

The United States Gets Involved in Vietnam

Why did the United States increase its military involvement in Vietnam?

Introduction



The Vietnam Veterans Memorial honors the killed or missing soldiers of the Vietnam War.

Near the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.'s Constitution Gardens sits a long, sloping wall made of polished black granite, engraved with thousands of names. Somber visitors file past this stark monument at a funereal pace. Here and there, some stop to touch a familiar name, stand in contemplation or quiet prayer, or even shed tears. Some leave letters, flowers, or personal objects, including medals, at the base of the wall.

The official name of this monument is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, more commonly known as "the Wall." The Wall lists the names of U.S.

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soldiers killed or missing in action during the Vietnam War. The first two men listed, Chester Ovnand and Dale Buis, were the first U.S. soldiers to die in Vietnam, according to official records. Killed during a surprise attack on their camp in 1959, Ovnand and Buis were both noncombat soldiers. At that time, few Americans paid attention to this faraway conflict, but reporter Stanley Karnow, who wrote a brief account of the soldiers' deaths, would later mention their names at a congressional hearing. He said, "I could never have imagined that these were going to be at the head of more than 58,000 names on the Wall."

Today, many young people visit the Wall, some of whom wonder why a list of names etched in stone has such a strong impact on other, older visitors. They are curious why the memory of this war provokes not only tears, but also anger. The answer is complicated, and is embedded in painful memories of loss, Cold War politics, and social rebellion. It concerns American GIs fighting and dying in a war far from home for reasons many did not entirely understand.

Before the United States entered the Vietnam War, politicians and their advisers argued about the wisdom of getting drawn into the conflict. Then, during the war, Americans bitterly debated U.S. involvement. The war morally divided the country unlike any issue since the Civil War. Many still ask the question: Did the United States have good justification for becoming involved in Vietnam?



The Vietnam Veterans Memorial lists the names of 58,253 Americans killed or declared missing in the Vietnam War. For many Vietnam veterans, the Wall is a place for healing and remembrance. Here, they can honor the loss of close friends and family members, and grapple with their wartime experiences. A replica of the Wall, above, was commissioned for a traveling exhibit.



Ho Chi Minh was president of North Vietnam from 1945 to 1969. He fought for an independent, unified Vietnam. He initially sought support from the United States, but his communist ideology aroused U.S. hostility. Though many considered Ho Chi Minh a wellintentioned “freedom fighter,” he also ordered the killing of thousands of North Vietnamese landowners as “class enemies.”

1. Three Presidents Increase Involvement in Vietnam

From the 1880s until World War II, Vietnam was part of French Indochina, a French colony in Southeast Asia that included Cambodia and Laos. During World War II, Japanese troops occupied part of French

Indochina. However, Vietnam also had a 2,000-year history of resisting foreign rule, a history that Vietnamese communist Ho Chi Minh used to incite nationalist sentiment in 1941. In northern Vietnam, he helped found a group to oppose foreign occupation. Members of this independence movement became known as the **Viet Minh**.

On September 2, 1945, the day that Japan formally surrendered to the Allies, Vietnam declared its independence in a speech delivered by Ho Chi Minh. In what seemed like an appeal for U.S. support, his address opened with phrasing from the Declaration of Independence: "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." Ho Chi Minh concluded his speech with words that might have stirred the hearts of the original American patriots. "The entire Vietnamese people," he said, "are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their independence and liberty." Indeed, his supporters would prove their determination over the next three decades. They first fought France when it attempted to reestablish colonial rule and would later fight the United States, which viewed them as a communist enemy. In the early stages of the war, three U.S. presidents deepened the nation's involvement in Vietnam.

Truman Chooses Sides in the First Indochina War The Viet Minh called their country the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, named the northern city of Hanoi as their capital, and declared Ho Chi Minh their president. France refused to accept Vietnamese independence and endeavored to eliminate the Viet Minh. First, French troops drove the rebels out of the southern city of Saigon, the French colonial capital. Afterward, the French launched attacks on northern Viet Minh strongholds. In November 1946, French warships opened fire on the port city of Haiphong, killing some 6,000 Vietnamese civilians. The Viet Minh retaliated the following month, attacking French ground forces. These incidents marked the beginning of the **First Indochina War**, which would continue for eight years.

Some American officials viewed this conflict as a war between a colonial power and nationalists who aspired to govern themselves and urged France to allow complete independence for Vietnam. Other opinions, including that of President Truman, were more influenced by Cold War politics. These Americans believed that the Viet Minh intended to establish a communist dictatorship. Although Truman suspected the French might be fighting to preserve their empire, he chose to see their efforts as a noble battle against communism instead.

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For Truman, containing communism outweighed supporting a nationalist movement. By 1951, thousands of U.S. soldiers had already died trying to halt the spread of communism in Korea. Truman was determined to block further communist advance in Asia, so he called for an increase in military aid to French Indochina. This aid increased from \$10 million in 1950 to over \$100 million in 1951. By 1954, the United States was funding 80 percent of the cost of the war in Indochina.

Eisenhower Considers Increased American Involvement Despite U.S. aid, the First Indochina War persisted. The French controlled the cities in both northern and southern Vietnam, but the Viet Minh dominated the countryside. The Viet Minh often took control of rural villages by assassinating local leaders with close ties to the French. They gained the support of Vietnam's peasants, about 80 percent of the country's population, partly by giving them land taken from the wealthy.



The key battle of the First Indochina War occurred between March and May 1954, when Viet Minh troops attacked the French stronghold at Dien Bien Phu. After the French lost the battle, they began to withdraw their forces from Vietnam. At this time, President Eisenhower first postulated the domino theory, expressing his concerns regarding the spread of communism in Southeast Asia.

The decisive battle of the war began in March 1954, when the Viet Minh launched a surprise attack on a large French military base at Dien Bien Phu, in the mountains of northern Vietnam. The Viet Minh quickly surrounded the base. By April, the more than 12,000 French soldiers at Dien Bien Phu appeared ready to surrender, creating a dilemma for Truman's successor, President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Because a French loss at Dien Bien Phu might spell their ultimate defeat, Eisenhower briefly considered sending B-29 aircraft to bomb Viet Minh positions. He did not want to act alone, however, desiring a commitment from Britain and other allies to take unified military action against communist expansion in Vietnam and elsewhere in Indochina.

During a news conference on April 7, 1954, Eisenhower warned that if Vietnam fell to communism, the rest of Southeast Asia would topple like a "row of dominoes." Even Japan, he said, might be lost. This **domino theory** would later motivate U.S. intervention in Vietnam, but now, mere months after the end of the Korean War, neither the United States nor its allies were prepared to fight another ground war in Asia. Senator John F. Kennedy reflected Congress's stance when he said, "To pour money, materiel, and men into the jungles of Indochina without at least a remote prospect of victory would be dangerously futile and self-destructive." **Materiel** is military equipment and supplies. Other policymakers feared that direct military intervention might trigger a war with Vietnam's communist neighbor, China.

On May 7, 1954, the Viet Minh finally overran the French base, ending the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and shattering French morale. The French, lacking domestic support for the war efforts, began to withdraw troops from northern Vietnam. The final act of the First Indochina War would be resolved at a peace conference in Geneva, Switzerland.



The Geneva Accords of 1954 split Vietnam temporarily at the 17th parallel. The French occupied South Vietnam, while the Viet Minh moved into North Vietnam. The Viet Minh left a political network in the south, however, to secure victory in the 1956 national unity election. They also left weapons hidden in South Vietnam.

Geneva Peace Conference Splits Vietnam in Two French and Viet Minh representatives began talks in Geneva the day after the French loss at Dien Bien Phu. France wanted to maintain some control over southern Vietnam, while the Viet Minh demanded that France leave the country completely and recognize the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as an independent nation.

As negotiations dragged on, China and the Soviet Union pressured the

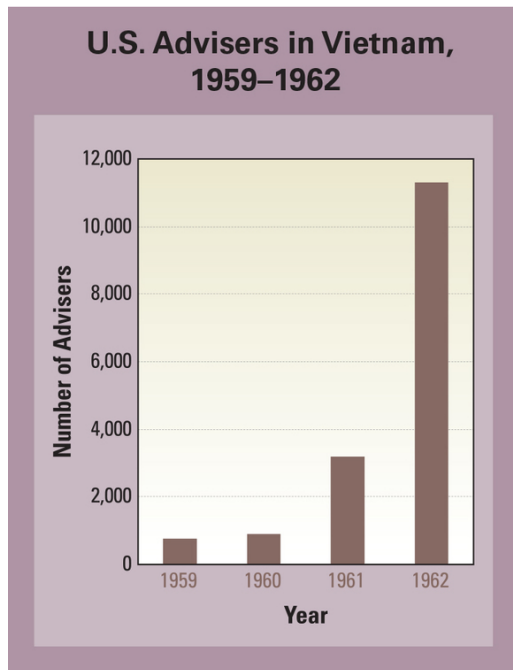
Viet Minh to compromise so that they did not antagonize the United States, fearing that the country would intervene militarily. In July 1954, the French and Viet Minh signed the **Geneva Accords**, which ended the fighting and split Vietnam temporarily along the 17th parallel. The Viet Minh moved north of that line, while the French withdrew to the south. The accords also scheduled national elections for 1956 in order to reunify Vietnam.

As France prepared to withdraw from Vietnam, the United States began to move in, since American officials believed they could form a strong noncommunist state in South Vietnam. In 1955, the United States helped put an anticommunist South Vietnamese leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, into power. Diem began to build an army with the assistance of Eisenhower, who provided some 350 U.S. **military advisers**—noncombat specialists who train and equip another nation's soldiers. Chester Ovnand and Dale Buis, the first U.S. soldiers killed in Vietnam, were military advisers.

As the unification election approached, Ho Chi Minh was favored to win. With U.S. approval, Diem blocked the national vote, rejecting the Geneva Accords, and held elections only in the south. In October 1955, he declared himself president of South Vietnam, began to return land to wealthy landlords, and started drafting young men from the countryside into his army. Diem ruthlessly attacked opponents, jailing thousands of people without charging them with a crime or putting them on trial.

Viet Minh communists in the south launched a guerrilla war against Diem's brutal government, using terrorism and assassination tactics. In 1960, the Viet Minh formed a group called the National Liberation Front and invited all opponents of Diem to join. Diem referred to the group as **Viet Cong**, slang for "Vietnamese communists," even though many of its members were noncommunists. At this time, North Vietnam was supplying and supporting these rebels, setting the stage for the Second Indochina War, also known as the Vietnam War.

Kennedy Tries to Prop Up South Vietnam The Viet Cong **insurgency**, or rebellion, threatened to overwhelm the South Vietnamese army. Like many South Vietnamese government leaders, numerous South Vietnamese army officers were incompetent and corrupt. Some officers even sold weapons to the Viet Cong. When Kennedy became president in 1961, he sent an inspection team to South Vietnam to evaluate the situation.



In the early 1950s, the United States began to send military advisers to Vietnam to assist the French. The number of U.S. advisers in Vietnam increased rapidly in the early 1960s. These advisers were not combat troops, but they played a key role in the military buildup in Southeast Asia.

Kennedy originally opposed U.S. military intervention to assist the French, but his opinions regarding the strategic importance of Vietnam eventually shifted. In 1956, he proposed his own version of the domino theory, calling Vietnam “the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone in the arch, the finger in the dike.” As president, he favored policy of containing communism.

When Kennedy’s inspection team returned from Vietnam, they informed the president that South Vietnam was losing the war. They recommended increasing economic and military aid, including in the form of U.S. combat troops. Some political advisers urged Kennedy to pull out of Vietnam completely. Unsure of the best strategy, JFK chose to send more weapons, equipment, technicians, and military advisers.

By mid-1962, the number of U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam had soared to around 9,000. JFK resisted calls to send U.S. soldiers into combat. His actions were intended, according to one policy memo, to help Diem's army "win its own war."

Meanwhile, Diem was losing not only the war, but also the respect of his people. Besides being corrupt and brutal, Diem discriminated against Buddhists, the majority of Vietnamese citizens. In May 1963, at a Buddhist rally opposing Diem's policies, South Vietnamese police killed nine demonstrators. In protest, several Buddhist monks publicly set themselves on fire. Kennedy and other U.S. officials acknowledged that Diem had failed as a leader and tacitly approved a coup staged by South Vietnamese generals in November of that year. Diem was assassinated as he tried to flee Saigon.



In 1963, photographs of South Vietnamese Buddhist monks setting themselves on fire shocked the world. The monks were protesting the corruption and brutality of the Diem regime. Although Diem had wrested power with U.S. support, his leadership embarrassed the United States and prompted his overthrow.



The Ho Chi Minh Trail was actually a network of some 12,000 miles of trails. Soldiers and supplies traveled the route on foot and by bicycle, oxcart, and truck. The trip south, through the rugged mountains of Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam, could take as long as three months.

2. Johnson Inherits the Vietnam Problem

Three weeks after Diem's death, Kennedy was also assassinated, and the growing conflict in Vietnam was transferred to the new president, Lyndon B. Johnson. LBJ thought the situation in Vietnam was a potential quagmire that could suck the United States into protracted conflict, but he also believed that communists had to be stopped. In May 1964, LBJ expressed his ambivalence toward Vietnam to an adviser: "I don't think it's worth fighting for, and I don't think we can get out."

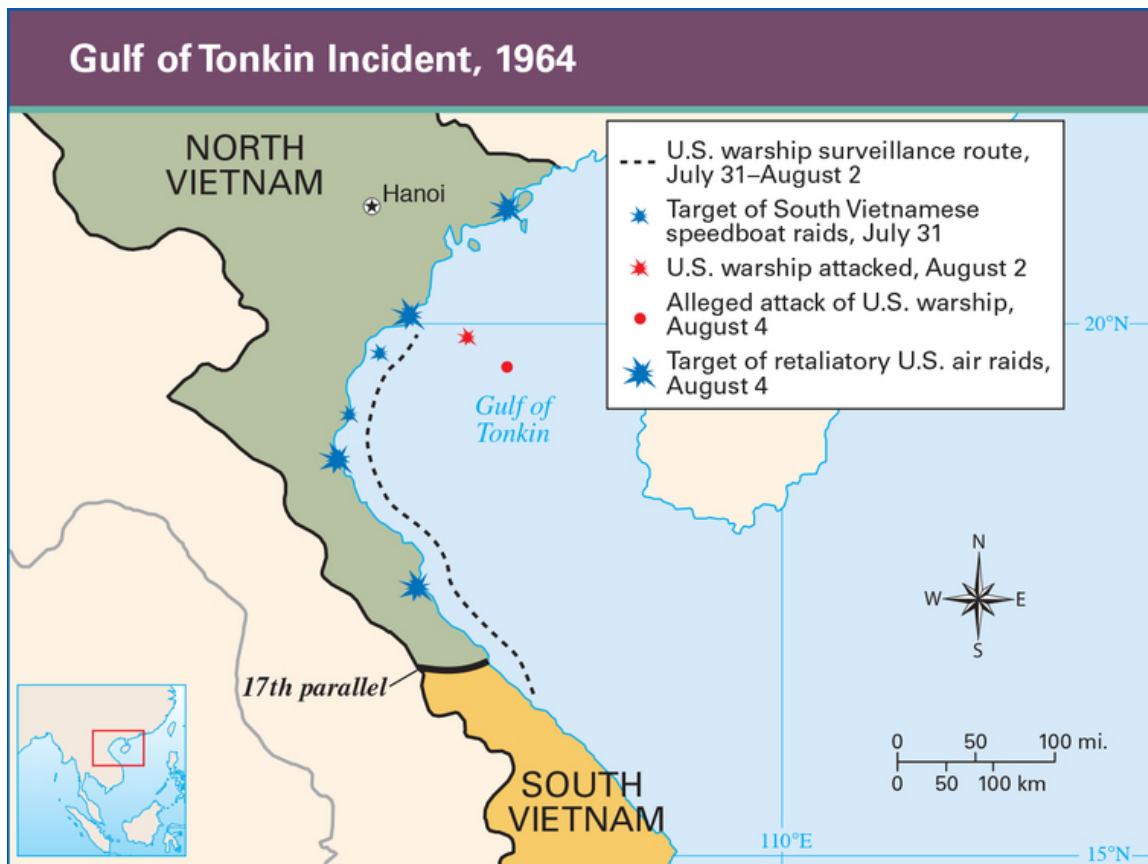
LBJ was a politician who knew both how to get things accomplished in Congress and how to win elections. During the 1964 presidential race, his opponent, Barry Goldwater, insisted that the United States take a more active role in the war. Johnson responded, “We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.” LBJ’s moderate stance on Vietnam boosted his voter appeal. Yet the president had already devised plans to **escalate**, or increase, U.S. involvement in the war. In March 1964, he instructed the military to prepare to bomb North Vietnam.

Gulf of Tonkin Incident Riles the United States For years, North Vietnam sent weapons and supplies south to the Viet Cong over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This network of footpaths, roads, bridges, and tunnels passed through the mountainous terrain of eastern Laos and Cambodia. In mid-1964, regular units of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) began traveling south along this route. Johnson knew that South Vietnam’s weak and ineffective army would have difficulty defeating this new offensive. The United States had to escalate involvement, he believed, or risk losing Vietnam to communism.

In July 1964, Johnson approved covert attacks on radar stations along North Vietnam’s coast. The CIA planned the operation, but South Vietnamese soldiers in speedboats conducted the raids. U.S. Navy warships used electronic **surveillance**, or close observation, to locate the radar sites. In response to the raids, NVA patrol boats retaliated on August 2, firing machine guns and torpedoes at a U.S. destroyer located in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of North Vietnam. The ship was undamaged.

LBJ chose not to retaliate further, but sent a message to Hanoi warning the North Vietnamese government that more “unprovoked” attacks would trigger “grave consequences.” On the stormy night of August 4, in the Gulf of Tonkin, American sailors believed their destroyer was under attack once more. Although they never saw any enemy boats, the sailors fired back. In fact, no attack had occurred.

Officials back in Washington, D.C., promptly analyzed accounts of the incident. From erroneous evidence, these officials—and the president—concluded that a second attack had occurred. LBJ immediately ordered air strikes against North Vietnamese naval bases, and implored Congress the next day on August 5, to approve the air strikes and grant him power to subdue future threats.



The Gulf of Tonkin Incident provoked the United States' escalated involvement in Vietnam. On August 2, 1964, North Vietnamese boats fired on a U.S. ship, causing insignificant damage. Two days later, false reports of a second attack prompted the United States to launch air strikes against North Vietnam.

Two days later, Congress passed the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**, which allowed the president "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was not a legal declaration of war, but it did, in effect, enable the president to expand the U.S. role in the Vietnamese conflict.

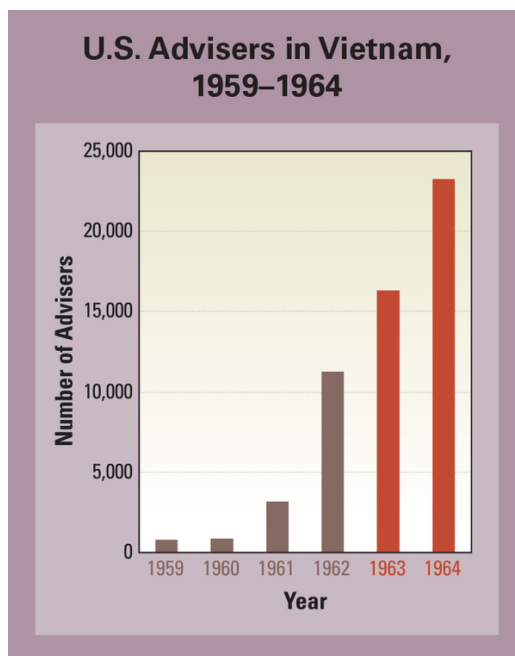
Only two members of Congress, both in the Senate, voted against the resolution. One of the dissenters, Alaska's Ernest Gruening, explained his opposition in a speech on the Senate floor:

[Authorizing this measure] means sending our American boys into combat in a war in which we have no business, which is not our war, into which we have been misguidedly drawn, which is steadily being escalated. This resolution is

a further authorization for escalation unlimited.

—Senator Ernest Gruening, August 1964

The United States Reaches a Crisis Point in Vietnam The escalation that Senator Gruening foresaw began on February 7, 1965, after the Viet Cong attacked a U.S. air base in the south. LBJ then ordered the bombing of barracks and military staging areas north of the 17th parallel. “We have kept our guns over the mantel and our shells in the cupboard for a long time now,” the president said of his decision. “I can’t ask our American soldiers out there to continue to fight with one hand behind their backs.”



The number of U.S. military advisers in Vietnam continued to grow in the mid-1960s. By 1964, there were more than twice as many advisers in the country as there had been two years previous. This figure was also 30 times that of 1959.

The February bombing raid led to a series of massive air strikes as part of Operation Rolling Thunder. Most of the president’s advisers believed that this action was necessary to bolster the Army of the Republic of

Vietnam (ARVN) and to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam. But the South Vietnamese government, plagued by coups and corruption, was in turmoil and had little support outside Saigon and other large cities. The military was also in rough shape because ARVN units were rarely successful against the enemy forces roaming the countryside. ARVN soldiers deserted by the thousands each month.

In addition to attacking staging areas, U.S. planes began intensive bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, hoping to sever supplies and soldiers streaming in from the north. However, the flow of men and materiel from the north continued, as did the growing war, so the Johnson administration elected to reexamine U.S. policy in Vietnam.

Johnson's Advisers Debate Increased Involvement President Johnson supported a limited war to secure South Vietnam's independence. His foreign policy team debated the necessary actions to achieve that objective.

Most of LBJ's political advisers were hawks, or people who favored expanding U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. To them, Vietnam's defense was crucial to the broader struggle to contain communism. In policy debates, the hawks—including Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and top military leaders—argued in favor of sending U.S. ground troops to Vietnam to escalate the war. They invoked the well-known domino theory to justify their argument, asserting that the fall of Vietnam would trigger the spread of communism from Cambodia and Laos to the rest of Southeast Asia and beyond.



President Johnson relied on advisers like Defense Secretary Robert McNamara to help formulate Vietnam policy. Here, McNamara discusses Vietnam during a press conference in 1965. Like many of LBJ's advisers, McNamara was a hawk who favored sending more U.S. troops to Vietnam. Other advisers, called doves, urged the president to seek peaceful means to resolve the Vietnam conflict.

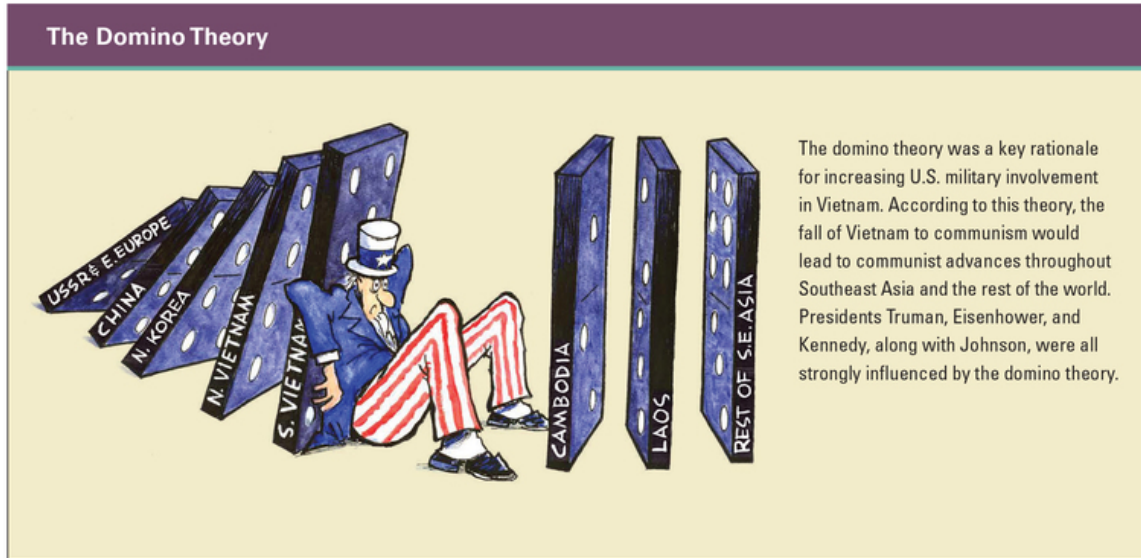
The hawks also argued against a policy of appeasement. They cited the Munich Pact of 1938, which had been intended to appease Hitler but ultimately enabled the continued aggression that led to World War II. LBJ concurred, stating, "The central lesson of our time is that the appetite of aggression is never satisfied. To withdraw from one battlefield means only to prepare for the next."

The hawks' third argument emphasized the importance of American credibility, claiming that allies must be able to rely on the United States, the leader of the free world, to support them in times of crisis. Only then, the hawks claimed, would the United States receive allied support in the worldwide struggle against communism. Furthermore, they believed the United States had to demonstrate its willingness to challenge communist aggression and threats to U.S. power. A similar argument was purely political—during the Cold War, politicians were expected to take a firm stance against the communist threat. LBJ could

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not afford to lose domestic support by being branded “soft on communism.”

Not all of LBJ’s advisers were hawks. Some, like Undersecretary of State George Ball, were doves, or advocates of achieving a peaceful resolution in Vietnam through negotiation and compromise. In previous policy debates, they had argued against widespread bombing. Now, they argued against escalation and sending in U.S. combat troops.





Some critics of the Vietnam War believed that the conflict could not be managed successfully. This cartoon shows President Johnson clinging desperately to the tail of a tiger, representing Vietnam, as it whips him through space, implying that Vietnam could not be controlled. LBJ's advisers who opposed U.S. involvement in Vietnam, citing the conflict's insignificant interest to the nation, were known as doves.

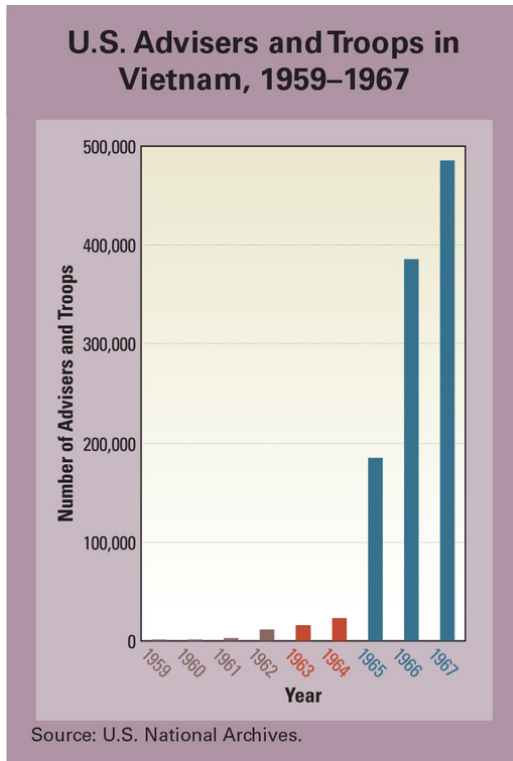
The doves contended that furthering the war would not guarantee victory, pointing to the Korean War to assert that the war in Vietnam was unwinnable. In Korea, U.S. troops had fought a costly war for three years, ultimately achieving little. The doves predicted that fighting a guerrilla war in the unfamiliar jungles of Vietnam would prove even more difficult and deadly than the Korean War. In addition, the expense of such a war would undermine LBJ's Great Society programs, his policy priority.

The doves also claimed that involvement in the war was not in the

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nation's interest, insisting that the United States had no business entangling itself in another country's civil war. In addition, they questioned Vietnam's strategic value to the United States. The United States' significant investment in Southeast Asia, doves argued, diverted attention from more important issues both at home and abroad.

Furthermore, doves feared that direct U.S. involvement in Vietnam might draw China or the Soviet Union into the conflict since both countries were supplying North Vietnam with military aid. In addition, China was building an air base just inside its North Vietnamese border. The doves were concerned that China might challenge U.S. ground troops with its own combat forces. They believed increased U.S. involvement would not reassure the nation's allies but would instead ignite their anxieties over a major war erupting in the region.



After the first U.S. soldiers arrived in Vietnam in 1965, troop numbers increased rapidly. Four months after the first landing, the number of American men drafted into the armed forces doubled to 35,000 a month to meet the demand for soldiers in Vietnam.

3. Johnson Americanizes the War

After weighing advice regarding American involvement in Vietnam, Johnson decided to deploy U.S. troops. On March 8, 1965, about 3,500 U.S. marines waded ashore on a beach near Da Nang, South Vietnam. This was the first time U.S. combat troops set foot in Vietnam. The marines received a warm greeting from local officials, and several Vietnamese girls placed garlands of flowers around the soldiers' necks.

The marines did not pause to celebrate, however, and immediately began digging foxholes on the beach, preparing to defend against a Viet Cong attack. The next day, they continued unloading equipment and supplies, including tanks equipped with flamethrowers. The marines were ordered to defend the air base at Da Nang, the home base of the bombers for Operation Rolling Thunder. Their orders soon changed, and they were sent on patrol to find and eliminate enemy forces instead. These search-and-destroy missions led to the first firefights with Viet Cong guerrillas. LBJ hid the military shift to combat tactics from the American people until the following month.

Johnson Dramatically Increases Troop Levels By the end of April, President Johnson had approved the dispatch of 60,000 additional U.S. combat troops to Vietnam. After conferring with his advisers, LBJ publicly announced in July that he was boosting U.S. troop levels to 125,000 men. “We cannot be defeated by force of arms,” he said. “We will stand in Vietnam.” LBJ’s words underscored the United States’ decision to undertake a full-scale war in Vietnam. Yet the president had not officially declared war, nor did he ask Congress for permission to send more troops. LBJ cited the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to justify his authority.

Over the following months, the air war in Vietnam intensified while the pace of the ground war accelerated. The first major assault by U.S. ground troops, called Operation Starlite, occurred in August 1965. The operation targeted 1,500 Viet Cong who were preparing to attack a U.S. air base near the coast. The United States commenced fighting with bomb and artillery attacks on Viet Cong positions. Helicopters flew many of the 5,500 U.S. marines to the battle site, while ships transported others ashore. Supported by tanks and fighter planes, the marines successfully defeated the enemy force, killing more than 600 Viet Cong—only 45 U.S. soldiers died.



U.S. combat troops flooded into Vietnam after initial ground contact in 1965. As the war became Americanized, the South Vietnamese played a less significant role. Here, U.S. troops navigate a Vietnamese jungle in 1969.

The strategy of transporting troops by helicopter while battering the enemy with overwhelming firepower would continue throughout the war, as would the lopsided number of casualties. Although many U.S. and ARVN soldiers died in Vietnam, four times as many enemy troops perished. Despite significant losses, however, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese managed to recruit enough fighters to continue the war.

The United States relied on ever-increasing numbers of ground troops to sweep through jungles and rice paddies to root out the enemy. U.S. combat soldiers numbered more than 184,000 by the end of 1965, a figure that doubled in 1966 to 385,000. By late 1967, nearly 500,000 Americans were actively serving in Vietnam, while more continued to stream into the country.

An American War The landing of the first U.S. combat forces in 1965 altered the Vietnam conflict. The United States assumed the main

responsibility for fighting the war, adopting a two-pronged strategy. First, U.S. marines would seize key cities and other vital sites along the coast, and transform them into modern military bases. These bases would then be used to launch search-and-destroy missions against the Viet Cong. From this point onward, the South Vietnamese would play only a supporting role in the conflict.

This strategic change represented the Americanization of the Vietnam War. Horace Busby, one of LBJ's advisers, explained, "This is no longer South Vietnam's war. We are no longer advisers. The stakes are no longer South Vietnam's. The war is ours."

Summary

After World War II, nationalist and communist rebels in the French colony of Vietnam fought for their independence. A 1954 agreement ending this colonial war split the country into communist North Vietnam and democratic South Vietnam. When France pulled out the following year, the United States stepped in to prop up South Vietnam. Over the years, American involvement grew and eventually led to the introduction of U.S. ground forces.

First Indochina War In this first phase of the conflict, which lasted from 1946 to 1954, Ho Chi Minh led Viet Minh insurgents in the struggle to end French rule in Vietnam.

Geneva Accords The First Indochina War formally ended with a 1954 agreement known as the Geneva Accords. The accords split Vietnam into northern and southern halves but called for elections in 1956 to reunify the country. The United States supported South Vietnam financially and militarily.

Viet Cong Insurgents in the south, known as the Viet Cong, worked to overthrow the nominally democratic but corrupt government of South Vietnam. The Viet Cong received aid from communist North Vietnam.

Gulf of Tonkin Resolution An alleged attack on U.S. ships off the coast of North Vietnam led Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. This resolution gave President Johnson broad powers to expand U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Massive air strikes against North Vietnam ensued.

Ho Chi Minh Trail By 1965, North Vietnamese Army troops were moving south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail to assist the Viet Cong. The United States feared that South Vietnam would fall without stronger, direct support.

Americanization In March 1965, the United States began sending ground troops to fight the Vietnam War. The war quickly became an American conflict.