

SECTION

4

THE VIETNAM WAR, 1954-1973

In this section you will learn how Vietnam, a country in Southeast Asia, had an important impact on the affairs of the United States in the 1960s and 1970s.

THINK ABOUT IT

Many Americans protested against the Vietnam War. Is it unpatriotic for citizens to protest involvement in a war they oppose? _____

Explain. _____

Important Terms and Concepts: As you read this section, look for the following:

◆ Vietnam War

◆ Paris Peace Accords

◆ Domino Theory

◆ War Powers Act

To help you find these terms, the ◆ symbol appears where the term is first explained.

EVENTS LEADING TO THE VIETNAM WAR

American involvement in the war in Vietnam did not occur suddenly, as in World War II. It ◆ evolved slowly, over a period of time, and through several U.S. Presidencies.

BACKGROUND

During the 1800s, France colonized Vietnam. When World War II ended in 1945, Vietnam declared its independence. France refused to recognize Vietnamese independence, and a war followed. After nine years of fighting, the Vietnamese finally defeated the French in 1954. At the **Geneva Peace Conference**, Vietnam was divided in two. The Vietnamese communist leader, **Ho Chi Minh**, was given control of the north, and a non-communist state was established in the south. The country was to be reunited after elections in 1956. However, when the time came to hold the elections, South Vietnam refused. Its leaders claimed that the communists in the north would not conduct a fair election. When elections were not held, Vietnamese communists, called **Vietcong**, supported by the North Vietnamese, began a **guerrilla war** (*a war fought by irregular troops who take cover in the countryside or jungle*) against South Vietnam, to reunite the country under communist rule.

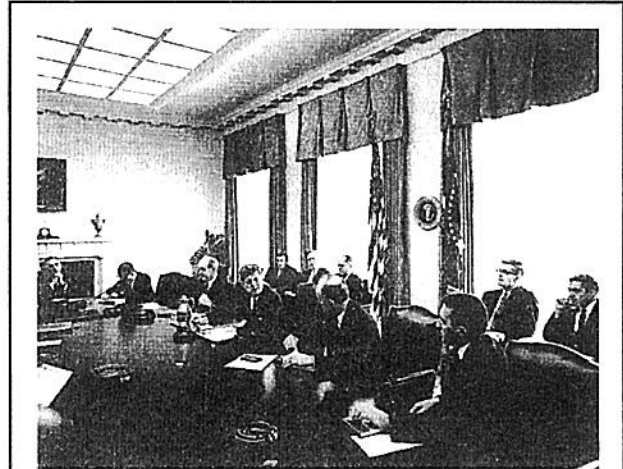


Ho Chi Minh

THE WAR UNDER

PRESIDENT KENNEDY (1961-1963)

Responding to requests from South Vietnam for help, President Kennedy sent military and economic aid to assist in fighting the Vietcong. Kennedy and the Presidents who succeeded him believed that if South Vietnam fell to communism, other nations in Southeast Asia would quickly follow. ♦ This belief was called the “**Domino Theory**” — countries would fall to communism one after another, like a row of dominoes. Kennedy also felt a moral duty to defend South Vietnam, believing it could develop into a democratic nation and serve as a model for other developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.



*President Kennedy meeting
with members of his Cabinet*

THE WAR UNDER

PRESIDENT JOHNSON (1963-1968)

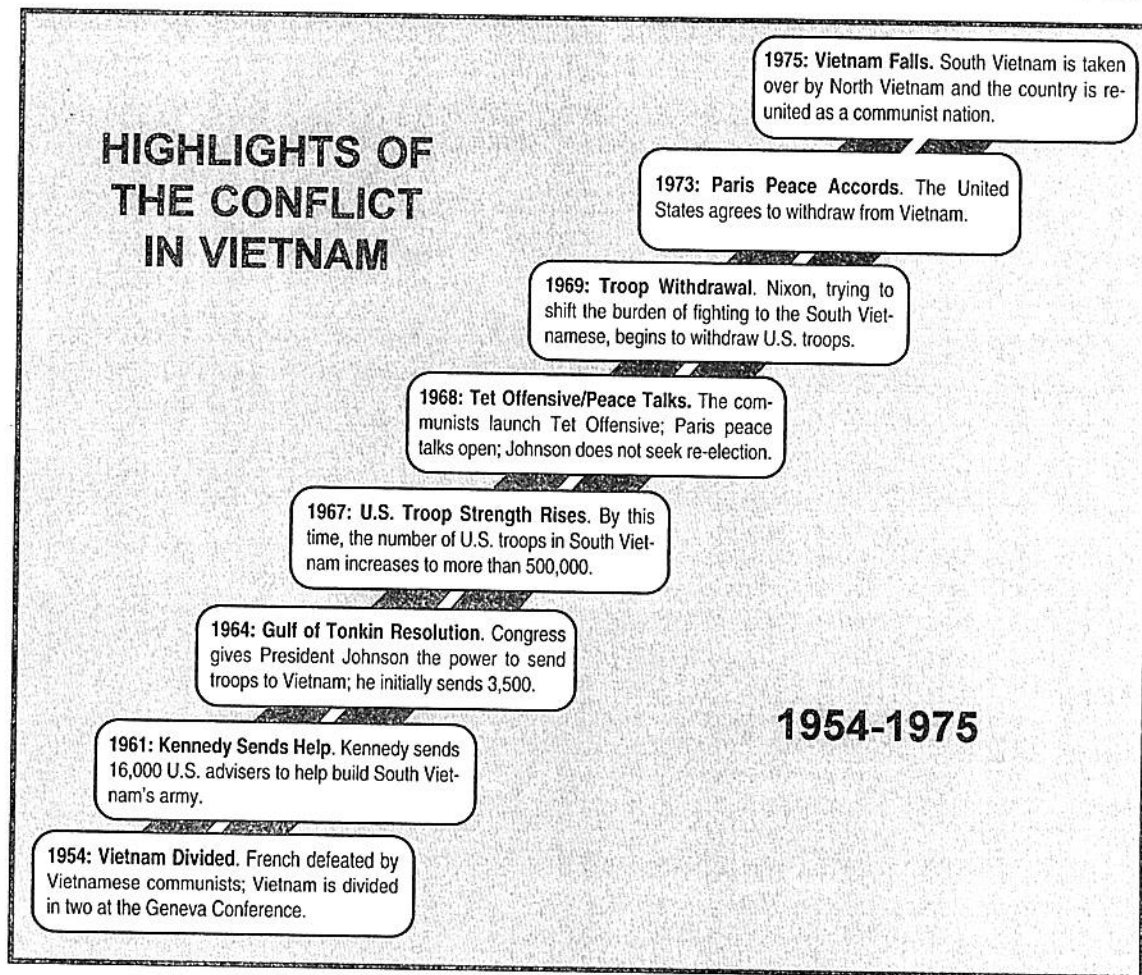
A major turning point occurred in 1964, when Congress passed the **Tonkin Gulf Resolution**, giving President Johnson authority to take emergency steps to halt North Vietnamese aggression. Over the next three years, Johnson sent large numbers of troops to Vietnam; more than 500,000 U.S. soldiers were eventually stationed there. Despite this, the Vietcong were able to launch major attacks throughout South Vietnam in 1968. These attacks, known as the **Tet Offensive**, showed that despite the large number of U.S. forces, the Vietcong could still mount major military offensives. The Tet Offensive demonstrated to the American public that victory was far off.

THE WAR UNDER PRESIDENT NIXON (1969-1973)

President Nixon campaigned for the Presidency in 1968 on the promise that he would bring about “peace with honor” in Vietnam. However, the war dragged on for five more years. Nixon began his Presidency by increasing the bombing of North Vietnam and invading neighboring Cambodia, a country from which the Viet Cong often attacked. When this had little impact, Nixon began gradually withdrawing U.S. forces from South Vietnam. In 1973, Nixon’s representatives signed a cease-fire agreement with the North Vietnamese, known as the **Paris Peace Accords**. ♦ Under its terms, the United States simply withdrew its remaining forces from South Vietnam. Two years later, South Vietnam was taken over by North Vietnam, and Vietnam was reunited under communist leadership.



*U.S. soldiers relaxing after a battle
in the jungles of Vietnam*



WHY THE U.S. WAS UNABLE TO WIN THE WAR

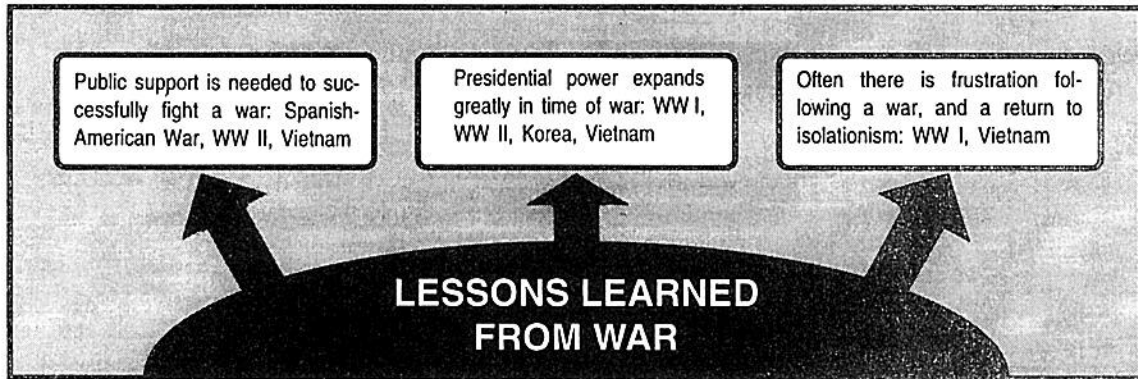
By the end of 1968, the United States had dropped more bombs in Vietnam than during all of World War II. The war was costing \$25 billion a year. Despite these efforts, America was still losing the war, for a number of reasons:

- **Guerrilla War.** Vietnam's jungles provided an ideal cover for guerrilla war. American soldiers were not trained in guerrilla warfare. The Vietcong often hid among the South Vietnamese people and had the support of many of them.
- **International Support for North Vietnam.** The North Vietnamese received large amounts of supplies from the communist governments of China and the Soviet Union. This prompted American leaders to reject an invasion of North Vietnam, fearing it might lead to Chinese and Soviet intervention.
- **Popularity of the Nationalist Cause.** Since Ho Chi Minh had led the fight for independence from the French, many Vietnamese saw him as the father of their country. The North Vietnamese were willing to suffer large losses to reach their goals; the South Vietnamese government was unable to command the same respect and loyalty from their people.

- **The American Anti-War Movement.** The Vietnam War was one of the most unpopular wars in American history. Marches and demonstrations in the U.S. called for complete withdrawal from Vietnam. Many Americans saw the conflict as a Vietnamese civil war, and believed that the U.S. was acting immorally by bombing civilians and burning villages.

RESULTS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

Over 58,000 Americans died in the war. Almost 2 million Vietnamese were killed, and over half the population of South Vietnam was left homeless. Cities and rice paddies were ruined, leaving the Vietnamese economy in shambles. The war also left Americans deeply divided.



IMPACT OF PUBLIC OPINION

Universities became centers of protest. Some young men burned their draft cards and refused to serve in the military. The Vietnam War demonstrated to America's leaders that for government policies to succeed in a democracy, they must have popular support.

LIMITS ON PRESIDENTIAL WARTIME POWERS

- ◆ The President is often in a position to act quickly. In the Vietnam War, as in the Korean War, Presidential powers greatly expanded. In response, Congress passed the **War Powers Act (1973)**, limiting the ability of the President to send troops overseas. The President must inform Congress within 48 hours; Congress must approve within 60 days, or the troops must be withdrawn.

CONCERN OVER U.S. OVERSEAS INVOLVEMENT

American leaders became less willing to involve U.S. military power abroad. Just as after World War I, many Americans again became opposed to an active role in world affairs. As a result, U.S. leaders adopted a more cautious foreign policy, avoiding overseas commitments.

ANALYSIS

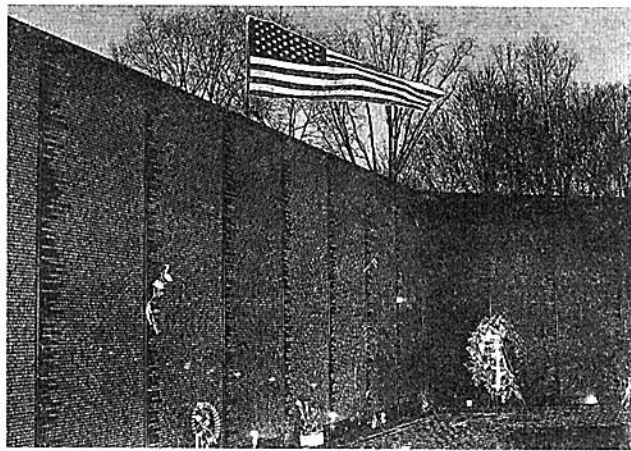
The Vietnam War again raised questions over how much control over foreign policy the President or Congress should have. What are the advantages of Presidential control?

What are the advantages of Congressional control? _____

Maya Lin, Architect**FOCUS
ON THE
ARTS**

In the late 1970s, the government decided to build a memorial in Washington, D.C. to the 58,724 Americans killed and the 2,487 listed as missing during the Vietnam War. A contest was held to determine the design of the monument. Hundreds of proposals were submitted. The winner was an unknown 21-year-old Chinese-American student, Maya Lin. Her design was

a V-shaped 500-foot-long wall rising out of the ground. On its polished black granite surface appear the names of every American killed or missing in the Vietnam War. Since its dedication in 1984, millions of people have visited the memorial. In 1988, another of her designs was chosen for the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama.

**THINKING IT OVER**

What do you now think is the best way to protest involvement in a war that you disapprove of? _____

SUMMING UP: THE VIETNAM WAR

In 1954, Vietnam was divided into two states: communist North Vietnam and non-communist South Vietnam. When Vietnamese communists began attacking South Vietnam, the U.S. sent troops to help. At one point, over 500,000 U.S. troops were fighting in support of South Vietnam. Eventually, many Americans came to believe that U.S. troops should be withdrawn. The war became one of the most divisive and unpopular causes in U.S. history. In 1973, a cease-fire agreement with North Vietnam was signed and U.S. forces withdrew. Two years later, Vietnam was reunited under communist rule. Congress passed the War Powers Act, requiring Congressional support when the President sends U.S. troops abroad.