, governing a mostly Buddhist population. The Diem regime was opposed by the National Liberation front (NLF) and a guerrilla force, the **Viet Cong**, in South Vietnam. Both these groups were supported by the North. The North, even though it had signed the agreements at Geneva, never did accept a divided Vietnam.

<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/shwv/shwvhome.html>

Before we begin to look at U.S.A. involvement in Vietnam, it is necessary to set the wider picture. Korea was the first application of the American containment policy against communism in Asia. While far from a total victory, the American involvement there had at least checked the advance of communism. It is also worth noting that the domino theory was much in vogue in those days. Should Vietnam fall to the communists, the next would be Cambodia and Laos, and then the dominoes would lead to countries throughout the South Pacific. While it is easy to pick apart the domino theory today, it did have a kind of simplistic logic to it at that time.

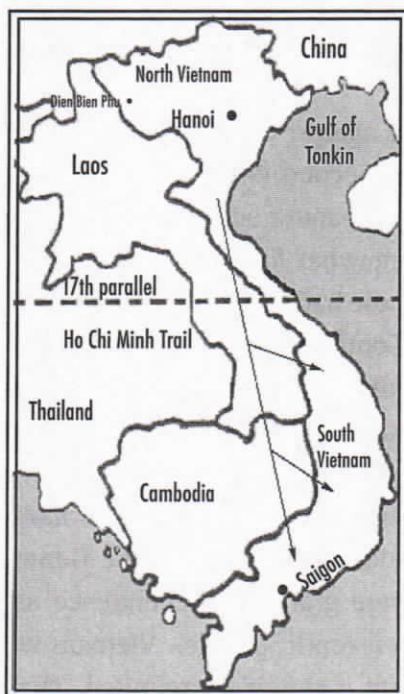
B. ESCALATION OF AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT TO 1969

1. PUTTING THE WAR INTO CONTEXT

This is a war of containment. America had signed the SEATO alliance in 1954. Furthermore, this war was about the domino theory.

2. GETTING STARTED

The Americans had supported the French in their efforts before 1954. The



VIETNAM 1954-1975

American forces also became involved in a minor way as soon as the French left. They were military advisers to the South Vietnamese government. This involvement increased in time as it became obvious that the government at Saigon could not control the Communists in their own countryside. President Kennedy increased American forces in 1962 from 500 to 10,000, in a effort to prop up Diem. Incidentally, Diem was corrupt, and in fact in 1963, with the support of the CIA, he was overthrown. Diem committed suicide. The new leader would be Nguyen Van Thieu.

It is interesting at this early stage of the war to point out that American involvement in Vietnam is a classic case of a government practising folly. According to Barbara Tuchman's, "*A March Of Folly*,"

American fact-finding-missions sent to Vietnam during the 1950's and 1960's repeatedly returned to Washington with the simple message that America should get out. They claimed that short of nuclear war this was a no-win situation for the U.S.A.. American leaders from Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson on through to Nixon chose to ignore the facts in Vietnam. They were blinded by their fear of communism and the perceived threat that it posed to the free



Lyndon Johnson

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/tonkin-g.htm>



Richard M. Nixon

world. This simple act of ignoring factual information because one's mind is already made up is known as cognitive dissonance. (Incidentally, for those of you who enjoy a good read, Tuchman's book, mentioned above, is about as good as it gets.)

3. ESCALATION

One of the key events in the escalation was the North Vietnamese torpedoing of an American destroyer in the **Gulf of Tonkin** in August, 1964. This led Congress to give Johnson the infamous "all necessary powers" and "all necessary measures" authority (also known as the **Tonkin Gulf Resolution**). The growing number of American advisers in Vietnam led to the commitment of regular ground forces, which in turn led to air support. The numbers grew larger, from 200,000 troops in 1965 to 600,000 in 1968. The main factor in this escalation was the increasing aid that the NLF [National Liberation Front (Communists within South Vietnam also known as the **Viet Cong**)] was receiving from North Vietnam. Much of this aid came via the famous **Ho Chi Minh Trail** which ran from North Vietnam, through Cambodia, through Laos, and back into South Vietnam.

Escalation continued because the U.S.A. refused to see the conflict as a civil war. It viewed it as a much wider plan to expand communism. In 1965 Johnson changed the status of American troops from advisers to that of combat troops.

4. A NEW PRESIDENT

By 1968, a presidential election year in the U.S.A., Johnson was totally discredited by his role in the Vietnam War. He did not even let his name stand for the Democratic Party nomination. Richard Nixon, that anti-Communist of the 1950's, easily won the election for the Republicans. Strangely enough, he was elected on a peace platform. Do not be fooled by Nixon's election. He, and the American government, were not about to simply pull out of Vietnam.

C. VIETNAMIZATION: 1969

By 1969 the anti-war movement in the U.S.A. had reached a sophisticated level. No longer was this movement merely a few disgruntled university students and "dropout hippies." The movement had gained some measure of respectability. Students should not believe, however, that Nixon's efforts to rid America of this Asian albatross was driven by his respect for the anti-war protestors. Much to the contrary. Nixon had been elected on a peace platform, but he was not about to resign from this war in disgrace. He needed to find an "honourable" way out.

1. THE NEW PLAN FOR WAR AND WITHDRAWAL IN VIETNAM

The key players in Nixon's plan were Nixon himself, **Henry Kissinger**, the American Secretary of State, and Henry Cabot Lodge, the American negotiator at the on-going Paris peace talks.

2. VIETNAMIZATION

The term Vietnamization describes the overall Nixon plan to make the military of South Vietnam capable of defending itself and therefore allow the U.S.A. to withdraw as well as establish a creditable political regime in South Vietnam. However, the problem of doing this lay in the concept of "honour."

a) Two Track Formula

Kissinger's Two Track Formula was to be the basis of Nixon's plan for the next four years. It consisted of:

- (i) Military solution: Strengthen the South Vietnam military.
- (ii) Political Solution: Strengthen the South Vietnam government so it could attract a broader base of support in South Vietnam.

b) Withdrawal

The first withdrawal of American troops started in August, 1969. What follows is a brief survey of key events in the American withdrawal:

(i) July, 1970: The New Nixon Peace Offensive

This term is a good example of the type of doublespeak the U.S.A. was beginning to use regarding this war. The peace offensive meant that Nixon was going to remove American ground forces and step up the air war. It is during this phase that the real power of the B-52 was unleashed, as the U.S.A. bombed North Vietnam in an attempt to get the Vietnamese to make some concessions at the conference table in Paris.

(ii) 1971

The war had changed almost entirely to an air war, i.e., the bombing of North Vietnam.

(iii) 1972

The Americans were down to 200,000 men, but Nixon continued to order the bombing of northern cities.

(iv) 27 January, 1973

A ceasefire with North Vietnam was signed. All the U.S.A. got out of twenty years of fighting was the return of their POW's. The agreement was to withdraw all U.S.A. forces within sixty days.

(v) 15 August, 1973

All U.S.A. forces were out of Vietnam.

(vi) Spring, 1975

South Vietnam fell to the Communists of the North and the National Liberation Front.

D. SUMMARY: EFFECTS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

1. The war cost the U.S.A government \$150 billion. Two million Americans saw action. America lost 57,939 men in Vietnam. To give you a small idea of the scope of American involvement in this war, one statistic will do: the

Americans dropped more tonnage of bombs on North Vietnam than the sum total of bombs used by all the belligerents during the Second World War.

2. The U.S.A. was left with less influence throughout S.E. Asia.
3. Turmoil, sometimes violent, resulted at home because of opposition to the war. This issue of domestic unrest as a result of the Vietnam war is a topic all in itself. Barbara Tuchman appropriately has entitled her chapter on Vietnam: "*America Betrays Herself in Vietnam.*" That about says it all. The proud nation that had held out so long against this type of raw exercise of power as practised by Europe could no longer claim innocence and moral superiority. The American experience in Indochina had a significant effect upon her future foreign policy decisions.
4. Limitations were introduced with regard to the President's powers to wage war. By the way, the war in Vietnam was never a declared war.

E. WHY THE UNITED STATES LOST THIS WAR:

1. Difficulty in winning a war against nationalist guerrillas
2. Unpopularity of the war at home as represented by
 - a) The anti-war movement
 - b) The cost of war in casualties
 - c) The cost of war to the economy (inflation)
3. International disgrace. In the eyes of the world the stature of the U.S.A. suffered greatly.
4. The U.S.A. could not win the war for the "hearts and minds" of the South Vietnamese people.
5. The American military was half-hearted and disillusioned.

F. LESSONS OF THE VIETNAMESE WAR

1. THE LIMITATIONS OF POWER

The U.S.A. learned that even nuclear superpowers had their limitations. While a few Americans favoured "turning North Vietnam into a sheet of glass," in time the majority realized that this was an unwinnable war. A further check on American power in Vietnam was the Cold War conflict itself. The threat of Soviet or Chinese retaliation elsewhere acted as a constant brake on American actions in Indochina.

2. HOME SUPPORT

The American government also learned that war without popular support at home is difficult to wage in a democracy. This lesson was much in evidence when President Bush prepared the American public for Operation Desert Storm in 1990-1991, America's next major war.

3. INTERVENTION IN NATIONALIST UPRISINGS

Military intervention in a popular nationalist uprising can be futile.

4. CONSCRIPT ARMIES

Conscript armies fighting for questionable causes are not a reliable military force and thereby the U.S.A. soon cancelled the universal draft after the Vietnam War. For those of you who like to learn history from the movies, I would strongly recommend the movie *Platoon*. It clearly demonstrates a disillusioned American army.

5. PRESIDENTIAL RESTRICTIONS

The powers of the President to wage war were constitutionally restricted.

6. DOMINO THEORY

Time would prove that even though the Communists did spread into South Vietnam and several surrounding states, their gains were but temporary. The domino theory soon proved to be only so much political rhetoric.

7. QUESTIONING

The American experience in Vietnam helped to bring about a serious questioning of many fundamental beliefs in American society. Issues like the power of the President, the role of the military and even whether it was worth opposing the spread of communism were much debated.

G. THE WATERGATE SCANDAL

Richard Nixon, a Republican, became President in the 1968 election. His first term was consumed with the prosecution of the Vietnam War. As the 1972 election was approaching five men working for the Republican Party were arrested for breaking into the Watergate Hotel (headquarters for the Democratic Party). These men had attempted to placing 'bugs' in the offices of the Democratic Party. Even though Nixon was easily re-elected this scandal started a process in which the worst abuses of the executive level of American government were exposed. The investigation became much larger than the original break in. In the end many high ranking Nixon advisors were arrested and sent to jail. Nixon himself was finally implicated in the cover up of this scandal and as the impeachment process was beginning in August, 1974 he resigned. This scandal is without a doubt the largest (exposed) scandal in American political history.

II. INDOCHINA: LAOS AND CAMBODIA**A. LAOS**

This country, too, was a former colony of France. It was granted independence by the Geneva Agreements of 1954. The **Pathet Lao**, a Communist organization within Laos, worked easily with the Viet Cong of Vietnam. This was particularly the case as the Ho Chi Minh Trail entered Laos just above the seventeenth parallel, carried on into Cambodia and back into South Vietnam. This was to be the famous supply line for the Viet Cong during the war in Vietnam. A power struggle was going on in Laos between Prince Souphanou Vong (backed by

Unit Five: Exercise One: The Beginning Of The Vietnamese War

Name _____ Block _____ Date _____

Refer to the *Student Workbook* p. 157-159

1. During the Second World War, who was involved in the war of decolonization in Indochina?

2. a) What new war of decolonization broke out after the Second World War?

b) What was the outcome?

3. After 1954, who were the forces in the North and the South of Vietnam?

4. Why did the U.S.A. become involved in Vietnam? What fear fuelled her decision?

5. How were American forces involved in Vietnam after the French left?

6. In what way was American involvement in Vietnam "a classic case of a government practising folly"?

Unit Five: Exercise One: The Beginning Of The Vietnamese War

Name _____ Block _____ Date _____

7. a) Why was the Tonkin Gulf Resolution issued in 1964?

b) What is the Tonkin Gulf Resolution?

c) What did this resolution accomplish in Vietnam?

8. How did aid from North Vietnam reach the National Liberation Front?

9. What change to the status of American troops did Johnson make in 1965? Why?

10. Who replaced Johnson as President in 1968? On what platform was he elected?

11. To what does the term "vietnamization" refer?

12. Kissinger's Two Track Formula to implement Nixon's plan consisted of two solutions:

i) _____

ii) _____

13. What did the New Nixon Peace Offensive mean for Vietnam?

14. In January 1973, a ceasefire was signed. What were the terms?
