

Vietnam War

Explore the key events in Vietnam and the USA

French and American involvement

The French had attempted to reassert control over their former colonies in southeast Asia after the Second World War but been defeated by a nationalist insurgency led by Ho Chi Minh. The French had left Vietnam by 1956.

The French were replaced by US military advisors who sought to prevent a 'domino effect' of countries falling to communism. In the following years, American involvement in Vietnam would gradually increase. The peak involvement of US troops was between 1964 and 1973.

US opposition

Internal opposition to the war in the USA was also crucial in determining the outcome. As troop casualties mounted, and without any obvious progress being made, public opinion turned against the war, particularly after the Tet Offensive in January 1968. Students demonstrated against the draft that operated between 1969 and 1972, and politicians increasingly spoke out against the war.

Once the USA had withdrawn its troops in 1973, Congress forbade their return. North Vietnamese violations of the peace accord therefore went unpunished and this contributed to the rapid military collapse of South Vietnam in 1975.

Military operations

The war was probably unwinnable from the start for the Americans. Instead of fighting a conventional war, the North Vietnamese engaged in a guerrilla campaign, never allowing the full military might of the USA to be deployed effectively.

Far more North Vietnamese were killed than Americans during the war but the North successfully turned the war into a patriotic one against an imperialist USA. The tactics used by the USA, including carpet bombing, defoliation through the use of Agent Orange, and massacres like that at My Lai, turned significant parts of the civilian population against them.

Parallels

Interesting parallels can be drawn between Vietnam, the American Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In each case a military superpower was defeated by a lightly armed foe waging a guerrilla war. All three were fighting far from home, which created logistical problems, and all involved a steep decline in domestic support for the war that ultimately made it untenable.



2 August 1964

Gulf of Tonkin incident. North Vietnamese boats allegedly fire on the USS Maddox. Congress authorises President Johnson to 'take all necessary measures' in response

8 March 1965

First US combat troops deployed

30 January 1968

Tet Offensive, coordinated Northern attacks on 100 South Vietnamese targets

May 1968

Paris peace talks begin

8 June 1969

Policy of 'Vietnamisation' announced, reducing US troops and replacing them with South Vietnamese

4 May 1970

Four students protesting against the war are killed at Kent State University

27 January 1973

Ceasefire signed in Paris

Jan-Apr 1975

Major North Vietnamese offensive against the South

1964

1965

1966

1967

1968

1969

1970

1971

1972

1973

1974

1975

13 February 1965

Johnson orders Operation Rolling Thunder, a sustained bombing campaign against North Vietnam

17 August 1965

Operation Starlite, first major battle of the war results in a US victory

16 March 1968

My Lai massacre: about 200 civilians are killed by US troops

January 1969

US troop numbers peak at 542,000

1 December 1969

First draft lottery is held conscripting men into the army

18 December 1972

Operation Linebacker 2: a renewed bombing campaign by USA after North Vietnam pull out of peace talks

29 March 1973

Last American troops leave Vietnam

29-30 April 1975

USA evacuates its embassy personnel and several thousand civilians as Saigon falls to the North

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