

The Vietnam War

Why does the United States get involved in Vietnam?



Vietnam had been a French colony since the late 1800s. After World War II, the French began to battle the Viet Minh, who wanted to kick out the French and make Vietnam a Communist country. The U.S. believed in the Domino Theory which was the belief that if 1 country in Asia became communist all the others might fall. At 1st the U.S. gave France money to fight the Communists in Vietnam. In 1954 the French were defeated at the battle of Dien Bien Phu and soon left Vietnam.

After the French left, Vietnam was divided into 2 countries: South Vietnam was Democratic and North Vietnam was Communist. In the late 1950s, the U.S. sent several dozen soldiers to help train and advise the South Vietnamese army. In the early 1960s more advisors were sent to help South Vietnam defeat Communism. The U.S. was still not technically at war in Vietnam. In 1964, the U.S.S. Maddox was attacked by North Vietnamese boats in the gulf of Tonkin. This outraged many people in the U.S. including President Johnson. On August 7, 1964 Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution which allowed President Johnson to begin sending combat troops to Vietnam. By the end of 1965 the amount of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam grows from a few dozen to 200,000. U.S. involvement in Vietnam really begins.



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Who were we fighting in Vietnam?



The U.S. was mainly fighting 2 different groups in Vietnam, the North Vietnamese army who were referred to as “North Vietnamese regulars” and citizens of South Vietnam who supported Communism called the Viet Cong referred to as VC or “Charlie”. Most VC were not professional soldiers. Instead they were regular citizens who would fight against U.S. soldiers and then blend back into a village or city full of people. Both groups were supplied by the Soviet Union and China. These 2 Communist countries gave the North Vietnamese army and the VC billions of dollars of supplies and weapons.

Why were people in the U.S. protesting the war?

As the war dragged on through the 1960s into the 70s, it became more and more unpopular. Some people thought that the U.S. should allow the Vietnamese to solve their own problems and settle their own differences. People wondered why we were involved in a war that was 3,000 miles away. Many people wanted South Vietnam to fight the Communists alone so U.S. soldiers could come home. Others, mostly younger Americans were upset that the draft was reinstated and they would be forced to enter the military and possibly fight in Vietnam. Many of the anti-war protests took place on college campuses. Thousands of college students called for an end to the war and burned their draft cards. Violent anti-war protests happened in Chicago during the 1968 Democratic convention when Chicago police fought anti-war protesters downtown and along Lake Shore Drive. In 1970, 4 students were shot and killed during an anti-war protest at Kent State University.



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What is the Tet Offensive?

Tet is the name of the Vietnamese lunar New Year. Both sides agreed to stop fighting during this 2 week celebration. In 1968, the Communists broke the Tet cease fire agreement and began a massive attack on South Vietnam, this was called the Tet Offensive. Almost every major city in South Vietnam was attacked by the North Vietnamese army and the Viet Cong including the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon. The U.S. embassy in Saigon was overrun and it took the Marine guards hours to kill the intruders and take back the embassy. In the end, the Tet Offensive was a disaster for the Viet Cong. 40,000 Communists were killed compared to only 1,500 Americans killed. You would think it would be considered a big victory for the U.S. but it wasn't. People in the U.S. were being told that we were winning the war, and they were surprised by this massive attack during Tet. Because of Tet, many people began to question whether we could win in Vietnam. America's most famous and trusted news reporter was Walter Cronkite. After Tet, he visited Vietnam. When he returned, during his February 27, 1968 news show he told the U.S. that he doubted we could win the war.



**“But it is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could.
This is Walter Cronkite. Good night.”**

In the end, even though the VC and North Vietnamese army were defeated in battle during the Tet offensive, it was the turning point of the war. Soon most Americans would be calling for the U.S. to withdraw from Vietnam.

Why was 1968 one of the most important years in American history?

Not only did the Tet Offensive happen in 1968, 1968 was also the deadliest year for American troops in Vietnam. 16,589 Americans were killed in Vietnam in 1968. The number of anti-war protests on college campuses rose dramatically in 1968. President Lyndon Johnson announced that he would not run for reelection. On April 4, 1968 Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. King's assassination set off race riots across the country. Two months later John F. Kennedy's brother Bobby was shot and killed while he was running for President. In August violence erupted at the Democratic Convention. 1968 was a very difficult year for the United States.

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What happened with American POW/MIAs?

During the Vietnam War, about 1,350 Americans were taken as prisoners of war. The majority of American POWs were pilots shot down while bombing North Vietnam, including Congressman John McCain. Many POWs were tortured and starved while in prison. Captain Floyd Thompson spent 9 years as a prisoner of war. In 1973, the U.S. ended involvement in the war. 591 prisoners of war returned to the U.S. What happened to the rest? Some were killed before they were taken prisoner and their bodies were never recovered. Some Americans died while in prison camps. Some people believe that still today Americans are being held as POWs in Vietnam. From 2000-2010 the remains of over 700 U.S. troops from the Vietnam War were recovered and identified. Today almost 1,800 Americans remain unaccounted for in Vietnam.



How did the Vietnam War end?

By the late 1960s the U.S. began to pull soldiers out of Vietnam. The plan was for South Vietnam to take more responsibility in defending their own country. This was called “Vietnamization”.

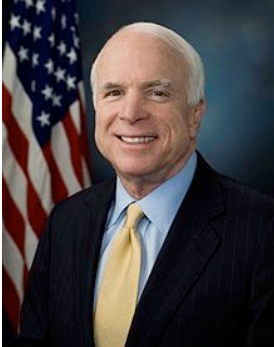


In 1970, the U.S. and North Vietnam began peace talks to end the Vietnam War. In 1973, the Paris Accords were signed ending America’s involvement in Vietnam. The U.S. still had soldiers in Vietnam defending U.S. bases and the U.S. embassy in Saigon. In 1974, North Vietnam resumed attacks on the South. Without the

help of the U.S. South Vietnam had no chance to win. By 1975, the Communists had captured almost all of South Vietnam. As North Vietnamese soldiers entered Saigon, the last Americans were quickly evacuated. Many Vietnamese tried to escape before the Communists conquered the whole country. On April 29, 1975, Saigon was captured and the war was over. Vietnam was unified under Communist control.

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What famous people fought in Vietnam?



John McCain: Congressman who ran for President of the U.S.

Oliver stone: Movie director

Colin Powell: 1st African American Secretary of State

Bob Kerrey: Governor of Nebraska and U.S. Senator

Roger Staubach: Super Bowl winning quarterback with the Dallas Cowboys

Al Gore: Vice President of the U.S.

Fred Smith: Founder of Federal Express

John Kerry: Congressman who ran for President

Pat Sajak: Host of Wheel of Fortune

R. Lee Ermy: TV actor

Rocky Bleier: Football player at Notre Dame and won a Super Bowl with the Pittsburgh Steelers

Bob Kalsu: Professional football player with the Buffalo Bills, only NFL player killed in Vietnam



Go to this website:

www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war

watch the video called Vietnam and spend a few minutes exploring the interactive display about the Vietnam Wall.

Go to this website:

thewall-usa.com

Spend a few minutes searching names of soldiers killed in Vietnam. Some searches you can make are: people with your last name, people who were born or killed on your birthday, people from Palos Heights or surrounding towns. Once you search a soldier, be sure to visit the persons info page and personal comments.