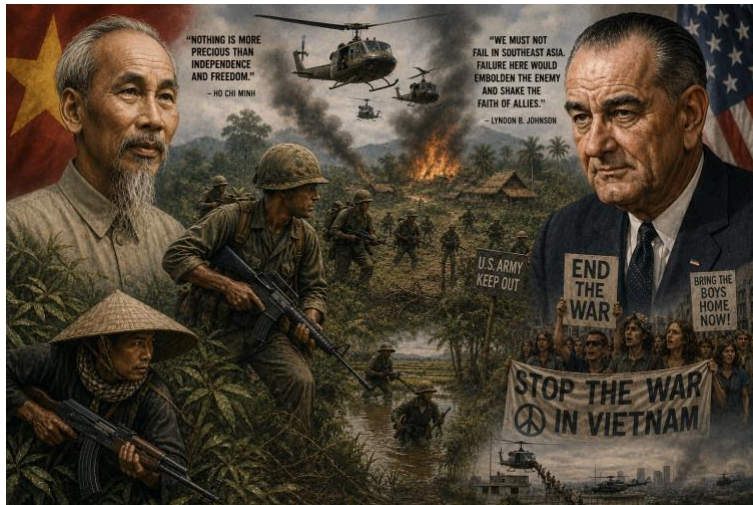




Vietnam: America's Long War of Containment

The Vietnam War grew out of the same Cold War policy that had taken the United States into Korea. Beginning with the Truman Doctrine in 1947, American foreign policy rested on a seemingly straightforward principle: communism must be contained. The United States would not necessarily attempt to overthrow communist governments already in power, but it would resist further communist expansion.

That policy appeared to work in Europe and, at considerable cost, had prevented South Korea from falling under communist control. Vietnam would prove far more complicated. What began as another effort to contain communism became a long, frustrating war against an enemy motivated not only by communist ideology but also by nationalism and a determination to reunify Vietnam under its own rule.

From French Colony to Divided Nation

Vietnam had been part of French Indochina before World War II. During and after the war, the nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh led a movement seeking Vietnamese independence. Ho was also a committed communist, creating the dilemma that would shape American policy for the next three decades. To Washington, Vietnam increasingly appeared not simply as a colonial independence struggle but as another front in the worldwide contest between communism and the West.

After French forces suffered a decisive defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, Vietnam was temporarily divided near the 17th parallel. Ho Chi Minh's communist government controlled the North, while an anti-communist government emerged in the South. The United States gradually assumed the role that France had abandoned, supporting South Vietnam with money, equipment, military advisers and, eventually, American combat troops.

Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy increased American involvement, partly because of the "domino theory"—the belief that if South Vietnam fell to communism, neighboring countries might follow. By the time Lyndon B. Johnson became president after Kennedy's assassination in 1963, the United States was already deeply committed to keeping South Vietnam independent.

Johnson Goes to War

The turning point came in 1964 with the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Congress overwhelmingly approved the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, giving Johnson broad authority to use military force in Southeast Asia without a formal declaration of war.

American involvement escalated dramatically. In 1965, U.S. combat troops arrived in large numbers, and American aircraft began an extensive bombing campaign against North Vietnam. At the war's peak, more than half a million American military personnel were serving in Vietnam.

Johnson and his advisers believed superior American military power could force North Vietnam to abandon its effort to conquer the South. American forces won most of the conventional battles they fought and inflicted enormous casualties on North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces. Yet battlefield superiority did not produce the political result Washington expected.

Vietnam was becoming a quagmire.

A War of Ideology—and Nationalism

The United States viewed Vietnam largely through the lens of the Cold War: communism versus democracy, East versus West, "us versus them." North Vietnam certainly was communist and received substantial support from the Soviet Union and Communist China. But ideology explained only part of the conflict.

Vietnamese nationalism was equally important.

The Vietnamese had resisted foreign domination for centuries. Many Vietnamese therefore saw the conflict not simply as a communist revolution but as another struggle to unify their country and remove foreign influence. The United States increasingly found itself in the difficult position of defending a South Vietnamese government that suffered from instability, corruption and limited popular support.

This was the fundamental weakness in America's strategy. The United States could win battles, destroy enemy formations and control territory, but it could not easily defeat an enemy willing to endure enormous losses for years—or decades—to achieve national unification.

Military power could not solve the underlying political problem.

The War Comes Home

Vietnam was also the first American war experienced nightly on television. Americans watched combat footage, wounded soldiers, burning villages and flag-draped coffins while government officials continued to insist that progress was being made.

By the late 1960s, the credibility gap between official optimism and what Americans were seeing and hearing had widened considerably. College campuses became centers of protest. Demonstrations grew larger, draft resistance increased, and the anti-war movement became a major force in American politics. Not every opponent of the war was a youthful protester. Members of Congress, journalists, clergy, veterans and ordinary middle-class Americans increasingly questioned whether the war could be won and whether its cost was justified.

Then came the Tet Offensive in January 1968. North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces launched attacks across South Vietnam, including an assault on the grounds of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. Militarily, Tet was a costly defeat for the communist forces. Politically, however, it was devastating to the Johnson administration. Americans who had been told that victory was approaching suddenly saw an enemy capable of launching coordinated attacks throughout South Vietnam.

The question increasingly became not "How do we win?" but "How do we get out?"

Johnson's Two Wars

Vietnam also collided with Lyndon Johnson's ambitious domestic agenda. Johnson hoped his presidency would be remembered for the Great Society—civil rights legislation, Medicare, Medicaid, education programs, the War on Poverty and other efforts to reshape American society.

Instead, Vietnam consumed increasing amounts of money, political energy and public confidence. Johnson found himself trying to fight two wars simultaneously: a military war in Southeast Asia and a domestic war against poverty and inequality at home.

He increasingly lost support from both directions. Conservatives attacked the cost of his domestic programs, while liberals who might otherwise have supported the Great Society turned against him because of Vietnam. On March 31, 1968, Johnson stunned the nation by announcing that he would not seek another term as president.

Vietnam had effectively destroyed his presidency.

Nixon and "Peace With Honor"

Richard Nixon entered the White House in 1969 promising to end the war while preserving American credibility. His administration adopted a policy called "Vietnamization," gradually withdrawing American ground forces while transferring greater responsibility for the fighting to South Vietnamese troops.

The war nevertheless continued for four more years. Nixon expanded military operations into Cambodia and intensified bombing while simultaneously negotiating with North Vietnam. The Paris Peace Accords were signed in January 1973. American combat forces withdrew, prisoners of war returned home, and for the United States the direct military war was essentially over. But the war between North and South Vietnam was not.

Without American combat forces—and with declining American military assistance—South Vietnam's position deteriorated rapidly. North Vietnamese forces launched a major offensive in 1975 and swept southward. Saigon fell on April 30.

The Last Helicopters

The final evacuation produced some of the most haunting images in American history. Helicopters shuttled Americans and Vietnamese evacuees from Saigon to U.S. Navy ships offshore as desperate crowds sought escape from the advancing North Vietnamese forces.

One photograph became an enduring symbol of America's defeat: people climbing a ladder to a helicopter on a rooftop. Contrary to a widespread later belief, the building was not the U.S. Embassy but an apartment building used by CIA personnel. The actual embassy was also evacuated by helicopter during the frantic final hours.

The scenes aboard American ships were equally extraordinary. South Vietnamese helicopters arrived carrying refugees, and after their passengers had escaped, some helicopters were pushed overboard to clear landing space for others still approaching. It was an astonishing ending to America's longest war up to that time.

North and South Vietnam were formally reunited the following year as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The communist victory that successive American presidents had spent decades trying to prevent was complete.

The Cost of Vietnam

More than 58,000 Americans died in the Vietnam War, and more than 150,000 were wounded. Vietnamese military and civilian deaths numbered in the millions. The war also spilled into neighboring Laos and Cambodia, leaving destruction and political instability that continued long after American forces departed.

At home, Vietnam left another kind of scar. Americans became far more skeptical of government assurances and more reluctant to accept open-ended military commitments overseas. Congress passed the War Powers Resolution in 1973 in an attempt to limit a president's ability to commit American forces to prolonged hostilities without congressional approval.