



▲ Ho Chi Minh depicted in a Vietnamese propaganda poster

## WITNESS HISTORY AUDIO

### Hope for Independence

After World War II, a spirit of nationalism and revolution spread among European colonies around the world. As colonial peoples strived for independence, their struggles sometimes became mixed up with the Cold War conflict between communist states and western democracies. Such was the case in French Indochina, which consisted of the lands of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Unaware of the long and bloody war that lie ahead, a Vietnamese communist named Ho Chi Minh dreamed of a Vietnam free from French rule:

“The oppressed world over are wresting back their independence. We should not lag behind. . . . Under the Vietminh banner, let us valiantly march forward!”

—Ho Chi Minh, 1945

# Origins of the Vietnam War

## Objectives

- Describe the reasons that the United States helped the French fight the Vietnamese.
- Identify ways in which the United States opposed communism in Southeast Asia.
- Analyze how the United States increased its involvement in Vietnam.

## Terms and People

Ho Chi Minh	Vietcong
domino theory	Gulf of Tonkin Resolution
SEATO	

## NoteTaking

**Reading Skill: Summarize** As you read, describe the Vietnam policies of Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson.

U.S. Policy in Vietnam		
Truman/ Eisenhower	Kennedy	Johnson
• •	• •	• • Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

**Why It Matters** Presidents Kennedy and Johnson shared a vision for a better America in the 1960s. They also shared a vision for a better world in which America would emerge victorious from its Cold War struggle against global communism. As part of this strategic and ideological battle, the United States established a new line of defense against communism in Vietnam. The conflict in Southeast Asia would grow to be one of the costliest wars in American history. **Section Focus Question:** Why did the United States become involved in Vietnam?

## America and the War in Indochina

Situated far away in Southeast Asia, Vietnam did not attract significant American attention until the 1960s. Television news shows rarely mentioned it, and most Americans could not locate it on a map. But over a span of more than ten years, the United States sent several million soldiers to fight in Vietnam. America's involvement in Vietnam had roots in European colonialism, Cold War politics, and Vietnamese calls for national independence.

**France Rules Indochina in Southeast Asia** In the 1800s, French military forces established control over Indochina, a peninsula in Southeast Asia that includes the modern countries of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Slightly larger than the state of Texas, Indochina included almost 27 million people by the end of World War II. French colonial officials ruled Vietnam with an iron fist. They transplanted French laws into Vietnam and imposed high taxes. French business people acquired large rice and rubber



plantations and controlled the mineral wealth of the country. Some Vietnamese, especially wealthier members of society, benefited from western culture and technology. Many others, however, were impoverished by colonialism.

Some Vietnamese rebelled against France's exploitative rule. **Ho Chi Minh** became the most important voice demanding independence for Vietnam. Born in 1890, Ho became involved in anti-French organizations as a young man and fled Vietnam in 1912. He traveled the world, visiting American ports and living periodically in London, Paris, and Moscow. During his 30-year absence, Ho constantly thought and wrote about Vietnam, and he searched for westerners who would support his plans for Vietnamese independence. Ho embraced communism, and eventually Soviet communists rallied to his cause.

**The French Battle Nationalism and Communism** During World War II, Japan had undermined French control over Vietnam. But when the conflict ended, France reasserted its colonial aims there. France's problem, however, was that colonialism was a dying institution. World War II had strengthened nationalist movements while weakening the economic and military positions of traditional European powers. In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh clamored for independence as France struggled to maintain its dwindling global power.

Meanwhile, the United States faced a difficult decision. On the one hand, it supported decolonization. On the other hand, America wanted France as an ally in its Cold War effort to contain the Soviet Union. President Harry S. Truman believed that if he supported Vietnamese independence, he would weaken anticommunist forces in France. So, to ensure a strong, anticommunist Western Europe, Truman sacrificed his own anticolonial sentiments.

Vietnam thus became a pawn in Cold War politics. To ensure French support in the Cold War, Truman agreed to aid France's efforts to regain control over Vietnam. After communist forces won the civil war in China in 1949, America increased its aid to the French in Vietnam. Truman did not want to see another communist victory in Asia. Between 1950 and 1954, the United States contributed \$2.6 billion to France's war efforts. Containing Ho Chi Minh's communist Vietnam—an abbreviation of the League for the Independence of Vietnam—became a national priority.

## French Indochina, 1954



### Vietnam Under French Rule

During the French colonial era, rural villagers failed to see the same profits as French plantation owners. Ho Chi Minh found many supporters for his anticolonial efforts in villages like the one above. *In 1954, what regions of Indochina were under communist control?*

### Vocabulary Builder

ensure—(en SHOR) *v.* to guarantee; secure



### Dien Bien Phu Under Siege

For almost two months, Vietminh soldiers hammered at French military positions around Dien Bien Phu. At left, Vietnamese communists take cover in a trench during the siege. At right, French troops guard Vietminh soldiers taken captive during the fighting.

**The Domino Theory and Dien Bien Phu** When President Dwight D. Eisenhower took office in early 1953, he continued Truman's policies toward Vietnam. He sent monetary aid to the French, arguing that by battling Ho Chi Minh, they were containing the spread of communism. Eisenhower told a journalist that the fight in Vietnam involved more than the future of just one country:

#### Primary Source

“You have a row of dominos set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.”

—Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954

The **domino theory** was the idea that if Vietnam fell to communism, its closest neighbors would follow. This in turn would threaten Japan, the Philippines, and Australia. In short, stopping the communists in Vietnam was important to the protection of the entire region.

In 1954, however, the French lost their eight-year struggle to regain Vietnam. The Vietminh trapped a large French garrison at Dien Bien Phu, a military base in northwest Vietnam, and laid siege to it for 55 days. During the siege, which one Frenchman described as “hell in a very small place,” Vietminh troops destroyed the French airstrip, cut French supply lines, and dug trenches to attack key French positions. Finally, on May 7, 1954, after suffering some 15,000 casualties, the French surrendered.

The very next day at an international peace conference in Geneva, Switzerland, France sued for peace. According to the Geneva Accords, France granted independence to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The accords also divided Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel into two countries, North Vietnam and South Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh's communist forces ruled in North Vietnam, and an anticommunist government, supported by the United States, assumed power in South Vietnam. The accords also called for free elections in 1956 to unify Vietnam.



**Checkpoint** Why did Presidents Truman and Eisenhower support French efforts against Ho Chi Minh?



# America Opposes Communism in Vietnam

During the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, France appealed to the United States for military support. President Eisenhower was willing to supply money but not soldiers. Ike would not commit American troops to defend colonialism in Asia. Nevertheless, the President firmly supported the new anticommunist government of South Vietnam.

**The United States Aids South Vietnam** America channeled aid to South Vietnam in different ways. In 1954, the United States and seven other countries formed the **Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)**. Similar to NATO, SEATO's goal was to contain the spread of communism in Southeast Asia.

The United States provided economic and military aid to the South Vietnamese government led by Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem was an ardent nationalist and anticommunist. Although he lacked popular appeal, his anticommunism guaranteed American support. When it came time for the 1956 unification elections, American intelligence analysts predicted that Diem would lose to the more popular Ho Chi Minh. Rather than risk losing, Diem refused to participate in the elections, a move made under the auspices of the United States government.

**Communist Opposition Grows** By 1957, a communist rebel group in the South, known as the National Liberation Front (NLF), had committed themselves to undermining the Diem government and uniting Vietnam under a communist flag. NLF guerrilla fighters, called **Vietcong**, launched an insurgency in which they assassinated government officials and destroyed roads and bridges. Supplied by communists in North Vietnam, the Vietcong employed surprise hit-and-run tactics to weaken Diem's hold on South Vietnam.

Diem's own policies also weakened his position in South Vietnam. A devout Roman Catholic in an overwhelmingly Buddhist nation, Diem did little to build a broad political base. Instead, he signed anti-Buddhist legislation and refused to enact significant land reforms. His lack of popular support hurt him in the civil war against North Vietnam. Only the support of the United States kept the unpopular leader in power.


**Kennedy Sends U.S. Troops to Vietnam** After his election in 1960, President John F. Kennedy took a more aggressive stand against the communists in Vietnam. Beginning in 1961, he sent Special Forces troops to South Vietnam to advise the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) on more effective ways to fight the communist forces. By 1963, more than 15,000 American "advisers" were fighting in Vietnam.

Although U.S. advisers fought bravely and achieved some success, Diem continued to alienate South Vietnamese citizens. By late 1963, his regime was in shambles. Buddhists protested his restrictive policies, occasionally by setting themselves on fire. The Kennedy administration eventually concluded that South Vietnam needed new leadership. Working behind the scenes, Americans plotted with anti-Diem generals to overthrow Diem's government. On November 1, 1963, Diem was removed from power and later assassinated.

**Vocabulary Builder**  
auspices—(AWS puh sihzh) *n.*  
approval and support

▼ A Buddhist monk sets himself on fire in Saigon to protest the Diem regime.



 **Checkpoint** How did the United States help the South Vietnamese government resist communism?



### Analyzing Political Cartoons

**The Opposing Forces** Early in the war, this American cartoon focused on the technological differences between the two opposing forces.

1. Is the cartoon an accurate or exaggerated representation of the technological differences? Explain.
2. Who do you think the cartoonist expected to win the war? Why?

## Johnson Leads the Nation Into War

Three weeks after Diem's fall, an assassin's bullet struck down President Kennedy. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in as the new President. Johnson was a Cold War traditionalist who held a monolithic view of communism. For this "Cold Warrior," communism in the Soviet Union, China, and Vietnam were all the same. He did not recognize subtle differences. He also knew that the American people expected victory in Vietnam.

**North Vietnamese and U.S. Forces Clash** In 1964, President Johnson faced his first crisis in Vietnam. On August 2, North Vietnamese torpedo boats fired on the American destroyer USS *Maddox* as it patrolled the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam. The *Maddox* was not hit, and it returned fire on the North Vietnamese boat. Johnson promptly responded to the attack and to other North Vietnamese provocations. He announced that "aggression by terror against peaceful villages of South Vietnam has now been joined by open aggression on the high seas against the United States of America." Troubled by increasing strikes against an American ally, Johnson ordered an airstrike against North Vietnam.

**Congress Gives Johnson Broad Military Powers** The President next asked Congress to authorize the use of force to defend American troops. With little debate and only two senators voting against it, Congress agreed to Johnson's request and passed the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**. The resolution authorized 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 resolution gave Johnson tremendous war powers. It allowed him to commit U.S. troops to South Vietnam and fight a war against North Vietnam without ever going back to Congress to ask for a declaration of war.

**Checkpoint** What was the significance of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution?

### SECTION

# 1 Assessment

### Progress Monitoring Online

For: Self-test with vocabulary practice  
Web Code: nea-1602

### Comprehension

- 1. Terms and People** For each item below, write a sentence explaining its significance.
  - Ho Chi Minh
  - domino theory
  - Vietcong
  - Gulf of Tonkin Resolution
- 2. NoteTaking Reading Skill:**  
**Summarize** Use your flowchart to answer the Section Focus Question: Why did the United States become involved in Vietnam?

### Writing About History

- 3. Quick Write: Generate an Argument** Choose a topic from this section that could be the subject of a persuasive essay. For example, you might choose the domino theory. Then, write a thesis statement arguing in favor of or against U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia. Make sure that the argument clearly explains your opinion on the topic.

### Critical Thinking

- 4. Identify Central Issues** Identify one argument for and one argument against Truman's decision to support the French rather than the Vietnamese nationalists.
- 5. Make Decisions** What goals motivated President Kennedy's policy decisions regarding Vietnam?
- 6. Recognize Cause and Effect** How did the *Maddox* incident contribute to the outbreak of war? How did it lead to a change in the balance of power in the American government?