



The Vietnam War

A History in Documents



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Timeline

Sept. 2, 1945
Ho Chi Minh proclaims the Democratic Republic of Vietnam

Sept. 26, 1945
First American, OSS officer A. Peter Dewey, is killed in Vietnam

Dec. 19, 1946
French-Vietnamese talks break down; first Indochina War breaks out

June 5, 1948
Bao Dai named head of state by the French

May 1, 1950
President Harry S. Truman offers U.S. aid to the French in Indochina

Dec. 30, 1950
The United States, France, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos sign a Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement

May 7, 1954
Vietnamese defeat the French at Dien Bien Phu

May 8, 1954
Geneva Conference convenes

July 21, 1954
Geneva Accords signed

Sept. 8, 1954
The United States establishes the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)

July 6, 1955
Ngo Dinh Diem renounces the Geneva Accords

Dec. 20, 1960
National Liberation Front (NLF) established

Dec. 31, 1961
Approximately 3,200 U.S. servicemen in Vietnam

Dec. 31, 1962
Approximately 11,300 U.S. servicemen in Vietnam

Nov. 2, 1963
Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu are assassinated

Nov. 23, 1963
President John F. Kennedy is assassinated

Dec. 31, 1963
Approximately 16,300 U.S. servicemen in Vietnam

Aug. 2, 1964
U.S.S. *Maddox* attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin

Aug. 4, 1964
U.S.S. *Turner Joy* allegedly attacked in

the Gulf of Tonkin

Aug. 7, 1964
U.S. Congress passes the Tonkin Gulf Resolution

Dec. 31, 1964
Approximately 23,300 U.S. servicemen in Vietnam

Mar. 2, 1965
Operation Rolling Thunder unleashed

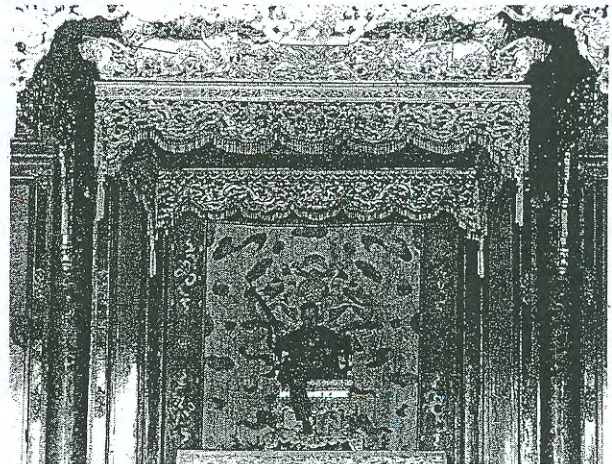
Mar. 24, 1965
First "teach-in" against the war on a college campus (University of Michigan)

Dec. 31, 1965
Approximately 184,300 U.S. servicemen in Vietnam as well as 22,500 "allied" troops

Dec. 31, 1966
Approximately 385,200 U.S. servicemen in Vietnam



Sept. 3, 1967 Nguyen Van Thieu "elected" president of South Vietnam in a dubious electoral process	Sept. 3, 1969 Ho Chi Minh dies	Oct. 11, 1972 Kissinger and his Vietnamese counterparts reach an agreement to end the war	Feb.-Mar., 1973 North Vietnam releases U.S. prisoners of war
Dec. 31, 1967 Approximately 485,600 U.S. servicemen in Vietnam	Dec. 31, 1969 Approximately 475,200 U.S. servicemen in Vietnam	Dec. 18-29, 1972 The United States launches massive bombing of Hanoi (the "Christmas bombing") to convince the South Vietnamese that the secretly negotiated peace treaty will not mean an end to U.S. military support	Aug. 14, 1973 All U.S. military operations in Indochina end
Jan. 30, 1968 Tet offensive launched	Feb. 20, 1970 Henry Kissinger begins secret peace talks with the North Vietnamese in Paris	Dec. 31, 1972 Approximately 24,000 U.S. servicemen in Vietnam	Dec. 31, 1973 Approximately 50 U.S. servicemen in Vietnam
Mar. 16, 1968 My Lai massacre occurs	Apr. 30, 1970 The United States invades Cambodia	Jan. 27, 1973 The United States, South Vietnam, National Liberation Front, and North Vietnam sign a peace treaty in Paris	Dec. 13, 1974 Battles break out between the armies of North and South Vietnam
May 12, 1968 Paris Peace Talks begin	Dec. 31, 1970 Approximately 334,600 U.S. servicemen in Vietnam		Apr. 12, 1975 President Nguyen Van Thieu resigns
Dec. 31, 1968 Approximately 536,000 U.S. servicemen in Vietnam	June 13, 1971 <i>New York Times</i> publishes the Pentagon Papers		Apr. 29-30, 1975 North Vietnamese troops take Saigon and the war ends
Jan. 22, 1969 Richard M. Nixon becomes President of	Dec. 31, 1971 Approximately 156,800 U.S. service-		



Glossary

ARVN—Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South). Regular army units of the south.

attrition—A policy or strategy with the goal of killing as many of the enemy as possible, rather than fighting for territory.

body count—enemy casualty statistics regularly reported by the military to the press as a measure of U.S. military success; the numerical expression of a policy of attrition.

casualty—A person either wounded or killed in action. The general category includes prisoners and those who later died of their wounds.

CIA—Central Intelligence Agency of the United States.

DMZ—Demilitarized zone along the 17th parallel dividing South Vietnam from North Vietnam.

DRV—The Democratic Republic of Vietnam; capitol in Hanoi.

frag killing—one's own officer, sometimes with a fragmentation grenade.

Free Fire Zone—Area from which friendly civilians were supposed to have been cleared; anyone found may be killed.

GVN—Government of Vietnam; capitol in Saigon (see also RVN).

KIA—Killed in action.

MACV—Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.

MIA—Missing in action.

NLF—National Liberation Front; the umbrella organization formed in the South in 1961 to fight against the Diem government and the United States. Commonly referred to as the Viet Cong (VC) by the U.S. and the South Vietnamese government.

North Vietnam—The colloquial name for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

PAVN—People's Army of Vietnam (North); regular army units from the north, sometimes referred to as the NVA.

Pentagon Papers—The secret history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967; leaked to the press by Daniel Ellsberg in 1971.

POW—Prisoner of war.

punji stick—Sharpened bamboo sticks that were stuck in the ground and used as booby traps in the countryside by NLF forces.

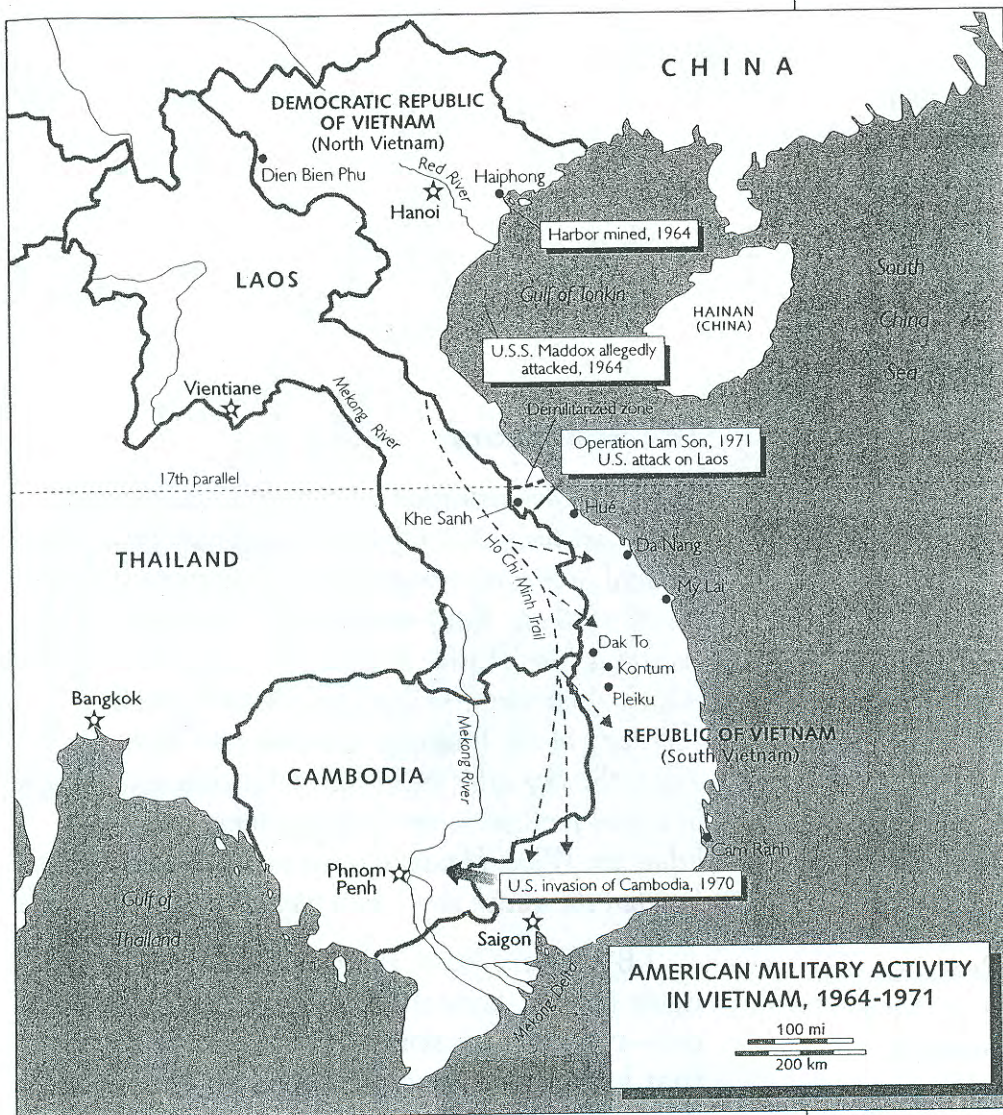
RVN—The Republic of Vietnam; capital in Saigon.

search and destroy—The active pursuit of guerillas in the countryside, one aspect of the strategy of attrition.

South Vietnam—Colloquial name for the Republic of Vietnam.

Viet Cong (VC)—"Vietnamese Communists"; phrase used by the U.S. and the Saigon government to refer to the NLF.

vietnamization—The gradual transition of military ground control in South Vietnam from American troops to South Vietnamese troops.



On August 7, 1964, Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, allowing Johnson to increase involvement in Vietnam. **1.**

Whereas naval units of the Communist regime in Vietnam, in violation of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and of international law, have deliberately and repeatedly attacked United States naval vessels lawfully present in international waters, and have thereby created a serious threat to international peace; and

Whereas these attacks are part of a deliberate and systematic campaign of aggression that the Communist regime in North Vietnam has been waging against its neighbors and the nations joined with them in the collective defense of their freedom; and

Whereas the United States is assisting the peoples of southeast Asia to protect their freedom and has no territorial, military or political ambitions in that area, but desires only that these peoples should be left in peace to work out their own destinies in their own way: Now, therefore, be it Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

That the Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as commander in chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.

Hard Questions

2.

The American media generally reported what administration officials told them to report. In this unusual case, an NBC-TV journalist, Elie Abe, questions Secretary of State Dean Rusk about why the Vietnamese would launch an allegedly unprovoked attack.

Question (Elie Abel): What explanation, then, can you come up with for this unprovoked attack?

Answer (Dean Rusk): Well I haven't been able, quite frankly, to come to a fully satisfactory explanation. There is a great gulf of understanding between that world and our world, ideological in character. They see what we think of as the real world in wholly different terms. Their very processes of logic are different. So that it's very difficult to enter into each other's minds across that great ideological gulf. I can't come to a rational explanation of it. Perhaps they will offer one some day. But thus far we have to take it as we see it. And the essential fact was that our vessels were being attacked on the high seas by these boats and we had to do something about it. . . .

The Real Story

3.

Publicly, administration officials were unwilling to admit that the U.S. Navy destroyers may have been engaged in provocative military action against North Vietnam. But privately they knew better. This excerpt is from President Johnson's conversation with Robert Anderson, President Eisenhower's former Secretary of the Treasury, took place on August 3, 1964, the day after the U.S.S. Maddox was engaged in a brief firefight in the Gulf of Tonkin and a day before the White House began a public campaign arguing that the attack was "unprovoked."

LBJ: There have been some covert operations in that area that we have been carrying on—blowing up some bridges and things of that kind, roads and so forth. So I imagine they wanted to put a stop to it. So they . . . fired and we respond immediately with five-inch [artillery shells] from the destroyer and with planes overhead. And we . . . knock one of 'em out and cripple the other two. Then we go right back where we were with that destroyer and with another one, plus plenty of planes standing by. . . .

ANDERSON: . . . You're going to be running against a man who's a wild man on this subject [Barry Goldwater, the Republican candidate for President]. Any lack of firmness he'll make up.

LBJ: What happened was we've been playing around up there and they came out, gave us a warning, and we knocked hell out of 'em.

ANDERSON: That's the best thing in the world you could have done—just knock hell out of 'em.

LBJ: And we've got our people right there and we haven't pulled out. We've pulled up.

There was never any consensus among policymakers and elected officials about how to proceed in Vietnam. Democratic Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield, urged Johnson to seek a truce and subsequent neutralization of South Vietnam. McGeorge Bundy, on the other hand, argued for moving ahead forcefully and decisively, conjuring up the ghost of the "domino theory" that President Eisenhower had first talked about.

To: The President

Date: January 6, 1964

From: McGeorge Bundy

Re: Senator Mansfield's Views on South Vietnam

1. To neutralize South Vietnam today, or even for the United States Government to seem to move in that direction, would mean the following:
 - a. A rapid collapse of anti-Communist forces in South Vietnam, and a unification of the whole country on Communist terms.
 - b. Neutrality in Thailand, and increased influence for Hanoi and Peking.
 - c. Collapse of the anti-Communist position in Laos.
 - d. Heavy pressure on Malaya and Malaysia.
 - e. A shift toward neutrality in Japan and the Philippines.
 - f. Blows to U.S. prestige in South Korea and Taiwan which would require compensating increases in American commitment there—or else further retreat.
2. We may have to move in these painful directions, but we should do so only when there is a much stronger demonstration that our present course cannot work. If we neutralize, it should not be because we have quit but because others have. Today a move in this direction would be regarded as betrayal by the new regime in Saigon and by all anti-Communist Vietnamese. There are enough of them to lose us an election.
3. The right course is to continue to strengthen our struggle against the Communist terror (which is exactly what it is). For this we need new and stronger leadership in the U.S. effort.

The growing severity of the debate over Vietnam—both inside the administration and in the streets—created a political problem for President Johnson, so he decided to talk directly to the people in a televised speech on July 28, 1965.

Why must young Americans, born into a land exultant with hope and with golden promise, toil and suffer and sometimes die in such a remote and distant place?

The answer, like the war itself, is not an easy one, but it echoes clearly from the painful lessons of half a century. Three times in my lifetime, in two World Wars and in Korea, Americans have gone to far lands to fight for freedom. We have learned at a terrible and a brutal cost that retreat does not bring safety and weakness does not bring peace.

It is this lesson that has brought us to Viet-Nam. This is a different kind of war. There are no marching armies or solemn declarations. Some citizens of South Viet-Nam at times, with understandable grievances, have joined in the attack on their own government.

But we must not let this mask the central fact that this is really war. It is guided by North Viet-Nam and it is spurred by Communist China. Its goal is to conquer the South, to defeat American power, and to extend the Asiatic dominion of communism.

There are great stakes in the balance. Most of the non-Communist nations of Asia cannot, by themselves and alone, resist the growing might and the grasping ambition of Asian communism. Our power, therefore, is a very vital shield. If we are driven from the field in Viet-Nam, then no nation can ever again have the same confidence in American promise, or in American protection.

In each land the forces of independence would be considerably weakened, and an Asia so threatened by Communist domination would certainly imperil the security of the United States itself.

We did not choose to be the guardians at the gate, but there is no one else.

Nor would surrender in Viet-Nam bring peace, because we learned from Hitler at Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression.

This then, my fellow Americans, is why we are in Viet-Nam.

Vietnam--Place and People

The Place:

- +++ Is in southeast corner of Asia, bounded by Laos, Cambodia, and South China Sea.
- +++ In shape, long and narrow. In size, about the same area as the state of Washington.
- +++ Geography: central highland comprises two-thirds of country, with chain of mountains, dense jungles, some open forests. Narrow coastal plain runs from northern tip almost to Saigon, is very level with numerous beaches, backed by a narrow piedmont of open hills. Delta, in south, takes 25 per cent of land mass, has more than 50 per cent of population. Yields immense rice crop. Has more than 3,500 miles of navigable rivers and canals.
- +++ Climate is tropical, monsoonal, with hot-dry, hot-wet seasons varying through country.

The People:

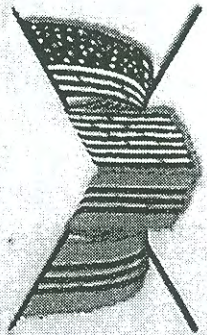
- +++ Number about 15.5 million, 85 per cent being ethnic Vietnamese. About one million Chinese, half-million Cambodians, 800,000 Montagnards (mountain tribal groups) make up most of remainder. Eighty per cent of population are farmers. About half of people are concentrated in the area from just north of Saigon south through the delta.
- +++ Worship ancestors, venerate elders, hold family as keystone of society. They are quieter, less excitable than Westerners, place high value on harmony, good manners, tradition.
- +++ Are proud, valiant, have stood up bravely under communist harassment 12 years, longer than any other nation.

The Enemy

The Enemy:

- +++ Is communist North Vietnam and its southern arm, Viet Cong (Vietnamese communist or "Viet Red").
- +++ Controls, directs, supplies entire effort to conquer Republic of Vietnam through COSVN (Central Office for South Vietnam), which heads military, political efforts of North Vietnam in South Vietnam, closely resembles government structure, reaches into every district.
- +++ Trains military, political cadres, terrorists, spies, saboteurs, providing most of VC leadership. These have infiltrated in increasing numbers since 1966.
- +++ Uses systematic terrorism, assassination to wreck economy, destroy fabric of government of 2,600 villages. In past five years communists have assassinated, beheaded or kidnaped 2,000 village chiefs, have driven away able-bodied men, have deluded or terrorized many citizens into cooperating.
- +++ Still failing to win, in 1965 Hanoi began sending regular units of North Vietnamese Army to south. Backbone of communist military in South Vietnam is VC "main force" and NVA units, of about 112,000. VC guerrillas number 113,000, political cadres 39,000, combat support 18,000. (Estimates are as of summer 1966.)
- +++ Estimated average of at least 5,000 men infiltrated South Vietnam monthly during first seven months of 1966, plus supplies, by land and sea from north. Arms are from China, Russia, Red satellites.
- +++ In first half of 1966, however, 10,000 VC and NVA soldiers and sympathizers turned themselves in to South Vietnam government under Chieu Hoi (open arms) program.

Navy--Pearl Harbor



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reference
facts
ON

SOUTH VIETNAM



Office of Information
Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
APO San Francisco 96243

6.

When the war began, and perhaps for much longer, few Americans knew much about Vietnam, not even where it was. The military gave soldiers what it felt were the most essential facts, including the warning that Vietnamese were "quieter" than Westerners and cared a lot about "good manners." Its description of Vietnam's history of resistance to outside aggression omitted any reference to the Chinese, French, or Japanese and failed to note that the communists involved were themselves Vietnamese.