Cold War Notes: Vietnam War

History

* Vietnam was once a French colony
* Ho Chi Minh led a group known as the Vietcong for independence from France
* After the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, the Vietnamese were able to get other major world leaders to listen.
* The Geneva Accords decided that Vietnam was to be divided into 2 separate countries in July 1954 (it would be divided at the 17th parallel)
  + North Vietnam: Communist and led by Ho Chi Minh
  + South Vietnam: Non-communist and led by Ngo Diem
* U.S. involvement in Vietnam was a part of Vietnam was a part of the REALPOLITIK or détente policy of Henry Kissinger. With this, the U.S. seemingly has a peaceful relationship with the Soviet Union while at war with other communist countries.

U.S. Support of Vietnam Timeline

* In the years after World War II ended in 1945, President Harry S. Truman declared that the United States must help any nation threatened by communism. Truman’s policy, called containment was followed by Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson.
* Truman sends money to France during the war in Vietnam
* Eisenhower believed in the Domino Theory and he sends almost 700 military leaders to help stabilize South Vietnam following the Geneva Accords.
* Kennedy sent Johnson to meet with Diem. This is the FIRST REAL U.S. INTERVENTION IN VIETNAM. He sends 16,000 military leaders which lead a rebellion against Diem, having his assassinated. 3 weeks later, Kennedy is assassinated.
* While America is dealing with the death of Kennedy:
  + North Vietnam was giving more and more support to the South Vietnamese communists known as the Vietcong.
  + North Vietnam is smuggling in supplies to the Vietcong through a system of roads and trails that ran through nearby Laos and Cambodia known as the Ho Chi Minh trail.
* Johnson and the United States are going to accuse the North Vietnamese of attacking the U.S. ship, *The Maddox*, of the Gulf of Tonkin. Johnson goes to Congress and asks for the authority to take any necessary action against an aggressive attack against the U.S. He gets it. This is known as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. IT GAVE JOHNSON UNLIMITED POWER TO DO WHATEVER HE WANTED IN VIETNAM.
* A year later, Johnson sent a group of U.S. marines to South Vietnam. They were the first American ground forces to enter the war.

The War

* The Sides:
  + The United States and South Vietnam

VERSUS

* + North Vietnam and the Vietcong
* American strengths: superior weapons and supplies
* North Vietnamese strengths: knowledge of the land, protection in nearby Laos and Cambodia, and local support.
* Weaponry: guerilla warfare (surprise attacks), land mines, tunnels, saturation bombing (explosives continually dropped over the same targets), canister bombing (tiny bombs located inside larger bombs), Agent Orange (herbicide to kill plants exposing Vietnamese hiding places), and napalm (highly flammable substance dropping from planes).
* U.S. troop strength grew from 60,000 in 1965 to 543,000 in 1969. The Americans were joined by about 800,000 South Vietnamese forces and another 69,000 men from Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines.
* North Vietnam and the Vietcong had over 300,000 troops, but the exact number is unknown. The Soviet Union and China, the two largest communist nations in the world at the time, sent war materials but no military forces to the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong.
* The United States did not try and invade and conquer North Vietnam during the war. Instead, it focused on air strikes against targets in North Vietnam and search and destroy ground missions against the enemy in South Vietnam.
* The air raids against North Vietnam were carried out by huge B-52 bombers and smaller warplanes.
* In South Vietnam, American pilots used helicopters to search for the Vietcong in jungle and mountain regions.
* The Vietcong and North Vietnamese used a defensive strategy and tried to avoid major battles in the open. The lightly armed communists preferred guerrilla warfare which included such tactics as ambushes and hand-laid bombs. Land mines and tunnels allowed such surprise attacks.
* Between 1965 and 1967, neither side could gain an advantage. The U.S. Army and Marines usually won their battles, but North Vietnam continued to send in new troops. The Soviet Union and China provided more war materials.
* To avoid defeat, North Vietnamese forces often retreated into Laos and Cambodia.

Timeline

* 1964
  + Johnson gradually begins escalating the war effort: he sends more troops and budgets more money. He doesn’t do this publicly with any addresses or speeches; this is known as backdoor escalation. Robert McNamara, an advisor to Kennedy on Vietnam, also serves as a head Johnson advisor.
  + North Vietnam also begins expanding and is pouring resources into South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail.
* 1965
  + Operation Rolling Thunder, the U.S. bombing campaign, begins this year and lasts for the next 3 years.
* 1968
  + North Vietnam and the Vietcong launch the Tet Offensive. This was a series of surprise attacks on major cities and towns. This is a major turning point in the war. It was a psychological victory against the U.S. Many Americans saw that North Vietnam could win; Americans at home saw gruesome images that made them oppose the war.
    - Hue: North Vietnamese soldiers killed between 3,000 and 5,000 civilians and military personnel.
    - My Lai: American soldiers led by Lieutenant William Calley, rounded up civilians and were ordered to kill them (around 400)
    - Kids and dogs were used as human bombs
    - Johnson’s popularity became to lessen and he decided not to seek re-election. Nixon wins the election.
  + When field commander General William Westmoreland asked for an additional 206,000 troops, Johnson denies the request, even though Westmoreland had been promised this. Johnson cut back the bombing of North Vietnam and called for peace negotiations.
* 1969
  + The Paris Peace talks begin in May 1968, but they reach no agreement.
  + Americans became impatient with the war. Nixon announces his plan of Vietnamization. This, he stated would get Americans out of Vietnam. Under this plan, South Vietnamese troops would train with U.S. troops; they would learn our tactics and our weaponry. Then, we could remove some troops. This would be a continuous process until all U.S. troops would be removed. It doesn’t actually happen.
  + As the fighting dragged on, anti-war demonstrations were held in the U.S., many on college campuses.
* 1970
  + Nixon announces that the war is moving into nearby Cambodia
  + Nixon was determined not to lose
  + American anti-war sentiment reached a peak with the massacre at Kent State that left 4 students dead and 9 wounded. The National Guard had fired into a group of protestors. The event shocked the nation and aroused more antiwar sentiment. A similar occurrence happened at Jackson State University leaving 2 dead and 11 wounded.
  + Opposition to the Vietnam War also developed as a result of T.V. coverage led by Walter Cronkite who brought scenes of war into millions of American homes. This is the first time that Americans begin to distrust the government and look to the media for the truth.
  + War critics called attention to the large number of civilians killed by U.S. bombing missions and ground operations in South Vietnam. Bombs and chemical sprays destroyed much of the countryside. U.S. forces used such weed killers as Agent Orange to reveal Communist hiding places in the jungle and to destroy enemy food crops.
* 1971
  + A government report is leaded to the New York Times editor Neil Sheehan. It is a study commissioned by Robert McNamara, a top government aide for Vietnam looking at America’s involvement within the Vietnam War. The report becomes known as the Pentagon Papers. In it, it becomes obvious that Johnson lied to the American public about Americans involvement and escalation into Vietnam. This leads to more distrust of the government, and it hurt Nixon’s image to the American people.
* 1972
  + Nixon runs for re-election promising an end to the war.
  + North Vietnam undertook a major invasion of South Vietnam. This campaign resulted in heavy losses for both sides, and led to the beginning of serious peace negotiations.
* 1973
  + On January 27th, 1973, a cease-fire was signed by the U.S., South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and the Vietcong. The terms included:
    - The United States would withdraw all forces from South Vietnam within 60 days
    - All POWs would be released
    - All parties to the agreement would end military activities in Laos and Cambodia
    - The 17th parallel would continue to divide North and South Vietnam
  + On March 29th, 1973, the last U.S. ground forces left Vietnam. Congress sharply reduced military aid to South Vietnam.
  + With American troops gone from Vietnam, North Vietnam and the Vietcong resumed their attacks against South Vietnam.
  + The war finally ended with South Vietnam surrendered to North Vietnam in Saigon on April 30th, 1975. Saigon was then renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

Results of the War

* South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia all became communist
* 58,000 Americans died
* More than one million South Vietnamese lost their lives during the fighting
* The death toll among the North Vietnamese ranged from 500,000 and 1,000,000
* The U.S. spent over $150,000,000,000 on the war
* U.S. warplanes caused heavy damage to the North’s factories and transportation systems
* South Vietnam suffered the most destruction because that is where nearly all of the fighting took place. As many as 10,000,000 South Vietnamese, nearly half of the population, became war refugees.
* The bombing and use of chemicals destroyed crop land and plant and animal life.
* In 1976, North Vietnam united North and South Vietnam into the communist nation of Vietnam.
* The Vietnam War was the first foreign war in which American forces failed to achieve their objectives. This hurt the pride of many people in the United States and left bitter and painful memories
* About 2,700,000 American men and women fought in the war. Most veterans made the transition to civilian life with relative ease, but others experienced serious problems. These veterans suffered from a high rate of divorce, drug abuse, suicide, involvement in violent crime, and unemployment.
* Political dissent in America:
  + Hawks: those who supported the war
  + Doves: those who did not support the war
  + Student activism
    - Pop culture was changed and the 1960’s saw a widening of the generation gap (ways in which parents and their children were different)
    - Many students came to make up the New Left, a political movement wanting to focus on domestic problems like poverty and racism.
    - Teach Ins: professors at colleges would hold night sessions to talk about the issues surrounding the Vietnam War; the first was held at the University of Michigan
    - Selective Service Act was passed drafting all eligible men ages 18-26; many who refused to be drafted would do so on the grounds of being a conscientious objector, or one who opposed on moral or religious grounds
* War Powers Resolution: This act was passed in 1973. With it, the President can only have 60 days of use of the military forces without Congress’s approval and the declaration of war. This can be extended by up to 30 days if Congress allows. This was meant to correct what happened with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.
* 1982: The U.S. government constructs the Vietnam Wall in memory of all Vietnam veterans in Washington D.C. It lists the names of all the men and women who died in Vietnam or were missing in action.