

# VIETNAM, 1945-75

## The End of French Rule and the Division of Vietnam (1945–1954)

Vietnam had been a French colony since the 1800s. During World War II, Japan took control, but the French stayed in charge under Japanese rule. In 1941, a communist group called the **Viet Minh**, led by **Ho Chi Minh**, began fighting for independence. After Japan's defeat in 1945, the Viet Minh declared Vietnam independent.

France refused to give up control. In 1946, the **First Indochina War** began between the French and the Viet Minh. The Viet Minh used guerrilla tactics and had strong support from peasants. France had modern weapons but struggled to control rural areas. The USA backed France with money and equipment, because it feared a communist victory in Asia.

After eight years of fighting, the war ended in 1954 with the French defeat at **Dien Bien Phu**. French forces had built a base in a valley, expecting an easy win. But the Viet Minh, led by **General Giap**, surrounded the base, bombarded it, and forced a French surrender. It was a humiliating defeat for a European colonial power.

Soon after, the world's major powers met at the **Geneva Conference** to prevent further conflict. Vietnam was **temporarily divided** at the **17th Parallel**:

- The **North**, ruled by Ho Chi Minh's communist government
- The **South**, led by the anti-communist **Ngo Dinh Diem**

Elections to reunite Vietnam were promised for 1956, but they never happened. The USA and Diem refused, fearing Ho would win. This blocked peaceful reunification.

The Geneva decisions ended French rule—but left Vietnam divided. The stage was set for a new, more dangerous conflict.

## Civil War in South Vietnam: Diem's Rule and His Fall (1954–63)

After the Geneva Conference, **Ngo Dinh Diem** became leader of **South Vietnam**. The USA supported him with money and weapons because he was strongly anti-communist. But Diem's government was harsh and unpopular. He gave top jobs to his family, ignored poor peasants, and favoured Catholics (his own religion) over the Buddhist majority. He refused land reform and arrested opponents. Many South Vietnamese came to see him as corrupt and out of touch.

Meanwhile, in the countryside, support for the **Viet Minh** remained strong. In 1960, former Viet Minh fighters and others who opposed Diem formed a new group: the **National Liberation Front (NLF)**, known in the South as the **Vietcong**. Their aim was to overthrow Diem and reunite Vietnam. They were supported by **North Vietnam**, led by Ho Chi Minh, and used guerrilla tactics to attack South Vietnamese officials and army units.

To fight back, Diem launched the **Strategic Hamlet Programme** in 1962. Villagers were moved into fortified settlements, where they were supposed to be safe from Vietcong influence. In reality, many peasants were forced to move and lost their land. The programme caused anger rather than support and often made it easier for the Vietcong to recruit.

As Diem grew more unpopular, protests increased. In 1963, Buddhist monks set themselves on fire to protest his anti-Buddhist policies. The USA began to lose faith in him.

In **November 1963**, with American knowledge, South Vietnamese generals launched a **military coup**. Diem was arrested and later killed. The USA hoped his removal would make the South stronger.

Instead, it led to political chaos. Several weak governments followed, while the Vietcong grew stronger. Diem's fall removed one problem—but made the situation in South Vietnam even more unstable.

## Growing US Involvement: Domino Theory to Tonkin (1954–64)

After Diem's fall, South Vietnam became even more unstable. One weak government replaced another. The **Vietcong** were growing in strength, helped by **North Vietnam** and using guerrilla tactics to control large parts of the countryside. The USA feared that, without support, South Vietnam would collapse—and communism would spread.

This fear was based on the **Domino Theory**. US President **Eisenhower** believed that if one country in Asia became communist, others would quickly follow, like falling dominoes. So, from the late 1950s, the USA sent more **advisers** to train the South Vietnamese army and gave more **money and weapons**.

In 1961, President **John F. Kennedy** increased US involvement. He sent **11,000 military advisers** by 1962 and supported Diem's Strategic Hamlet Programme. But when Diem was overthrown in 1963, the South Vietnamese government collapsed into confusion. Kennedy was assassinated that same year.

His successor, **President Lyndon B. Johnson**, faced a difficult choice. If the USA pulled out, South Vietnam might fall to communism. But deeper involvement would mean sending American troops.

In **August 1964**, Johnson got the chance to act. A US warship, the **USS Maddox**, was attacked (or believed to be attacked) by North Vietnamese boats in the **Gulf of Tonkin**. Johnson used this to ask Congress for more powers. Congress passed the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**, giving him the right to take "all necessary steps" in Vietnam.

This marked a major turning point. Although the attack may not have happened as reported, Johnson now had permission to escalate the war.

By the end of 1964, the US was no longer just advising the South Vietnamese. It was preparing to send combat troops. What had started as support was turning into a full-scale war.

## The Vietcong and Life in the North: Ho Chi Minh's War for Unity

After 1954, **Ho Chi Minh** ruled **North Vietnam** with the aim of uniting the whole country under communism. His leadership was strict but widely respected. He focused on **rebuilding the North**, strengthening the army, and preparing for a long struggle against the South and the USA. **Land reform** gave property to peasants, winning support, though it also led to purges and unrest. Life was harsh: shortages, rationing and tight government control were common. But many believed they were fighting for independence and justice.

Ho worked closely with **General Vo Nguyen Giap**, his top military commander. Giap had already defeated the French and now helped lead the war in the South. Together they backed the creation of the **NLF (National Liberation Front)** in 1960, made up of southern communists and others who opposed Diem. In the South, it became known as the **Vietcong**.

The Vietcong had a clear aim: to overthrow the South Vietnamese government and reunite Vietnam. They used **guerrilla tactics**—small groups would ambush soldiers, sabotage equipment, and disappear into the jungle or villages. They dressed like ordinary peasants and relied on support from locals. They also built hundreds of miles of tunnels to hide from bombing and launch surprise attacks.

To support the Vietcong, Ho Chi Minh built a vital supply line: the **Ho Chi Minh Trail**. This network of paths and roads ran through **Laos and Cambodia**, allowing weapons, soldiers and supplies to travel from North to South. Despite constant US bombing, the trail kept operating, often rebuilt by hand overnight.

In North Vietnam, the whole country was mobilised to support the war. Young people joined the army, civilians worked on farms or helped repair the trail. Propaganda, education and strict rules kept the people united.

Ho's goal was always the same: **a single, independent, communist Vietnam**. By 1964, the Vietcong controlled much of the South's countryside. The North had built up an efficient war machine, supported by **China and the USSR**. The USA believed it was facing a local uprising—but in reality, it was facing a well-planned and determined national movement, led from Hanoi.

## The US in Vietnam: Johnson's War (1965–68)

By early 1965, **President Johnson** believed South Vietnam was close to collapse. The Vietcong controlled large parts of the countryside. The South's government was weak and unstable. Johnson feared that if the USA didn't act, **communism would take over** the whole of Vietnam—and maybe spread across Asia.

So he made a huge decision: to send in **US combat troops**. In **March 1965**, the first US marines landed. By the end of the year, **200,000 American soldiers** were in Vietnam. Johnson also launched a major **bombing campaign**, called **Operation Rolling Thunder**, to destroy North Vietnamese supply lines and force them to stop supporting the Vietcong.

The USA expected a quick victory. But the war in the **jungle** was unlike anything American troops had faced before. The Vietcong didn't fight in open battles. Instead, they used **ambushes, booby traps, tunnels, and hit-and-run tactics**. US soldiers couldn't tell who the enemy was—many Vietcong looked like ordinary villagers.

To fight back, US commanders like **General Westmoreland** used **Search and Destroy** missions. Soldiers were sent into villages to kill Vietcong and destroy supplies. But these raids often killed civilians by mistake, turning more people against the Americans.

Other tactics also caused damage. The US used **chemical weapons** like **Agent Orange** and **napalm** to destroy jungle cover. They hoped this would expose Vietcong hiding places. But the chemicals also **burned civilians**, ruined farmland and caused long-term health problems.

The US also tried to win support through the **"Hearts and Minds"** campaign, offering aid and medical help to villagers. But this rarely worked. The destruction caused by bombing, chemicals, and Search and Destroy made many ordinary people hate the US more than they feared the communists.

By 1968, it was clear the war was not going as planned.

## 1968: The Tet Offensive and the My Lai Massacre

In early 1968, the Vietcong launched a surprise attack during the **Tet festival**, the Vietnamese New Year. For months, the US had claimed the communists were close to defeat—but this attack proved otherwise.

The **Tet Offensive** saw over **100 towns and cities** attacked at once, including the capital **Saigon**. Vietcong soldiers even reached the grounds of the **US embassy**, shocking Americans who thought they were safe. In the city of **Hue**, it took US and South Vietnamese forces nearly a month to drive the communists out. Thousands were killed.

Militarily, Tet was a **disaster for the Vietcong**—they lost about **10,000 fighters** and gained no permanent ground. But politically, it was a **turning point**. For the first time, many Americans saw the war as **unwinnable**. They had been told that victory was close, yet the enemy was strong enough to launch such a huge attack.

Back home, TV cameras brought the war into American living rooms. Graphic footage of fighting, destruction and dead soldiers made the war feel close—and horrifying. Support for the war dropped sharply. **Walter Cronkite**, the most trusted news anchor in the US, told viewers: "We are mired in stalemate." President Johnson reportedly said, "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America."

Just two months later, another blow landed. News broke of the **My Lai Massacre**, which had happened in **March 1968**. A US army unit had entered the village of **My Lai**, searching for Vietcong—but found only unarmed civilians. In a few hours, they **murdered over 500 people**, including women, children and the elderly.

The massacre had been covered up, but when it came out, the public was horrified. Photos of the killings spread across newspapers. In 1971, **Lieutenant William Calley**, the officer in charge, was put on trial and found guilty—but many felt justice was not done.

The impact of Tet and My Lai was huge. Trust in the government collapsed. Protests grew stronger. Johnson, now deeply unpopular, **announced he would not stand for re-election**. The war had become not just a military struggle—but a political and moral crisis for the USA.

America was still pouring troops and money into Vietnam, but by the end of 1968, the question had changed from "How do we win?" to **"How do we get out?"**

## Growing Division: Opposition and Support for the War in the USA

By the late 1960s, the Vietnam War had deeply divided the American people. Many now believed it was a **costly, unjust and unwinnable** war. But others still thought it was necessary to stop the spread of communism. The country split into those who **opposed** the war and those who still **supported** it.

**Opposition** grew for several reasons. The war was the **first to be televised**. Every night, Americans saw images of wounded soldiers, burning villages and dead civilians. The media no longer trusted government claims and began reporting more critically. This made people question whether the war was right or even winnable.

The **student movement** became a major voice of protest. Many young people felt the war was **morally wrong**. Some objected to the **draft system**, which forced young men into the army, often choosing the poor and working-class while wealthier students avoided service. Protests grew larger—one in **Washington D.C. in 1969** attracted over **half a million people**.

At **Kent State University in 1970**, a student protest ended in tragedy when **National Guard troops opened fire**, killing **four students**. This shocked the nation and intensified anger at the government.

Opposition also grew inside the government. In 1971, the **Fulbright Hearings** in the US Senate publicly questioned whether the war could or should continue. Soldiers, journalists and officials gave testimony showing the war's failure and brutality.

However, not everyone opposed the war. Many Americans still feared **communist expansion**. Some believed the US had to stand by its allies and fight for freedom. Groups like the **'Hard Hats'**—mainly construction workers and war veterans—**held pro-war demonstrations** and clashed with anti-war students. President Nixon spoke of a **'silent majority'**: ordinary Americans who supported him and wanted peace, but with honour.

Still, the protests and political pressure were growing. The war was not only costing lives—it was dividing the country.

## Nixon's War: Vietnamisation, Expansion and Peace Talks

When **Richard Nixon** became President in 1969, he faced a war that had badly divided America and wasn't going well. Nixon promised to **end the war** and bring US troops home, but he also wanted to ensure that South Vietnam could survive without American help. His strategy was called **Vietnamisation**—the idea that South Vietnamese forces would gradually take over the fighting, allowing US troops to leave.

However, **Vietnamisation** didn't mean the war was winding down. Nixon believed that if the US withdrew too quickly, it would **lose face** and allow communism to spread across Southeast Asia. To force North Vietnam to negotiate a peace deal, he **expanded the war** into neighbouring countries like **Laos** and **Cambodia**. The goal was to cut off the **Ho Chi Minh Trail**, the supply route that the North used to send weapons and supplies to the Vietcong. These bombings, especially in Cambodia, were kept secret from the American public and caused outrage when they were exposed.

Nixon also relied on **intense bombing**. The US launched massive campaigns, including **Operation Linebacker** and **Operation Rolling Thunder** (repeated). These bombings aimed to destroy North Vietnamese supply lines and weaken morale. However, they also **killed civilians** and caused widespread destruction, making even more people in Vietnam and America question the war's morality.

Despite these efforts, **peace talks** with North Vietnam, held in **Paris**, made little progress for years. Nixon's policy of **"peace with honour"** was built on the belief that the US needed a deal that would allow it to leave without admitting defeat. In 1972, the US and North Vietnam agreed on a **ceasefire**, but it was clear the fighting would continue—just without US involvement.

The **Paris Peace Accords**, signed in **January 1973**, ended direct US involvement in Vietnam. The US withdrew its troops, but the North continued to press against the South. The war was not over, but American involvement was finished. Nixon's **Vietnamisation** had failed to secure a lasting peace.

## The End of the War

By 1973, the United States had **withdrawn its forces** from Vietnam, but the war was far from over. The **Paris Peace Accords**, signed in January 1973, officially ended direct US involvement in the conflict. The **US government**, represented by **Henry Kissinger**, and **North Vietnam**, represented by **Le Duc Tho**, negotiated the terms of the ceasefire. It included a promise to **end the bombing** and **withdraw US troops**, while North Vietnam agreed to a ceasefire and the release of American prisoners of war.

However, the ceasefire didn't bring lasting peace. The **South Vietnamese government** was left to defend itself, and **North Vietnam** continued its aggressive actions. After the US left, the **North Vietnamese offensive** renewed in **1974** as they attempted to take over the South. The **South's government**, led by **President Thieu**, was weak and dependent on US aid, which had now dried up. The US, under **Gerald Ford** (who succeeded Nixon after his resignation in 1974), did not intervene despite North Vietnam's renewed attacks.

The **final offensive** came in **March–April 1975**. North Vietnamese forces swept through the South, capturing **Saigon on April 30, 1975**. This marked the **fall of Saigon** and the **end of the war**. Vietnam was **unified under communist control**, with the country renamed the **Socialist Republic of Vietnam**.

The economic and human costs of the war were **devastating**. The US lost over **58,000 soldiers**, and the war cost around **\$168 billion**. The **Vietnam War** had left a legacy of suffering: millions of Vietnamese died, and the war had torn apart the infrastructure of Vietnam, leaving it economically weak and struggling to rebuild.

## Reasons for the US Failure

Several key factors contributed to the **failure of the United States in Vietnam**. The US underestimated the **strengths of North Vietnam** and the **Vietcong**. North Vietnam received significant support from **Russia** and **China**, both of whom supplied the North with weapons, training, and resources. The **Vietcong's guerrilla tactics**, relying on ambushes, traps, and surprise attacks, made it hard for the US to win conventional battles. They also made effective use of the **Ho Chi Minh Trail**, which was a vital supply line running through Laos and Cambodia, constantly replenishing their forces.

The **US military**, despite its advanced technology and firepower, struggled with tactics that didn't suit the environment. The US relied heavily on **air superiority** and **bombing campaigns** like **Operation Rolling Thunder**, but these strategies failed to break the will of the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong. The **jungle terrain** was difficult to navigate, and the US soldiers were unfamiliar with it, leading to high casualties.

Additionally, the **weaknesses of the South Vietnamese government**, led by **Ngo Dinh Diem** and later **President Thieu**, played a key role in the US failure. The South's government was **corrupt, unpopular**, and lacked legitimacy, which meant they couldn't effectively mobilize their people to fight the North.

**Opposition to the war in the US** also played a major role in weakening support for continued military involvement. **Protests** and **public disillusionment** grew over time, especially after events like the **Tet Offensive** and **My Lai Massacre**. These incidents, covered widely by the media, turned many Americans against the war. The **student movement**, TV coverage, and figures like **Walter Cronkite** questioned the government's claims and the morality of the war, weakening the resolve of political leaders to continue the fight.

The **failure of US tactics**, the **lack of local support** in South Vietnam, and the mounting pressure from the American public created a situation where the US simply couldn't win the war, leading to its eventual defeat.