

During the Second World War Southeast Asia had been under Japanese control, but in 1945 the French re-occupied Indo-China. A nationalist group, the Vietminh, eventually surrounded and wiped out the French occupying army and America was dragged into fighting a costly and disastrous war in Vietnam.

- At the Treaty of Geneva in 1954, Indo-China was divided into Laos, Cambodia, North Vietnam and South Vietnam, although it was agreed to hold elections in 1956 to unify the two parts of Vietnam.
- Ngo Dinh **Diem**, the ruler of South Vietnam, refused to hold elections.
- **Ho Chi Minh** was a communist, who was supported by China. In 1960, he set up the National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnam, which started a guerrilla war to take over South Vietnam from Diem and his American backers.
- The Americans called the NLF guerrillas the **Vietcong**, and supported Diem with military advisers and money.
- Diem's government was made up of rich Christian landowners. It was corrupt and unpopular and persecuted the poor Buddhist peasants. By 1963, most of South Vietnam's rural areas were under Vietcong control - the **ARVN (South Vietnamese army)** could not defeat them.
- In 1963, the US supported a military coup, which murdered Diem and put a military government in South Vietnam

In August 1964, sailors on the American warship USS Maddox in **the Gulf of Tonkin** claimed they had been attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. The US Congress passed the **Gulf of Tonkin resolution**, allowing the American President Lyndon B. Johnson to take direct military action in retaliation.

In February 1965, the Vietcong attacked American air bases and killed American soldiers. President Johnson declared war against North Vietnam.

Why did the US get involved?

1. Containment

China had fallen to communism in 1949, and America had fought in Korea in 1950-53 to contain the spread of communism.

The US president, Lyndon B. Johnson, said: "I am not going to be the president who saw South-East Asia go the way China went."

2. Domino theory

Americans believed that, if South Vietnam fell, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand - and then Burma and India - would follow.

President Johnson said: "If you let a bully come into your garden, the next day he'll be in your porch, and the day after that he'll rape your wife."

3. ARVN's weakness

It was obvious the South Vietnamese could not resist communist infiltration by the Vietcong without help. In 1963, the American commander reported that the ARVN - the South Vietnamese army - were "ill-equipped local militia who more often than not were killed asleep in their defensive positions."

US advisers believed that good government and an efficient, large-scale war would defeat the Vietcong.

4. The US was attacked

The North Vietnamese had attacked the USS Maddox in August 1964, and then killed US soldiers in February 1965.

Johnson became convinced that action in South Vietnam alone would never win the war: "We are swatting flies when we should be going after the manure pile."

The Vietnam War did not seem like a fair match. The Americans had a huge army, money and technology at their disposal while the Vietcong were an underground army, using underground tactics. So why couldn't the Americans defeat the Vietcong?

- In February 1965, President Johnson ordered **Operation Rolling Thunder** - a massive bombing campaign against North Vietnam.
- He sent US troops - 500,000 by 1969 - to fight in Vietnam.
- In November 1965, General William Westmoreland, the US commander, lured the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) to attack a force of American troops at Ia Drang, then destroyed the attackers with a massive air strike.
- In 1968, the CIA started Operation Phoenix, arresting, interrogating and killing suspected Vietcong activists.
- Despite this, the Americans could not succeed in driving the Vietcong out of the rural areas

In January 1968, the NVA launched the **Tet Offensive**, capturing a number of towns in South Vietnam.

The North Vietnamese lost 45,000 men, including many officers. Their morale was damaged - the offensive proved that they could not defeat the Americans by direct attack.

It took the Americans a month to recover the towns. Their confidence was badly shaken. They won the Tet Offensive, but realised that they would never defeat the Vietcong.

Vietcong and American tactics

The Vietcong's tactics	The Americans' tactics
They fought a guerrilla war, ambushing US patrols, setting booby traps and landmines, and planting bombs in towns.	They fought a hi-tech war, using B52 bombers (Operation Rolling Thunder), artillery, helicopters, napalm and defoliants (Agent Orange). This killed many innocent civilians, and failed to stop the Vietcong guerrillas.
They mingled in with the peasants, wearing ordinary clothes. The Americans couldn't identify who the enemy was.	They forced the peasants to leave Vietcong-controlled areas and made them live in defended strategic hamlets in loyal areas. This created immense opposition, and allowed Vietcong infiltrators into loyal areas.
They were supplied with rockets and weapons by China and Russia.	American troops were sent on patrols, then supported by air and artillery when attacked. This demoralised the soldiers, who realised they were being used just as bait.
They used the Ho Chi Minh Trail - a jungle route through Laos and Cambodia - to supply their armies. The Americans couldn't attack their supply routes without escalating the war.	Search and destroy patrols went out looking for "Charlie", as they called the Vietcong. But the patrols were very visible, and easy to ambush. This led to atrocities such as "zippo raids" to burn villages, and the unprovoked massacre of peaceful villagers at My Lai in 1968.
Their tactic was "hanging onto the belts" of the Americans - staying so close to the Americans so they could not use air or artillery backup without killing their own men.	

The Americans didn't leave Vietnam until 1973 - by which time 58,000 US soldiers had lost their lives. How was peace finally achieved and at what cost?

The US gets out of Vietnam

In 1968, the US president, Lyndon B. Johnson, ordered an end to American bombing of North Vietnam.

- There were increasing problems in the American army in Vietnam.
- There was increasing opposition to the war in America.
- Richard Nixon, who became US president in 1969, began **Vietnamisation** - pulling US troops out but giving financial support to the South Vietnamese army (the ARVN).
- On occasions, the US escalated the war, launching attacks into Cambodia (1970) and Laos (1971) to pursue the Vietcong who were hiding there.

In October 1972 Henry Kissinger worked out a peace agreement with the North Vietnamese.

Nguyen Van **Thieu**, the president of South Vietnam, refused to sign (he thought the Americans were going to abandon him), so the North Vietnamese pulled out of the talks.

Richard Nixon mounted huge bombing raids on North Vietnam until the North Vietnamese were forced to sign.

Nixon told Thieu he had to make peace whether he agreed with it or not, so Thieu was forced to sign too.

January 1973: the Paris Peace Agreement was signed, and the Americans left Vietnam.

Why did America lose the war?

The differences between the Americans and the Vietcong

Americans	Vietcong
The American hi-tech tactics continually killed the wrong people and demoralised their own troops.	The Vietcong's guerrilla tactics were appropriate to the nature of the conflict.
The US was trying to supply a war 8,000 miles from America.	The Vietcong were supplied with weapons by China and Russia.
The South Vietnamese regime was weak, brutal and corrupt	The South Vietnamese peasants supported and sheltered the Vietcong.
Their short (one-year) tour of service meant that American troops were always inexperienced.	The Vietcong had been continuously at war since they resisted the Japanese during the Second World War.
The morale of Americans soldiers was rock bottom - they took drugs, shot their officers ('fragging') and deserted.	The Vietcong were fanatically determined to drive out the Americans, whatever the cost.
The war became very unpopular in the US, and lost public support.	The North Vietnamese were motivated, fighting at home to unite their country.