

The Vietnam War: Tragic Conflict in Asia

Affected an American Generation



By History.com, adapted by Newsela staff

The Vietnam War was a long and deadly struggle that cost many lives. North Vietnam and the Viet Cong were on one side of the war. South Vietnam and the United States were on the other.

The war began in 1954, and for Americans it lasted until 1973, when the U.S. left Vietnam. More than 3 million people were killed, including over 58,000 Americans. More than half of the Vietnamese who died were not soldiers. They were ordinary people who could not escape the bombs and bullets.

Vietnam was under France's control starting in 1858. In 1954, French troops were defeated by Vietnamese forces led by Ho Chi Minh. Vietnam was then split in two. Emperor Bao Dai ruled in

the South, while Ho was in control of the North. The northern part of Vietnam became the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The southern part was known as the Republic of Vietnam.

In 1955, Ngo Dinh Diem pushed Bao aside and became president of South Vietnam.

U.S. intervention begins during the Cold War

U.S. interest in Vietnam was shaped by its fear of the Soviet Union, which was led by Russia. The United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a struggle. This struggle was known as the Cold War, because there was no real fighting. Instead, it was a war of ideas.

The United States hoped to stop the spread of communism. Communism is a system that gives the government a lot of control over businesses. This is very different than the U.S. system of capitalism. In capitalism, people can own homes, land and businesses and make their own decisions about money. The Soviet Union was communist. Ho and his followers were communists, too, and North Vietnam became communist after 1954.

Diem, the leader of South Vietnam, was strongly anti-communist. By 1955, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower had decided to support Diem and South Vietnam. With help from the American military, Diem's police cracked down on communists in South Vietnam, who were known as the Viet Cong. Around 100,000 people were arrested, and many of them were killed. The Viet Cong soon began fighting back. By 1959 they were in a shooting war with South Vietnamese army forces.

In January 1961, John F. Kennedy became president. Kennedy increased U.S. aid to South Vietnam. By 1962, there were around 9,000 U.S. troops in South Vietnam.

The war escalates under a new president

In November 1963, Diem was overthrown by some of his own generals, and then put to death. Three weeks later, President Kennedy was killed. America's new president, Lyndon B. Johnson, increased U.S. military support of South Vietnam. By early 1965, U.S. planes were running regular bombing raids over North Vietnamese territory.

In March 1965, Johnson decided to send U.S. ground forces into battle in Vietnam. By 1966, around 282,000 U.S. troops were stationed in Vietnam. The United States also stepped up its bombing of North Vietnam, and later began bombing areas of South Vietnam as well.

By November 1967, there were nearly half a million American troops in Vietnam. U.S. casualties had reached 15,058 killed and 109,527 wounded.

Soon, Americans began turning against the war. In October 1967, around 35,000 demonstrators staged a mass anti-war protest.

The war ends

In January 1969, Richard Nixon became the new American president. Nixon was determined to continue the war effort. He ordered an increase in bombing raids, though he also brought many U.S. ground troops home. Around the U.S., anti-war protests continued to grow.

During 1970, the U.S. spread the war into both Cambodia and Laos, two countries that border Vietnam. The spread of the war led to a wave of new protests across the United States. In December 1972, Nixon ordered a number of new bombing raids. These were heavily criticized around the world.



In Berkeley-Oakland City, California, demonstrators march against the war in Vietnam, December 1965. AP Photo.
[click to enlarge]

In January 1973, the United States and North Vietnam finally agreed to put an end to the fighting. For Americans, the war in Vietnam was over at last.

War between North and South Vietnam continued until 1975, however. The North was the victor. In 1976, Vietnam was unified under communist control and became the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The war's toll

Almost everyone in Vietnam was affected by the war. Three million Vietnamese were killed. Three million more were wounded and another 12 million became refugees. Much of the country lay in ruins when the fighting finally ended.

Around 58,200 American soldiers were killed during the war, and many more were wounded.