***§ Decades of War in Vietnam***

1. In Southeast Asia after WWII, there was post-colonial struggle in the region once known as French Indochina. It affected the emerging nations of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The 30-year conflict had two major phases: 1) 1945-1954, in which France tried to re-establish control of its pre-war colony; and 2) 1957-1973, a Cold War conflict in which the United States supported non-communist South Vietnam from being taken over by North Vietnam. The conflicts ended in a complete communist victory in 1975.

**2. Ho Chi Minh** was a Vietnamese who had been trained in Moscow in 1923. For 18 years he worked for the Comintern, establishing revolutionary organizations in China and Southeast Asia. He was sent to Vietnam in 1941 to set up a united front to fight the Japanese during WWII. The coalition was called the **Viet-Minh** and the communist aspect of it was downplayed. With the defeat of the Japanese, the Vietminh declared Vietnam independent with Ho Chi Minh as president. Non-communist, nationalist leaders in the Vietminh were eliminated and many of them murdered.

3. **First Indochinese War.**  Immediately after the war, the French sought to re-establish control over Indochina. The Viet Minh now fought the French in what is called the **First Indochinese War,** lasting from 1946 to 1954. The 1949 victory of the Communists in China meant that the Viet Minh had a supply base, training area and refuge across the northern border. The Chinese sent military equipment and thousands of laborers to build roads and carry supplies through the jungle. With this assistance the communists were able to besiege a French force at ***Dien Bien Phu***, and ultimately force the entire 12,000 soldiers there to surrender.

**4. Vietnam divided.** At a **1954 conference in Geneva**, Switzerland, Western and Communist powers agreed to a division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel, while Cambodia and Laos became independent nations. Ho Chi Minh ruled North Vietnam, while a non-communist government, governed South Vietnam. In 1955 a referendum in the South established **Ngo Dinh Diem** *(pronounced “no din zyem”)* as the new president. Approximately one million peasants—many of them Roman Catholics—left communist North Vietnam and moved to the South (100,000 peasants relocated to the *north*).

**5. Elections**. At Geneva, France had intended that elections would be held in 1956 to reunite Vietnam under a single government, but neither South Vietnam nor the United States signed that accord. The North had a larger population and, since the Communist party had outlawed all political opposi­tion, voting in the North would be concentrated on only one candidate-- Ho Chi Minh. In contrast, South Vietnam had a number of political parties. Since the South’s smaller vote would be split over several candidates, any *single* North Vietnamese can­di­date was sure to be elected. Accordingly, the Diem government refused to participate in an election which would only serve to deliver 11 million South Vietnamese to a communist dictatorship.

**6. Domino Theory.** First articulated by Eisenhower, the concept of the domino theory was that a communist victory in South Vietnam would cause ***non*-communist** governments on its borders to fall to communism. They feared the subversion of Laos and Cambodia, then Thailand, Burma, and maybe India. At this time there were active communist insurgent groups in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines. To prevent communism from spreading through SE Asia, the United States stepped in to support the Diem government as the French withdrew.

**7. Second Indochinese War.**  The Second phase of the Vietnam War lasted from 1957 to 1975 and increasingly involved the United States as it backed non-communist South Vietnam. Starting in 1959, North Vietnam began infiltrating communist *cadres* (agents) and equipment to the south in order to undermine the government. In 1960, North Vietnam created the **National Liberation Front** in the South in order to bring critics of the Diem government together in a united front. While the NLF (and its armed wing, the Viet Cong), were mostly southern­ers, their strategy and supplies were controlled by the communist party in North Vietnam.

8. **To weaken the social order** of the South, the Viet Cong began an assassination campaign against South Vietnamese civic leaders. By 1963 the communists had assassinated over 37,000 village, district and province leaders—the civilian brain trust of the country. This created serious problems for the Diem government as it struggled to find competent personnel to carry out its programs at all levels. ( (see Pike, *War, Peace and the Viet Cong,* p. 62-63) .)

9. At first, the US sent only military **advisers** to South Vietnam. In 1961 and ‘62, Diem was making progress in protecting the country and under President Kennedy the American involvement increased as what had been a post-colonial struggle became a Cold War conflict. By the end of 1963 there were 13,000 American personnel in South Vietnam.

**10. Religion** Diem was a Catholic in a majority Buddhist country. He did make mistakes, especially with regards to rules about religious parades, but claims of general religious persecution were untrue. Because the only colleges in colonial Vietnam were run by the Jesuits, college-educated Viet­nam­ese tended to be Catholic, and many of Diem’s administrators were college-educated.)

**11. Buddhist Crisis.** In 1963 Buddhists monks in the cities of Saigon and Hue began to demonstrate against the Diem government, claiming religious persecution. The leader of the protests was a young Buddhist leader --Thich Tri Quang (pronounced Teek tree kvanhg —who wanted to bring down the Diem government.

Thich was keenly aware of the power of the foreign press His most spectacular strategy was convincing older monks to self-immolate *(= burn themselves to death)*. The self-immolations were carefully stage-managed by Thich so that western photographers were always present to capture them on film. These striking pictures of red flames with a monk in the center explained nothing to American viewers but they led to a revulsion with the Diem government. This was given added force since this was at a time that civil rights protests were being broadcast on American televisions. (Btw, Thich’s membership in the Communist party was only confirmed in 2000.)

12. **Coup**. In the 1940s, Ngo Din Diem refused to be a flunky for the French and in the 1960s he would not be a puppet of the US State Department. Frustrated that they could not manipulate him, a faction within the State Department encouraged some Vietnamese generals when they expressed interest in removing Diem. The coup, and Diem’s murder took place on November 1, 1963. Although Diem ***was*** authoritarian, he also was respected as a genuine nationalist and was not personally corrupt. When he was murdered, the State Department quickly discovered that there was no one with Diem’s stature and credibility to replace him. Over the next sixteen months, South Vietnam endured about six different coups. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong took advantage of this instability and stepped up their attacks.

13. **Gulf of Tonkin, 1964**. On August 2, 1964, North Vietnamese patrol boats approached the destroyer *Maddox* in international waters off the coast of North Vietnam. When the *Maddox* challenged them, they attacked with torpedoes. The *Maddox* hit three of the boats, which withdrew. On the night of August 4, the *Maddox* believed a second attack had begun and the captain radioed Washington to that effect. President Johnson used this attack to ask for a resolution to “take all necessary measures … against the forces of the United States and to prevent further Aggression.” Congress voted for this “***Gulf of Tonkin Resolution,”*** 416 to 0. With it, Johnson ordered the bombing of North Vietnam naval ports in retaliation.

14. Johnson now had the authority to use whatever military means he saw fit in Vietnam. However, the captain of the *Maddox* soon had doubts about the second attack, fearing that the threatening blips on his radar screens could have been wave action or electronic noise. (Subsequent investigations proved that that was the case; the second attack never happened.)

15**. Election 1964**. Johnson sought to portray Senator Barry Goldwater, the Republican nominee for president, as a dangerous war monger who was planning to bomb Hanoi. Johnson said he would never do such a thing and he won the election in a landslide.

16. In February, 1965, in response to Viet Cong attacks on Americans in Vietnam, Johnson began a bombing campaign against the North. “Rolling Thunder” was designed to gradually increase in intensity on the theory that, to avoid the pain of further bombing, the North Vietnamese would agree to negotiate an end to the fighting. However, the incremental nature of the campaign gave the North Vietnamese time to adjust to the bombing. Moreover, Johnson never grasped that the North Vietnamese leaders were uninterested in compromise and saw Johnson’s offers to negotiate as signs of weakness, which just encouraged them to fight.

**US Troop strength in So. Vietnam**:

The end of 1963: 13,000

Beginning of 1965: 25,000

End of 1965: 184,000

“ 1966: 385,000

“ 1967: 485,000

“ 1968: 543,000

“ 1972: 39,000

March, 1973: a few thousand

**17. Americanization of the War.** By early 1965, after a year of coups and government confusion, the Army of the Republic of (South) Viet Nam (ARVN) was near collapse. At the recommendation of his advisors, President introduced American troops into Vietnam on a large scale. He was not looking for “victory” over North Vietnam, only to get them to stop attacking the South. Johnson hoped US military action would stabilize the situation until an agreement to stop the fighting could be reached. American troop strength increased until it was over half a million soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines by the end of 1968.

18. Johnson had campaigned as a peace candidate, promising not to “send American boys ten thousand miles away to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.” His reversal was the beginning of a “credibility gap” that grew between him and the American public and that would prove disastrous in 1968.



19. **A Proxy War.** North Vietnam received military support from China and the USSR. The arrival of thousands of **Chinese laborers** meant that many more North Vietnamese youth could be drafted and sent South. Soviet technicians helped set up, train, and sometimes to operate anti-aircraft batteries in the North.

In the back of President Johnson’s mind there was always the fear that if US military got *too* aggressive, Communist China might enter the war as she had done in 1951 to aid North Korea. If that happened, the US might be forced into a general (i.e., nuclear) war. Johnson would not risk that possibility.

**20. “Search and Destroy”**  The main tactic of the Viet Cong was to pre-position large quantities of ammunition and food and then stage an attack at a time of their choosing. During 1966-1967 Allied forces (US, ARVN, Australia, New Zealand and S. Korea) successfully destroyed tons of weapons and rice on “search and destroy” missions while NVA and Viet Cong slipped away to safety across the border into Laos or Cambodia. Since offensive action into Laos and North Vietnam was forbidden, there was no way to decisively ***defeat*** the communists. The refusal of the Johnson administration to take the war to the enemy caused tremendous resentment in the troops doing the fighting. Increasingly, they felt that their government called them to fight and to die, but would not let them win.

**21. The Ho Chi Minh Trail.** In 1962 President Kennedy and North Vietnam agreed that Laos was neutral. The US was willing to abide by this, but the North Vietnamese army immediately violated the agreement. With the US staying out of Laos, North Vietnam had a secure route through which to transport men, food, weapons, and ammunition to points along the border where they were stored for future operations in South Vietnam. This was the ‘Ho Chi Minh Trail,’ the use of which was vital to the North Vietnamese war effort (see map). In interviews after the war, former North Vietnamese officers noted that, *“If Johnson had granted General Westmoreland's requests to enter Laos and block the Ho Chi Minh trail, Hanoi could not have won the war...”*

**22. Tet Offensive.** By early 1967, North Vietnamese leaders realized they were blocked from their goals due to the effectiveness of the Allied missions. They decided on a desperate strategy—surprise attacks against major population centers throughout the country, ***all at once****!*  On January 26, 1968 they began with an assault against the Marine base at **Khe Sanh,** near theborder withNorth Vietnam (see map, find “• K”). For that attack they brought in heavy artillery and over 20,000 soldiers (against 6,000 Marines). Five days later, on January 30, 1968, they launched simultaneous attacks on about 100 towns and cities throughout the country. The VC were told that once they attacked, the entire population would rise up and join them in overthrowing the South Vietnamese government, which the communist believed was everywhere hated. The VC were victims of their own propaganda because n**owhere did this popular uprising occur**. In fact, most townspeople either hid or fought *against* the communists. After one or two days, the fighting in all but a handful of cities ended. At the old capital city of Hue (pronounced “*whey*”), North Vietnamese regiments held out for a month. When US Marines finally pried them out, they left mass graves with 3,500-5000 victims—mostly civilians who had been shot or buried alive.

23. **Tet and the Viet Cong.** The Tet offensive was a military disaster for the Viet Cong, whose immediate casualties were about 40,000. In two more waves (“mini-Tets”) later that year, casualties rose to 200,000 (with about 70,000 killed). As a fighting force, the Vietcong never recovered. Vacancies in their units were increasingly filled by North Vietnamese draftees.

24. **Tet and** P**resident Johnson.** For years, Johnson had pressured the military for good news that he could use to improve public opinion on the war. The generals always gave him the most optimistic outlook that they could. (Researchers have accused the military at that time of purposely lower­ing the estimate of the size of Viet Cong forces.) But because military action *had* quieted down in late 1967, Johnson was especially surprised by the broad scale of the Tet attack, “*I thought we were winning this! ”* Although there were many attacks, everywhere the fighters were quickly contained and/or killed. Nevertheless, Johnson and some newsmen mistakenly assumed that “if they can attack in so many places, then we must be losing.” In fact the opposite may have been the case—the North launched Tet because the war was dragging on. General Westmoreland pointed out that with the communists having suffered such a massive loss, *now* was the time to go on the offensive to defeat North Vietnam. But Johnson was too shaken and demoralized to listen. Instead, he announced that he would not run for re-election in the fall and instead, focus all his attention on ending the war. Thus, despite being a military disaster, the Tet offensive turned out to a decisive *political* victory for North Vietnam.

**25.** **Time is running out.** By 1969-1970, American forces under a new general--Creighton Abrams—were showing that they finally understood how to fight an insurgent war in the jungle while at the same time attacking the village organizations (the Viet Cong Infrastructure) that supported the insurgency. Also, ten years of American training and military assistance had resulted in gains for the South Vietnamese army (ARVN). Unfortunately also by this time, the culture wars in the US and Europe had reached a critical level. Anti-war protests had generated formidable opposition to the war back home.

**26. President Nixon.** In 1968 Richard Nixon was elected president, having promised to bring an end to American participation in the war. His program of “Vietnamization,” replaced US troops with South Vietnamese, while the US continued its supply efforts and use of air power. In March of 1972, North Vietnam invaded the South with **hundreds of heavy tanks and artillery,** but was defeated by the South Vietnamese on the ground, with crucial help by US air power. In addition to a promise of financial aid (similar to the Truman Doctrine) a commitment was made to use the B-52s if ever again South Vietnam was invaded. By the end of 1972, Vietnamization was all but complete and Nixon was re-elected by a record majority (49 states to 1). This showed that while Americans wanted to end US involvement in the war, they wanted to do it with honor.

**27. Black April.** Two years later, in April 1975 the North attacked again. But this time it was in the wake of the Watergate scandal. The 94th US Congress slashed the financial aid it had promised to South Vietnam (*from $2.4 billion to $700,000)*, which meant that South Vietnam could not buy the gasoline or bullets it needed to defend itself. Even worse, Congress specifically forbade US bombers from operating in Vietnam’s air space. The result was that South Vietnam was overwhelmed by large armored divisions --655 tanks and armored vehicles and over 400 pieces of heavy artillery. (These would have been easy targets for the US planes if they had been allowed to fight.) Just before the capital of Saigon was captured, US embassy staff and Vietnamese employees withdrew in a manner that was disorganized and humiliating.

28. The casualties from the Vietnam war were approximately 58,000 US personnel killed and another 300,000 wounded. For the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, there were ~1,000,000 military deaths.

**29. Postwar.** Upon their victory, the North Vietnamese pushed aside southerners who had participated in the National Liberation Front as strict communist dictatorship from Hanoi was established over the whole country. This was the same pattern that Ho Chi Minh followed when he eliminated nationalist rivals from the Viet Minh at the end of WW II. Many southerners who fought against the South Vietnamese government thinking there would be political freedom and representa­tive elections once the war was over, discovered otherwise. They shut up, or were sent to prison, or tried to escape.

**30. Boat People.** The communist victors imposed a harsh rule on the South, confiscating people’s homes and businesses and forcing thousands into outdoor prisons (“re-education camps”). Hundreds of thousands fled overland or in small boats. Between 1975 and 1995 roughly 2 million people left the Communist state. About 800,000 successfully escaped by boat; of which half eventually came to the US.

**31**. **Poverty.** Economic recovery in Vietnam was slow because of the communist system of central control and the total regimentation of society. Western banks were reluctant to lend to Vietnam and for years the country was one of the poorest in the world. As Vo Nyugen Giap, their most famous general, admitted: “Marx was a great analyst but he never gave us a formula for running a country.”\*

**32.** **In the early 1990s,** as the revolutionary generation died off, Vietnam introduced free-market reforms, which opened the door to (capitalist) investors. Diplomatic relations with the United States were normalized in 1995. In the early 21st century, Vietnam took advantage of its cheap labor costs to attract foreign clothing manufacturers.

This essay is based on an article in: Prentice- Hall, *World History: Connections to Today, Chapter 34.* Over the years it has been expanded with many additional details based on more recent scholarship. *Mr. G.*

\* Summers, Jr., Harry. *Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War* (1995) from the epilogue, by Stanley Karnow, p. 211.

*Mr. Gibson* *name:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_* Viet h1

*American History II*

d 440*, May, 2019* ***Questions on Vietnam-* Decades of War**

1. Before World War II, which country ruled Indochina?

2a Who were the **two sides** fighting in Vietnam between **1940-1945?**

2b. **Ho Chi Minh**. The Vietnamese are an especially argumentative people. How was Ho Chi Minh able to achieve such unity in political opinion after the end of WWII?

3. Identify the **two sides** fighting between **1946-1954**?

4a. **Elections.** Who was the elected leader of South Vietnam in the 1955? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

4b. You were probably surprised to learn that so many people in Vietnam were believers of this religion: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

5. Why was Diem feel he was justified to *not* hold joint elections in 1956?

6. “If Vietnam becomes communist, it makes it more likely that Laos and Malaysia will go com­mun­ist. Then Indonesia will be threatened.” This is an example of ***what theory***?

7. **2nd Indochinese War.** From where did the National Liberation Front (in *South* Vietnam), get its orders?

**8**. Why was there a shortages of effective local leaders in South Vietnam?

9. American involvement in Vietnam was seen as a part of **what larger conflict?**

11. What was the Buddhist crisis?

12. What death led to 16 months of instability in South Vietnam and the near collapse of the country?

13. What was the Gulf of Tonkin resolution?

12. **Americanization**. What was President Johnson’s goal in Vietnam?

13. Why were the communists in North Vietnam generally unreceptive to President Johnson’s offers to negotiate a compromise?

14. How large did the American troop presence in Vietnam eventually become? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

15. Which countries were helping North Vietnam?

16. What was President Johnson afraid of?

17. **(§ 15 & 16)** Why was it “impossible” for the US to “win’ the war?

\*18. Do you think that that (question 17) demoralized the soldiers fighting that war, in the jungles?

19. Find the Ho Chi Minh trail on the internet or on the front of the packet. Is the trail to the ***east***  or ***west*** of South Vietnam? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Which two “neutral” countries did it go through?

20. What was the Ho Chi Minh trail **used for?**

**21. What would have happened if the US had closed the Ho Chi Minh trail?**

22. What were the military results of the Tet offensive? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

What was the political result of Tet?

24. Which President withdrew all American troops by 1973? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

25. North Vietnam launched massive, conventional invasions of the South in 1972 and 1975. The one in 1972 was defeated, but not the one in 1975. What did the South Vietnamese military have in ***1972*** that they did **not** have in ***1975***?

26. How did the actions of the 93rd Congress contribute to the defeat of South Vietnam by the North?

27. Who were the “boat people?”

28. After unification, Vietnam had very hard years. What changes occurred in the 1990s which helped improve their economy?



**Fear of an all-out war.** Why did Johnson never ask the American people to go all out? In an interview many years after the war, Secretary of State Dean Rusk noted that with such a large nuclear arsenal at the country’s disposal, President Johnson was concerned about inflaming American opinion for total victory. He feared it might lead to a demand by the country that we use nuclear weapons to bring the war to a close. Avoiding a nuclear exchange was the right move, but by removing the idea of victory, Johnson condemned himself—and the country—to a conflict that had no end. (cf. Vietnam, a Television History, Episode 1, minute 44:20)