

Appendix B

Origins of the War in Vietnam, 1945- 1965

Version One (737 words)

The Vietnam War represents America's dedication to democracy during the Cold War. It began after World War II ended, when the French declared their right to govern Vietnam as they had before the war. In 1946 Vietnamese communists, the Viet Minh, rejected the French and demanded independence. The leader of the Viet Minh, Ho Chi Minh, raised an army to resist the French. The United States supported France, and in 1950, it began to send military supplies and advisors to help them. The defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 resulted in the partition of Vietnam along the 17th parallel. North Vietnam became a communist nation led by Ho Chi Minh, while South Vietnam became a democratic republic led by Ngo Dinh Diem.

The division was not acceptable to radicals who wanted to unite Vietnam under a communist government. They were supported by China and the Soviet Union. It also was unacceptable to Americans and their allies. They believed in the "domino theory" that if Vietnam became communist, then communism would spread all over Asia. In 1947, the Truman Doctrine declared that the U.S. was committed to stopping communism from spreading. That commitment led to war and the loss of over 58,000 American lives.

Between 1955 and 1963, South Vietnam struggled to be a democracy. Diem's government was corrupt and limited some civil rights. The U.S. continued to support Diem because he was committed to fighting communism. During this time, the Viet Minh built military supply routes in Laos and Cambodia to enable strikes against Diem's government. Some people in South Vietnam lost confidence in Diem and supported Ho Chi Minh. In 1960, anti-government activists in South Vietnam formed the National Liberation Front (NFL). It supported the unification of Vietnam under communism and it created its own militia. The U.S. referred to NFL members as Viet Cong and saw them as a serious threat to democracy in Asia.

In 1961, President Kennedy sent military supplies, helicopters, and Green Berets (special U.S. Army forces) to assist the South Vietnamese in their fight against North Vietnam and communism. Kennedy promised in his Inaugural Speech that the U.S. would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty." Americans were proud of this declaration as they saw the U.S. as the leader of all free nations and world's greatest defender of democracy. Kennedy's administration was aware of the risk of declaring war on North Vietnam. He also believed that it would not be good for the world if communism were allowed to spread all over Southeast Asia. His cabinet members and advisors knew that China and the Soviet Union — both communist countries — supported North Vietnam and might enter the war with grave consequences as both had nuclear weapons.

Tragically, in 1963, Diem was assassinated by soldiers led by Duong Van Minh, a general in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. The coup brought instability to South Vietnam. Diem's successors were not effective in repelling the North Vietnamese army nor the Viet Cong who supported them. Twenty days after Diem's death, Kennedy was murdered in Dallas Texas. As the nation mourned the loss of a great leader, Lyndon Johnson became president. He inherited the moral obligation to prevent the expansion of communism in Asia.

Johnson was determined to defeat the communists in Vietnam, but he struggled with the idea of escalating the war. Many Americans did not know where Vietnam was or why it was important. Johnson also understood that a war would be costly. In August 1964, the *USS Maddox*, a destroyer ship patrolling the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam was attacked twice by a North Vietnamese torpedo boat. Johnson bravely authorized air strikes on North Vietnamese naval bases and two U.S. planes were shot down. Johnson then made the difficult decision to ask Congress for permission to take any measures necessary to combat communist aggression in the region. Congress approved the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and the U.S. increased its commitment to send soldiers and supplies to South Vietnam in its defense. Many regard 1965 as the first year of the Vietnam War because for the first time in the conflict, thousands of combat troops were sent to engage the enemy on the ground, side by side with South Vietnamese soldiers to fight for their freedom.