



Moving Toward Conflict

MAIN IDEA

To stop the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, the United States used its military to support South Vietnam.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The United States' support role in Vietnam began what would become America's longest and most controversial war in its history.

Terms & Names

- Ho Chi Minh
- Vietminh
- domino theory
- Dien Bien Phu
- Geneva Accords
- Ngo Dinh Diem
- Vietcong
- Ho Chi Minh Trail
- Tonkin Gulf Resolution

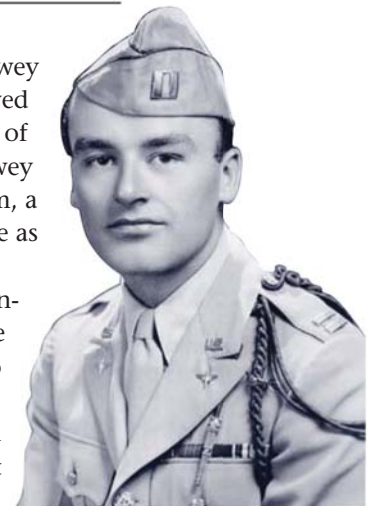
One American's Story

On the morning of September 26, 1945, Lieutenant Colonel A. Peter Dewey was on his way to the Saigon airport in Vietnam. Only 28, Dewey served in the Office of Strategic Services, the chief intelligence-gathering body of the U.S. military and forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency. Dewey was sent to assess what was becoming an explosive situation in Vietnam, a Southeast Asian country that had recently been freed from Japanese rule as a result of the allied victory in World War II. (See map on page 939.)

Before the war, France had ruled Vietnam and the surrounding countries; now it sought—with British aid—to regain control of the region. The Vietnamese had resisted Japanese occupation; now they were preparing to fight the French. Dewey saw nothing but disaster in France's plan. "Cochinchina [southern Vietnam] is burning," he reported, "the French and British are finished here, and we [the United States] ought to clear out of Southeast Asia."

On his way to the airport, Dewey encountered a roadblock staffed by Vietnamese soldiers and shouted at them in French. Presumably mistaking him for a French soldier, the guards shot him in the head. Thus, A. Peter Dewey, whose body was never recovered, was the first American to die in Vietnam.

Unfortunately, Dewey would not be the last. As Vietnam's independence effort came under communist influence, the United States grew increasingly concerned about the small country's future. Eventually, America would fight a war to halt the spread of communism in Vietnam. The war would claim the lives of almost 60,000 Americans and more than 2 million Vietnamese. It also would divide the American nation as no other event since the Civil War.



▲ Lieutenant Colonel A. Peter Dewey

America Supports France in Vietnam

America's involvement in Vietnam began in 1950, during the French Indochina War, the name given to France's attempt to reestablish its rule in Vietnam after World War II. Seeking to strengthen its ties with France and to help fight the spread of communism, the United States provided the French with massive economic and military support.

Vocabulary

peasant: a member of the class of agricultural laborers

FRENCH RULE IN VIETNAM From the late 1800s until World War II, France ruled most of Indochina, including Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. French colonists, who built plantations on peasant land and extracted rice and rubber for their own profit, encountered growing unrest among the Vietnamese peasants. French rulers reacted harshly by restricting freedom of speech and assembly and by jailing many Vietnamese nationalists. These measures failed to curb all dissent, and opposition continued to grow.

The Indochinese Communist Party, founded in 1930, staged a number of revolts under the leadership of **Ho Chi Minh**. Although the French condemned Ho Chi Minh to death for his rebellious activity, he fled Vietnam and orchestrated Vietnam's growing independence movement from exile in the Soviet Union and later from China.

In 1940 the Japanese took control of Vietnam. The next year, Ho Chi Minh returned home and helped form the **Vietminh**, an organization whose goal it was to win Vietnam's independence from foreign rule. When the Allied defeat of Japan in August 1945 forced the Japanese to leave Vietnam, that goal suddenly seemed a reality. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh stood in the middle of a huge crowd in the northern city of Hanoi and declared Vietnam an independent nation.

FRANCE BATTLES THE VIETMINH France, however, had no intention of relinquishing its former colony. French troops moved back into Vietnam by the end of 1945, eventually regaining control of the cities and the country's southern half. Ho Chi Minh vowed to fight from the North to liberate the South from French control. "If ever the tiger pauses," Ho had said, referring to the Vietminh, "the elephant [France] will impale him on his mighty tusks. But the tiger will not pause, and the elephant will die of exhaustion and loss of blood."

In 1950, the United States entered the Vietnam struggle—despite A. Peter Dewey's warnings. That year, President Truman sent nearly \$15 million in economic aid to France. Over the next four years, the United States paid for much of France's war, pumping nearly \$1 billion into the effort to defeat a man America had once supported. Ironically, during World War II, the United States had forged an alliance with Ho Chi Minh, supplying him with aid to resist the Japanese. But by 1950, the United States had come to view its one-time ally as a communist aggressor. **A**

THE VIETMINH DRIVE OUT THE FRENCH Upon entering the White House in 1953, President Eisenhower continued the policy of supplying aid to the French war effort. By this time, the United States had settled for a stalemate with the communists in Korea, which only stiffened America's resolve to halt the spread of communism elsewhere. During a news conference in 1954, Eisenhower explained the **domino theory**, in which he likened the countries on the brink of communism to a row of dominoes waiting to fall one after the other. "You have a row of dominoes set up," the president said. "You knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly."

Despite massive U.S. aid, however, the French could not retake Vietnam. They were forced to surrender in May of 1954, when the Vietminh overran the French outpost at **Dien Bien Phu**, in northwestern Vietnam.

KEY PLAYER



HO CHI MINH
1890–1969

Born Nguyen Tat Thanh to a poor Vietnamese family, Ho Chi Minh (which means "He Who Enlightens") found work as a cook on a French steamship. This allowed him to visit such cities as Boston and New York.

Ho Chi Minh based the phrasing of the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence on the U.S. Declaration of Independence. His admiration for the United States turned to disappointment, however, after the government chose to support France rather than his nationalist movement.

The Communist ruler's name lived on after his death in 1969. In 1975, the North Vietnamese Army conquered South Vietnam and changed the name of the South's capital from Saigon to Ho Chi Minh City.

MAIN IDEA

Synthesizing

A How and why did the United States support France's Vietnam War efforts?

From May through July 1954, the countries of France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States, China, Laos, and Cambodia met in Geneva, Switzerland, with the Vietminh and with South Vietnam's anticommunist nationalists to hammer out a peace agreement. The **Geneva Accords** temporarily divided Vietnam along the 17th parallel. The Communists and their leader, Ho Chi Minh, controlled North Vietnam from the capital of Hanoi. The anticommunist nationalists controlled South Vietnam from the capital and southern port city of Saigon. An election to unify the country was called for in 1956.

The United States Steps In

In the wake of France's retreat, the United States took a more active role in halting the spread of communism in Vietnam. Wading deeper into the country's affairs, the Eisenhower and the Kennedy administrations provided economic and military aid to South Vietnam's non-Communist regime.

DIEM CANCELS ELECTIONS Although he directed a brutal and repressive regime, Ho Chi Minh won popular support in the North by breaking up large estates and redistributing land to peasants. Moreover, his years of fighting the Japanese and French had made him a national hero. Recognizing Ho Chi Minh's widespread popularity, South Vietnam's president, **Ngo Dinh Diem** (ngō' dīn' dē-ēm'), a strong anti-Communist, refused to take part in the countrywide election of 1956. The United States also sensed that a countrywide election might spell victory for Ho Chi Minh and supported canceling elections. The Eisenhower administration promised military aid and training to Diem in return for a stable reform government in the South. **B**

Diem, however, failed to hold up his end of the bargain. He ushered in a corrupt government that suppressed opposition of any kind and offered little or no land distribution to peasants. In addition, Diem, a devout Catholic, angered the country's majority Buddhist population by restricting Buddhist practices.

By 1957, a Communist opposition group in the South, known as the **Vietcong**, had begun attacks on the Diem government, assassinating thousands of South Vietnamese government officials. Although the political arm of the group would later be called the National Liberation Front (NLF), the United States continued to refer to the fighters as the Vietcong.

Ho Chi Minh supported the group, and in 1959 began supplying arms to the Vietcong via a network of paths along the borders of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia that became known as the **Ho Chi Minh Trail**. (See map on page 733.) As the fighters stepped up their surprise attacks, or guerrilla tactics, South Vietnam grew more unstable. The Eisenhower administration took little action, however, deciding to "sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem."

KENNEDY AND VIETNAM The Kennedy administration, which entered the White House in 1961, also chose initially to "swim" with Diem. Wary of accusations that Democrats were "soft" on communism, President Kennedy increased financial aid to Diem's teetering regime and sent thousands of military advisers to help train South Vietnamese troops. By the end of 1963, 16,000 U.S. military personnel were in South Vietnam.

Meanwhile, Diem's popularity plummeted because of ongoing corruption and his failure to respond to calls for land reform. To combat the growing Vietcong presence in the South's countryside, the Diem administration initiated the strategic hamlet program, which meant moving all villagers to protected areas.

The Vietcong saw the United States and South Vietnam as oppressors. This propaganda poster reads, "Vietnam will surely be victorious and America will surely be defeated."



MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Motives

B Why did the United States support canceling elections?

Background

The Buddhist religion is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, also known as Shakyamuni, an Indian mystic who believed that spiritual enlightenment could be obtained through right conduct, meditation, and wisdom.

Indochina, 1959



After parachuting into the mountains north of Dien Bien Phu, South Vietnamese troops await orders from French officers in 1953.



The swampy terrain of South Vietnam made for difficult and dangerous fighting. This 1961 photograph shows South Vietnamese Army troops in combat operations against Vietcong



Rivers serve as places to work, bathe, and wash clothing.

GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER

- 1. **Movement** Through which countries did the Ho Chi Minh Trail pass?
- 2. **Location** How might North Vietnam's location have enabled it to get aid from its ally, China?

A Buddhist monk sets himself on fire in a busy Saigon intersection in 1963 as a protest against the Diem regime. ►



Many Vietnamese deeply resented being moved from their home villages where they had lived for generations and where ancestors were buried.

Diem also intensified his attack on Buddhism. Fed up with continuing Buddhist demonstrations, the South Vietnamese ruler imprisoned and killed hundreds of Buddhist clerics and destroyed their temples. To protest, several Buddhist monks and nuns publicly burned themselves to death. Horrified, American officials urged Diem to stop the persecutions, but Diem refused. 🕒

It had become clear that for South Vietnam to remain stable, Diem would have to go. On November 1, 1963, a U.S.-supported military coup toppled Diem's regime. Against Kennedy's wishes, Diem was assassinated. A few weeks later, Kennedy, too, fell to an assassin's bullet. The United States presidency—along with the growing crisis in Vietnam—now belonged to Lyndon B. Johnson.

MAIN IDEA

Forming Generalizations

🕒 Why was the Diem regime unpopular?

Vocabulary

coup: a sudden appropriation of leadership; a takeover

President Johnson Expands the Conflict

Shortly before his death, Kennedy had announced his intent to withdraw U.S. forces from South Vietnam. "In the final analysis, it's their war," he declared. Whether Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam remains a matter of debate. However, Lyndon Johnson escalated the nation's role in Vietnam and eventually began what would become America's longest war.

THE SOUTH GROWS MORE UNSTABLE Diem's death brought more chaos to South Vietnam. A string of military leaders attempted to lead the country, but each regime was more unstable and inefficient than Diem's had been. Meanwhile, the Vietcong's influence in the countryside steadily grew.

President Johnson believed that a communist takeover of South Vietnam would be disastrous. Johnson, like Kennedy, was particularly sensitive to being perceived as "soft" on communism. "If I . . . let the communists take over South Vietnam," Johnson said, "then . . . my nation would be seen as an appeaser and we would . . . find it impossible to accomplish anything . . . anywhere on the entire globe."

THE TONKIN GULF RESOLUTION On August 2, 1964, a North Vietnamese patrol boat fired a torpedo at an American destroyer, the USS *Maddox*, which was patrolling in the Gulf of Tonkin off the North Vietnamese coast. The torpedo missed its target, but the *Maddox* returned fire and inflicted heavy damage on the patrol boat.



▲ The Navy destroyer U.S.S. *Maddox*.

Two days later, the *Maddox* and another destroyer were again off the North Vietnamese coast. In spite of bad weather that could affect visibility, the crew reported enemy torpedoes, and the American destroyers began firing. The crew of the *Maddox* later declared, however, that they had neither seen nor heard hostile gunfire.

The alleged attack on the U.S. ships prompted President Johnson to launch bombing strikes on North Vietnam. He asked Congress for powers to take “all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” Congress approved Johnson’s request, with only two senators voting against it, and adopted the **Tonkin Gulf Resolution** on August 7. While not a declaration of war, it granted Johnson broad military powers in Vietnam.

Johnson did not tell Congress or the American people that the United States had been leading secret raids against North Vietnam. The *Maddox* had been in the Gulf of Tonkin to collect information for these raids. Furthermore, Johnson had prepared the resolution months beforehand and was only waiting for the chance to push it through Congress.

In February of 1965, President Johnson used his newly granted powers. In response to a Vietcong attack that killed eight Americans, Johnson unleashed “Operation Rolling Thunder,” the first sustained bombing of North Vietnam. In March of that year the first American combat troops began arriving in South Vietnam. By June, more than 50,000 U.S. soldiers were battling the Vietcong. The Vietnam War had become Americanized. **D**

MAIN IDEA

Developing Historical Perspective

D How did the Tonkin Gulf Resolution lead to greater U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War?



ASSESSMENT

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Ho Chi Minh
- Dien Bien Phu
- Ngo Dinh Diem
- Ho Chi Minh Trail
- Vietminh
- Geneva Accords
- Vietcong
- Tonkin Gulf Resolution
- domino theory

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

In a chart like the one below, cite the Vietnam policy for each of the following presidents: Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson.

President	Vietnam Policy

Choose one of the four presidents and explain his goals in Vietnam.

CRITICAL THINKING

3. MAKING INFERENCES

How did the United States become more involved in the war? Explain your answer in a short paragraph.

4. SYNTHESIZING

In what ways was America’s support of the Diem government a conflict of interests? Cite examples to support your answer.

5. EVALUATING

Do you think Congress was justified in passing the Tonkin Gulf Resolution? Use details from the text to support your response.

Think About:

- the questionable report of torpedo attacks on two U.S. destroyers
- the powers that the resolution would give the president
- the fact that the resolution was not a declaration of war