The Vietnam War

Between 1965 and 1973 US troops fought a disastrous war against communists in South Vietnam. In the end, the wealthiest country in the world was unable to defeat the Vietnamese fighters.

Why did the USA fight and lose the Vietnam War?

Vietnam divided

Vietnam had been a French colony. After the Second World War, Vietnamese nationalists and communists, led by Ho Chi Minh, fought against the French. In 1954 the French decided to pull out and Vietnam was divided in two. Communists took power in North Vietnam. South Vietnam was ruled by an anti-communist leader called Ngo Dinh Diem. In 1959 the communist government of the North decided to encourage a revolution in the South. Southern communists, who had fled North, returned to fight. These forces were known as the Vietcong.

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident

In 1964 regular North Vietnamese forces marched south along what became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail to support the Vietcong. Without outside help South Vietnam looked doomed. American involvement increased dramatically after a clash at sea between North Vietnam and the USA in August 1964. An American destroyer near the coast of North Vietnam was attacked by North Vietnamese ships. No serious damage was done in this so-called Gulf of Tonkin Incident. However, the new American President, Johnson, ordered the bombing of Northern naval bases in retaliation. Congress passed a resolution giving the President power to 'take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force' in order to defend South Vietnam. After this Johnson felt he had full authority to step up American involvement in the war.

The arrival of US ground troops

By early 1965 American bombers were regularly attacking targets in the North. Johnson did not think that this was enough. He decided that the South Vietnamese needed the help of large numbers of American soldiers on the ground. In July 1965 President Johnson took a fateful step: he agreed to send 180,000 American troops to Vietnam. The number of US troops increased over the next three years until there were 540,000 American soldiers in Vietnam.

SOURCE A

SOURCE B

Robert McNamara, US Secretary of Defense, March 1964:
We seek an independent, non-communist South Vietnam. Unless we can achieve this objective in South Vietnam, almost all of South-East Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance. Thailand might hold for a period with our help, but would be under grave pressure. Even the Philippines would become shaky, and the threat to India in the west, Australia and New Zealand to the south, and Taiwan, Korea and Japan to the north and east would be greatly increased.

SOURCE C

President Johnson, August 1964:
The challenge that we face in South-East Asia today is the same challenge that we have faced with courage and that we have met with strength in Greece and Turkey, in Berlin, Korea and in Cuba.

SOURCE D

The US government State Department reviewed its policy on Vietnam in February 1965.

South Vietnam is fighting for its life against a brutal campaign of terror and armed attack directed by the Communist regime in Hanoi. This aggression has been going on for years, but recently the pace has quickened and the threat has now become acute. The war in Vietnam is a new kind of war. A totally new kind of aggression has been launched against an independent people who want to make their own way in peace and freedom. The war in Vietnam is not a spontaneous and local rebellion against the established Government. In Vietnam, a Communist Government has set out deliberately to conquer a neighbouring state. The people of South Vietnam have chosen to resist this threat. At their request, the United States has taken its place beside them in their defensive struggle. The United States seeks no territory, no military bases, no favoured position. But we have learned the meaning of aggression elsewhere in the post-war world and we have met it. The United States will not abandon friends who want to remain free. It will do what must be done to help them.

>> Activity

What can you learn from Sources B - D about why the USA got involved in Vietnam?
What were the results of the Tet Offensive?
The Tet Offensive was a turning-point in the war. Although in the short term it was a failure for the communists, in the long run it helped the North to win the war. The sight of communist fighters in the grounds of the US embassy in Saigon made a mockery of the idea that Americans were close to victory. As a result of the violence of the attack and the clear determination of the communists, many American politicians and people became disillusioned with the war. The anti-war movement in the US grew in strength. Leading figures in the government began to think that they could not win the war in Vietnam.

SOURCE E
Dean Acheson in November 1967:
We can and will win. We must not have negotiations. When these fellows decide that they can’t beat the South, then they will give up. This is the way it was in Korea. This is the way the Communists operate.

SOURCE G
Dean Acheson in March 1968:
Neither the effort of the Government of South Vietnam nor the effort of the US government can succeed. Time is limited by reactions in this country. We cannot build an independent South Vietnam. The issue is: can we by military means keep the North Vietnamese out of the South Vietnamese? I do not think we can.

Johnson bows out and peace talks begin
At the end of March 1968, Johnson admitted that he had failed in Vietnam. Presidential elections were due later in the year. Johnson declared that he would not be seeking re-election. He reduced the level of bombing in the North. He called for peace talks. North Vietnam agreed to negotiate and talks began in Paris in May 1968.
The peace talks got nowhere, but it was clear by the summer of 1968 that the American government was looking for a way out. A new President was elected in November 1968 – Richard Nixon – and he was determined to end the war.

SOURCE H
A British cartoonist, Nicholas Garland, ridicules Nixon’s policy in 1969.
What point is the cartoonist trying to make?
Atrocities at My Lai

The American war effort was hit by another devastating blow in 1969. It became known that US troops had carried out an appalling atrocity against Vietnamese civilians. On 16 March 1968 American soldiers massacred the villagers of a place called My Lai. The American officer, Lieutenant William Calley, was eventually court-martrialled for the murder of 109 civilians. The story of what happened at My Lai horrified many Americans. They had seen their action in Vietnam as a fight against wicked communists. In My Lai all the wickedness was American.

Protests against the war

News of the atrocities at My Lai fuelled the anti-war feelings of many Americans. The war was shown on American television and this also caused many people to question why their country was fighting in Vietnam. As the peace talks made little progress in Paris there were increasing numbers of demonstrations in America calling for an end to the war.

SOURCE K

The British journalist, John Pilger, described the scene on 25 April 1971 when a huge demonstration of veterans, or former soldiers, protested in Washington against the war.

"The truth is out! Mickey Mouse is dead! The good guys are really the bad guys in disguise!" The speaker is William Wyman, from New York City. He is nineteen and has no legs. He sits in a wheelchair on the steps of the United States Congress. In the midst of 300,000, the greatest demonstration America has ever seen. He has on green combat fatigues and the jacket is torn where he has ripped away the medals and the ribbons he has been given in exchange for his legs. Along with hundreds of other veterans of the war, he has hurled his medals on the Capitol steps and described them as a joke. And now to those who form a ring of pity around him, he says, "Before I lost these legs, I killed and killed and killed. We all did! Jesus, don’t grieve for me!"

Never before in this country have young soldiers marched in protest against the war in which they themselves have fought and which is still going on.

SOURCE L

Did Vietnisation work?

The South Vietnamese forces were not strong enough to defeat the communists. The government of General Thieu lacked the support and loyalty of the Vietnamese people. Thieu had the backing of landlords and Catholic Church leaders but crucially he had little support from the ordinary Vietnamese people in the countryside.

SOURCE M

When Nixon later wrote his memoirs he recognised the weakness of Vietnisation.

The real problem was that the enemy was willing to sacrifice in order to win, while the South Vietnamese simply weren’t willing to pay that much of a price in order to avoid losing.

As part of Vietnisation the USA stepped up the bombing of the supply lines of the Viet Cong. This had the effect of spreading the conflict into neighbouring countries of Laos and Cambodia. The attacks on these countries did little to stop the supplies to the communist troops but did manage to encourage local communists. Between 1969 and 1973 the US dropped over half a million tons of bombs on Cambodia. This contributed to the support for the ruthless Cambodian communists, known as the Khmer Rouge. Communists won control of Cambodia in 1975. Similarly, the communist force known as Pathet Lao gained support in Laos and took control of the whole country in 1975.
WHY DID THE USA FIGHT AND loose the VIETNAM War?

The cease-fire: 1973

The peace talks in Paris dragged on for years without achieving anything. By 1972 the communists felt strong enough to launch another all-out attack on the cities of the South, similar to the Tet Offensive. This attack was more successful than the Tet Offensive but the communists were still not able to conquer the main centres of population. After the offensive of the summer of 1972, neither side could see any hope of victory and the peace talks started to make some progress. At last in January 1973 a cease-fire was agreed and the Americans started to take their troops home.

The fall of the South: 1975

The American forces pulled out soon after the cease-fire agreement was signed. This ended US involvement but it did not end the war. Fighting soon resumed between the communists and the Southern forces. Two years after the agreement in Paris the North launched another major offensive against South Vietnam in March 1975. This time, relying only on South Vietnamese troops and without American air support, the Saigon government was not able to resist. The Vietnamese and the army of the North swept victoriously through the South. The war effectively ended on 29 April 1975 when the communists captured the southern capital of Saigon.

American TV viewers watched in horror as thousands of South Vietnamese people fought to get on the last US helicopters out of Saigon.

After Vietnam: détente and a loss of confidence

American failure to contain communism in Vietnam led to a deep re-assessment of policy towards the communist world. American leaders had been shocked by their failure in Vietnam. The cost had been enormous: 55,000 dead American soldiers and billions of dollars spent. This huge commitment had achieved nothing. Communist governments had taken power not only in North and South Vietnam but also in the neighbouring states of Cambodia and Laos. In addition, Americans had lost the confidence in their mission as the world’s leading nation.

The American President who took the US out of the war was Richard Nixon. Together with his adviser, Henry Kissinger, Nixon developed a new foreign policy for the post-Vietnam world. This became known as ‘détente’ and it involved striving for agreement and peace with the communist world.

>> Activity

Explain why the USA lost the war in Vietnam. In your answer describe:

a. American military tactics,

b. the impact of the Tet Offensive,

c. atrocities such as My Lai,

d. opposition to the war in the USA.

Nixon in China

Nixon tried to get better relations not only with the Soviet Union, but also with communist China. The world was surprised when Nixon announced in 1971 that he would visit China. Since 1949 the US government had treated China with contempt and had refused to ‘recognise’ the communist government. The visit took place in 1972 and led to much better relations between the two countries.

SOURCE 0

The world was astonished when Nixon visited China in 1972.

Arms control

In dealing with the Soviet Union, Nixon emphasised the need for arms control negotiations. The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) began in 1969 and led to the signing of an agreement on Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles in 1972. Nixon stated that American policy on nuclear weapons was now one of ‘sufficiency’, rather than ‘superiority’. This meant that the Americans wanted enough weapons to defend themselves and were no longer committed to having more than the Soviet Union. Détente also increased trade between the superpowers. In 1972 the US government agreed to supply wheat to the Soviet Union and soon a large proportion of all American wheat was exported to the Soviet Union.

In Europe, détente meant a reduction of tension over the divisions of Germany. In 1974 the USA formally recognised East Germany as an independent country. Détente allowed the two German states to establish better relations with each other. Détente continued after Nixon’s fall from office during the Watergate Scandal in 1974. Brezhnev, the Soviet leader organised a conference on the future of Europe in Helsinki between 1973 and 1975. This produced agreements on ways of avoiding confrontation between East and West and economic co-operation. The Helsinki agreements also committed all parties to respect human rights. Communist countries did very little to honour the pledge on human rights.

The end of détente

The US president, Jimmy Carter (in office 1977–80) attempted to achieve more arms reductions through the SALT II talks. These talks were very protracted. Carter annoyed Brezhnev by trying to link cuts in weapons to discussions of human rights in the communist countries. A SALT II treaty was finally signed in 1979. This set further limits on the number of nuclear weapons that each side could hold. The SALT II treaty was never ratified by the US Congress because the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979. The sending of troops into Afghanistan marked the end of the period of détente. The USA boycotted the Moscow Olympics in 1980 in order to show disapproval for the Soviet nation.

In 1981, Carter was replaced by a hard-line President, Ronald Reagan, who rejected détente and who started a new arms race with the Soviet Union. The early 1980s have been called the Second Cold War. Reagan attacked Soviet communism in his speeches and talked of the need to oppose an ‘evil empire’. His scientists were instructed to explore ways of giving the USA nuclear superiority by developing ways of shooting down Soviet missiles in space. This project was known as Star Wars, or the Strategic Defence Initiative.

>> Activity

Explain in your own words how American foreign policy developed after Vietnam.