

# The escalation of the War in Vietnam

## French Indo-China and the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954

- 100 years ago, Vietnam didn't even exist as a separate country.
- It was part of the Indo-Chinese peninsula and controlled by France as part of their empire. The area was useful for its valuable rubber supplies.
- During WW2 (1939 – 1945) France were forced to leave Indo-China and Japan took control.
- After WW2 the Indo-Chinese War broke out as France returned to reclaim its territory and the locals led by a communist called Ho Chi Minh, fought back.
- In this period Ho Chi Minh developed guerrilla warfare techniques to fight back against France.
- The Indo-Chinese War came to a conclusion with the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. A French base in North Vietnam was surrounded and attacked by a peasant army (the Viet Minh) inspired by Ho Chi Minh. France suffered an unexpected and humiliating defeat and left the country and never returned.

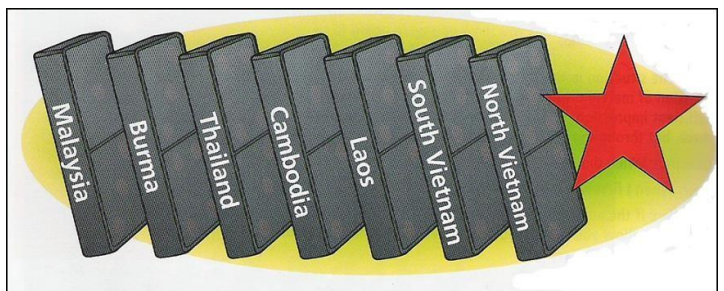
## Vietnam is divided and Diem becomes unpopular in the South

- When the French left, a peace conference was held in Geneva in 1956 and the country was divided in two; North Vietnam was controlled by Ho Chi Minh who ran the country along communist lines, South Vietnam was controlled by Diem with the help of French funding and equipment.
- However, Diem began to make mistakes which made him really unpopular with his own people. He cancelled elections that were due in 1956 because he feared he might lose. He also arrested and imprisoned anyone opposed to him.
- Diem was a catholic and persecuted Buddhists in South Vietnam. During the **Buddhist Crisis**, protests marches took place and Diem arrested and even killed some of the protestors.
- In one well known protest a Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc, publicly burned himself to death in protest against Diem's government.
- Diem was eventually assassinated in 1963, but by then the way South Vietnam was run had become really unpopular.



## Why did the USA get involved in Vietnam?

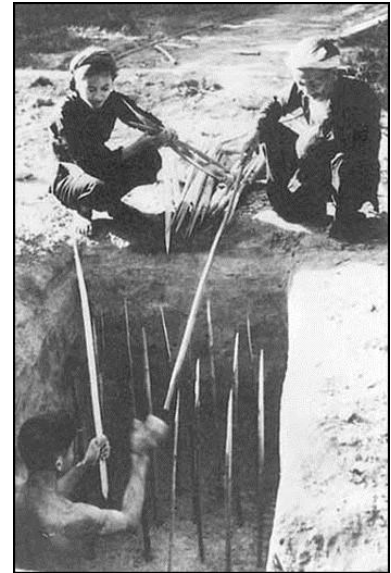
- During the 1950s the Cold War was underway as Communist Russia and Capitalist USA tried to spread their own ideas and stop their opponents. The USA's '**Truman Doctrine**' pledged to stop the spread of communism wherever it appeared.
- The USA also came up with the '**domino theory**' which said that even small countries must be stopped from turning communist – this would prevent communism from spreading across a whole region.
- In the early 1960s the USA started to send weapons and funding to South Vietnam to protect it from the North. The US President Eisenhower also sent in small numbers of military 'advisors' to help the South stop the spread of communism.
- At the same time Ho Chi Minh was receiving arms, supplies and troops from China and Russia.
- In 1960 John F Kennedy (JFK) became American president, and started to increase the number of special advisers sent over to help.
- In 1962 JFK introduced his '**Strategic Hamlets**' program. The USA attempted to stop the spread of communist ideas into the villages of South Vietnam by moving the villagers into new safe compounds, surrounded by guards and barbed wire, to protect them. However, this backfired on JFK when the locals felt that they were being rounded up and sent into prison camps, rather than being protected.
- In 1964 an American ship, the USS Maddox, allegedly came under attack in the '**Gulf of Tonkin incident**'. There is controversy here since it was later found that the attack may not have actually happened and President Johnson manipulated events to persuade Congress to pass the 'Gulf of Tonkin Resolution'.



- The **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution** allowed the President to act as he wished in Vietnam. The media had supported this action – persuading Congress & the US population that he was doing the right thing. The USA responded by bombing the North and by sending troops into South Vietnam. The Vietnam War had begun.

### How effective were guerrilla warfare tactics?

- When the USA first entered Vietnam they mistakenly thought that Ho Chi Minh's army – The National Liberation Front (NLF) usually better known as the **Viet Cong** – were a primitive peasant army. In fact, they had been fighting since WW2 and had steadily become more effective.
- The VC did not wear uniforms – this made them difficult to identify and allowed them to blend into the background. VC fighters could be men or women, young or old, also making them difficult to identify.
- A significant aspect was that they were politically driven and often volunteered to fight for their beliefs – this made them even more determined to resist the Americans.
- They were experts at fighting in jungle conditions and had great knowledge of their own terrain.
- The VC were experts at making **improvised weapons** (booby traps – e.g. Punji traps) – these were quickly made out of local materials. Within minutes deadly weapons could be made from a few bamboo sticks and rusty nails.
- These weapons proved to be more effective in jungle conditions than the USAs' \$multi-million equipment.
- The VC had built a sophisticated tunnel system, which allowed them to appear and disappear at will. It also protected them during air raids. The Americans didn't discover these tunnels until after a year of fighting.
- The VC also used unconventional tactics – they would disappear into the background when attacked, and then attack back when the US was least expecting it. They also used ambushes very effectively.
- In addition the VC were respectful of the local Vietnamese population, following the Viet Cong code of conduct and would help farmers in the fields – this meant that the local population always protected them.
- Finally, the rural countryside –  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the population – were farmers and were more sympathetic to the communist ideas of land redistribution rather than democracy.



### The USA's uniform, tactics and equipment.

- The USA initially entered Vietnam expecting a conventional war, however they had trained and equipped for the wrong type of war.
- Their uniforms and helmets were heavy and cumbersome in the hot and humid climate.
- They took high technology equipment such as tanks or M16 rifles that often jammed in the wet, that were unsuited to the surroundings.
- The USA's initial tactics were to simply attack their enemy head on, but they were soon suffering heavy defeats – they were forced to change their approach.

### 'Hearts and Minds'

- The USA's first change in approach was operation 'Hearts and Minds'.
- This aimed to reward the South Vietnamese population who were loyal to the USA – effectively bribery.
- US money was spent on building schools and medical centres in the villages.
- Local democracy was encouraged to show the locals that the American political system was best – villagers could vote on how money was spent.
- 'Hearts and minds' had some success in South Vietnamese towns and cities, but was less successful in the smaller villages where the locals were more impressed by the idea of gaining their own land under communism.

## Operation 'Rolling Thunder'

- This began in 1965 and was an attempt to bomb North Vietnam into defeat – US General Curtis Lemay promised to '*Bomb North Vietnam into the stone age*'. 3 times the amount of bombs in WW2 were dropped at a cost of \$900 million.
- It was supposed to be a 3 week campaign but lasted 3 ½ years.
- The US used its mighty B52 bombers, each capable of carrying a massive 27,000 kg bomb load.
- They bombed North Vietnam from high altitude, in an attempt to destroy airfields, bridges, docks and supply routes such as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.
- It was also supposed to weaken the morale of the North Vietnamese.
- However much of the bombing was inaccurate.
- Any damage that caused was quickly repaired by the North Vietnamese where 400,000 part-time workers volunteered to repair the damage. Often, the Ho Chi Minh trail was missed as there were dummy routes and much was covered by the dense jungle.
- The VC also started to shoot down US aircraft with anti-aircraft guns and surface to air missiles – 367 US planes shot down in 1967.
- In 1968 Operation Rolling Thunder was judged to have failed in its original objectives and was called off. \$300million of damage was caused against a cost to the US of \$900million.



## New American Tactics

- The USA realised that it had to fight from a safe distance and avoid hand-to-hand fighting wherever possible.
- Saturation bombing as part of Operation Rolling Thunder had failed so they turned to new tactics.
- 'Search and Destroy' - The US built safe bases from which to launch sudden helicopter attacks. They would wait for intelligence and quickly attack VC strongholds, before returning to base...
- ...however these missions often targeted the wrong villages resulting in civilian casualties. American soldiers also lost self-control because of the short intensive nature of the attacks and sought revenge e.g. My Lai.
- Napalm – This was a new weapon, an explosive gel dropped in canisters from the air. They were intended to burn the jungle and destroy VC hiding places and food supplies...
- ...however napalm caused terrible injuries to anyone that got in its way, this often included innocent civilians e.g. 'the girl in the picture'.
- Agent Orange – This was an orange powdered defoliant (weed killer) sprayed by plane to destroy the jungle and VC hiding places and food supplies...
- ...however it poisoned water, soil and food supplies. Many locals were poisoned. 500,000 children were later born with birth defects.
- These new weapons and tactics had a common failing – they were indiscriminate in nature. They could not distinguish between guilty and innocent, old or young, men or women.



## **The Tet Offensive 1968**

- In January 1968, the Viet Cong made a sudden and unexpected change of tactic.
- On 31<sup>st</sup> January when American soldiers were expecting the VC to be celebrating their New Year, 70,000 made a co-ordinated attack on South Vietnamese towns and cities – the most high profile of these was when the VC attacked the American embassy in Saigon.
- The VC hoped that the local South Vietnamese population would rise up and support them in forcing the USA out of Vietnam.
- This was a move away from guerrilla warfare and towards conventional warfare – the VC were now fighting the USA on mass and in the open.
- The Tet Offensive initially caught America off guard and gave the VC some success.
- However the US soldiers quickly recovered and fought back killing 30,000 Viet Cong and regaining control.
- American military leaders such as General Westmoreland claimed (with some justification) that they were now winning the war and asked for more men to be sent out to 'finish the job'.
- However the Tet Offensive was a shock to the American public who believed media reports by Walter Cronkite suggesting that the VC were close to a final breakthrough, and that the war was unwinnable. Politicians refused to send over extra troops and the American advantage was lost.
- The Tet Offensive was a turning point in the Vietnam War – a military success but a media failure for the US army. This led to President Johnson's withdrawal from the 1968 election as he felt he had lost the public's support – *"If I've lost Cronkite, then I've lost middle America"*.

## **The My Lai Massacre**

- This was an important example of a Search and Destroy mission which went wrong.
- On 16<sup>th</sup> March 1968 the village of My Lai was incorrectly identified as a VC stronghold and attacked.
- US Soldiers of Charlie ('C') Company led by Lieu William Calley attacked the village and lost selfcontrol.
- Over 500 innocent villagers were killed, maimed or raped. Many of the men were out of their village working that day, so many of the victims were women and children. The youngest was a one year old baby, the oldest was an 80 year old woman.
- Atrocities such as My Lai had happened before in other wars, but this time it was caught on film.
- Once the event was publicised in the press by Seymour Hersh in 1971 and on TV, it became a key event in turning public opinion against the War.
- William Calley was put on trial, found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment. However many felt that he was a scapegoat (since 33 had been involved in the massacre) and he was later released from prison in 1974.

## Topic 3 – Ending the War in Vietnam

### The role of the media

- The Vietnam War has been called 'the first televised war'.
- In previous wars (such as WW2 just 20 years earlier) media technology made it difficult to capture events for newspapers, magazines or newsreel. In any case strict censorship was in place and government were able to control what was printed or broadcast.
- By the 1960s television had become an item in most homes. Cameras were smaller and more lightweight. This meant that battlefield images could be quickly captured and broadcast uncensored.
- Initially the media had supported the war, but as it dragged on and casualties increased, they became more sceptical.
- Images of the Vietnam War began to appear on the nightly TV news in the USA, and respected reporters such as TV news anchor-man Walter Cronkite, began to question whether the War was justified.
- Cronkite was believed to be the 'most trusted man in America' and his opinion could significantly influence the US population. His report following the Tet Offensive suggested that America, at best, could only achieve a stalemate.
- Many of the images made ordinary people question whether or not the USA should be involved in the war. Images such as napalm attacks on children made people question the morality of the War.
- Magazine images were important as well, public opinion around the world began to turn against the USA.
- A well known quote that is good to use in any answer on this topic is that '*The Vietnam War was lost in the living rooms of America and not on the battlefields of Vietnam*'.



### The rise of protest groups

- The role of the media meant that the harsh realities of war were broadcast at home and around the world for the first time – people began to protest against it.
- The first to protest were 'Draft dodgers' – the 'draft' was the compulsory call up to fight in the war (conscription).
- In 1965 the numbers conscripted were increased from 17,000 to 35,000 per month, and many started to refuse to go because they disagreed with the war. Open 'draft card burning' took place. □  
Many high profile draft dodgers, such as the boxer Mohammed Ali, refused to fight.
- University protests became commonplace as young people refused to fight and openly argued against the war – the most famous example came at Kent State University (see below).
- Protest songs became popular by artists such as Bob Dylan, John Lennon and Country Joe MacDonald.
- Returning soldiers (Veterans) began to openly protest – in 1967 'Veterans against the War' was founded. In 1967, 100,000 in Washington; 1968, 35,000 in New York, 1969, 500,000 at Woodstock and in 1971 300,000 veterans openly marched on Washington to protest.
- By the 1970s open protests against the war were commonplace.





## Nixon's last gambles to end the Vietnam War 1968 – 1971

- Richard Nixon replaced Lyndon B Johnson and became US president in January 1969. He won the election by promising to end the really unpopular Vietnam War and bring American soldiers home. However Nixon did not want to become the first American president to lose a major war. So he tried a number of last gambles to force communist North Vietnam to surrender. They all failed, but why?

	What was Nixon's plan?	Why did it fail?
<b>1968 Paris peace talks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Peace talks between the USA, South Vietnam and North Vietnam had already started in 1968 in Paris.</li> <li>When Nixon became president he continued with the peace talks to try to end the War.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>North Vietnam wanted to take over the South to form a united Communist Vietnam.</li> <li>The USA would never agree to this.</li> <li>The talks dragged on and went nowhere.</li> <li>No agreement was reached.</li> </ul>
<b>Vietnamisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vietnamisation was an attempt by President Nixon to deliver on his promises and return American soldiers home.</li> <li>He would gradually withdraw US soldiers from Vietnam and replace them with local soldiers from the South Vietnamese army (ARVN).</li> <li>The US would provide training, money and equipment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>400,000 US soldiers did return home.</li> <li>Money was spent on training and equipping South Vietnamese soldiers to replace them</li> <li>However the local ARVN soldiers (South Vietnamese Army) did not have the expertise needed to fight the North Vietnamese.</li> <li>Many deserted when faced by attacks from the VC.</li> </ul>
<b>1970 – 1971 The bombing of Laos and Cambodia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An attempt by President Nixon to bomb North Vietnamese bases and supply routes in the neighbouring countries of Laos and Cambodia.</li> <li>He hoped this would force the North Vietnamese to negotiate an end to the War.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The campaign had some initial success in Cambodia - 8,000 B52 missions forced many VC to leave.</li> <li>It was less successful in Laos.</li> <li>However many back home in the USA felt Nixon was expanding the War and began to protest.</li> <li>The Kent State University shootings and Veterans marches on Washington were a result.</li> <li>Extra pressure mounted on Nixon to end the War.</li> </ul>
<b>1972 – 1973 Operation Linebaker</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A last ditch attempt by President Nixon to bomb North Vietnam into surrender</li> <li>By the 1971 he saw this as his last chance to win the war.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This was another large scale indiscriminate bombing campaign like Operation Rolling Thunder before it.</li> <li>Again the bombing killed many innocent people and hit the wrong targets.</li> <li>It largely failed.</li> <li>However it did force the North Vietnamese to resume peace talks in Paris.</li> </ul>
<b>The Mad Man theory</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ In one last desperate attempt to make the North Vietnamese surrender, Nixon pretended he was mad and was prepared to drop a nuclear bomb on North Vietnam.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Nixon was bluffing and the North Vietnamese didn't fall for it.</li> </ul>

## Kent State University

- In May 1970 students at Kent State University in Ohio staged a protest about the bombing of Cambodia and at one point burned down an old building used by the local military training corps.
- In response, the Governor of Ohio ordered 800 National Guardsmen to enter the University to restore order.
- At one point the Guardsmen panicked and opened fire killing 4 students.
- The event had great impact – it went against the US traditional right of free speech and it also seemed as though US soldiers were now also killing their own young people on American soil.
- Much negative media coverage followed sparking further waves of University strikes and protest marches across the USA of up to four million students.
- Protest songs such as 'Ohio' by Neil Young proved to be popular with protestors.



## The Watergate Affair

- Richard Nixon had become US president in 1968 and another election was due to take place in 1972.
- Nixon was under pressure to end the war in Vietnam as it was becoming really unpopular in the early 1970s. He had delivered on some of his promises such as bringing US soldiers home in his policy of Vietnamisation – but many wanted him to end the war as quickly as possible.
- Yet Nixon had also just authorised the bombing of Laos and Cambodia was being accused of widening the scope of the war.
- During the 1972 presidential election campaign a burglary took place at the Watergate Hotel in Washington which was being used as a base by the Democrat opponents of Nixon.
- Despite denials when Nixon publically said 'I am not a crook', he was implicated in the Watergate Affair and forced to resign (impeached) in August 1974. He remains the only ever US president to have been forced to resign.
- This weakened the USA's position in Vietnam as, one of the few remaining supporters of the War (Nixon) was removed from power.

## The Paris Peace Conference and the Fall of Saigon

- In an attempt to end the war, peace talks between the USA and North Vietnam had been taking place since 1968. Nixon's heavy bombing of North Vietnam in December 1972 (operation Linebacker) and rumours of the 'madman' theory brought the North Vietnamese back to the negotiating table. In January 1973 peace talks resumed.
- Henry Kissenger represented the USA at the talks and Le Duc Tho represented North Vietnam.
- The Paris Peace Conference, agreed that all US soldiers should withdraw from Vietnam in return for the safe return of all US Prisoners of War (POWs) and by April 1973 they had all returned home, leaving a small number of military advisors in South Vietnam.
- However, once the vast majority of American soldiers had left South Vietnam in 1973, it left the country vulnerable to attack from the North.
- In December 1974 the North Vietnamese Army (VC), broke their promise from the peace conference and then fully invaded the South and made fast progress.
- In April 1975 the VC entered Saigon the capital of South Vietnam, and remaining US officials were airlifted out by helicopter and the War was over.

