

Appendix B

Origins of the War in Vietnam, 1945-1965

Version Two (761 words)

The Vietnam War began after World War II ended, when the French demanded that Vietnam be restored to its former status as a French colony. In 1946, the Viet Minh (a communist league for independence), rejected the French and demanded independence. Viet Minh leader, Ho Chi Minh, appealed to President Truman to intervene. He thought the U.S. would defend Vietnam's right to independence and self-governance (Letter from Ho Chi Minh, 1946). He also raised an army to resist the French. The U.S. 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. South Vietnam became a democratic republic led by Ngo Dinh Diem. Many South Vietnamese saw Diem as a U.S. puppet of U.S. imperialism. Some Americans understood the depth of Vietnamese anti-imperialism. President Eisenhower observed that had elections been held in 1954, 80 percent of all Vietnamese would have voted for Ho Chi Minh (Jacobs, 2006).

The division was not acceptable to the Viet Minh. It wanted to unite Vietnam. It also was unacceptable to Americans. 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 and 2.5 million Asian lives (Rummel, 1998).

Between 1955 and 1963, South Vietnam struggled to be a democracy. Diem's government was corrupt. It sold government positions to individuals, put people on military payrolls that did not work there, and suppressed his political competition. Diem was ineffective in his efforts to distribute more land to the poor, and he also persecuted Buddhists (Jacobs, 2006). The U.S. supported Diem because he opposed communism. During this time, the Viet Minh built military supply routes in Laos and Cambodia to enable strikes against Diem's government. In 1960, South Vietnamese activists against Diem formed the National Liberation Front (NFL). It supported Ho Chi Minh and it created its own militia. The U.S. referred to NFL members as Viet Cong and saw them as a 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. 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." He was under pressure to be tough on communism, but understood that actions in Vietnam could provoke China and the Soviet Union. Both were communist countries that supported North Vietnam and they had nuclear weapons.

In 1963, Diem was assassinated in a coup orchestrated by the CIA and led by Duong Van Minh, a general in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. The intent of the coup was replace Diem with a leader who would be more effective in extinguishing communism in South Vietnam (Kennedy, 1963). Instead, it brought instability to the region. 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, and Lyndon Johnson became president.

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 allegedly attacked twice by a North Vietnamese torpedo boat. Johnson authorized air strikes on North Vietnamese naval bases and two U.S. planes were shot down. Johnson then asked Congress for permission to take any measures necessary to combat communist aggression in the region. Congress approved the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The war ultimately cost \$168 billion to wage and over \$270 billion more to care for war veterans (Amadeo, 2024). Many historians regard 1965 as the year the Vietnam War began because that is when the first waves of American troops were sent to fight alongside the ARVN. It was also the first time that Americans bombed North Vietnam. In the next seven years, the U.S. sent over 500,000 soldiers to fight and widened the war by bombing Laos and Cambodia.

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