



EXTENSION OF THE COLD WAR OUTSIDE EUROPE (THE VIETNAM WAR)

Why was there a North and South Vietnam?

- At the end of the war in 1945, the Vietminh had established control over much of northern and central Vietnam and declared the formation of an independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). While the Americans had lent support to the Vietminh during the war, they now supported the French in restoring their control over Vietnam, convinced that the Vietminh were receiving help from the Soviets and were supported by the Communist China after 1949. After their capitulation at Dien Bien Phu, a conference was held at Geneva to determine the future of Vietnam. Under the terms of the Geneva Accords, Vietnam would be divided at the 17th parallel (though the Vietminh controlled 2/3 of the country) and elections for unification would happen within two years with a view to reuniting Vietnam and creating a multi-party system of government.¹
- Under Ho Chi Minh, the North Vietnamese government implemented land reforms to build-up support for the Communist government in the forthcoming free elections. Landlords were pilloried, imprisoned and executed, and their land distributed to the peasantry. A million refugees fled to the South. In addition, from 1960 onwards, guerrilla troops (the National Liberation Front) were trained in the North contrary to the Geneva agreements. These guerrillas, known as the Vietcong, terrorised villages and country districts in the South forcing them to support them with food, shelter, information and recruits. They were supplied by the North via a series of routes through the jungle and over the highlands of neighbouring Laos, known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.²



¹ Isaacs and Downing, Cold War, pp. 231-232.

² Ibid., pp. 235-236.



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- In the south, Ngo Dinh Diem established the Republic of Vietnam, having rigged a referendum which made him the president of the new republic. His principal sources of power were the United States, his family and Catholics, the latter hated by most of the southern Buddhist population because of their religion and northern origin. In 1957, he started a 'mopping up campaign', using emergency powers and vague definitions of espionage and treason to carry out arbitrary arrests of communists and non-communist alike. By then, Diem's state had become a quasi-police state and he had alienated all major sections of the South Vietnamese population – the intellectual elite were rendered politically mute, labour unions impotent, Buddhists distrustful and loyal opposition in the form of organised parties stifled out of existence.³

What were the Americans thinking?

The Truman Administration (1945-1953)

- The emerging superpower contest indirectly affected one power vacuum the Pacific War had left behind: the collapse of the European colonial authority in South and Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, the fact that it was Ho Chi Minh who led the nationalist resistance to the French meant that Washington's enthusiasm for self-determination quickly evaporated. In fact, when Ho declared Vietnamese independence in September 1945, pointedly quoting from the American Declaration of Independence, he received no encouragement from the country whose example he was emulating. The Truman administration on the contrary committed itself to restoring the pre-war position of the French in Indochina.⁴

³ Ibid., p. 236.

⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, p. 58. Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu*, pp. 62-66.



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- Cold War considerations now came into play. In no other region was national liberation as likely to bring social revolution. Ho Chi Minh was the only avowed Marxist dominating an anti-colonial movement with any prospect of immediate success. Vietnam acquired significance as a territory where the Truman administration now sought to design a strategy that would maintain support for nationalism without at the same time advancing the interests of Communism. Setting nationalism against Communism did not appear difficult at first. State Department officials even argued for cooperation with Communists in the Third World where they had nationalist aspirations. Ho Chi Minh himself had worked with the Office of Strategic Services during the war.⁵
- While Dean Acheson saw advantages by aligning the United States with nationalist movements to resist Communism, this was only his general position. Acheson took a very different view with respect to the situation in Indochina.⁶ Mao's impending victory in China enhanced Indochina's importance as a source of raw materials and potential markets, especially for an emerging Japanese economy cut off from the Asian mainland. Nor could events in Southeast Asia remain separate from those in Europe: a French collapse in Indochina would surely undermine morale in France and thereby weaken NATO. Security in Europe might yet require stability in the Third World.⁷ It makes little sense to seek consistency in Acheson's thinking: it only reflected the ambivalence afflicting the Truman administration at the time. Was it better to help the French suppress the Vietminh, thereby containing Communism while outraging nationalism, an outcome sure to generate future resentment against the United States in Southeast Asia and future opportunities for the Soviet Union and China? Or was it preferable to give the French no help at all, thereby ensuring another victory for Communism in Asia while at the same time humiliating a vital partner in the task of restoring stability to Europe?⁸
- The solution Acheson and his colleagues settled on turned out to be paradigmatic: Washington would support the French in their efforts to defeat Ho's insurgency while at the same time pushing them to prepare Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia for eventual independence. The idea therefore was to simultaneously bolster and reform colonial regimes there.⁹ In October 1949, Mao Zedong declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Under attack from the Republicans for having 'lost' China and fearing further Communist expansion in Asia, Acheson persuaded Truman to give more money to help French forces in Indochina. Washington's fears of a worldwide Communist offensive seemed justified when Ho (having failed to obtain American recognition in exchange for a promise of neutrality in the Cold War) persuaded China and the Soviet Union to recognise his Democratic Republic of Vietnam in January 1950.¹⁰ This allowed French officials to declare that their country was fighting a war for Containment, not for colonisation. Despite the history of Chinese-Vietnamese antagonism, Ho and the ICP decided to accept military and economic aid from Beijing as a means of achieving their immediate objective of defeating the French.¹¹
- In addition to seeing a strategic value in helping France in Vietnam in terms of preserving good relations within the European alliance and checking the spread of Chinese Communist influence in Asia, the United States also had economic reasons to aid France. Mainland Southeast Asia was not a significant market or source of raw materials for the United States, but it was important in those respects to America's allies Britain and France. Southeast Asia was also a natural economic partner for an industrialised Japan. With China a communist state, foreign policy analysts in the United States began to plan for the economic development

⁵ Ibid., p. 156. Secretary of State Dean Acheson told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in October 1949 that 'if we put ourselves sympathetically on the side of nationalism, which is the dominant spiritual force in Asia, we have put ourselves on the side of the thing which more than anything else can oppose Communism.'

⁶ In May 1949, Acheson cabled the American Consulate in Hanoi and stated "Question whether Ho as much nationalist as Commie is irrelevant, all Stalinists in colonial areas are nationalists."

⁷ Ibid., p. 157. David L. Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 17.

⁸ Ibid..

⁹ Ibid..

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 72. Stalin by this point of time was viewing Asia as opportune for the expansion of Communism and saw the situation in Vietnam, where Ho Chi Minh had been seeking Soviet and Chinese support for his war against the French as one of those opportunities. Gaddis, *We Now Know*, p. 159.

¹¹ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 18.



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of post-war Japan as a strategic and economic benefit. For France, Britain and Japan to be political allies and trading partners of the United States, preserving French interests in Indochina became part of the United States' global security planning. In the following month, the United States finally recognised the supposedly independent 'Associated State of Vietnam' that had been set up by the French in 1949.¹²

- Even before the Korean War, the Truman administration concluded that the French were invaluable allies against Communism in both Indochina and Europe, and therefore deserving of American assistance. Acheson and Truman were very conscious that France was important to the stability of the Western alliance in Europe and to NATO. When France linked Franco-American co-operation in Europe with American aid in Indochina, it served to confirm the American belief that they must become more involved in that region. In May 1950, Truman offered \$10 million to support the French military effort, and established a US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Saigon. Although at this stage there were only 15 American military officers in MAAG, by the end of 1950, the United States had given France \$100 million, along with military materiel. By now, makers of American foreign policy had firmly embraced the idea that the fall of Indochina to communism would lead rapidly to the collapse of other nations in Southeast Asia.¹³
- Despite the connections that US officials made between the hostilities in Asia and a worldwide Communist threat, they sought to keep American military role in Asia limited. The principal battleground of the Cold War remained in Europe, and the Truman administration did not want to commit resources to conflicts outside of continent. After the entry of China into the Korean War, American unwillingness to involve itself in a wider war in Asia increased. Attempts to persuade the French to give Bao Dai's government more autonomy to strengthen it politically and make it less reliant on external support failed. Despite the repeated losses in the field, the United States increased aid to France to sustain its war effort in Indochina. The Truman administration was trying to persuade Paris to support American defence plans for Western Europe, including possible rearmament of West Germany and the continued aid to the war in Indochina became hostage to that effort. As the war dragged on, it became increasingly controversial in France. Washington did not want the French to abandon its war against the Vietminh and present a situation where the United States might have to attempt military containment alone in Vietnam, while the war in Korea continued and defence of Europe remained paramount. By 1953, the level of US aid rose to a point when it was more than a third of the French war expenditures.¹⁴

What did the Chinese have to do with this?

- The contacts between the Chinese Communists and the Vietminh had always been more extensive than the Soviet Union. Ho himself had spent years in China and spoke Chinese easily; after Mao's victory, the Vietnamese and Chinese quickly exchanged emissaries. Vietnam was included in a speech announcing China's support for revolutionary movements elsewhere. The Chinese decided to provide military assistance to the Vietminh just as the United States was deciding to supply the French: both initiatives grew out of the Communists' victory in China. Ho Chi Minh formally requested Chinese help in April 1950, and that month, Mao authorised the despatch of military advisors to Vietnam.¹⁵
- Drawing on their experience against the Nationalists in China, Chinese advisors helped Ho and his chief strategist Vo Nguyen Giap, plan a successful fall offensive against the French which forced them away from the China-Vietnam border and allowed future military assistance to flow unimpeded. A French counter-offensive regained the initiative temporarily in early 1951 but the Chinese and Vietnamese worked out a defensive strategy of holding on until they were strong enough again to confront the French.

¹² Ibid..

¹³ By the early 1950s, the United States was spending \$1 billion annually on military assistance to France. Oliver Edwards, *The USA and the Cold War, 1945-1963*, p. 77.

¹⁴ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 19.

¹⁵ Gaddis, *We Now Know*, p. 161.



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- The end of the Korean War in 1953 affected the Indochina situation in a few ways. It allowed the Chinese to increase their military assistance to the Vietnamese; but the Americans did the same for the French. Cautious about provoking American military intervention, Mao nonetheless encouraged Ho to take the offensive in northwest Vietnam along the Laotian border. The French attempted to block this move by seizing the strategically located village of Dien Bien Phu in November 1953. Mao urged Ho to besiege Dien Bien Phu, promising all necessary military support.
- In the meantime, plans were already underway for an international conference on both Korea and Indochina. Well aware of the disagreements in Washington, London, and Paris over what to do with the later territory, the Chinese calculated that a humiliating French defeat would significantly weaken the West's negotiating position. Mao himself provided tactical advice to the Vietnamese, stressing – no doubt with the upcoming Geneva Conference in mind – that the final attack should begin ahead of schedule. In line with Mao's suggestions and with the promises of military assistance, the Vietminh launched the final assault on Dien Bien Phu on 5 May 1954. Two days later, the French surrendered. Once the contest shifted from the battlefield to the conference table, geopolitics began to override ideology in the thinking of the Chinese leadership. This made it necessary for Ho to settle for a lot less at Geneva than he and his comrades thought they had earned.¹⁶
- The Chinese had several reasons for wanting a compromise in Indochina. They hoped for recognition within the global community and the Geneva Conference would be their first appearance in international diplomacy and they were eager to make a good impression. The new French government was keen to cut its losses in Indochina. Mao and his close advisors also took seriously warnings Eisenhower and Dulles made about intervention and the Chinese repeatedly stressed the danger that a too obstinate Vietminh position might bring the Americans in. With these considerations in mind, Zhou Enlai and the Soviets persuaded the reluctant Vietminh to agree to the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Indochina – including their own in Laos and Cambodia as well as the 'temporary' partition of Vietnam along the 17th parallel.¹⁷

The Eisenhower Administration (1953-1961)

- By the end of 1953, a new strategy of containment emerged, entitled the 'New Look'. The objectives of containment remained fixed with its fundamental purpose to prevent the extension of Communism outside those areas where it was already established. The methods of containment employed by the Eisenhower administration were in many ways similar to those used under Truman. The United States continued to build a global web of anti-communist alliances designed to encircle the Soviet Union and check the spread of Communism. American military power remained an important tool of containment. American troops were now deployed around the globe to defend vulnerable areas such as West Berlin and South Korea or to be despatched quickly to a scene of Communist aggression from one of the United States' vast network of overseas bases. Huge sums in aid poured into states resisting Communist insurgency, one of which was the new Republic of Vietnam established after 1954.
- Even one of the potential differences between Truman's and Eisenhower's national security policies turned out to be a difference in tone rather than substance. In the 1952 presidential elections, John Foster Dulles criticised the passive posture of the Truman administration and promised 'rollback', which meant the liberation of eastern European countries under Soviet domination. While Eisenhower endorsed the objective of liberation, he emphasised that it must occur by only peaceful means. Yet in the event, the pledge of liberation proved to be only campaign rhetoric. Under Eisenhower, the United States acknowledged the Soviet sphere of influence and no attempt was made to recover territory occupied by the Communists. Rebellions in East Germany in 1953 and Poland and Hungary in 1956 were tacitly

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 162.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 163.



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encouraged by the Americans but not exploited as an opportunity to challenge the Soviet Union and force the withdrawal of those states from the eastern bloc.

- Nevertheless, there were significant differences between Truman's and Eisenhower's strategies of containment. The most important was the increased reliance on nuclear weapons. In the event of war with the Soviet Union, nuclear weapons were now to be regarded as a weapon of first and not last resort. Dulles labelled this approach the doctrine of massive retaliation. He had a clear view of how the nuclear arsenal of the United States could not only deter communist aggression but also further the goals of American diplomacy. The United States could threaten the use of nuclear weapons in order to extract concessions from communist adversaries. The fact that the Soviet Union now possessed nuclear weapons of its own made this a dangerous tactic.¹⁸
- The central place of nuclear weapons presupposed a smaller role for conventional weapons. Eisenhower was determined to cut the number of personnel in the armed forces and in this sense, the New Look rejected the conclusions of NSC 68 which had envisaged a build-up of conventional and nuclear forces. As a soldier, Eisenhower was keenly aware of the relationship between the means and end in any conflict. While he was committed to victory in the Cold War, Eisenhower wanted to achieve it at a price the United States could afford. The expansion of the nuclear arsenal over the continued increase in conventional forces was seen as the cheaper and more effective approach to containing Communism.
- Another area where Eisenhower differed from Truman could be seen in the area of covert operations. Truman had used them selectively, but Eisenhower was more willing to authorise such actions. He was familiar with intelligence operations from his time in the military and often referred to the importance of intelligence as a basis for decision-making. The fact that the Director of the CIA, Allen Dulles, was the brother of the Secretary of State made for a closer relationship between the CIA and the executive than had existed under Truman. The frequency and scale of CIA operations grew and Eisenhower regarded undercover action as a routine instrument of foreign policy. Covert actions also had the advantage of being quick, cheap and beyond the scrutiny of Congress.
- Eisenhower also considered negotiation both with the Soviet Union and China as part of the policy of containment. He believed in personal diplomacy and was gloomy about the future course of the Cold War unless leaders took personal initiative to reduce tensions. In 1955, there was a summit between the United States and the Soviet Union, and a further meeting between Eisenhower and Khrushchev in 1959. In 1954, Dulles met Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai to discuss the situation in Vietnam. Negotiations at ambassadorial level continued between the United States and China intermittently for the rest of Eisenhower's presidency. Under Truman, diplomacy of this kind would be unthinkable.¹⁹
- Between 1953 and 1963, US policy towards Vietnam moved from a measured containment approach to an avowed commitment to the survival of the Republic of Vietnam in the south as a global strategic imperative.²⁰ While the Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded that 'Indochina is devoid of decisive military objectives'. Eisenhower reasoned however that if Indochina were to fall, all of Southeast Asia would 'go over very quickly' to the Communists, like 'a row of dominoes' and added that 'the possible consequences of the loss are just as incalculable to free world'. In his first address to Congress, Eisenhower characterised the war against the Vietminh as holding 'the line of freedom' against 'Communist aggression throughout the world'.²¹

¹⁸ This was part of the premise to find the most economical ways to protect American security to get 'more bang for buck' through the use of nuclear weapons to deter aggression.

¹⁹ Oliver Edwards, *The USA and the Cold War*, pp. 86-89.

²⁰ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 20.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.



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- Eisenhower and his aides were as opposed as Truman to the French objective of restoring colonial rule to Indochina but the containment strategy still required the United States to support France. His Secretary of State John Foster Dulles privately explained to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the current division within the world left no alternative but to accept continued French presence in Indochina to prevent Soviet and Chinese gains in Southeast Asia. Dulles at this point was also trying to secure French support for the European Defense Community, which would strengthen NATO's position by rearming West Germany. Such a move was politically sensitive in France, and American aid to Indochina was viewed as part of the inducement to gain Paris's acceptance of the EDC. In addition, a new commander General Henri Navarre was appointed for the French Expeditionary Corps. Navarre presented plans to increase the size of the Vietnamese National Army of the State of Vietnam, give more independence to the states of the French Union, and to be more aggressive in fighting the Vietminh. To support Navarre's plans and buttress talks over the EDC, the United States now increased military assistance nearing almost 80 per cent of France's military expenditures in Indochina by early 1954.²²
- By 1954, French public and official opinion was turning against the war in Vietnam. Against the wishes of Washington, the French accepted a Soviet proposal for an international conference at Geneva to seek possible diplomatic settlements in Korea and Indochina. Scheduled to begin in April 1954, the Geneva Conference would include representatives from France, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the United States, the United Kingdom, Soviet Union and China. Dulles was opposed to the idea of compromise with the Communists but believed that to oppose this meeting could result in a unilateral French withdrawal from the war.²³
- In March, the Vietminh launched their assault on the French fortified position at Dien Bien Phu. Cut off from resupply and reinforcement, a French military disaster appeared likely. A request was sent to Washington for an air strike on the Vietminh and Eisenhower considered supporting the French at Dien Bien Phu with American airpower. However, having been elected to end the war in Korea, he was reluctant to involve the country in another conflict in Asia.²⁴ On 7 May, the French garrison finally surrendered and this set the stage for the signing of a ceasefire agreement between the French and Vietminh at Geneva at July. Behind the scenes, Eisenhower and Dulles worked to arrange a political and diplomatic foundation for intervention. Dulles met with congressional leaders, who preferred multilateral action. Eisenhower wrote to Churchill seeking joint action, but the British preferred to wait for developments at Geneva.²⁵
- Following Dien Bien Phu, it became likely that France would accept a compromise settlement at Geneva. Not wanting to be party to any agreement recognising the legitimacy of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the United States chose to observe the Geneva proceedings and not actively engage in arranging terms. The United States maintained a presence there, however, because it was unwilling to take a unilateral course in the region. With Britain, the Soviet Union and China urging both sides to reach a compromise, France and the Vietminh agreed to a ceasefire with the DRV controlling the area north of the seventeenth parallel, and France regrouping the FEC south of that line. This military disengagement plan created a temporary partition between North and South Vietnam. A separate, unsigned declaration issued at the end of the conference in July emphasised that the military demarcation line was not a political and territorial boundary. The Geneva Accords did not resolve the issue of governing authority within Vietnam and called for 'free general elections' throughout Vietnam in July 1956 to determine the future political structure of the nation. The United States issued a statement acknowledging but not endorsing these terms.²⁶

²² Ibid., pp. 22-23.

²³ Ibid..

²⁴ Gaddis, *We Now Know*, pp. 233-235.

²⁵ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 25.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 25-26.



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- The United States did not sign the Geneva Accords but promised not to break the agreements by the use of force. It sought to build up South Vietnam as a stable non-communist state capable of resisting Communist subversion from the north. The Americans wanted South Vietnam to develop along the lines of a second South Korea. A South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) was established in September 1954. Its members were the United States, France, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan. Modelled after NATO, SEATO's purpose was to prevent Communist interference in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. In reality, the organisation was a pale imitation of NATO. Two of the region's major powers, India and Indonesia, refused to join. The circumstances under which military force would be used by its members against an aggressor were also unclear. Dulles however was satisfied with the treaty and described it as a 'no trespassing' sign to deter communist aggressors, and Eisenhower and future presidents invoked SEATO as their authority for American intervention in Southeast Asian affairs.²⁷



- In order to help sustain the State of Vietnam south of the demarcation line, Eisenhower despatched General J. Lawton Collins to Saigon in November 1954. The principal challenge he faced was to identify and sustain a local leader who could compete with Ho Chi Minh and around him a regime friendly to Western interests could be built. In June 1954, while the Geneva Conference was underway, Emperor Bao Dai had appointed Ngo Dinh Diem as prime minister. This was the government which would have to face the Vietminh in the 1956 elections. The Vietminh had enormous political appeal after Dien Bien Phu and the diplomatic recognition the DRV received at Geneva. The new Diem administration was unproven and Bao Dai had the image of being a French puppet.²⁸
- Collins arrived in Saigon with specific instructions from Eisenhower to make a judgment on Diem's ability to provide the alternative Washington desired to contest the communist-led DRV. Weeks earlier, CIA Director Allen Dulles sent his own representative Colonel Edward G. Lansdale to Saigon to work with Diem. Lansdale maintained that what Diem needed was unqualified American backing and not criticism, Collins reported that Diem was incapable of providing the strong leadership that South Vietnam needed. Having visited Vietnam and gained a favourable impression of Diem and having received Lansdale's positive reports on Diem's potential, Secretary of State Dulles however was unprepared for Collin's negative assessment.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 27-28.



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- In April 1955, Collins returned from Saigon and met with State Department officials to determine the US position towards Diem. The general stood firm on his recommendations to broaden the South Vietnamese government to include other patriotic Vietnamese who opposed the Communists. From these meetings came a formal decision for 'some change in political arrangements in Viet-Nam'. Before this policy could be implemented, fighting broke out in Saigon on 28 April between various religious sects in the south together gangs controlling the vice trade and the Vietnamese National Army. Collin's return to Saigon coincided with the quelling of the disturbances. Dulles's Asian advisors persuaded him to reverse the earlier decision and make Diem the basis of American policy in Vietnam. Eisenhower's decision to continue working with Diem as the best hope of sustaining a regime in South Vietnam led to growing strains with the French. Eventually, Paris withdrew the FEC from the country and left the building of a nation in South Vietnam to the Americans.²⁹
- Given time, the Diem government could seek to reform its weak leadership structure and lack of a popular political base, but the Geneva Accords had set July 1956 as the date for elections. A genuinely free election would undoubtedly result in the victory for Ho Chi Minh as the president of a unified Vietnam, a prospect neither Saigon nor Washington wanted. The diplomats at Geneva had not proposed a specific voting process or even ballot for 1956. There was no possibility that the two sides would even cooperate on fashioning an election, and none of the major Geneva participants pressed for a vote. With no plans for an election by the summer of 1955, Diem surprised Washington in October by announcing and winning a referendum that deposed Bao Dai and made him the president of a newly created Republic of Vietnam (RVN). Through manipulation of the ballot, Diem and his American supporters now cited the election as the basis for the nation's new authority.³⁰
- Despite the repressive nature of the Diem regime, Washington continued providing material aid to the RVN. During the second half of the 1950s, almost a quarter of a billion dollars per year went to South Vietnam, with the bulk of it going to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). A military mission was set up in South Vietnam to advise the South Vietnamese on methods of resisting infiltration from the north. This was the beginning of the United States' commitment to the defence of South Vietnam. Even then, the number of uniformed American advisors never exceeded 900 before 1961. On the other hand, American funds paid for 85 per cent of the cost of maintaining the 150 000 strong South Vietnamese military.³¹
- As American foreign aid budgets shrank during Eisenhower's second term, the Diem regime also faced growing difficulties. Saigon's attempts to suppress opposition led to growing incidents of terrorism and anti-government violence in retaliation. Although Hanoi ordered its cadres in the south to avoid force and deploy propaganda and political recruiting to organise resistance to Diem's rule out of fear of inviting American intervention, they now faced growing reprisals from the government. American and South Vietnamese officials now clashed over how to use the American aid. The latter, headed by Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, insisted that available resources go almost entirely towards military assistance. The American ambassador at Saigon Elbridge Dubrow countered this, suggesting that the root of the problem laid in building popular support for the Diem regime and that military supplies be withheld from Saigon to force it into implementing reform. In the end, Dubrow's recommendations were rejected and military aid continued to flow to South Vietnam.³²
- In Hanoi, a decision was reached in January 1959 to pass a resolution accepting 'protracted armed struggle' against the US-Diem regime. In May, a system of trails to transport troops, weapons and supplies from the north through Laos into the central highlands of South Vietnam was begun. The Vietcong now began organising itself and launched guerrilla warfare against the Diem regime. In December 1960, they formed a

²⁹ Ibid., p. 30.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 31.

³¹ Ibid., p. 32.

³² Ibid., p. 34.



political arm, the National Liberation Front (NLF). They were supported by the local population and the North.³³ By the beginning of the 1960s, the South Vietnamese government had become an embarrassment to the Americans – and a target for renewed insurgency from North Vietnam. Aware that American credibility was on the line, Diem warned that his regime might collapse if the Americans did not increase their support for it.³⁴

- On the eve of his inauguration in January 1961, John F. Kennedy and a team of senior advisors met with President Eisenhower for a briefing on the issues facing the new administration. While accounts differ on the advice Kennedy was given, all present remember Eisenhower warning him about the dangers of Southeast Asia falling under Communism. While Eisenhower did not specifically point to Vietnam, he characterised Laos as 'the present key' to Southeast Asia. At that point of time, the United States and Soviet Union were supplying competing sides in the civil war in Laos. Eisenhower left Kennedy a policy of unequivocal support for the Diem regime and had kept the domino from falling, but had not produced a self-sustaining nation in the south. Even worse from the American perspective was the threat posed by the NLF presented the possible collapse of Washington's eight-year commitment to Vietnam if the level and substance of its assistance remained the same.³⁵

The Kennedy Administration (1961-1963)

- The strategy of containment under Kennedy was called 'flexible response'. Its key elements were an increase in conventional forces, the enlargement of the nuclear arsenal, economic aid, covert action and negotiations with the Soviet Union. Its purpose was to expand the available means of countering Communism. This versatile strategy rested on the premise that the Communist threat was more diverse than before. The United States must have the capacity both to fight a limited conventional war in Europe or Asia and to retaliate against a nuclear strike by the Soviet Union. At the same time, it must have the means to combat revolutionary movements in the Third World backed by China and the Soviet Union. Khrushchev had committed the Soviet Union to wars of national liberation, and flexible response was a reaction to the new strategy of the Communist powers and the expansion of the Cold War into new areas in the world. It also marked a deliberate departure from Eisenhower's policy of deterring Communism with the threat of nuclear retaliation.³⁶
- A strategy of containment based on enlarging both conventional and nuclear forces was obviously costly, but this was made possible by the economic policies pursued by Kennedy. Eisenhower's economic policy revolved around balanced budgets and tight control of government expenditure. Kennedy on the other hand pursued an expansionist economic policy based on higher levels of federal expenditure and budget deficits. The new administration embraced the idea that defence expenditure would stimulate output, employment and consumption and benefit the overall economy. Military expenditure expanded by 13 per cent under Kennedy. The defence budget rose from \$47.4 billion to \$53.6 billion between 1961 and 1964.
- There were clear differences between Eisenhower's and Kennedy's conceptions of containment. The New Look had emphasised nuclear weapons at the expense of conventional forces; flexible response committed the United States both to continued modernisation and expansion of its nuclear arsenal and to strengthening its conventional capabilities. The cuts in conventional forces were reversed by Kennedy. The number of combat ready divisions rose from 11 to 16 and the armed forces grew in size from 2.5 million in 1960 to 2.7 million men in 1964. This growth also included an increase in the number of soldiers trained in counter-insurgency warfare – so called 'special forces' such as the Green Berets. These could now be deployed to fight against communist-backed guerrilla forces in the Third World.

³³ Edwards, *The USA and the Cold War*, pp. 95-96.

³⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, p. 132.

³⁵ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, pp. 35-36.

³⁶ Edwards, *The USA and the Cold War*, p. 117.



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- Kennedy also attached greater importance than Eisenhower to economic aid as an instrument of containment. In his inaugural address, Kennedy made it clear that economic assistance to new nations was based on a mixture of idealism and a self-interested attempt to minimise communist influence. The United States wanted to offer a model of political and economic development to emerging nations which was different from Communism. Eisenhower's administration merely tackled the symptoms but not the causes of Communism. Kennedy sought to remove the conditions which spawned Communism. A Peace Corps of volunteers was formed to work on health, educational and agricultural projects in the Third World, and an Agency for International Development targeted overseas aid at developing countries.³⁷
- There were continuities in the policies of containment. While no purported missile gap existed, Kennedy continued the accumulation of nuclear missiles to preserve American strategic superiority. Ten new Polaris submarines were built, bringing the total to 29, and 400 additional Minuteman missiles were constructed, taking the total to 800. Kennedy also announced the Apollo space programme in 1961, seeking not only to maintain the advantage over the Soviets in terms of the quantity and quality of its nuclear arsenal but also in the exploration of outer space.
- Covert actions were also important aspect of containment under Kennedy, especially in Cuba. However, there were signs of willingness to negotiate with the Soviets. Even though there were moments of crisis in bilateral relations, bilateral diplomacy continued and agreements were reached on specific issues. There was however no comparable negotiations with Communist China. Important pressure groups in the United States still opposed the recognition of the People's Republic, while policy-makers also worried about the growth of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia, particularly its aid to North Vietnam. The Chinese also showed little interest in improving ties with the Americans.³⁸
- Kennedy's administration saw the Communist threat as monolithic. It saw the Vietnamese movement as closely related to guerrilla insurgencies in Malaya, Indonesia, Burma and the Philippines in the 1950s and failed to recognise the nationalist component in many of these struggles. While cognisant of the domino theory, the new administration however still disagreed over how to deal with Vietnam. Nonetheless, the administration was convinced that Vietnam was part of a larger struggle between the communist powers and the United States for hegemony in Southeast Asia. In this sense, Vietnam was truly a Cold War issue.³⁹
- In the meantime, Communist infiltration of South Vietnam grew. Kennedy's policy in Vietnam differed from Eisenhower's only in degree. Economic aid to South Vietnam and military advisors were increased. Kennedy wanted to reconcile the twin objectives of saving South Vietnam from Communism and avoiding entanglement in a limited war like the one in Korea. In October 1961, Kennedy sent Deputy Security Advisor Walt Rostow and General Maxwell Taylor to Vietnam to assess the situation. Their report suggested deploying 8000 soldiers in the guise of a flood relief team. Kennedy refused to introduce combat forces into Vietnam, but agreed to a modest increase in the number of military advisors to train the South Vietnamese in counter-insurgency. As this was expressly prohibited under the Geneva Accords, this was done covertly. In November 1961, the National Security Council agreed to a stronger commitment to save South Vietnam so long as Diem would accept the need for reforms and broaden the base of his government. By the end of the year, there were about three thousand military personnel in Vietnam.⁴⁰ In order to provide an effective command structure for this mounting military effort, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) was created. American economic and military aid to Saigon tripled.⁴¹

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 118-119.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 119.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 121.

⁴⁰ Isaacs and Downing, Cold War, p. 238. In May 1961, Kennedy authorised a personnel ceiling of 200 000 for the South Vietnamese military and an expansion of local self-defence forces.

⁴¹ Anderson, The Vietnam War, p. 38.



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- The response to the growing penetration of the countryside by the Vietcong was threefold. Kennedy increased the number of military advisors, authorised counter-insurgency operations against the communist guerrillas, and pressed Diem to enact reforms. Vietnam became a testing ground for flexible response but the strategy ultimately failed.⁴² The situation in Southeast Asia deteriorated throughout 1962. Secretary of Defense McNamara put in place his comprehensive plan for South Vietnam. He argued if American policy was to train South Vietnamese to defend themselves, then this should have a time limit. If this objective was met within this time frame, the programme could be reduced; if not, an alternative policy would be required. Military presence in Vietnam continued to increase. By the end of the year, with American pilots already flying combat missions, there were nearly 11 500 American military personnel in South Vietnam.⁴³
- In the meantime, Diem's rule over South Vietnam came under growing American scrutiny. His policy of religious intolerance had alienated the Buddhist population. Washington was divided over Diem. Many senior officials still saw him as preferable to other alternatives; what was lacking was sufficient pressure on him to change his policies. Others wanted him removed; it would be impossible to win the war with Diem and his family in control. As news of a renewed crackdown on Buddhists reached Washington in August 1963, Roger Hilsman, the assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs who was in the anti-Diem faction now seized the initiative. He cabled the new ambassador in Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., who interpreted it as an order from Kennedy to organise a coup and called on the CIA station in Saigon to make preparations.⁴⁴
- Differences came to a head at meetings assessing the situation the following week. Kennedy sent a cable to Lodge where he reserved "a contingent right to change course and reverse previous instructions" up to "the very moment of the go signal" for a coup. To assess the situation in Saigon, Kennedy sent McNamara and General Taylor on a personal mission. Diem's intransigence sealed his fate. As a sign of American willingness to disengage, Washington announced it would withdraw a thousand military advisors by the end of 1963.⁴⁵ On 1 November 1963, South Vietnamese rebel generals surrounded the presidential palace and forced the resignation of Diem the following day. Rounded up with his brother Nhu, Diem were assassinated. Within three weeks, Kennedy would be assassinated in Dallas on 22 November 1963.
- While there is evidence to suggest that Kennedy would have withdrawn the United States from the conflict if he had lived, his actual decisions between January 1961 and November 1963 however give him significant responsibility for further Americanising and militarising the conflict with the North Vietnamese and NLF. As long as he lived, Kennedy maintained that the security of South Vietnam was vital to the security of the United States. By the time he died, over 16 000 American advisors were in Vietnam and over 100 Americans had been killed.⁴⁶

The Johnson Administration (1963-1969)

- Kennedy was succeeded by his Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson. The new president was convinced that behind the conflict in Vietnam laid Soviet and Chinese plans for hegemony in Asia. In his first meeting with his senior advisors, he told them that he had 'serious misgivings' but he was 'not going to lose Vietnam'. In the next two years that followed, he made a series of decisions which escalated American involvement in Vietnam into a major war with the DRV, and then he continued to expand the size of that American

⁴² Edwards, *The USA and the Cold War*, p. 122.

⁴³ Isaacs and Downing, *Cold War*, pp. 238-239. At the end of 1963, there were 16 000 military advisors in Vietnam.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁴⁵ This was part of the Taylor-McNamara report that became known as National Security Action Memorandum (NSM) 263.

⁴⁶ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 40.



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intervention for two more years. The Vietnam War became the American war in Vietnam and it became Lyndon Johnson's war.⁴⁷

- From the outset, Johnson was virtually obsessed with the credibility of American commitment to South Vietnam. In November 1963, Johnson approved National Security Action Memorandum No. 273 that restated the American pledge to assist the South Vietnamese against the Communist north.⁴⁸ Johnson wanted a limited war and he constantly asked his advisors how much aid was enough. Invariably, they recommended increases as conditions within South Vietnam deteriorated. By the end of 1963, there were 20 000 US military personnel in Vietnam. After the coup against Diem, governments came and went in Saigon, and high level delegations were sent to Vietnam. General Curtis LeMay proposed bombing bases in North Vietnam and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Joint Chiefs of Staff considered using tactical nuclear weapons to hold the enemy at bay. Plans were made for bombing and blockading the North.
- By the spring of 1964, vast areas of South Vietnam were under National Liberation Front (NLF) control and the infiltration of men and materiel from the North had grown. Simply assisting the South against the North was no longer enough. In May 1964, the CIA concluded that the situation would become untenable by the end of the year if the tide did not turn. In June, Johnson sent one of the most accomplished military officers General William C. Westmoreland to head the MACV. One of his first requests was for more American military personnel to help the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (AVRN).⁴⁹
- Senior advisors whom Johnson retained from the Kennedy administration were convinced that Hanoi, and not the NLF, was the true enemy. Pressure on the DRV, they reasoned, would strengthen the South, but such coercion had to be covert because hostilities against the DRV could not be carried out without provocation. Throughout the spring and summer of 1964, the United States secretly gathered intelligence, spread propaganda, and supported increased South Vietnamese commando raids on the coast of North Vietnam as part of a covert operation codenamed OPLAN 34A. Hanoi was unimpressed and the Pentagon now began making contingency plans for air strikes against the North a possible next step.⁵⁰
- The pretext for Johnson to launch selective bombing of the North came in early August. On 2 August, the destroyer USS Maddox came under fire from North Vietnamese patrol boats while conducting surveillance in the Gulf of Tonkin. Two days later when subsequent attacks were reported, Washington responded with outrage at what it considered to be unprovoked aggression. The reality was that the second encounter did not take place as follow-up reports from the gulf cautioned that poor visibility and other factor raised doubts that a second attack even occurred. After reviewing many messages, the commander in chief of US Pacific forces concluded that an attack on the destroyers had been carried out. The Joint Chiefs of Staff immediately urged Johnson to launch retaliatory air strikes against DRV naval facilities. Johnson now ordered the bombing of North Vietnamese bases as retaliation and sought Congressional approval for a resolution that would authorise him to take 'all necessary measures' to defend US or allied forces and to 'prevent further aggression'. The proposed resolution would also enable the president to determine when 'peace and security' in the area had been achieved. On 7 August, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was passed in the Senate by 88-2 and in the House of Representatives by 416-0. This became the legal authority for the massive American effort that emerged in Vietnam. In the subsequent presidential election Johnson secured a mandate to build his 'Great Society' and take a tougher stance against Communism in Southeast Asia. By the end of 1964, there were 23 000 US military personnel in Vietnam.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 41.

⁴⁸ Johnson instructed Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. in Saigon to give South Vietnam's leaders his promise that the United States 'intends to stand by our word'.

⁴⁹ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 43.

⁵⁰ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States in Vietnam, 1950-1975*, pp. 138-141.

⁵¹ Isaacs and Downing, *The Cold War*, pp. 243-245. While Johnson may have believed he had a real incident, he was still guilty of a serious deception. Without revealing OPLAN 34A, Johnson informed Congress that Hanoi was guilty of making unprovoked attacks on US ships on the high seas.



- In August, Johnson wanted to keep the war limited, knowing that further involvement in the war would become an unpopular cause. In fact, Johnson denied throughout the 1964 presidential campaign any intention to escalate the war, deliberating allowing his opponent Barry Goldwater to endorse that course of action. After his election victory, Johnson authorised the escalation he had promised not to undertake, apparently in the belief he could win the war quickly before public opinion could turn against it.⁵² Having crossed the bombing threshold in August, many of Johnson's advisors recommended the use of more American air power, a point opposed by Under-Secretary of State George Ball. The fact that the Soviet Union and China might challenge American position elsewhere if Washington did nothing, Johnson approved a top secret plan that included the bombing of North Vietnam and the likelihood of sending US ground forces to South Vietnam.⁵³
- Johnson did not rush to implement this policy since he had pledged restraint in Vietnam during the election campaign. In the first half of 1965 however, he made a series of fateful decisions to Americanise the war against the DRV and the NLF. This took two forms: sustained and gradually increasing US air bombardment of targets in North and South Vietnam, and the deployment of entire combat divisions with supporting elements to South Vietnam. The bombing tonnage eventually exceeded that of World War II and US troops in South Vietnam surpassed the half-a-million mark by 1968.⁵⁴
- By now, the relationship between Beijing and Moscow had already deteriorated. Mao had not readily accepted Khrushchev's leadership of the Communist bloc. After he was removed from the party leadership, Leonid Brezhnev and Aleksei Kosygin replaced him.⁵⁵ Sino-Soviet tensions led to competition between them to supply Hanoi with aid and military assistance. In February 1965, Kosygin visited Hanoi. He was ready to provide the North with more military aid provided Hanoi would follow the Moscow line and not Beijing's. He also failed to persuade Ho Chi Minh to consider opening negotiations with the United States.⁵⁶
- With military assistance from Moscow and Beijing, the Vietcong was able to increase their infiltration of the South.⁵⁷ By now, their numbers had swelled to 170 000 and could launch attacks almost at will. In February 1965, an attack on the American air base at Pleiku in the Central Highlands led Washington to authorise sustained retaliation against Hanoi. In March, in an operation codenamed Rolling Thunder, the bombing of North Vietnam began. For the next eight years, high explosives, napalm and cluster bombs and herbicides rained down on the North but failed to force Hanoi to the negotiating table.⁵⁸ During the first year of Rolling Thunder, there were 25 000 sorties flown against North Vietnam. In 1966, the figure reached 79 000. In 1967, it reached 108 000 delivering nearly 250 000 tons of explosives. Even from the outset, American strategists debated the effectiveness of airpower in defeating an insurgency in a predominantly agricultural country as the Vietcong continued to inflict heavy casualties on the AVRN. The political situation in Saigon deteriorated, with 5 governments taking over since Diem's assassination.⁵⁹
- By now, the United States was well down the slippery slope towards full-scale war in Vietnam. General William C. Westmoreland, the field commander in Saigon, asked for reinforcements to protect the bases

⁵² Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, pp. 168-169.

⁵³ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 45.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

⁵⁵ Leonid Brezhnev was the first secretary of the Communist Party and Kosygin the premier. This was the phase of Soviet collective leadership after the removal of Nikita Khrushchev.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 246-247.

⁵⁷ The Soviet Union took a cautious approach to the DRV's decision to support the armed insurrection in South Vietnam. While not eager to risk confrontation with the United States over Vietnam, Moscow also knew that ignoring Hanoi's needs would erode their political credibility with other communist states. The Soviet Union became the principal supplier of industrial and telecommunication equipment, trucks, medical supplies, machine tools and iron ore. They also supplied surface-to-air missiles, fighter planes, anti-aircraft artillery, radar and military advisors to use these modern weapons. Beijing sent over 320 000 engineering troops and anti-aircraft artillery forces to North Vietnam in the four years after 1965. These troops freed the North Vietnamese army for service in the south and kept the supply lines functioning despite the air war.

⁵⁸ One of the most pernicious was the chemical defoliant known as Agent Orange, which contained amounts of a highly toxic dioxin. Tests revealed that South Vietnamese had blood levels of dioxin three times that of US citizens.

⁵⁹ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 46.



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from which the air raids were carried out. Although General Taylor, by now the US ambassador to Saigon objected, Johnson overruled him and on 8 March 1965, the first US ground troops, 3500 marines landed at Da Nang. In April, a further increase in troop deployments was authorised and American troops were now permitted to patrol the countryside to seek out and kill the Vietcong. Johnson continued to conceal the escalation of the war from the nation even though this was increasingly evident. Such developments was to create a credibility gap from which the president never recovered.⁶⁰

- The war did not end quickly, instead it escalated with no end in sight. Johnson knew the prospects were grim but he could not bring himself to explain this openly. His reasons went beyond his personal political fortunes. He had presided, by mid-1965, over the greatest wave of domestic reform legislation since the New Deal, and there was more to be done. The dilemma was thus a cruel one. American interests in the Cold War, Johnson believed, required that the United States persist in Vietnam until it prevailed. However, he was also convinced that he could not reveal what it would take to win without sacrificing the Great Society. The nation could not sacrifice major expenditures for both 'guns' and 'butter', so Johnson sacrificed public trust instead.⁶¹
- In June 1965, the civilian government in Saigon disintegrated and General Nguyen Van Thieu became head of state. Westmoreland asked for more troops on the ground. McNamara and Rusk supported the request and for the president, the choice was clear: full-scale war or humiliating American retreat.⁶² On 28 July, Johnson told a press conference that 'we will stand in Vietnam'. In November, the first confrontation between US and Communist forces took place in the Ia Drang Valley in the Central Highlands.⁶³ Both sides claimed victory but the administration failed to realise that American public opinion would not tolerate such losses for long, while the Vietnamese could sustain losses for an indefinite period. They were willing to pay a higher price for victory. The battle convinced Westmoreland that search and destroy tactics using air mobility would accomplish the attrition strategy. Johnson ordered a halt to the bombing during Christmas in a bid to encourage the North to negotiate; it failed and the bombing resumed in January 1966. By the end of the year, there were 183 000 American troops in Vietnam.⁶⁴ By June 1966, US troop levels in South Vietnam stood at 267 500, reaching 385 000 at the end of the year, with 7 combat divisions and specialised units. The AVRN also expanded to 11 divisions with American aid.⁶⁵
- Westmoreland's strategy set these priorities: first, to defend US bases along the South Vietnamese coast and in Saigon; second, to conduct search and destroy missions to find and eliminate the Vietcong; third, to mop up the remaining Communists to achieve final victory. Continued bombing of the North would then force Hanoi into submission and sap its will to fight in the South. The Americans also encouraged Saigon to control the countryside by winning the hearts and minds of the peasantry. None of these worked. During 1967, the bombing of the North increased by 50 per cent. Yet, the North Vietnamese were continually able to maintain their supply routes to the South through the Ho Chi Minh Trail and match every increase in military effort by the United States.⁶⁶
- The protest movement in the United States against the Vietnam War had no single organisation or source. It was a spontaneous and ad-hoc collection of various pacifists, ideological anti-imperialists, and peace liberals acting individually or in separate groups. It eventually came to include thousands engaged in

⁶⁰ Isaacs and Downing, *The Cold War*, pp. 248-249.

⁶¹ Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, p. 169.

⁶² Among his senior advisors, George Ball warned of a credibility trap. He predicted that 'our involvement will be so great that we cannot – without national humiliation – stop short of achieving our complete objectives.'

⁶³ The Americans suffered 300 casualties while the North Vietnamese lost more than 2000 soldiers.

⁶⁴ Isaacs and Downing, *The Cold War*, p. 250.

⁶⁵ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 52.

⁶⁶ Isaacs and Downing, *The Cold War*, pp. 253-254. In January 1967, Westmoreland assigned the AVRN primarily to occupation, pacification and security duties in populated areas. This freed large US combat formations to sweep rural areas. Operations Cedar Falls and Junction City were set in motion in an area known as the Iron Triangle, north and west of Saigon. MACV declared vast areas 'free-strike zones' which meant US and AVRN artillery and tactical aircraft, as well as B-52 carpet bombing, could target anyone or anything in the area.



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various activities, including political campaigns, petition drives, lobbying of legislators, street demonstrations, draft resistance and occasional acts of violence.⁶⁷ The anti-war movement in the United States got going with demonstrations in more than 90 cities, including Washington, where 80 000 protestors marched. Johnson's extension of the draft caused the protest to grow, bringing university students directly into the war, and the campuses began to erupt in a rash of draft card burnings. Over the next few years, anti-war slogans echoed around campuses and cities across the United States, and directly outside the White House and the Pentagon. Even though casualties began to mount, the majority of the population still supported the war effort.⁶⁸

- As the war escalated, various peace initiatives were considered. McNamara persuaded Johnson to prolong the Christmas halt on bombing the North in December 1965 and diplomatic exchanges took place for a month. Disagreement over the role of the Vietcong in ending the war led to a resumption of the bombing. Hanoi then broke off discussions. In 1966, the Poles began secret talks with the Americans and with the North Vietnamese in an exercise code-named Marigold. The Soviets got involved for the first time, but renewed bombing of Hanoi led to failure in the talks. In February 1967, Johnson appealed directly to Ho Chi Minh, offering to stop bombing the North in return for the Communists stopping their infiltration of the South. Ho insisted that the United States must unconditionally halt the bombing and 'all other acts of war' against the North before talks could begin. Efforts to establish a basis for negotiations throughout the year failed. A major obstacle was that the United States did not always integrate diplomatic and military action; diplomacy was often undermined by military activity at a critical moment. When Johnson met Kosygin in June 1967, the United States agreed to suspend the bombing so long as negotiations began immediately and neither side's forces made any advances. This was met with silence from Hanoi.⁶⁹
- Back home, protest against the war intensified. In October 1967, between 50 000 and 100 000 protestors marched against it in Washington. Johnson postponed choosing between the Great Society and the Vietnam War as far as possible. He also had the belief that the most affluent society in the world could afford to spend whatever was required to ensure security abroad and equity at home, whatever the public or Congress thought. This economic argument failed to consider whether Americans could sustain their morale as the human costs of the war rose while prospects of victory faded.⁷⁰ By the end of the war, the United States was spending \$20 billion a year on the war, generating an annual balance of payments deficit of \$7 billion. Troop presence in Vietnam reached 485 000.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 62.

⁶⁸ Isaacs and Downing, *The Cold War*, p. 285.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

⁷⁰ Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, p. 170.

⁷¹ Isaacs and Downing, *The Cold War*, p. 256.



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- By the beginning of 1968, several hundred American troops were killed in action each week. In January 1968, the Vietcong launched simultaneous attacks in more than one hundred cities; it was their most spectacular offensive yet. In Saigon, a commando unit penetrated the US embassy compound. The Tet Offensive stunned American and public opinion worldwide. While it was intended to inspire a popular uprising in the South, the Tet Offensive failed in this. However, in propaganda terms, it was a magnificent victory. Now the Vietcong had shown they could attack at will and strike at the very centre of American presence in South Vietnam.⁷² In the United States, many Americans concluded that Tet was a defeat or at least a reality check. Having heard assurances of progress from Johnson the previous November, citizens interpreted the stunning magnitude of the offensive as evidence that the end of the war was not near. After Tet, more Americans simply wanted the United States out of Vietnam.⁷³



⁷² Ibid., pp. 255-256. When the fighting ended, the Communists suffered 45 000 casualties and the Vietcong's combat strength was so decimated that the North Vietnamese had to take over most of the ground operations against the Americans and the AVRN for the remainder of the war.

⁷³ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 68.



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- Johnson was now increasingly isolated. Support for his handling of the war plunged to an all-time low. Eighty per cent of Americans felt that the United States was making no progress in the war.⁷⁴ McNamara left the Pentagon in February 1967. The new Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, opposed General Westmoreland's latest request for another 200 000 troops, arguing that there soon would be more requests with no end in sight. He suggested pegging the level at 20 000, which the president accepted. In March 1968, the civilians among Johnson's senior advisors were openly critical of the assessments presented by the military. On 31 March, Johnson addressed the nation on television and announced a halt to all bombing above the 20th parallel in the hope that 'talks begin promptly'. He went to announce his decision not to accept his party's nomination for another term as president.⁷⁵
- In May 1968, preliminary peace talks began in Paris and soon ran aground. The dispute focused on whether or not the United States would halt all bombing of the North and who could sit at the negotiating table. Johnson was basically correct about Hanoi's adoption of a strategy of 'fighting while negotiating'. Its intention was not to offer any concessions but to use the talks to strengthen its position, if possible, by prolonging the announced limits on the air war, encouraging the anti-war movement and fomenting distrust between Washington and Saigon over possible terms. The DRV stuck with its past position that no substantive talks were possible as long as any US bombing or other acts of war continued in Vietnam.⁷⁶
- In the summer of 1968, Richard Nixon was nominated by the Republicans as their presidential candidate. Hubert Humphrey was the Democrats' choice. Nixon met with Johnson and agreed not to attack the president over Vietnam during the campaign, in return for an understanding that Johnson would not abandon Saigon. Nixon also agreed that he would not call for a halt in the bombing while campaigning. By October, the peace talks were deadlocked over representation. President Thieu was deeply opposed to negotiating with the North if the Vietcong was also present as that would imply formal recognition of his enemy.
- With the elections days away, Johnson received FBI reports that a Nixon fundraiser was acting as an intermediary for the Republicans with Thieu. Nixon's campaign manager had asked her to tell Thieu to oppose the cessation of bombing and so undermine the peace talks, promising the latter would get a better deal under the Republicans. Thieu refused to attend talks which the Vietcong were present. Despite this, Johnson ordered a halt to the bombing on 31 October. Still, Thieu refused to join the negotiations. On 5 November, Nixon was elected president.⁷⁷
- It appears that a legacy of the early Cold War influenced Johnson's handling of the Vietnam War. American presidents had long been free to act abroad in ways for which they need not account at home. It was easy to conclude that his presidency was all-powerful and he could continue to employ, as NSC-68 had put it, "any measures, overt or covert, violent or non-violent" that would advance the American cause in the Cold War, without jeopardising "the integrity of our system". By the time he left the White House in 1969, the manner in which he fought the Vietnam War left the American system, both abroad and at home, in deep trouble.⁷⁸

The Nixon Administration (1969-1974)

- Richard Nixon inherited this situation and then made it much worse. One of the most geographically adept leaders of modern times, he also happened to be the American president least inclined – ever – to respect

⁷⁴ Isaacs and Downing, *The Cold War*, p. 289.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 256-257. On 16 March 1968, American soldiers massacred villagers at My Lai, and the episode was one of the largest massacres of civilians committed by the American military. It became public knowledge in November 1969 and helped increase domestic opposition to the Vietnam War.

⁷⁶ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 74.

⁷⁷ Isaacs and Downing, *The Cold War*, p. 258.

⁷⁸ Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, p. 170. 1968 would be known as the bloodiest year in the Vietnam War with more than 14 000 killed and 150 000 wounded.



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constraints on his own authority. After all that had happened during the Johnson years, Nixon still believed that the requirements of national security, as he defined them, outweighed whatever obligations of accountability, even legality, the presidency demanded. Nixon wrote after resigning the presidency that 'without secrecy, there would have been opening to China, no SALT agreement with the Soviet Union, and no peace agreement ending the Vietnam War.' There is little reason to doubt that claim. The only way Nixon saw to break the long stalemate in the Vietnamese peace talks – short of accepting Hanoi's demands for an immediate withdrawal of American forces and the removal from power of the Saigon regime- was to increase military and diplomatic pressure on Hanoi while simultaneously decreasing pressures from within Congress, the anti-war movement, and even former members of the Johnson administration to accept Hanoi's terms. That too required operating openly and invisibly.⁷⁹

- Where Nixon went wrong was not in his use of secrecy to conduct foreign policy – diplomacy had always required that – but in failing to distinguish between actions he could have justified if exposed and those he could never have justified. The process began in the spring of 1969 when Nixon ordered the bombing of Cambodia in an effort to interdict the routes through that country and Laos along which the North Vietnamese had for years sent troops and supplies into South Vietnam. While the decision was militarily justifiable, Nixon made no effort to explain it publicly. Instead, he authorised the falsification of Air Force records to cover up the bombing, while insisting for months afterwards that the United States respected Cambodian neutrality. The bombing was no secret to the Cambodians, or to the North Vietnamese, or to their Chinese and Soviet allies. Only Americans were kept in the dark to avoid anti-war protests. That, however, was how Johnson's credibility gap had developed. The New York Times exploited well-placed sources and reported on the bombing of Cambodia, as well as plans to begin withdrawing American troops from Vietnam. Nixon ordered wiretaps on the phones of several Kissinger assistants whom the Justice Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation suspected of having leaked the information. These remained, with Kissinger's approval, even after some of these aides had left the government, and they were soon extended to include journalists who could not have been involved in the original leaks. The lines between defensible and indefensible secrecy, already blurred under Johnson, became less distinct.⁸⁰
- In the first six months of his administration, Nixon and Kissinger turned to secret diplomacy and secret air bombardment of Cambodia. This was a two-tiered approach in which the United States and the DRV would negotiate a mutual withdrawal of forces from South Vietnam while the Saigon regime and the NLF discussed 'political reconciliation'. To coerce Hanoi into accepting a settlement, Nixon instructed Kissinger to inform Moscow that any improvement in relations would come after the end of the war in Vietnam. These initial military and diplomatic moves did not produce a response from Hanoi. This was part of the 'madman theory' which was to insert a significant element of unpredictability, intimidation and even fury into American negotiating position to crack Hanoi's resolve.⁸¹
- With military and diplomatic victory eluding Washington, Nixon began to herald the policy of Vietnamisation as the way to successfully conclude the war in Vietnam. This involved handing over day-to-day combat operations to the South Vietnamese army. In June 1969, Nixon announced the withdrawal of 25 000 troops from South Vietnam. Earlier, Nixon also made statements that American policy would be to provide military and economic assistance to Asian nations fighting insurrections, but those governments would provide their own troops.⁸²
- To keep North Vietnamese military pressure off the south as US troop levels declined, the administration leaked to the press in July dire threats of a 'go for broke' air and naval assault on the North, possibly including the use of nuclear weapons. A personal message resembling an ultimatum was sent to Ho Chi

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 172.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 173.

⁸¹ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 87.

⁸² This became known as the Nixon Doctrine.



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Minh which set 1 November as the deadline for evidence of progress in negotiations or the United States would use 'measures of great consequence and great force.' National Security Council staff also worked on a plan code-named Duck Hook, which included saturation bombing of the north, a naval blockade, and mining the port of Haiphong. Secret meetings meanwhile began in August between Kissinger and North Vietnamese representatives. Hanoi refused to be intimidated and Ho's reply on 15 August ignored the ultimatum and rejected compromise.⁸³

- On 15 October, one of the largest national protest to date called the Moratorium was staged. In hundreds of cities that day, hundreds of thousands participated in mostly peaceful and dignified expressions of opposition to the war. On 3 November, Nixon made one of his most notable public addresses on the war, his nationally televised 'Silent Majority' speech. With a second moratorium planned for 15 November, Nixon made an appeal to the silent majority for support against what he deemed to be a minority calling for what amounted to a US surrender in Vietnam to 'forces of totalitarianism'. In the days that followed, Nixon announced the additional withdrawal of 60 000 troops, cancellation of draft calls for the rest of the year and a Selective Security lottery system to begin in December which would reduce the number of men exposed to possible military induction. Cast against the administration's strategies, the speech took on a new meaning, presenting Vietnamisation not as a political move, but as a legitimate way to gain an honourable US exit from Vietnam.⁸⁴
- Despite Nixon's desire to achieve a quick end to the conflict, over 475 000 troops remained in South Vietnam at the end of 1969. To speed up Vietnamisation, US aid built up the AVRN up to nearly 1 million by early 1970. Despite dubious progress, Nixon announced in March that US troop levels would be reduced by 150 000 in the year ahead. To reassure Saigon, intensive bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail continued so did enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia. In May 1970, Nixon suddenly escalated the war by invading Cambodia, which he justified with the claim that destroying the enemy's supply bases would speed up American withdrawal. This ignited a fresh round of protests against the war.⁸⁵
- Before the Cambodian incursion interrupted talks, Kissinger had held three fruitless negotiating sessions with Le Duc Tho, the chief negotiator for the North. On 7 September, he returned to these discussions to try to break the diplomatic stalemate by presenting a schedule for total withdrawal of US forces over 12 months. For the first time, the American position did not couple troop withdrawal with an explicit provision for the DRV to remove its troops from the south. At this meeting, the North Vietnamese insisted they would not depart from their position that Thieu and Ky be excluded from any agreed political process. Kissinger reaffirmed that the United States would not drop its support for them prior to an election.⁸⁶
- The narrowing military options in Vietnam and widening domestic dissent on the war put pressure on Nixon to advance negotiations with Hanoi. On 31 May 1971, Kissinger offered to remove US troops six months after an agreement for a ceasefire was in place. This represented a unilateral American withdrawal that would leave DRV troops in the south. Hanoi on its part would end infiltration of the South and release US POWs. The proposal also included the idea that political issues in South Vietnam would be left to the Vietnamese to resolve. Le Duc Tho countered on 26 June, accepting the ceasefire idea and agreeing to a prisoner release, but he called for the United States to stop air attacks against North Vietnam, pay war reparations and not support Thieu for the elections in South Vietnam for the fall. It did not call for the removal of Thieu and other leaders as a precondition for a ceasefire. The impasse continued as both sides continued to fight amidst negotiations.

⁸³ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 89.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁸⁵ Isaacs and Downing, *The Cold War*, pp. 310-311. The killing of 4 students at Kent State University on 4 May 1970 led to further anti-war demonstrations across the country. In the wake of this incident, Nixon declared the end to the Cambodian incursion. By the end of 1970, troop levels were at 334 600. This figure fell to 156 000 by December 1971.

⁸⁶ Anderson, *The Vietnam War*, p. 96.



- Beijing and Washington shared a common interest in the war in Vietnam. Nixon wanted out of it, but on terms that would not humiliate the United States. North Vietnam could not be expected to help, but China – until now a major supplier of military and economic assistance to Hanoi- had a different perspective. It could hardly wish to see fighting drag on along its southern border while facing the prospect of larger and more dangerous conflict with the Soviet Union. In early 1970, Kissinger pointedly reminded Hanoi's chief negotiator, Le Duc Tho, that North Vietnam might not continue to enjoy "the undivided support of the countries which now support it."⁸⁷
- In February 1972, Nixon visited China and while it did not lead to the normalisation of relations, it helped reduce tensions over Vietnam and Taiwan. For the Soviet Union, a rapprochement between the United States and China was a terrifying prospect. After the visit to Beijing, Henry Kissinger, Nixon's Secretary of State, was sent to Moscow and he negotiated with Brezhnev on the final stumbling blocks to the conclusion of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT). In April, the North Vietnamese launched an offensive across Vietnam's demilitarised zone, overwhelming the South Vietnamese. Nixon was warned by his advisors against escalating the war in view of the upcoming summit in Moscow, but he decided to take a risk. Nixon now ordered a massive escalation of the war with a new bombing campaign against Hanoi, as well as the mining of Haiphong harbour, where many Soviet supply ships were moored. Brezhnev decided that the summit would proceed, despite North Vietnamese appeals to cancel it.⁸⁸
- Despite the conclusion of the summit and the signing of SALT, Nixon's primary foreign policy objective was still to find a way out of Vietnam. After SALT, Nixon and Kissinger were keen to pull off a ceasefire before the presidential elections in November 1972. The United States maintained pressure on Hanoi, with more than 40 000 bombing sorties over the next five months. Both Moscow and Beijing put pressure on the North to end the conflict. In reality, Kissinger had already held secret meetings with North Vietnamese representatives as early as 1969. In early 1970, he began private meetings with Le Duc Tho, the chief North Vietnamese negotiator in Paris. In August 1972, the Politburo in Hanoi voted to authorise a negotiated settlement. After intense negotiations, Kissinger secured a deal with the North Vietnamese on 9 October. Having being left out, Thieu refused to sign. Nixon secured re-election in November, but talks finally broke down in December. Nixon responded with the most sustained bombing campaign of the Vietnam War.
- North Vietnam was forced back to the negotiating table and a cease-fire agreement signed within a month. The Paris Accords on 27 January 1973 brought a US troop withdrawal and the return of POWs. Vietcong troops were allowed to remain in the South. While Thieu's objections were ignored, he was promised economic and military assistance if Hanoi resorted to military action again. Nixon had no illusions that the North Vietnamese would willingly abide by the ceasefire, though he did expect to compel compliance by threatening – and if necessary resuming – the bombing that led Hanoi to accept the ceasefire in the first place. However, the developing Watergate scandal had severely weakened the president. Frustrated by a long and bitter war, utterly distrustful of Nixon's intentions, sensing that his authority was crumbling, Congress voted in the summer of 1973 to terminate all combat operations in Indochina. On 29 March 1973, the last contingent of American forces left Vietnam.

⁸⁷ Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, p. 151.

⁸⁸ Isaacs and Downing, *The Cold War*, pp. 314-315.



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- Congress then passed the War Powers Act, which imposed a 60-day limit on all future military deployments without Congressional consent. Nixon's vetoes were overridden and the restrictions became law in November 1973. It was left to his successor Gerald Ford to suffer the consequences.⁸⁹ American aid now began to dry up for South Vietnam. Massive inflation, unemployment and increasing corruption sapped the will of the South to fight on. In early 1975, another military offensive was launched by Hanoi, taking over the Central Highlands. The military rout turned to a political collapse and Thieu fled the country. The last helicopters carrying Americans and pro-American Vietnamese took off from the rooftop of the US embassy in Saigon on 29 April 1975.⁹⁰



⁸⁹ Gaddis, *The Cold War*, pp. 176-177.

⁹⁰ Isaacs and Downing, *The Vietnam War*, pp. 318-319.