

Chapter 51

The United States Gets Involved in Vietnam

Why did the United States increase its military involvement in Vietnam?

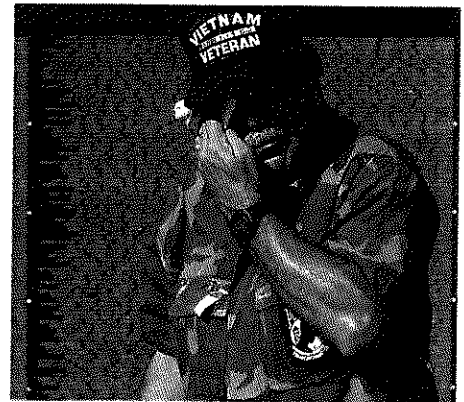
51.1 Introduction

In Washington, D.C.'s Constitution Gardens, not far from the Lincoln Memorial, sits a long, sloping wall made of polished black granite. Etched into the wall are thousands of names. Visitors file past this stark monument at a funereal pace. Here and there, some stop to touch a familiar name. Many simply stand in contemplation or quiet prayer, while others shed tears. Some leave letters, flowers, or personal objects, including medals, at the base of the wall.

The official name of this monument is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, but it is more commonly known as “the Wall.” The Wall lists the names of U.S. soldiers killed or missing in action in the Vietnam War. The first two men listed, Chester Ovnand and Dale Buis, were the first U.S. soldiers to die in Vietnam, according to official records. They were noncombat troops killed in a surprise attack on their camp in 1959. At the time, few Americans were paying any attention to this faraway conflict. Later, reporter Stanley Karnow, who had written a brief account of the soldiers’ deaths, mentioned their names at a congressional hearing. He said, “I could never have imagined that these were going to be at the head of more than 58,000 names on the Wall.”

Today many young people visit the Wall. Some of them wonder why a list of names carved in stone has such a strong impact on other, older visitors. They wonder why the remembrance of this war provokes not only tears but also anger. The answer is complicated. It has to do with painful memories of loss, with Cold War policies, and with social rebellion. It has to do with American GIs fighting and dying in a war far from home, for reasons many did not entirely understand.

Before the United States entered the war, politicians and their advisers argued about the wisdom of getting drawn into the conflict. During the war, Americans bitterly debated U.S. policy. The war divided the country more than any other issue since the Civil War. Today, many are still asking the question: Did the United States have good reasons for getting involved in Vietnam?



The Vietnam Veterans Memorial lists the names of 58,253 Americans killed or missing in the Vietnam War. For many Vietnam veterans, the Wall is a place for healing. Visiting the monument helps them come to terms with their experiences during the war, including the loss of close friends and family members. Above is a replica of the Wall that is part of a traveling exhibit.



Ho Chi Minh was president of North Vietnam from 1945 to 1969. He fought for an independent, unified Vietnam. At first he sought support from the United States, but his communist ideology aroused U.S. hostility. Though considered a "freedom fighter" by many, he ordered the killing of thousands of North Vietnamese landowners as "class enemies."

51.2 Three Presidents Increase Involvement in Vietnam

From the 1880s up until World War II, Vietnam was part of French Indochina, a French colony in Southeast Asia that also included Cambodia and Laos. During World War II, Japanese troops occupied part of French Indochina. But Vietnam had a 2,000-year history of resisting foreign rule. In 1941, a Vietnamese communist, Ho Chi Minh, drew on that history to stir up nationalist feelings. In northern Vietnam, he helped found a group to oppose foreign occupation. Members of this independence movement became known as the **Viet Minh**.

On September 2, 1945, the same day that Japan formally surrendered to the Allies, Vietnam declared its independence. Ho Chi Minh made the announcement. In what seemed like a bid for U.S. backing, he began his speech with words from the Declaration of Independence. "All men are created equal," he said. "They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." Ho ended his speech with words that might have stirred the hearts of the original American patriots. "The entire Vietnamese people," he said, "are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their independence and liberty." Ho's followers would show their determination over the next three decades. First they fought France when it tried to reestablish colonial rule. Later they would fight the United States, which saw them as a communist enemy. In the early stages of the war, three presidents would set the pattern for deepening U.S. involvement.

Truman Chooses Sides in the First Indochina War The Viet Minh called their country the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The northern city of Hanoi was their capital, and Ho Chi Minh was their president. France, however, refused to accept Vietnamese independence and set out to eliminate the Viet Minh. First, French troops drove the rebels out of the southern city of Saigon, the French colonial capital. Then the French launched attacks on Viet Minh strongholds in the north. In November 1946, French warships opened fire on the port city of Haiphong, killing some 6,000 Vietnamese civilians. The following month, the Viet Minh attacked French ground forces. These incidents marked the start of the **First Indochina War**. This war would continue for eight years.

Some American officials saw this conflict as a war between a colonial power and nationalists who aspired to govern themselves. They urged France to set a goal of complete independence for Vietnam. Others, including President Truman, held views of the conflict that were more colored by the Cold War. They believed that the Viet Minh intended to create a communist dictatorship. Although Truman suspected the French might be fighting to preserve their empire, he chose to see their efforts as a fight against communism.

For Truman, containing communism was more important than supporting a nationalist movement. By 1951, thousands of U.S. soldiers had already died in Korea trying to halt the spread of communism. Truman was determined to block any further communist advance in Asia. For this reason, he called for an increase in military aid to French Indochina. This aid rose from \$10 million in 1950 to more than \$100 million in 1951. By 1954, the United States was paying 80 percent of the cost of the war in Indochina.

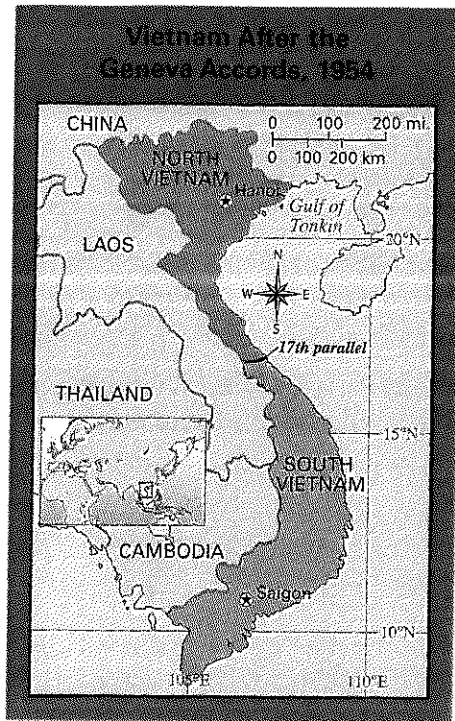


Eisenhower Considers Increased American Involvement Despite U.S. aid, the First Indochina War dragged on. The French controlled the cities in both northern and southern Vietnam, but the Viet Minh dominated the countryside. The Viet Minh took control of rural villages, often by assassinating local leaders with close ties to the French. They gained the support of Vietnam's peasants, who made up around 80 percent of the population, in part by giving them land taken from the wealthy.

The decisive battle of the war began in March 1954, when the Viet Minh launched a surprise attack on a large French military base at Dien Bien Phu, in the mountains of northern Vietnam. They soon had the base surrounded. By April, the more than 12,000 French soldiers at Dien Bien Phu appeared ready to give up. Now Truman's successor, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, faced a dilemma. A loss at Dien Bien Phu might knock the French out of the war. Eisenhower briefly considered sending B-29 aircraft to bomb Viet Minh positions, but he did not want to act alone. What he really wanted was a commitment from Britain and other allies to take unified military action to stop communist expansion in Vietnam and elsewhere in Indochina.

In a news conference on April 7, Eisenhower warned that if Vietnam fell to communism, the rest of Southeast Asia would topple like a "row of dominoes." Even Japan, he said, might be lost. In the years to come, this **domino theory** would provide a strong motive for U.S. intervention in Vietnam. But for now, just months after the Korean War had ended, neither the United States nor its allies were prepared to fight another ground war in Asia. Senator John F. Kennedy reflected the mood of Congress when he said, "To pour money, materiel, and men into the jungles of Indochina without at least a remote prospect of victory would be dangerously futile and self-destructive." **Materiel** is military equipment and supplies. Other policymakers feared that direct military intervention might even trigger a war with Vietnam's communist neighbor, China.

The key battle of the First Indochina War took place between March and May 1954, when Viet Minh troops attacked the French stronghold at Dien Bien Phu. The French lost the battle and began to withdraw their forces from Vietnam.



The Geneva Accords of 1954 split Vietnam temporarily at the 17th parallel. The French moved into South Vietnam, and the Viet Minh moved into North Vietnam. The Viet Minh left a political network in the south, however, in the hope of winning victory in the national unity election set for 1956. They also left weapons hidden in the south.

On May 7, 1954, the Viet Minh finally overran the French base, ending the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and shattering French morale. The French, lacking public support at home for the war, began pulling out of northern Vietnam. The final act of the First Indochina War would be played out at a peace conference in Geneva, Switzerland.

Geneva Peace Conference Splits Vietnam in Two Representatives of France and the Viet Minh began talks in Geneva the day after the French loss at Dien Bien Phu. France wanted to maintain some control over southern Vietnam. The Viet Minh demanded that France leave the country completely and that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam be recognized as an independent nation.

As negotiations dragged on, China and the Soviet Union put pressure on the Viet Minh to compromise. They did not want to antagonize the United States, fearing it would intervene militarily. Finally, in July 1954 the French and Viet Minh signed the **Geneva Accords**. Under this agreement, the fighting stopped, and Vietnam was split temporarily along the 17th parallel. The Viet Minh moved north of that line, while the French withdrew to the south. Under the accords, national elections to reunify Vietnam were scheduled for 1956.

As France prepared to leave Vietnam, the United States began moving in. American officials believed they could form a strong noncommunist state in South Vietnam. In 1955, the United States used its influence to put an anti-communist South Vietnamese leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, in charge. Diem began building an army. To help shape this army, Eisenhower provided some 350 U.S. **military advisers**—noncombat specialists who train and equip another nation's soldiers. Chester Ovnand and Dale Buis, the first U.S. soldiers killed in Vietnam, were military advisers.

As the election to unify north and south approached, Ho Chi Minh seemed likely to win. Diem, with U.S. approval, blocked the national vote, thus rejecting the Geneva Accords, and held elections only in the south. In October 1955, he declared himself president of South Vietnam. Diem began returning land to wealthy landlords and drafting young men from the countryside into his army. He ruthlessly attacked opponents and jailed thousands of people without putting them on trial or charging them with a crime.

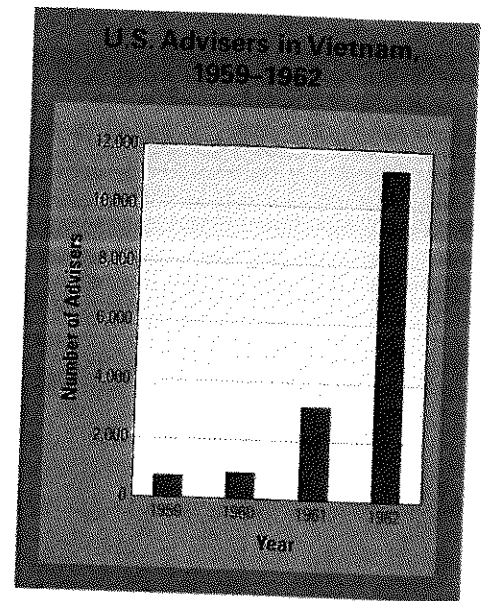
Viet Minh communists still living in the south launched a guerrilla war against Diem's brutal government. Their strategy included terrorism and assassination. In 1960, the Viet Minh formed a group called the National Liberation Front and invited all opponents of Diem to join. Diem referred to the group as **Viet Cong**, slang for "Vietnamese communists," even though many of its members were noncommunists. By now, North Vietnam was supplying and supporting these rebels. The stage was set for the Second Indochina War, also known as the Vietnam War.

Kennedy Tries to Prop Up South Vietnam The Viet Cong **insurgency**, or rebellion, threatened to overwhelm the South Vietnamese army. Many army officers, like many leaders of South Vietnam's government, were incompetent and corrupt. Some officers even sold weapons to the Viet Cong. When Kennedy became president in 1961, he sent an inspection team to South Vietnam to evaluate the situation.

Kennedy had originally opposed U.S. military intervention to help the French. As the years passed, however, his ideas about the strategic importance of Vietnam shifted. In 1956, he offered his own version of the domino theory. JFK called Vietnam "the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone in the arch, the finger in the dike." As president, he continued to favor a policy of containing communism.

When Kennedy's inspection team returned from Vietnam, they told the president that South Vietnam was losing the war. They recommended more economic and military aid, including the use of U.S. combat troops. However, some political advisers urged him to pull out of Vietnam completely. JFK, unsure of the best course, opted to send more weapons and equipment and more technicians and military advisers. By mid-1962, the number of military advisers had soared to around 9,000. But JFK resisted calls to send U.S. soldiers into combat. This policy was designed, according to one policy memo, to help Diem's army "win its own war."

Diem was losing not only the war but also the respect of his people. Besides being corrupt and brutal, Diem discriminated against the Buddhist majority. In May 1963, at a Buddhist rally opposing Diem's policies, South Vietnamese police killed nine demonstrators. Several Buddhist monks protested by publicly setting themselves on fire. Kennedy realized that Diem had failed as a leader. In November, a group of South Vietnamese generals staged a coup, with the tacit approval of U.S. officials. Diem was assassinated as he tried to flee Saigon.

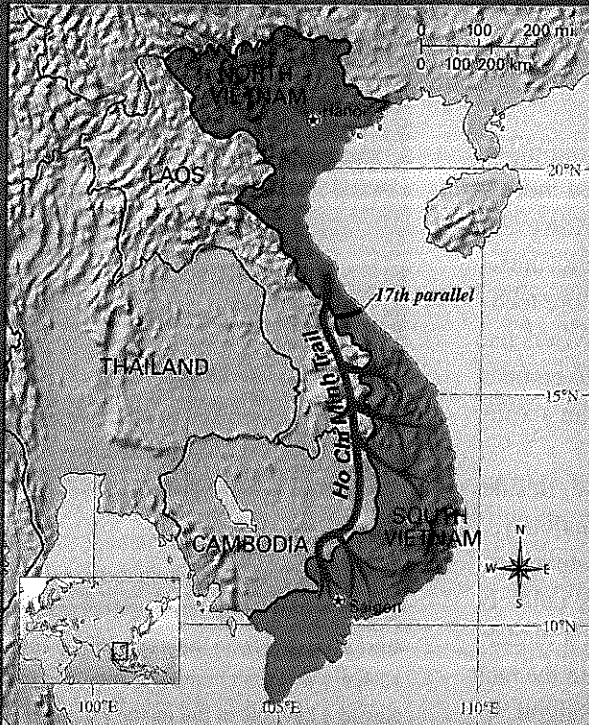


The United States began sending military advisers to Vietnam to help the French in the early 1950s. The number of advisers increased rapidly in the early 1960s. These advisers were not combat troops, but they played a key role in the military buildup in Southeast Asia.



In 1963, photographs of Buddhist monks burning themselves to death in South Vietnam shocked the world. The monks were protesting the corruption and brutality of the Diem regime. Diem had taken power with U.S. support, but his actions embarrassed the United States and led to his overthrow.

Ho Chi Minh Trail



The Ho Chi Minh Trail was actually a network of some 12,000 miles of trails. Soldiers and supplies moved the route on foot and by bicycle, oxcart, and truck. The trip south, through the rugged mountains of Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam, could take as long as three months.

51.3 Johnson Inherits the Vietnam Problem

Three weeks after Diem's death, Kennedy was also assassinated. The growing problem in Vietnam thus fell into the lap of a new president, Lyndon B. Johnson. LBJ knew that Vietnam was a potential quagmire that could suck the United States into protracted conflict. But he also believed that the communists had to be stopped. In May 1964, he expressed his ambivalent feelings about Vietnam to an adviser. "I don't think it's worth fighting for," he said, "and I don't think we can get out."

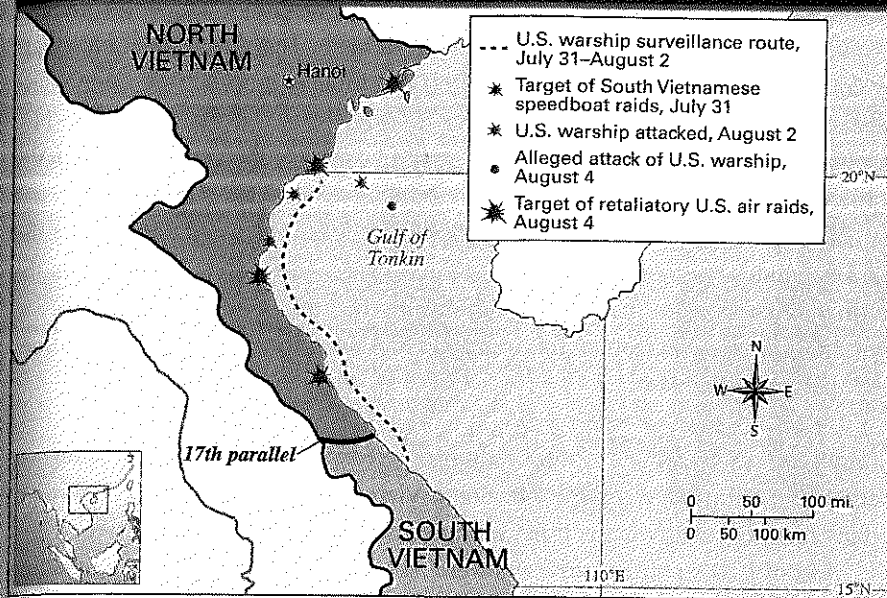
LBJ was first and foremost a politician. He knew how to get things done in Congress and how to win elections. During the 1964 campaign, his opponent, Barry Goldwater, insisted that the United States should take a more active role in the war. Johnson responded, "We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves." This moderate approach to Vietnam boosted LBJ's appeal to voters. Yet the president had already begun making plans to **escalate**, or increase, U.S. involvement in the war. In March 1964, he asked the military to begin planning for the bombing of North Vietnam.

Gulf of Tonkin Incident Riles the U.S. For years, North Vietnam had been sending weapons and supplies south to the Viet Cong over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This network of footpaths, roads, bridges, and tunnels passed through the mountainous terrain of eastern Laos and Cambodia. In mid-1964, regular units of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) began heading south along this route. Johnson knew that South Vietnam's weak and ineffective army would be hard-pressed to stop this new offensive. The United States had to do more, he believed, or risk losing Vietnam to communism.

In July 1964, Johnson approved covert attacks on radar stations along North Vietnam's coast. The CIA planned the operation, but South Vietnamese in speedboats carried out the raids. U.S. Navy warships used electronic **surveillance**, or close observation, to locate the radar sites. On August 2, in response to the raids, NVA patrol boats struck back. They fired machine guns and torpedoes at a U.S. destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of North Vietnam. The ship was not damaged.

LBJ chose not to retaliate, but he sent a message to Hanoi warning the North Vietnamese government that further "unprovoked" attacks would bring "grave consequences." On the night of August 4, in stormy weather in the Gulf of Tonkin, American sailors thought their destroyer was again

Gulf of Tonkin Incident, 1964



The Gulf of Tonkin Incident provoked an escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. On August 2, 1964, North Vietnamese boats fired on a U.S. ship, causing little damage. Two days later, false reports of a second attack prompted the United States to launch air strikes against North Vietnam.

under attack. They fired back, although they never saw any enemy boats. In fact, no attack had taken place.

Back in Washington, D.C., officials quickly studied accounts of the incident. Based on erroneous evidence, these officials—and the president—concluded that a second attack had occurred. LBJ immediately ordered air strikes against naval bases in North Vietnam. The next day, August 5, he asked Congress to approve those air strikes and to give him the power to deal with future threats.

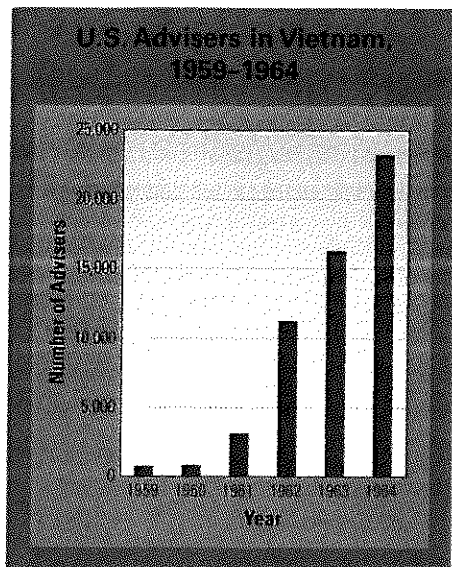
Two days later, Congress passed the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**. This resolution allowed the president “to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was not a legal declaration of war, but it did, in effect, give the president permission to expand the U.S. role in the conflict.

Only two members of Congress, both in the Senate, voted against the resolution. One of them, Ernest Gruening of Alaska, explained his opposition in a speech on the Senate floor:

[Authorizing this measure] means sending our American boys into combat in a war in which we have no business, which is not our war, into which we have been misguidedly drawn, which is steadily being escalated. This* resolution is a further authorization for escalation unlimited.

— Senator Ernest Gruening, August 1964

The U.S. Reaches a Crisis Point in Vietnam The escalation that Senator Gruening feared began on February 7, 1965, after the Viet Cong attacked a U.S. air base in the south. LBJ responded by ordering the bombing of barracks and military staging areas north of the 17th parallel. “We have kept our guns over the mantel and our shells in the cupboard for a long time now,” the president said of his decision. “I can’t ask our American soldiers out there to continue to fight with one hand behind their backs.”



The number of U.S. military advisers in Vietnam continued to grow in the mid-1960s. By 1964, there were more than twice as many advisers in the country as there were two years before. The figure was more than 30 times the number in 1959.

President Johnson relied on advisers to help formulate Vietnam policy. Here he is shown in a meeting with military experts, including Defense Secretary Robert McNamara (with arm outstretched), in 1965. McNamara, like many of LBJ's advisors, was a hawk who favored sending more troops to Vietnam. Other advisers, known as doves, urged the president to seek more peaceful means to resolve the Vietnam conflict.

The February bombing raid led to a series of massive air strikes called Operation Rolling Thunder. Most of the president's advisers believed that this action was needed to give a boost to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and to avoid the collapse of South Vietnam. The government, plagued by coups and corruption, was in turmoil. It had little support outside Saigon and other large cities. The military, too, was in rough shape. Units of the ARVN rarely had success against the enemy forces that roamed the countryside. ARVN soldiers deserted by the thousands each month.

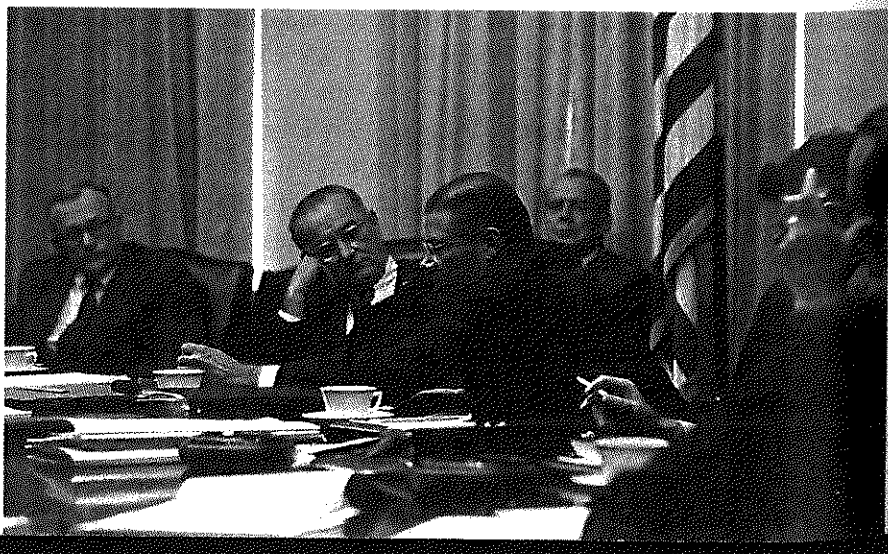
Besides attacking staging areas, U.S. planes began intensive bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, hoping to cut off supplies and soldiers streaming in from the north. But the flow of men and materiel from the north continued, as did the war. In light of these results, the Johnson administration decided to reexamine U.S. policy in Vietnam.

Johnson's Advisers Debate Increased Involvement President Johnson believed in a limited war to secure South Vietnam's independence. His foreign policy team debated what actions were necessary to reach that objective.

Most of LBJ's political advisers were hawks, people who favored expanding U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. In their eyes, the defense of Vietnam was crucial in the wider struggle to contain communism. In policy debates, the hawks—a group that included Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, along with top military leaders—argued in favor of escalating the war by introducing U.S. ground troops. One of their arguments had been heard many times before: the domino theory. The fall of Vietnam, they asserted, would trigger the collapse of Cambodia, Laos, and the rest of Southeast Asia. Under this scenario, communism would spread across the entire region and beyond.

The hawks also argued against a policy of appeasement. They recalled the Munich Pact of 1938, which was intended to appease Hitler but allowed for the continued aggression that led to World War II. LBJ understood their point. "The central lesson of our time," he said, "is that the appetite of aggression is never satisfied. To withdraw from one battlefield means only to prepare for the next."

A third argument of the hawks stressed American credibility. They said that allies must be able to rely on the United States, the leader of the free world, to stand by them in times of crisis. Only then, the hawks claimed, could the United States count on allied support in the worldwide battle against communism. They also argued that the United States had to make clear to the communists that it



The Domino Theory



The domino theory was a key rationale for increasing U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. According to this theory, the fall of Vietnam to communism would lead to communist advances throughout Southeast Asia and the rest of the world. Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy, along with Johnson, were all strongly influenced by the domino theory.

would meet any challenge to its power. A related argument was purely political. During the Cold War, politicians were expected to take a hard line against the communist threat. LBJ could not afford to lose domestic support by being branded “soft on communism.”

Not all of LBJ’s advisers took such a hard line. Some, such as Undersecretary of State George Ball, were doves—advocates of a peaceful solution in Vietnam through negotiation and compromise. Previously they had argued against widespread bombing. Now, in policy debates, they made the case against escalating the conflict further by sending in U.S. combat troops.

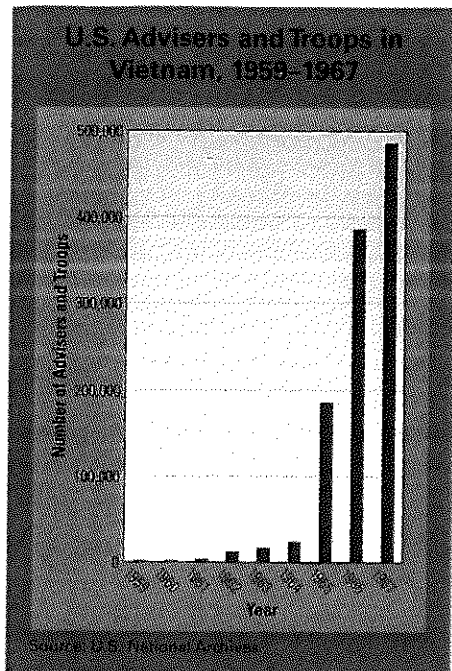
The doves contended that escalating the war would not guarantee victory, arguing that the war was unwinnable. They pointed to the case of Korea, where U.S. troops had fought a costly war for three years but achieved little. Fighting a guerrilla war in the unfamiliar jungle terrain of Vietnam, the doves predicted, would prove even more difficult and deadly. In addition, the expense of such a war would undermine LBJ’s top priority, his Great Society programs.

The doves also argued that involvement in the war was not in the nation’s interest. They said the United States had no business becoming entangled in someone else’s civil war. In addition, they questioned the strategic value of Vietnam to the United States. The huge investment the United States was making in Southeast Asia, they argued, was diverting attention from more important problems both at home and abroad.

Furthermore, the doves pointed out that direct U.S. involvement in Vietnam might draw China or even the Soviet Union into the conflict. Both countries were supplying North Vietnam with military aid, and China was building an air base just inside its border with North Vietnam. The doves feared that China might counter the entry of U.S. ground troops with combat forces of its own. Increased U.S. involvement, they claimed, would not reassure its allies but instead make them more anxious that a major war could erupt in the region.



Some critics of the Vietnam War believed that the conflict could not be managed successfully. This cartoon shows President Johnson clinging desperately to the tail of a tiger, representing Vietnam, as it whips him through space. The cartoonist is implying that Vietnam could not be controlled.



U.S. troop levels in Vietnam rose rapidly after the first soldiers arrived in 1965. Four months later, the number of young men drafted into the armed forces doubled, to 35,000 a month, to meet the demand for new soldiers.

The first U.S. combat troops arrived in Vietnam on March 8, 1965, on a beach near Da Nang. Before long, U.S. forces had taken charge of the war. As the war became Americanized, the South Vietnamese played less and less of a role.



51.4 Johnson Americanizes the War

After weighing all the advice he received about American involvement in Vietnam, Johnson decided to send troops. On March 8, 1965, about 3,500 U.S. marines waded ashore at a beach near Da Nang, South Vietnam. This was the first time U.S. combat troops had set foot in Vietnam. The marines received a warm greeting from local officials. Several Vietnamese girls placed garlands of flowers around the soldiers' necks.

The marines knew this was no time to celebrate, though. They immediately began digging foxholes on the beach, preparing to defend against a Viet Cong attack. The next day, they continued bringing equipment and supplies ashore, including tanks equipped with flamethrowers. The marines' job was to defend the air base at Da Nang, the home base for bombers taking part in Operation Rolling Thunder. Soon their orders changed, however. They were sent on patrol to find and eliminate enemy forces. These search-and-destroy missions led to the first firefights with Viet Cong guerrillas. Until the following month, LBJ kept this shift to combat status a secret from the American people.

Johnson Dramatically Increases Troop Levels By the end of April, President Johnson had approved the dispatch of 60,000 more combat troops to Vietnam. In July, after conferring with advisers, he publicly announced that he was boosting U.S. troop levels dramatically, to 125,000 men. "We cannot be defeated by force of arms," he said. "We will stand in Vietnam." LBJ's actions and words revealed that the United States was about to undertake a full-scale war. Yet the president did not officially declare war or ask Congress for permission to expand troop levels. He based his authority to act on the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

In the months that followed, the air war continued to intensify, and the pace of the ground war accelerated. The first major assault by U.S. ground troops, called Operation Starlite, took place in August 1965, against 1,500 Viet Cong who were preparing to attack a U.S. air base near the coast. The battle started with bomb and artillery attacks on Viet Cong positions. Helicopters flew many of the 5,500 marines to the battle site, and others came ashore from ships. Supported by tanks and fighter planes, the marines successfully smashed the enemy force. In this American victory, marines killed more than 600 Viet Cong, while 45 U.S. soldiers died.

This pattern of delivering troops by helicopter while battering the enemy with overwhelming firepower would continue throughout the war. So would the lopsided pattern of casualties. Although many U.S. and ARVN soldiers would die in Vietnam, four times as many enemy troops would perish. Despite huge losses, however, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese managed to produce enough new fighters to keep the war going.

The United States, too, relied on ever-increasing numbers of ground troops to sweep through jungles and rice paddies and root out the enemy. By the end of 1965, U.S. combat soldiers numbered more than 184,000. That figure more than doubled in 1966, to 385,000. By late 1967, nearly half a million Americans were serving in Vietnam, and more were streaming into the country.

An American War Starting in 1965, with the landing of the first combat forces, the conflict in Vietnam changed. The United States took over the main responsibility for fighting the war, adopting a two-pronged strategy. First, U.S. marines would take key cities and other vital sites along the coast and transform them into modern military bases. They would then use those bases to launch search-and-destroy missions against the Viet Cong. From that time forward, the South Vietnamese would play only a supporting role.

This change in strategy represented the Americanization of the Vietnam War. As one of LBJ's advisers, Horace Busby, put it, "This is no longer South Vietnam's war. We are no longer advisers. The stakes are no longer South Vietnam's. The war is ours."

Summary

After World War II, nationalist and communist rebels in the French colony of Vietnam fought for their independence. A 1954 agreement ending this colonial war split the country into communist North Vietnam and democratic South Vietnam. When France pulled out the following year, the United States stepped in to prop up South Vietnam. Over the years, American involvement grew and eventually led to the introduction of U.S. ground forces.

First Indochina War In this first phase of fighting, which lasted from 1946 to 1954, Ho Chi Minh led Viet Minh insurgents in the struggle to end French rule in Vietnam.

Geneva Accords The First Indochina War ended with a 1954 agreement known as the Geneva Accords. The accords split Vietnam into north and south but called for elections to reunify the country. The United States backed South Vietnam financially and militarily.

Viet Cong Insurgents in the south, known as the Viet Cong, worked to overthrow the nominally democratic but corrupt government of South Vietnam. The Viet Cong received aid from communist North Vietnam.

Gulf of Tonkin Resolution An alleged attack on U.S. ships off the coast of North Vietnam led Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. This resolution gave President Johnson broad powers to expand the U.S. role in Vietnam. Massive air strikes against North Vietnam followed.

Ho Chi Minh Trail By 1965, North Vietnamese Army troops were moving south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail to help the Viet Cong. The United States feared that South Vietnam would fall without more direct support.

Americanization In March 1965, the United States began sending ground troops to fight the Vietnam War. The war quickly became an American conflict.