

The Vietnam War: Origins and Early Years of U.S. Involvement

- I. Before WWII:
 - a. Vietnam had been controlled by outside forces for centuries. WHO?

- II. After WWII:
 - a. Japan withdrew from Vietnam in 1945.
 - b. France fought to regain control over Vietnam.
 - c. Vietnamese forces under _____ fought the French when they tried to re-establish colonial rule.
 - i. Minh, a communist and leader of the Vietnamese independence movement, founded the **Democratic Republic of Vietnam** (1945) – which he claimed was the legitimate govt. of Vietnam.
 - d. The U.S. wrongly assumed that because he was a communist, that Minh took orders from the Russians. Minh was a nationalist first, communist second.

**DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE OF THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF VIET-NAM
(September 2, 1945)**

All men are created equal; they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

This immortal statement was made in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In a broader sense, this means: All the peoples on the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, to be happy and free.

The Declaration of the French Revolution made in 1791 on the Rights of Man and the Citizen also states: "All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights."

Those are undeniable truths.

Nevertheless, for more than eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, have violated our Fatherland and oppressed our fellow citizens. They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice.

In the field of politics, they have deprived our people of every democratic liberty...

In the field of economics, they have fleeced us to the backbone, impoverished our people and devastated our land...

For these reasons, we, members of the Provisional Government, representing the whole Vietnamese people, declare that from now on we break off all relations of a colonial character with France; we repeal all the international obligation that France has so far subscribed to on behalf of Viet-Nam, and we abolish all the special rights the French have unlawfully acquired in our Fatherland...

The whole Vietnamese people, animated by a common purpose, are determined to fight to the bitter end against any attempt by the French colonialists to reconquer their country...

For these reasons, we, members of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam, solemnly declare to the world that Viet-Nam has the right to be a free and independent country—and in fact it is so already. The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their independence and liberty.

What document strongly influenced the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence?

Who are they addressing their Declaration to?

What are they asking of the United States?

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- e. The French rejected Vietnam's Declaration of Independence and did not want to relinquish control of Vietnam. (The U.S. under FDR opposed colonialism but they bowed to the French.)
 - f. This was the start of an 8 year war between Ho Chi Minh's forces and the French who were trying to re-establish colonial rule.
 - g. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was widely supported as the legitimate ruling govt. of Vietnam. The U.S., however, refused to give them formal diplomatic recognition.

III. Role of the U.S. under Truman

- a. Ho Chi Minh sent President Truman 8 letters asking for support.
- b. How did Truman and later Eisenhower respond?
- c. By 1954, the U.S. was paying over $\frac{3}{4}$ of the cost of France's war to regain control of Vietnam. U.S. provided France with \$1 billion in aid.
- d. Why did the U.S. get involved in France's struggle? The U.S. was an ally of France and they used the **domino theory** to justify getting involved. MEANING?

IV. Battle of Dien Bien Phu

- a. In 1954, the French tried to force a final show down at Dien Bien Phu. 12,000 French troops were surrounded and they pleaded for more American aid including nuclear strikes. Eisenhower did not want another Korean War and the French surrendered in May of 1954.

V. Geneva Conference, 1954

- a. A peace conference was held in Geneva, Switzerland in 1954 to discuss the situation in Indochina.
 1. Representatives from the U.S., France, England, the Soviet Union, China, Laos, Cambodia, the competing governments in Vietnam, met and agreed to divide Vietnam in half at the _____.
 2. Ho Chi Minh agreed to withdraw his communist forces, known as the Viet _____, to the north of the 17th parallel.
 3. _____ were to be held within two years to reunite Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh expected an easy victory.
 4. The U.S. and the State of Vietnam refused to sign the agreement. Why?



VI. U.S. Involvement Under Eisenhower:

- a. Following the Geneva Conference, the U.S. helped establish a South Vietnamese government under _____ and declared that he did not have to hold elections.
- b. The U.S. then sent _____ to train an army to keep Diem in power.
 - i. By the time Pres. Eisenhower left office, he had sent _____ military advisors to Vietnam)

VII. U.S. Involvement Under JFK:

- a. By the time Pres. Kennedy took over (1960), a civil war was underway.
- b. How did JFK respond?
- c. By the end of 1963, there were more than _____ military advisors.
- d. **Military aid was not enough** – Diem was still in power but growing increasingly unpopular. He made a number of unpopular decisions while in office, including:
 - i.
 - ii.
 - iii. Diem imprisoned people who opposed his regime and put them in re-education centers
 - iv. Launched a program to move peasants from ancestral lands to “strategic hamlets” or govt-run farm communities that isolated farmers/peasants from communist influences that were seeping into S. Vietnam

- v. Diem was Catholic in a largely Buddhist country – he frequently ignored the religious concerns of others, insisting that Buddhists obey Catholic religious laws (roused serious opposition)

e. **Opposition to Diem:**

- i. In June 1963, a Buddhist monk doused himself with gas and burned himself to death – the photos were on the cover of newspapers around the world. Martyrdom of more and more monks did not change Diem’s policies.



- f. JFK realized Diem was not going to change or reform his govt policies. He realized that the S. Vietnamese struggle against communism was not going to be won by Diem. He therefore told S. Vietnamese military leaders that the U.S. wouldn’t object to Diem’s overthrow.
 - i. *What happened in Nov. 1963?*

- g. When Kennedy died (Nov. 1963), we were involved in a civil war that we had no strategy for winning. South Vietnamese communists, known as the _____, waged a guerrilla war against Diem’s regime with support from North Vietnam. New military govt was in trouble – ruling generals were bickering among themselves and not running the army effectively.

VIII. U.S. Involvement Under Johnson:

- a. Before JFK’s death, LBJ had not been actively involved in the decision making process in Vietnam.
- b. Once he became president in 1963, he inherited JFK’s military advisors, most of whom supported increased aid to Vietnam.
- c. *What made LBJ willing to do whatever was necessary to win in Vietnam?*

- d. **LBJ pushed containment.** By 1964, the U.S. was spending more than \$ _____ a day in Vietnam and several Americans a week on average were being killed in battle.
 - i. In March 1964, Sec. of Defense McNamara returned from his 2nd trip to Vietnam in four months. He reported that: “The situation has unquestionably been growing worse, at least since Sept. [1963]...In terms of govt control of the countryside about 40% of the territory is now under Viet Cong control or predominant influence...”
 - ii. *What did LBJ’s advisors suggest needed to be done?*

- e. N. Vietnam supported southern rebels (the Viet Cong) who took control of territory in the South and gained the loyalty of more and more S. Vietnamese people.

- f. U.S. military leaders were frustrated by the hit-and-run tactics of the Vietcong in S. Vietnam. Convinced the only way to defeat them was to engage in heavy bombing of the North.
- g. **LBJ was most concerned with winning re-election in 1964.** Told military leaders at a White House Christmas Party in Dec. 1963, “just let me get elected, and then you can have your war.”
- h. LBJ saw **need for congressional resolution** that would support the growing US involvement in Vietnam. *WHY?*
- i. Had his aides draft a resolution for Congress supporting the US’s work in Vietnam and supporting the President’s actions. Decided to wait for further North Vietnamese provocation before sending the request to Congress.
- j. Following a questionable attack on the American ship, the C. Turner Joy, in the Gulf of Tonkin in the summer of 1964, LBJ asked Congress for a resolution of support.



“[I] ask Congress for a resolution expressing the unity and determination of the United States in supporting freedom and in protecting peace in southeast Asia...Our policy in southeast Asia has been consistent and unchanged since 1954...four simple propositions:

1. America keeps her word. Here as elsewhere, we must and shall honor our commitments.
2. The issue is the future of southeast Asia as a whole. A threat to any nation in that region is a threat to all, and a threat to us.
3. Our purpose is peace. We have no military, political, or territorial ambitions in the area.
4. This is not just a jungle war, but a struggle for freedom on every front of human activity. Our military and economic assistance to South Vietnam and Laos in particular has the purpose of helping these countries to repel aggression and strengthen their independence.

The threat to the free nations of southeast Asia has long been clear. The North Vietnamese regime has constantly sought to take over South Vietnam... This Communist regime has violated the Geneva accords for Vietnam. It has systematically conducted a campaign of subversion, which includes the direction, training, and supply of personnel and arms for the conduct of guerrilla warfare in South Vietnamese territory. In recent months, the actions of the North Vietnamese regime have become steadily more threatening...

As President of the United States I have concluded that I should now ask the Congress...to join in affirming...that all such attacks will be met, and that the United States will continue in its basic policy of assisting the free nations of the area to defend their freedom...the United States intends no rashness, and seeks no wider war. We must make it clear to all that the United States is united in its determination to bring about the end of Communist subversion and aggression in the area. We seek the full and effective restoration of the international agreements signed in Geneva in 1954, with respect to South Vietnam.”

How does LBJ rationalize U.S. involvement in Vietnam?

Congress never officially declared war in Vietnam because 2 days after he asked for Congress’ support, President Johnson gained Congressional approval to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” This act was called the

Remember the balance of power established by the Constitution.

Under the Constitution, who has the power to declare war? _____

Who has the power to wage/fight wars? _____

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...
 The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia...the United States is, therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member...of Southeast Asia...requesting assistance in defense of its freedom....
 This resolution shall expire when the President shall determine that the peace and security of the area is reasonably assured by international conditions created by action of the United Nations or otherwise, except that it may be terminated earlier by concurrent resolution of the Congress.

What does the resolution do/say?

Only 2 of the 50 senators opposed the resolution. What concerns do you think they might have had with it? How does this resolution violate the balance of power established by the Constitution?

Johnson later said that the resolution was like “grandmother’s nightgown because it covered everything” – what did he mean by this?

Subsequent annual requests for funds to cont. the war were regularly approved by Congress. Even Congressmen who opposed the war were reluctant to deny the funds and resources necessary to support the US effort.

The Tonkin Gulf Resolution was repealed by the Senate in June 1970. US involvement in the war continued until January 1973 although no formal declaration of war was ever requested.

