

## Background to the United States in Vietnam

**F**rom the southern rim of the landmass of Asia juts the Indochina Peninsula. The interior is shared by the countries of Laos and Cambodia. Flexed like a backbone along its eastern edge is Vietnam, a small land that gradually loomed larger and larger in the effort of the United States to contain communism wherever it arose. Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson each saw Vietnam as a cold-war battleground.

The cold-war view, however, gives an incomplete picture. The step-by-step process by which the United States became involved more and more deeply in the Vietnam War cannot be understood without exploring the Vietnamese people's ties to their land, and their history of struggle against foreign domination.

### **Vietnam: The Land and Its People**

Vietnam naturally divides into northern and southern regions, both blessed with fertile delta farm lands. Between the Red River Delta in the north and the Mekong Delta in the south, a long narrow coastal plain rises to the west through thick forests to a chain of craggy mountains. For centuries the Red River Delta has nourished a culture centered on wet-rice farming, a process requiring a spirit of shared labor that is the basis of village life.

In 111 B.C. the Chinese conquered what is now North Vietnam, imposing a grim rule. As the Vietnamese struggled to retain their own culture, their sense of national identity grew. Finally, in the tenth century, they overthrew their Chinese rulers.

The following centuries were chaotic. As population soared and rival groups clashed over power, land-hungry Vietnamese pushed south to conquer new territory. Eventually, they spread through the Mekong Delta to the tip of the peninsula.

### **The French Conquest**

French merchants and missionaries probed Vietnam in the 1600s. The merchants failed to set up ongoing trade, but the missionaries made inroads by converting about a tenth of the population to Catholicism. Meanwhile, France continued eyeing

Vietnam as a source of raw materials. Eventually, in 1858, it sent soldiers to turn Vietnam into a French colony. The Vietnamese warrior spirit was unleashed against the invaders, and it was not until 1893 that the French finally subdued Indochina.

The French imposed heavy taxes and exported rice and raw materials for profit. French settlers and Vietnamese with close ties to the colonial government took control of most farm land. Before French rule, most Vietnamese had owned land. By the 1930s about half were landless.

The heavy-handed French rule sparked fierce opposition. Bands of guerrillas harassed the French. One French soldier complained, "They appear from nowhere in large numbers and then disappear." The French response was brutal, further inflaming resistance.

### **Nationalism on the Rise**

The guerrillas found a powerful leader in Ho Chi Minh. Known to his followers as "Uncle Ho," he was a charismatic patriot dedicated to freeing his people from the French. Looking to the United States as a natural ally against colonialism, Ho asked President Wilson for support in 1919.

The United States did not come to Ho's aid, however. Loyalty to France, its World War I ally, was one reason. Another was growing fear of communism. Ho saw himself as a nationalist, but his supporters included Communists, which aroused American suspicions.

Denied American aid, Ho himself moved toward communism and founded a Communist party to attract Soviet support. A Communist state seemed

an appropriate ally since capitalism, French-style, had been a disaster for the Vietnamese. Ho later explained, "It was patriotism and not communism that originally inspired me."

When Japan invaded Indochina in 1940, Ho and his followers formed a nationalist organization known as the Vietminh to fight both the Japanese and the French. By the war's end the Vietminh controlled the north, and on September 2, 1945, Ho proclaimed Vietnam independent. Borrowing from the American Declaration of Independence, he declared, "We hold the truth that all men are created equal." A renewed appeal for American support, however, fell on deaf ears. At the Potsdam conference in July, no decision was made on the postwar status of Vietnam.



## The Defeat of the French

The French moved quickly in their quest to reconquer Vietnam. By early 1946 they held the southern cities and roads. The Vietminh still controlled the north, though, and were supporting guerrilla resistance throughout the south. Defying the French, Ho Chi Minh declared,

*“You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours, but even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.”*

Seeking American aid, the French made a show of giving the Vietnamese a voice in government. In 1949 they appointed a former Vietnamese ruler, Bao Dai, as chief of state. The United States was unimpressed by the corrupt regime but continued to back it as a bulwark against the spread of communism. After Mao Zedong's victory in China, President Truman got Congress to approve sending \$10 million in aid and fifty military advisors to Vietnam in 1950.

By 1954 American dollars were covering 80 percent of France's war costs, but the French were still losing. Soviet and Chinese military aid and training had helped transform guerrilla bands into a large, skilled military organization, and the Vietminh controlled much of Vietnam and neighboring Laos. In the spring of 1954 they launched a major strike at a large French force near the northern village of Dien Bien Phu.

As the Vietminh battered the French, France pleaded for American intervention, including nuclear strikes. Eisenhower refused, though, because he knew that America's allies would not join in and that Congress, with the memory of the Korean War still fresh, would not risk entanglement in another war. Dien Bien Phu fell in May. It was a final defeat for the French.

## A Divided Country

In July 1954 representatives of France, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, China, Britain, and the Soviet Union met in Geneva, Switzerland, to work out a settlement for Indochina. American observers also attended.

Out of the meeting came the Geneva Accords. The agreement, which the United States did not sign, established a cease-fire and temporarily divided the country at the 17th parallel, leaving the Vietminh ruling the north from the city of Hanoi, and a pro-Western government in the south, with its capital at Saigon. Elections were to be held in 1956 to unify the country, and the Vietminh were expected to win.

Fearing that a Communist victory would topple neighboring countries in Southeast Asia—the so-called *domino effect*—Secretary of State John Foster Dulles hastily engineered a regional alliance. In September 1954 New Zealand, Australia, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand joined the United States, Britain, and France in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The Geneva Accords barred South Vietnam from joining, but American

policymakers considered it protected by the treaty. The SEATO treaty would be used later to justify American intervention in Vietnam.

By 1955 the division between North and South Vietnam had hardened. In the north the Vietminh took firm control, redistributing land to landless farmers and executing or imprisoning former landlords. Thousands of government opponents fled south.

In the south Ngo Dinh Diem had seized control from Bao Dai. A member of the Catholic minority, Diem had little support among the largely Buddhist population. He did, however, have the backing of Eisenhower and Dulles, who hoped he could control the political and religious factions and keep the south out of Communist hands.

Diem refused to schedule the election called for by the Geneva Accords because he feared a Vietminh victory. When Communist and non-Communist guerrillas joined together as the National Liberation Front to oppose him, he called them all Vietnamese Communists, or “Viet Cong.” To support him, the United States sent almost \$2 billion in money and supplies between 1954 and 1959. American advisors trained Diem's army, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). By 1960 there were 685 advisors, the maximum allowed by the Geneva Accords.

## Kennedy Increases Aid

When Kennedy took office in 1961, the Viet Cong, aided by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), was gaining strength, and Diem's position was extremely shaky. Kennedy feared that allowing the country to fall under Communist rule would send a message to the Soviets and Chinese that America lacked the will to stand behind its alliances. However, he did not want to risk an all-out war that might draw in one or both Communist giants.

Kennedy chose a “flexible response,” sending more aid and military advisors. This solution, though, left the door wide open to further entanglement. The number of advisors swelled to 16,732 in 1963, and the line between advising and participating in combat began to blur. By 1963 nearly sixty Americans had died in Vietnam, but as far as

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the public back home knew, the American role remained strictly advisory.

Meanwhile, Diem would not bow to American urgings that he change repressive policies. He rejected land reform, and his "strategic hamlet" program forced villagers into detention compounds to keep them from aiding the Viet Cong. He replaced village councils with his own officials, appointed family members to powerful positions, and threw suspected opponents into detention camps. His only solid support was the privileged Catholic minority.

Diem's policies aroused protests from Buddhists. When his troops fired at demonstrators in May 1963, killing nine people, anger flared into more

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demonstrations. In an ultimate protest, a monk named Quang Duc set himself on fire, but the suicide failed to move Diem. Finally, encouraged by American diplomats, ARVN officers seized power in November 1963 and executed Diem.

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King, David C., McRae, Norman and Jay Zola. *The United States and Its People*.  
Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley, 1995.

### **“Background to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam” Questions**

**Read** “Background to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam” and answer the following:

1. What does the fact that it took the French 35 years to make Vietnam into a French colony tell you about the Vietnamese people?

2. Why did Ho Chi Minh (leader of the nationalists in Vietnam) begin to move towards communist ideas?

3. Why did the French have to “reconquer” Vietnam after WWII? What group controlled the North and supported guerilla resistance in the South?

4. Why was the U.S. willing to back the French supported leader in Vietnam (Bao Dai) even though he was corrupt?

5. How did the U.S. support the French in Vietnam?

6. How were the Soviets and Chinese aiding the North Vietnamese?

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7. How did French rule in Vietnam end? Why wasn't the U.S. willing to assist more?

8. Describe how the Vietminh controlled the North.

9. Why did the new ruler of South Vietnam (Ngo Dinh Diem) refuse to schedule the elections called for by the Geneva Accords?

10. Who were the Viet Cong?

11. What was ARVN and which side did they support?

12. How did the U.S. involvement in Vietnam increase under President Kennedy?

13. How was the role of "advisers" shifting in South Vietnam in the early 1960s?

14. Describe the rule of Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam.

15. What eventually happened to Diem?