

Conflict in Indochina: 1954-1979

Jonathon Dallimore





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Conflict in Indochina: 1954-1979

Jonathon Dallimore



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1st Edition

Jonathon Dallimore

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CONTENTS

About the book	iv
Author acknowledgements	vi
Introduction	1



01	Decolonisation in Indochina, 1946–54	8
----	--------------------------------------	---



02	The emergence of the Second Indochina War, 1954–64	34
----	--	----



03	The Second Indochina War, 1964–68	64
----	-----------------------------------	----



04	The Second Indochina War, 1969–73	95
----	-----------------------------------	----



05	Communist victories in Indochina, 1973–75	122
----	---	-----



06	The Cambodian Revolution, 1975–79	144
----	-----------------------------------	-----



07	The impact and legacy of the conflict in Indochina	168
----	--	-----

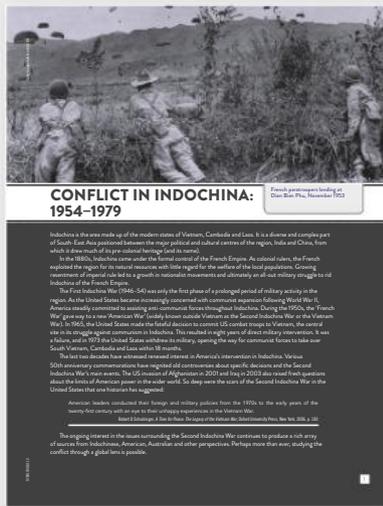
Index	178
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ABOUT THE BOOK

Conflict in Indochina: 1954–1979

Conflict in Indochina: 1954–1979 has been developed especially for senior secondary students of Modern History in New South Wales. The book is based on the understanding that History is an interpretative study of the past by which you also come to better appreciate the making of the modern world.

Developing understandings of the past and present in senior History extends on the skills you learnt in earlier years. As senior students you will use historical skills, including research, evaluation, synthesis, analysis and communication, and the historical concepts, such as evidence, continuity and change, cause and effect, significance, empathy, perspectives and contestability, to understand and interpret societies from the past.



BOOK INTRODUCTION provides a context to the issues that are addressed.

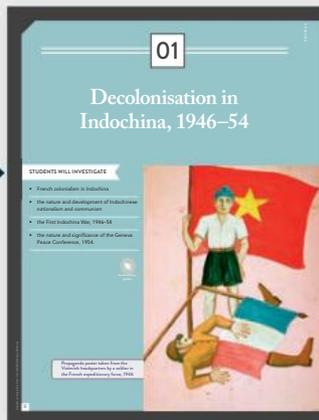


KEY FIGURES AND ORGANISATIONS, KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS, AND KEY DOCUMENTS feature brief biographies, profiles, definitions and summaries of key documents as a ready reference for learning and revision.



SYLLABUS OUTCOMES

are listed at the start of the chapter. These provide a focus for you as you read each chapter.



The Resistance



Truong Chinh was a leading member of the DRV. He was named its first prime minister in 1960. He was known for his role in the DRV's military and political development. He was a member of the Politburo and the Central Committee of the DRV. He was also a member of the Politburo of the Workers' Party of Vietnam. He was a member of the Politburo of the Workers' Party of Vietnam. He was a member of the Politburo of the Workers' Party of Vietnam.

QUESTIONS

1. Why does Truong Chinh suggest that it is necessary to protect the war of resistance?
2. Analyze the perspective of the source.

SOURCE STUDIES of visual and text primary sources and secondary literature appear frequently throughout the text and are combined with questions and activities to aid your evaluation and interpretation of evidence from the past.

PRINCE NORODOM SIHANOUK (1922–2012)



Norodom Sihanouk was born in France. He was the King of Cambodia from 1955 to 1970. He was a member of the royal family. He was a member of the royal family. He was a member of the royal family.

LON NOL (1913–85)



Lon Nol served in the French colonial army and then in the Cambodian Army in the early 1950s. He was a member of the royal family. He was a member of the royal family. He was a member of the royal family.

SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUALS are biographical profiles and assessments of key historical figures and frequently include questions and activities.

The Ngo family



Diem's family were prominent Catholics from South Vietnam. During Diem's presidency, many of his family members were given government jobs. Some of these individuals were not prepared to fulfill positions within the government, but this did not reduce the power they had within certain sectors. Diem's regime was a Ngo Dinh Diem regime. He was a member of the royal family. He was a member of the royal family.



Nhu was the wife of Diem. She was a member of the royal family. She was a member of the royal family. She was a member of the royal family.

INFORMATION BOXES contain extended discussions of key events, concepts and historical developments. Many also include questions and activities.

Qiang Zhai on China's support for the DRV

In his book *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–75* (2000), Chinese historian Qiang Zhai argues that international influences on the Lao Dong Party were crucial to the DRV's decisions in the early 1950s. He notes that there were regular meetings between Chinese and North Vietnamese officials and that, in 1961, China raised some cautions on the part of the DRV because it did not want to provoke a major US retaliation. Qiang Zhai claims that a meeting between China and communist delegates from the DRV, Laos and Indochina in September 1963 in Guangzhou (Southern China) changed this. At this meeting, the Premier of the People's Republic of China (PRC) told communist delegates that it was time to challenge US intervention in South-East Asia with more open aggression. Then, in December 1963, Chinese military officials visited the DRV and developed detailed plans to increase China's assistance to the North. In 1964, China also sent military teams into Laos to expand its commitment to the Pathet Lao. All of this, according to Qiang Zhai, amounted to an important change in China's relationship with communists in Indochina and, in turn, emboldened both the DRV and its allies in South Vietnam. In December 1963, the Lao Dong Party passed the 9th Plenum, which increased the DRV's military assistance to the NLF.

HISTORIAN BOXES introduce key historians and schools of interpretation as a way of making historiography clearer.

Use Source 1.15 on page 29 and other evidence to describe the process of negotiations at Geneva in 1954.

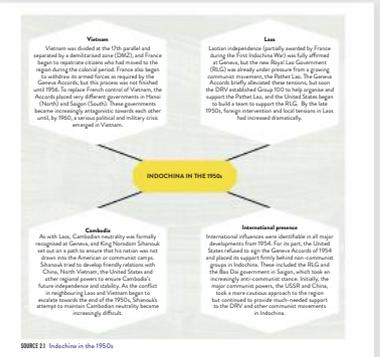
Create a mind map or set of structured notes that outlines the main causes of the Geneva Accords.

How did the final decisions at Geneva affect the following?

- a. The Vietnam
- b. The French Union
- c. Cambodia and Laos

How were the Geneva Accords meant to be monitored?

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES are included throughout the text to consolidate content knowledge and hone examination skills.



DIAGRAMS are used to visually summarise complex ideas and events, and each chapter includes **LOCATION MAPS**.

Chapter summary

- Indochina in the region made up of the modern states of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.
- This region was colonised by France through a lengthy process beginning in the 17th century.
- France ruled the region directly from 1857, after proclaiming the Indochinese Union.
- In general, the French Empire exploited the people of Indochina, which helped to inspire the growth of many anti-colonial movements in the region.
- Nationalism and communism became two of the most powerful ideas shaping Indochina in the 20th century.
- The Vietnam became the most successful nationalist organisation during Japanese occupation of Indochina.
- In 1946, a major war between the Vietnamese and France broke out, which was transformed by international intervention in 1950 as Indochina became part of the global Cold War.
- In 1954, delegates tried to find a peaceful solution to the problems in Indochina at the Geneva Conference.
- The Geneva Accords delivered on 20 July 1954 established a fragile peace in Indochina, and many key stakeholders were not entirely pleased with the outcomes of the conference.

Further resources

- Brooks, Hal, *Public Vietnam: An Anticolonial Campaign*, Oxford, 2009
- Brooks, Peter and Henry, David, *Indochina: An Anticolonial Campaign*, MSR-1954, University of California Press.

CHAPTER SUMMARY AND CHAPTER REVIEW ACTIVITIES conclude each chapter. They include a brief precis of the topic, suggestions for further reading, and a range of learning activities that consolidate knowledge and understanding of the chapter's content. These tasks incorporate a range of historical understandings and skills.

CHAPTER REVIEW

CHAPTER REVISION QUESTIONS

- Individually or in pairs, create three timelines (10–15 events each) for the period 1954–60.
 - a. North Vietnam
 - b. South Vietnam
 - c. International developments.
- Using Sources 2.1 page 36 and 2.23 page 56 and your own research, identify and explain the most important changes that took place in Indochina between 1954 and 1964.
- Compare and contrast the political, social, economic and military developments in North and South Vietnam in the period up to 1964.
- Write about the main developments in the policy of the United States towards the following in the period 1954–61:
 - a. Vietnam
 - b. Laos
 - c. Cambodia
- Explain how historians continue to shape the interpretation of George Herring and Michael Lind's pages 40–2 regarding US involvement in Indochina up to 1964.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Conduct some research into other historians who have written on the period. How do their interpretations compare with those of Herring and Lind on the following? How far would you concur with the 'Further research' section on page 62 to fully justify your research?
 - a. Ho Chi Minh
 - b. The role of Ngo Dinh Diem
 - c. Reasons for US involvement in Indochina up to 1964
 - d. The role of the United States in South Vietnam
 - e. The role of the PRC and the USSR in the expanding conflict

EXTENDED WRITING EXERCISE

- Conduct an essay responding to one of the following questions:
 - a. Account for the failure of the Geneva Accords by 1964.
 - b. Evaluate the importance of communism to the developments in Indochina up to 1964.
 - c. Evaluate the importance of religion to the developments in Indochina up to 1964.
 - d. Analyse the role of the Cold War in shaping US policy towards Indochina in the period 1954–64.
 - e. To what extent was US intervention responsible for the groupings in Vietnam in the period 1954–61?

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Weblinks for the book may be accessed at <http://nmh-indochina.nelsonnet.com.au>.

AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have only recently been privileged to write for students studying history at secondary school. It has given me a new appreciation for the amount of work that goes into creating resources that are faithful to the events and the historiography while remaining useful within a school setting – hopefully we have achieved that here. Much of the credit in this particular case should go to the production team at Cengage, who have been incredibly supportive and open-minded throughout the process: Michael, Danielle, Kathryn, Stephen and everyone else who contributed.

Special mention in this book must go to Cheryl Tolland at Smith's Hill High School, who got me on my feet with resources for teaching Indochina all those years ago. Also, thanks to David Chandler, who cast a very knowing eye over the early drafts of these chapters, which improved them measurably (any mistakes obviously remain my own). Lastly, a big thank you to Jean and my wider family, who have enabled me to take up this work through their support and encouragement.

Jonathon Dallimore

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CONFLICT IN INDOCHINA: 1954–1979

French paratroopers landing at
Dien Bien Phu, November 1953

Indochina is the area made up of the modern states of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. It is a diverse and complex part of South-East Asia positioned between the major political and cultural centres of the region, India and China, from which it drew much of its pre-colonial heritage (and its name).

In the 1880s, Indochina came under the formal control of the French Empire. As colonial rulers, the French exploited the region for its natural resources with little regard for the welfare of the local populations. Growing resentment of imperial rule led to a growth in nationalist movements and ultimately an all-out military struggle to rid Indochina of the French Empire.

The First Indochina War (1946–54) was only the first phase of a prolonged period of military activity in the region. As the United States became increasingly concerned with communist expansion following World War II, America steadily committed to assisting anti-communist forces throughout Indochina. During the 1950s, the ‘French War’ gave way to a new ‘American War’ (widely known outside Vietnam as the Second Indochina War or the Vietnam War). In 1965, the United States made the fateful decision to commit US combat troops to Vietnam, the central site in its struggle against communism in Indochina. This resulted in eight years of direct military intervention. It was a failure, and in 1973 the United States withdrew its military, opening the way for communist forces to take over South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos within 18 months.

The last two decades have witnessed renewed interest in America’s intervention in Indochina. Various 50th anniversary commemorations have reignited old controversies about specific decisions and the Second Indochina War’s main events. The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 also raised fresh questions about the limits of American power in the wider world. So deep were the scars of the Second Indochina War in the United States that one historian has suggested:

American leaders conducted their foreign and military policies from the 1970s to the early years of the twenty-first century with an eye to their unhappy experiences in the Vietnam War.

Robert D Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace: The Legacy of the Vietnam War*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006, p. 183

The ongoing interest in the issues surrounding the Second Indochina War continues to produce a rich array of sources from Indochinese, American, Australian and other perspectives. Perhaps more than ever, studying the conflict through a global lens is possible.

KEY FIGURES AND ORGANISATIONS

A note on language: A variety of Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian names and terms have been used in this book. For the sake of consistency and clarity, we have chosen to use the Anglicised form and have removed any accents from the original.

GENERAL CREIGHTON ABRAMS (1914–74)

Commander of the US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) from 1968 to 1972.

BAO DAI (1913–97)

Nguyen dynasty emperor from 1926 to 1945. In 1949, Dai was made head of state in Vietnam under French guidance. He was formally recognised in this role again after the Geneva Accords in 1954 but was replaced by the Prime Minister, Ngo Dinh Diem, in a referendum conducted in October 1955.

NGO DINH DIEM (1901–63)



Prime Minister of South Vietnam after the Geneva Accords. With the support of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Diem organised a referendum in October 1955 that changed the political system in South

Vietnam. The main result of this referendum was that Diem replaced the former head of state, Bao Dai, becoming the President of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).

LE DUAN (1907–86)



Communist leader from South Vietnam who became very influential in the North from the late 1950s. His more radical outlook came to define much of the North's policies during the 1960s and 1970s.

ZHOU ENLAI (1898–1976)

Prominent Chinese politician who served as Premier of China from 1949 to 1976 and as Foreign Minister from 1949 to 1958. Under his leadership, China maintained close relationships with all of the major communist movements in Indochina throughout this period. Zhou Enlai was also the main delegate from China to attend the Geneva Conference in 1954.

VO NGUYEN GIAP (1911–2013)



Vietnamese communist politician and military leader who rose to prominence during the First Indochina War (1946–54). He remained an important figure in North Vietnamese politics for the Second Indochina War but was overshadowed by more radical leaders such as Le Duan.

Left to right: Getty Images/PhotoQuest/Archive Photos; Imagefolk/Sovfoto/UIG; Imagefolk/World History Archive

LYNDON B JOHNSON (1908–73)



President of the United States following the assassination of John F Kennedy in 1963. Johnson was in power as the United States began to pursue a policy of direct military intervention in Indochina. He remained in office until January 1969 and was replaced by Richard Nixon.

JOHN F KENNEDY (1917–63)



President of the United States from 1961 to 1963 following Dwight Eisenhower. Kennedy increased the number of US military advisers in South Vietnam but was assassinated in 1963, leaving many questions over what he would have done during his next term in office.

NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV (1894–1971)



Soviet Premier from 1958 to 1964. Khrushchev tried to relax some of the most aggressive policies of Joseph Stalin and pursue ‘peaceful co-existence’ with Western powers in the Cold War. He tried to pressure Ho Chi Minh and other communist leaders in North Vietnam to avoid antagonising the United States over South Vietnam.

HENRY KISSINGER (B. 1923)



National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State for Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. With Nixon, Kissinger wanted the United States to take a tough approach to communists in Vietnam and was part of the administration that designed the expansion of the war into

Cambodia in 1969–70 (including the major bombing campaigns). Kissinger was the lead negotiator in the secret Paris peace talks between the United States and North Vietnam. For his role in helping to bring about the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, Kissinger was jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (along with North Vietnamese negotiator Le Duc Tho, who refused the award).

HO CHI MINH (1890–1969)



One of Vietnam’s most prominent nationalist and communist leaders. Ho Chi Minh came to prominence in the 1920s and in 1941 created Vietnam’s most successful nationalist movement, the Vietminh. Ho went on to become one of North Vietnam’s most powerful politicians after 1954 but was increasingly sidelined in the 1960s due to ill health and the rising influence of radicals such as Le Duan.

Clockwise from top left: Alamy Stock Photo/Andia; Getty Images/Bettmann; Alamy Stock Photo/INTERFOTO; Alamy Stock Photo/US State Department; Alamy Stock Photo/GL Archive

RICHARD NIXON (1913–94)



President of the United States from 1969 to 1974 following Lyndon Johnson. Nixon wanted to find a way for the United States to disengage from Vietnam but also took an aggressive approach to negotiations by escalating the war further than his predecessor. He was forced to resign amid controversy in August 1974.

LON NOL (1913–85)

A high-ranking Cambodian military official who led the coup against Cambodia's long-term ruler Norodom Sihanouk in 1970. Lon Nol established the Khmer Republic (1970–75) and quickly developed a close alliance with the United States. Lon Nol fled Cambodia in early 1975 before the Khmer Rouge captured the capital, Phnom Penh, in April.

VANG PAO (1929–2011)

Commander of the CIA-backed Hmong army in Laos, which fought against the Pathet Lao during the civil war.

POL POT (SALOTH SAR) (1925–98)



A prominent Cambodian communist who came to lead the radical Communist Party of Kampuchea. Pol Pot's party took power in Cambodia in April 1975 and pursued an extremely destructive and violent revolutionary path in Cambodia that caused approximately 1.7 million deaths by 1979.

NORODOM SIHANOUK (1922–2012)



A member of Cambodia's royal family, Sihanouk served as the king of Cambodia and then also as president. He tried to pursue a policy of neutrality (avoiding close alliances with communist or non-communist powers) throughout the 1950s and 1960s, but this became increasingly difficult after US and

North Vietnamese escalation during 1964–65. Sihanouk was overthrown in a military coup in 1970.

NGUYEN VAN THIEU (1923–2001)



A prominent South Vietnamese military official who helped overthrow Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963. Thieu served in several powerful positions in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) government before his election as president in 1967. He served as the RVN's president until 1975 and fled to the United States before NLF–NVA forces reached the presidential palace in Saigon.

LE DUC THO (1911–90)



A prominent communist politician and military leader in North Vietnam. He was a leading member of the Lao Dong Party from the 1950s and was North Vietnam's most important (secret) negotiator in Paris, working closely with Henry Kissinger. Although Le Duc Tho was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (with Kissinger) for his efforts to bring 'peace' to Vietnam, he refused to accept the honour.

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GENERAL WILLIAM WESTMORELAND (1914–2005)



US commander of MACV between 1964 and 1968.

ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM (ARVN)

The formal army of the South Vietnamese state, which fought alongside American forces during the Second Indochina War.

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY (CIA)

The main foreign intelligence organisation of the United States.

CENTRAL OFFICE FOR SOUTH VIETNAM (COSVN)

The main headquarters of communist activity in South Vietnam. COSVN had very close ties with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the Lao Dong Party.

DEMOCRATIC KAMPUCHEA (DK)

The name of Cambodia from January 1976 to January 1979. This was the name of Cambodia during the rule of the Khmer Rouge.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM (DRV)

The official name of the North Vietnamese Government. This was formally recognised as the Government of Vietnam by many

nations in 1950. The Geneva Accords of 1954 divided Vietnam into two separate zones, the North and South, and the DRV was given authority over the North until reunifying elections took place in 1956 (these were never held). In April 1975, the DRV with the support of southern communists conquered South Vietnam, bringing the nation under one government from the northern capital, Hanoi.

KHMER ROUGE (FRENCH: 'RED KHMERS')

The general name given to Cambodian communists. Over time, the name came to refer to the radical communist movement led by Pol Pot and his closest allies. This group ruled Cambodia between April 1975 and January 1979.

MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND VIETNAM (MACV)

The formal name given to the United States military organisation in Vietnam from 1964. This organisation effectively commanded US military operations in South Vietnam until 1973.

NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT (NLF)

The revolutionary organisation founded in 1960 in South Vietnam. The group opposed the South Vietnamese Government then led by Ngo Dinh Diem and criticised the growing US intervention in Vietnam. The NLF quickly developed into a very powerful opposition group with strong support from North Vietnam.

NORTH VIETNAMESE ARMY (NVA)

The formal army of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). From

1964, this army came to play an increasingly important role in the Second Indochina War as large units of soldiers were sent into South Vietnam to fight the growing US forces. The NVA was an important factor in the ultimate success of Vietnamese communists in 1975.

PATHET LAO

The main communist organisation operating in Laos. The movement developed out of an earlier nationalist group, the Lao Issara. The Pathet Lao took power in Laos in December 1975.

PROVISIONAL REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT (PRG)

The alternative government established by the NLF in South Vietnam in June 1969. It was designed to be ready for a complete takeover of Nguyen Van Thieu's government in the South and played an increasingly important role in peace negotiations from 1969.

REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM (RVN)

The formal name of South Vietnam after the referendum of October 1955. The first president of the new republic was Ngo Dinh Diem. The RVN was overthrown in April 1975 by NLF–NVA forces.

ROYAL LAO GOVERNMENT (RLG)

The name given to the Laotian Government after 1954. This government was dissolved and reformed several times and was eventually overthrown by the communist Pathet Lao in December 1975.

Top left: Getty Images/Co Rentmeester/The LIFE Picture Collection

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Attrition

A military strategy aimed at defeating an opponent by wearing down their forces and morale over time. This is usually contrasted with a strategy of annihilation, which aims to completely destroy an enemy.

Cold War

The period of extreme political, military and economic tension between the United States and its allies (Britain, France, Australia, etc.) and the communist bloc (first the Soviet Union and its allies and later expanded when communism began to spread to nations including China, North Korea and Cuba).

Colonialism

The process of exploring and conquering new territories. In the 19th century, there were renewed efforts by European powers to control the last remaining parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East. During this period, the French Empire acquired Indochina as part of its global possessions.

Communism

A political and economic system in which private ownership is strictly limited or illegal. The aim is to create a society in which all people live equally.

Confucianism

Confucius was a Chinese philosopher born in the 6th century BCE. His ideas were brought to Vietnam from China and adapted over many centuries. Some of the main ideas of Confucianism that were adopted in Vietnam were the values of respect for older members of society (including worshipping ancestors who had passed away), the importance of education, and loyalty to both the emperor and the nation more broadly.

Containment

A US strategy used in the Cold War to prevent the spread of communism around the world. This strategy is often contrasted with that of 'rollback', which

aimed to replace a communist regime with a government more likely to align with the United States. Containment was a major influence on US policy in Indochina during the 1950s and 1960s.

Counterinsurgency (COIN)

Combined military and civilian action taken to limit the effects of rebel groups within a nation. This usually includes military patrols and community development programs.

Détente

An attempt to ease tensions between the United States and the USSR during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Nixon's visit to the Soviet Union in May 1972 was part of his attempt to develop this.

Geopolitics

Major political issues relating to a specific region, often including territorial competition, conflict over resource use and alliances.

Guerilla warfare

Guerilla warfare is usually conducted by small groups fighting a larger, more powerful force. Guerilla tactics often involve using quick hit-and-run tactics, secrecy and surprise to wear down an opponent over a longer period.

Indochina

The region made up of modern-day Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. It was ruled by the French Empire from the late 19th century to 1954.

Insurgency

An uprising against a government, usually making use of secret organisations, guerilla warfare and propaganda.

Moratorium

Technically defined as a suspension of normal activity. The mass demonstrations during the Second Indochina War took the name to reflect the widespread opposition to military intervention in Indochina and the fact that the

movement drew people from a wide variety of backgrounds, including students and professionals rather than only radicals.

Nationalism

The belief that a group of people, usually from a distinct ethnic and cultural background, deserve to live as a unified and independent community governing their own affairs. Although some parts of Indochina had long traditions of nationalism, it gained considerable power in the region during the 20th century.

Pacification

The use of military and civilian groups to develop programs aimed at community and social development. In the context of the Second Indochina War, this referred to the attempt by US forces and their allies to help build South Vietnam into a stable and prosperous nation so that civilians would remain loyal to their own government.

Sino-Soviet split

Although the USSR and China were the two largest communist powers, they disagreed on many important ideas and strategies (especially from the mid-1950s). As a result, the communist movements in Indochina were forced to carefully manage their alliances with these powers. By the 1970s, North Vietnam was more closely aligned with the USSR and the Cambodian communists were more closely aligned with China.

Strategy

A broader plan that a military develops to achieve its overall objective. For example, the military might decide on a strategy of attrition, which aims to wear down an opponent so that they surrender or agree to a ceasefire.

Tactics

Specific day-to-day military methods or actions that are used to reach strategic goals.

Declaration of Independence, 1945

A transcript of Ho Chi Minh's speech declaring a new, independent state in Vietnam at the end of World War II.

The Resistance Will Win, 1947

A book published in 1947 by radical nationalist and communist Truong Chinh. The book made a strong call for the people of Vietnam to rally behind the war of resistance against French colonial forces.

Eisenhower Press Conference, April 1954

During a press conference in 1954, US President Dwight Eisenhower delivered one of the clearest public summaries of the domino theory. This idea became an important metaphor for explaining US strategic interest in Indochina.

The Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference, 1954

The summary of the decisions reached at Geneva in 1954.

Program of the National Liberation Front, 1960

The platform of the NLF.

The Caravelle Manifesto, 1960

An appeal made to South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1960. The document called on the president to make changes in South Vietnam to improve the quality of life for all citizens.

President Johnson's 'Peace Without Conquest' speech, April 1965

A famous speech made by US President Lyndon Baines Johnson at the Johns Hopkins University. In the address, Johnson defends the decision to commit American combat troops to Vietnam in the previous month.

Le Duan's letter to South Vietnamese Communists, 1965

A letter calling for a renewed effort of nationalist resistance against the United States and the Government of South Vietnam in response to the American military escalation of 1965.

President Nixon's 'Silent Majority' speech, November 1969

This speech outlined the Nixon administration's plans for Vietnamisation for the American public.

Compilation of statements of apology made by Kaing Guek Eav, alias Comrade Duch, 2009

Statements made by one of the Khmer Rouge's leading prison operators during criminal proceedings.

Surviving Year Zero, 2014

A memoir published by a survivor of the Khmer Rouge. The book provides an intimate portrayal of life under Cambodia's brutal communist regime.

01

Decolonisation in Indochina, 1946–54

STUDENTS WILL INVESTIGATE

- French colonialism in Indochina
- the nature and development of Indochinese nationalism and communism
- the First Indochina War, 1946–54
- the nature and significance of the Geneva Peace Conference, 1954.



Modern History
Syllabus



Propaganda poster taken from the Vietminh headquarters by a soldier in the French expeditionary force, 1946

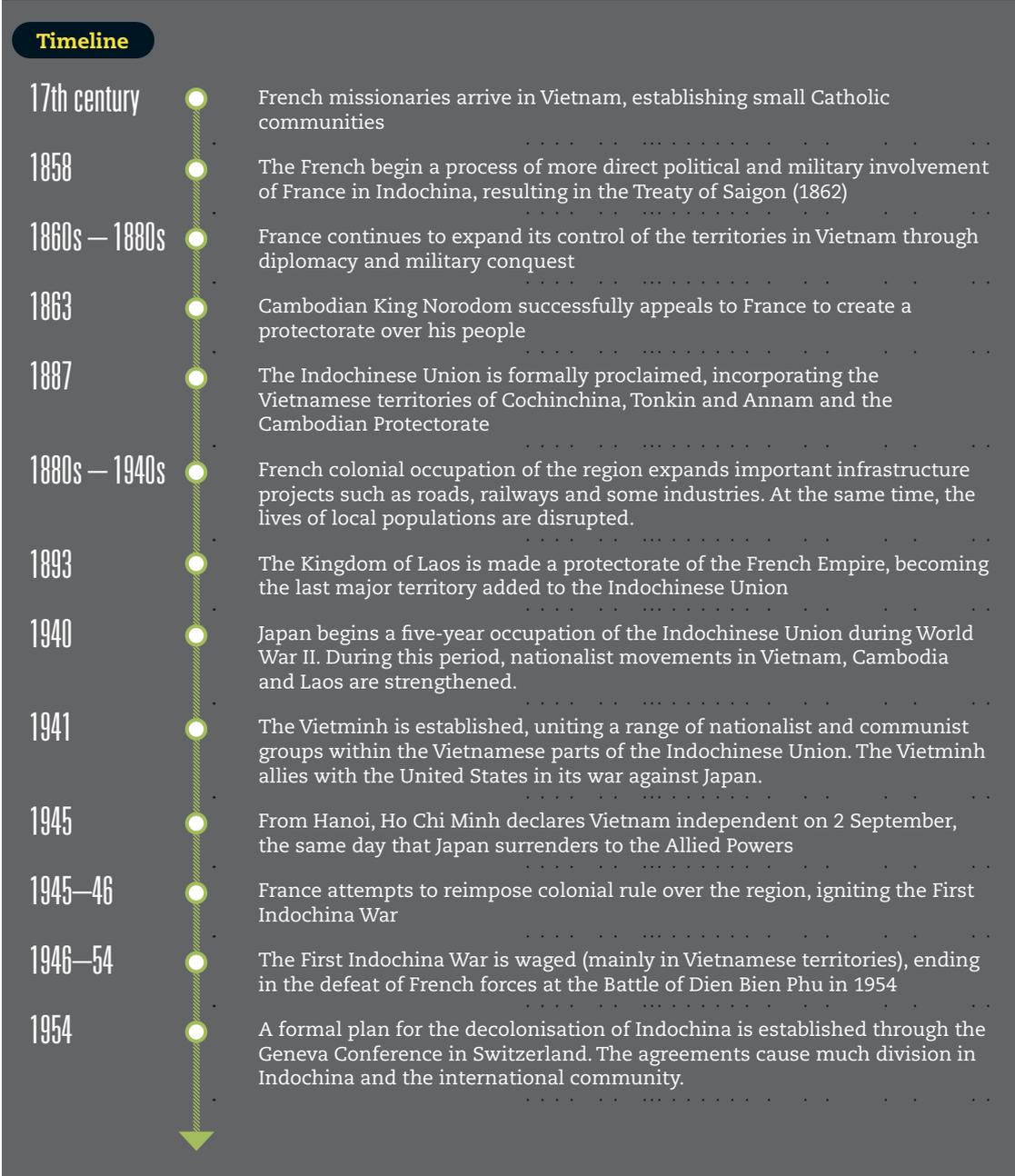
Indochina

Prior to French colonial rule, it was not obvious that the peoples of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos made up a coherent 'region'. Vietnam shared greater cultural links to China, while Cambodia and Laos were more obviously influenced by the traditions of India and other regional powers.

There were some similarities between the people of Indochina. In each area, most people lived in small towns and villages and worked in agriculture. A small part of each population also continued to live in the mountains and jungles and practise older ways of life. The most powerful rulers were the kings (in Cambodia and Laos) and the emperors (in Vietnam).

Nevertheless, the French brought these diverse people together under colonial rule in a complex process beginning in the 17th century.

Timeline

- 
- 17th century** French missionaries arrive in Vietnam, establishing small Catholic communities
 - 1858** The French begin a process of more direct political and military involvement of France in Indochina, resulting in the Treaty of Saigon (1862)
 - 1860s — 1880s** France continues to expand its control of the territories in Vietnam through diplomacy and military conquest
 - 1863** Cambodian King Norodom successfully appeals to France to create a protectorate over his people
 - 1887** The Indochinese Union is formally proclaimed, incorporating the Vietnamese territories of Cochinchina, Tonkin and Annam and the Cambodian Protectorate
 - 1880s — 1940s** French colonial occupation of the region expands important infrastructure projects such as roads, railways and some industries. At the same time, the lives of local populations are disrupted.
 - 1893** The Kingdom of Laos is made a protectorate of the French Empire, becoming the last major territory added to the Indochinese Union
 - 1940** Japan begins a five-year occupation of the Indochinese Union during World War II. During this period, nationalist movements in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are strengthened.
 - 1941** The Vietminh is established, uniting a range of nationalist and communist groups within the Vietnamese parts of the Indochinese Union. The Vietminh allies with the United States in its war against Japan.
 - 1945** From Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh declares Vietnam independent on 2 September, the same day that Japan surrenders to the Allied Powers
 - 1945—46** France attempts to reimpose colonial rule over the region, igniting the First Indochina War
 - 1946—54** The First Indochina War is waged (mainly in Vietnamese territories), ending in the defeat of French forces at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954
 - 1954** A formal plan for the decolonisation of Indochina is established through the Geneva Conference in Switzerland. The agreements cause much division in Indochina and the international community.

French Indochina

TABLE 1.1 Indochina: from first contact to colony

PERIOD	KEY FEATURES
1 First contact	The first French contact with Indochina came in the form of missionary activity and trade. The most famous missionary was Alexandre de Rhodes, who arrived in Vietnam in 1619 and began to establish Catholic missions, creating a sizeable Christian minority. Some estimates suggest that by 1850 about 300 000 Vietnamese people had converted to Catholicism. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, French interest in the region continued to expand. The most important motivations for this were the growth and protection of French missions, the new economic possibilities that the region offered and the strategic concerns of the French Empire. In particular, France wanted to compete with Britain and other European empires that had also begun to develop colonial networks throughout the Asia Pacific.
2 Occupation	<p>French occupation of Indochina began to speed up at the end of the 18th century when France formed an alliance with an exiled Vietnamese emperor, Nguyen Anh (later known as Gia Long). With French assistance, Nguyen Anh and his military took control of southern Vietnam and then successfully extended this all the way north to the Chinese border, conquering some major resistance in the process. The emperor and some of his successors in the Nguyen Dynasty were, however, cautious of allowing too much European influence to flourish under their rule. Nguyen Anh's successors attempted to implement more isolationist policies. They banned Christian missionaries from entering Vietnam and targeted missionaries in an attempt to limit their influence. Some missionaries were arrested and executed, but these decisions began a new period of tension between the French Empire and the Nguyen Dynasty, leading to direct intervention by the French Government.</p> <p>In 1858, the French imperial government used requests for protection from persecuted missionaries in Vietnam to begin military intervention. French Admiral Charles Rigault de Genouilly was ordered to take the city of Tourane (Da Nang), but was soon forced to leave due to the deteriorating health of his men. He then sailed for Saigon, laying siege to the city in 1859. Under direct military pressure, Emperor Tu Duc signed the Treaty of Saigon in 1862, handing over parts of southern Vietnam to France. This was followed by other treaties and the expansion of French colonial rule throughout other parts of Vietnam.</p> <p>In 1863, Cambodia's King Norodom asked for French protection against hostile regional powers (mainly Thailand). Through negotiation with Thailand, a formal French Protectorate was proclaimed over Cambodia that same year, marking a clear expansion in France's control over the region.</p>
3 The Indochinese Union	Through war and diplomacy, France continued to extend control over the region until, in 1887, the Indochinese Union was formally proclaimed (initially made up of Cochinchina, Annam, Tonkin and Cambodia). In 1893, Laos was added to the Union, completing France's most important acquisitions in Indochina. In 1902, the seat of French colonial government in the region was moved to Hanoi, where it remained until 1954, apart from a brief move to Dalat during the Japanese occupation (1940–45).

isolationist

The attempt to ensure that a nation or region remains distinct and protected from external influences that are considered a threat or undesirable

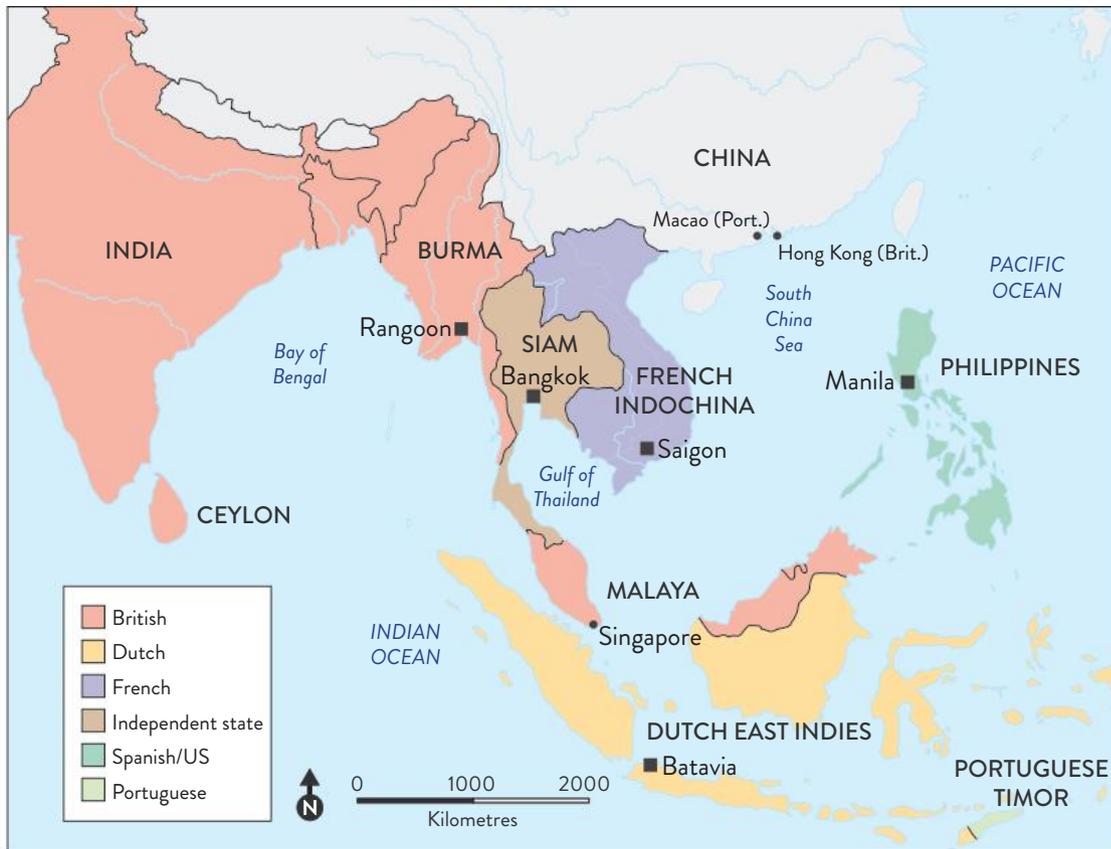


Indochina before the French

civilising mission

In the context of French colonialism, this was an idea based on the belief that European culture was superior. By colonising Indochina, French authorities claimed that they were 'improving' the people of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos by introducing Christianity, European institutions and modern infrastructure. It is an attitude that has since been heavily criticised.

In general, French administrators did not treat the Indochinese people with much respect. The French claimed to be pursuing a **civilising mission** in Indochina, and they certainly helped to build important infrastructure in the region, including roads, railways, schools and some industries. At the same time, they exploited the Indochinese people by forcing them to work in very difficult conditions, taxing essential commodities such as salt, opium and rice wine, and denying local populations any real political influence in their national affairs.



SOURCE 1.1 Indochina, c. 1895

- 1 How did France first develop contact with Indochina in the 17th century?
- 2 Explain how and why France came to be more directly involved in Indochina.
- 3 List the five main territories that made up the Indochinese Union by 1900.
- 4 Describe general French colonial attitudes to the people of Indochina.

Opposition to French rule in Indochina

Resistance to French colonialism in Indochina emerged almost as soon as the French had arrived. This was most apparent in Vietnam, where the Nguyen emperors tried to limit French domination. Once the Indochinese Union had been declared, opposition emerged in the form of nationalist groups that sought greater independence for the people of Indochina.

Nationalism

In simple terms, nationalism is the belief that a group of people, usually from a distinct ethnic and cultural background, deserve to live as a unified and independent community governing their own affairs. These ideas became extremely powerful in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. By the 20th century, many colonised groups also developed a strong sense of nationalism as a response to imperialism. Some parts of Indochina had long traditions of nationalism but, as in many other areas, it gained considerable power during the 20th century and was one of the driving forces behind the challenge to French colonial rule and the military intervention of the United States that followed.



Nationalism

Confucianism

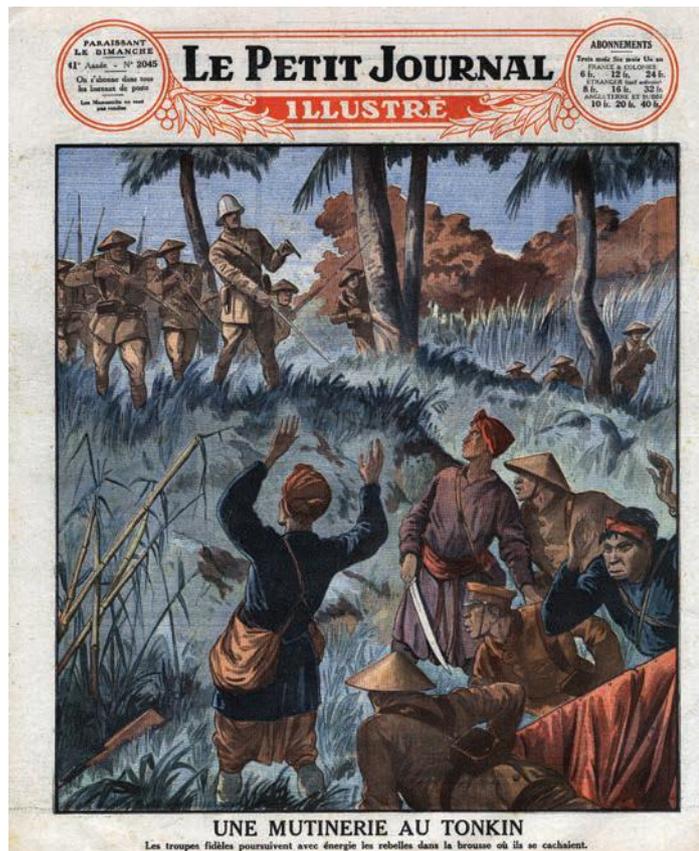
The ideas developed by the Chinese philosopher Confucius. Some of the main ideas of Confucianism that were adopted in Vietnam were the values of respect for older members of society, ancestor worship, the importance of education, and loyalty to both the emperor and the nation more broadly.

Enlightenment

The period (c. 1685–1815) in which many European thinkers began to challenge traditional authorities such as the Christian Church and promote the ideals of freedom and rationalism.

Most of these early nationalist groups did not propose radically new alternatives to French rule. In Vietnam, for example, some nationalists wanted a return to the rule of emperors and the traditional values of **Confucianism**. Other, more radical, groups sought to combine nationalism with modern ideas that developed out of the European **Enlightenment**.

In the 20th century, several major nationalist rebellions broke out in Indochina. One of the most famous of these was the Yen Bai mutiny organised by the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNQDD) in Tonkin in 1930. The VNQDD was a secretive anti-communist nationalist organisation that assassinated a number of French officials before staging an attempted military mutiny in the city of Yen Bai. French security forces (the *Sûreté*) brutally repressed any opposition to their rule, and in this case 39 of the 87 Vietnamese found guilty at Yen Bai were executed. Events like this angered the most radical critics of French colonialism, but none of them were successful in changing the political structure of the Indochinese Union and none of them came close to forcing France to relinquish its control over the region before the outbreak of World War II in 1939.



Getty Images/Leemage/Universal Images Group

SOURCE 1.2 On 2 March 1930, popular French magazine *Le Petit Journal* included a cover image of the French retaliation against the mutiny at Yen Bai in Vietnam that occurred on 10 February.

The growth of communism in Indochina

Modern communist ideas, especially Marxism–Leninism, became an important political force in Indochina in the first half of the 20th century. Although there are many different versions of communism, it is generally understood as a political philosophy that stresses the importance of creating an **egalitarian** society run in the interests of the whole community rather than those of a specific group or individual.

egalitarian

The belief that society should be organised so that people have equal rights and equal opportunities and that no individual or group should be unfairly privileged above the rest

Communism, Marxism and Leninism

German political activist and philosopher Karl Marx (1818–83) was one of the founders of modern communist thought. A lot of Marx's energy was committed to developing a critique of **capitalism**, the main economic and social system he saw emerging in Europe around the time of the Industrial Revolution. In his critique, Marx claimed that capitalism was a highly productive system but that workers were exploited by wealthy individuals and businesses and that this caused friction between the two groups. Marx believed that over time, as the poorer working class became larger and more frustrated by their circumstances, they would rebel and stage a **revolution** to create a fairer society in which no single group or individual could exploit another.

Russian communist Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) took these ideas even further. Writing during the time of World War I (1914–18), Lenin believed that capitalism was on the brink of collapse. He argued that, in the search for greater wealth, European nations such as Britain, France, Russia and Germany had developed large empires that were coming into frequent conflict as they competed to conquer new areas of the world in search of resources and profits. In Lenin's view, World War I was the clearest proof of this competition and its destructive potential.

Lenin firmly believed that capitalism and imperialism could not survive, and he called on communists to create highly organised and secretive groups that would lead a revolution against capitalism (with violence, if necessary). In 1917, he returned from exile to lead his own communist organisation, the Bolshevik Party, in a successful coup against the government in Russia. Later that year, Lenin and the Bolsheviks established the world's first communist government. Over the next decade, the Bolshevik government grew into a very powerful but strictly controlled state that was often violent towards its own citizens. Nevertheless, many poorer people in Europe's colonies saw Lenin's ideas and his example as a great beacon of hope that they too might successfully challenge or overthrow their colonial rulers and go on to build a new social order.

capitalism

An economic system in which a nation's production is owned privately (by individuals and companies). In this system, companies compete in a free market to increase profits while the majority of people work for wages.

revolution

The rapid and comprehensive transformation of a political, social and economic system

Marxism–Leninism had special appeal in areas ruled by colonial powers. Because this system advocated an organised effort to overthrow the colonial system, many nationalists in colonised regions saw an immediate connection to their own concerns. Many of these men and women also regarded the aim to create a more egalitarian world as immediately attractive, since their own nations were treated so poorly by the much wealthier European empires.

Communist ideas were carried to Indochina through various regional and international channels and developed a strong influence in parts of the Indochinese Union by the 1920s. The first influential communist movement in Indochina was developed by Vietnamese radicals. In 1925, a young Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969), then named Nguyen Ai Quoc and a member of the French Communist Party, founded the Revolutionary Youth League in southern China. The League mainly consisted of younger, radical students who sought rapid and drastic change in Vietnam. The group's ideas and strategy were guided by *The Road to Revolution*, a book written by Ho Chi Minh and published in 1927. Although this book drew heavily on communist ideas, it also argued that the best strategy for overthrowing colonialism in Vietnam lay in a **two-stage revolution**. For *The Road to Revolution* and the Revolutionary Youth League, the most important first step on the path to transforming their nation was achieving independence. The specific aim of building communism could follow *after* this had been achieved.

two-stage revolution

Widely advocated by revolutionaries operating in a colonial context. The first stage of this strategy urged revolutionaries to form a broad independence movement drawing on workers, peasants and wealthier nationalists. Once they had taken power, the second stage of the strategy would see communists push to recreate society based more specifically on Marxist principles.

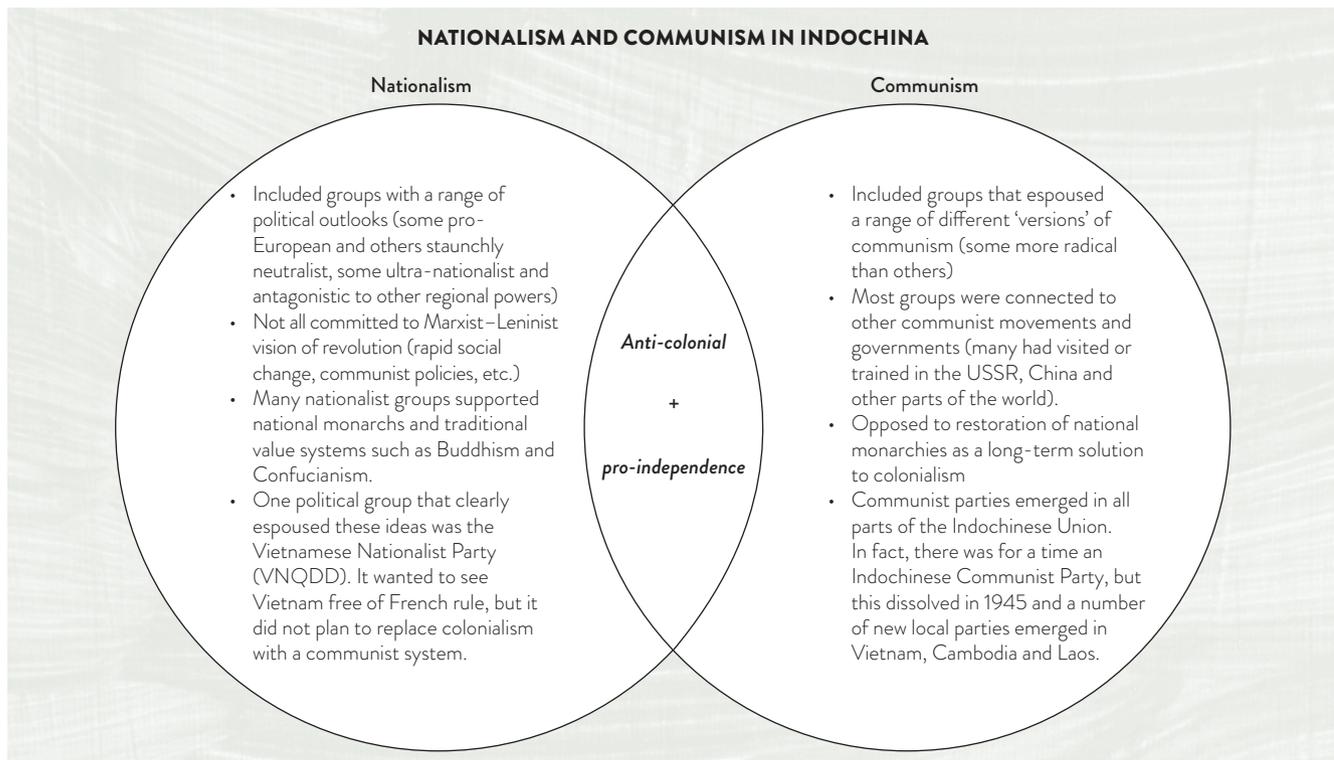


SOURCE 1.3 Nguyen Ai Quoc, later named Ho Chi Minh, was one of Vietnam's most influential nationalist and communist activists. He gained widespread influence, first in the Revolutionary Youth League, and then later in the Indochinese Communist Party. The most successful movement he helped organise was the Vietminh, established in 1941.

In 1930, a regional communist movement also developed in Indochina: the Indochinese Communist Party. Although this was dominated by Vietnamese members, the party reached into Cambodia and Laos by encouraging membership from across the Indochinese Union. This movement was more radical than the Revolutionary Youth League, as it stressed a more rapid transition to communism than *The Road to Revolution*. The party included many members of the Youth League and garnered some support throughout the colonies. It also helped to expand the influence of anti-colonial and communist ideas in Indochina, and many later communist movements in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia could trace their roots back to this organisation. The Indochinese Communist Party was officially dissolved in November 1945.

The fusion of nationalism and communism in Indochina

Ultimately, the most successful groups to mount a challenge to French rule in Indochina combined communism and nationalism. Although nationalism and communism shared a similar anti-colonial outlook, not all nationalist groups were communist. The fusion of these ideas brought together well-organised communist parties that often enjoyed international support and the widely popular pro-independence agenda of nationalism. In most cases, these groups were dominated by communists who became increasingly assertive over time.



SOURCE 1.4 Some anti-colonial groups in Indochina blended the broad idea of nationalism with the more specific ideas of communism. The most well-known and successful of these was the Vietminh, established in 1941. Although the group had many communist members, they often played down these communist aspirations to form stronger links with other nationalists who did not necessarily share their admiration of Marx and Lenin.

- 1 What is nationalism?
- 2 How had nationalist ideas begun to develop in Indochina in the early 20th century?
- 3 Outline the main ideas of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin.
- 4 Explain why Marxism–Leninism had a special appeal in some colonial areas.
- 5 What was the common goal of nationalists and communists in Indochina?
- 6 Research the life of Ho Chi Minh (Nguyen Ai Quoc). Develop a timeline for his life up to 1945, including 10–15 of the most important events from that period.
- 7 What was Ho Chi Minh's importance to nationalism and communism in Indochina prior to World War II?
- 8 Outline the Revolutionary Youth League's general plan for Vietnam.
- 9 How did the Indochinese Communist Party differ from the Revolutionary Youth League and what was its impact?

Japanese occupation and independence in Indochina

In June 1940, large parts of France were conquered by German forces during World War II. After the surrender, a new French Government was proclaimed in the city of Vichy and it quickly pledged allegiance to Nazi Germany. The French officials in Indochina aligned with the Vichy government.



SOURCE 1.5 Japanese Empire during World War II

In September 1940, Germany's ally Japan moved into Indochina as part of its own colonial expansion throughout Asia. Although allied in the context of World War II, Vichy French governors in Indochina and the Japanese Army had an uneasy relationship, which local nationalists tried to exploit.

One of the most important developments in Vietnam during the Japanese occupation (1940–45) was the founding of a new nationalist organisation in 1941, the Vietminh. The Vietminh began to wage guerilla war against the Japanese. In this effort, it eventually gained the support of the United States, which came into the war against Japan after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Through the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the United States began to secretly supply the Vietminh with weapons and training to fight Japan, and this dramatically improved the group's effectiveness.

The Vietminh

The Vietminh was established mainly by Vietnamese communists in 1941 and it was by far the most successful anti-colonial organisation in Indochina. In February 1941, the group's founders met in a small village in northern Vietnam to sign the Pac Bo Plenum. This advocated a path to revolution in Vietnam that promoted nationalism and independence over communist ideas of economic and social change. The plenum also advocated the use of guerilla warfare against the Japanese and French. To organise for this, the signatories to the Pac Bo Plenum established the Vietminh, which was designed to appeal to the widest possible audience in Vietnam. With the support of the OSS, the Vietminh rapidly gained influence and became Vietnam's most powerful anti-colonial movement.



SOURCE 1.6 Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap with members of OSS team 13 (codename 'Deer') during training at Tan Trao, North Vietnam, in August 1945

The Japanese occupation of Indochina had at least three important effects on the region. Firstly, it severely weakened French authority in Indochina and especially in the Vietnamese territories – at the time, it was still regarded as a major humiliation for a European power to be defeated by an Asian nation because in most parts of the world Europe remained dominant. Although France reimposed its control over the region after 1945, it was never able to fully regain the power it enjoyed prior to 1940. Secondly, during the Japanese occupation, the people of Indochina suffered severe hardship. Most obviously, horrific famines broke out in which the Vietnamese people were particularly hard hit (as many as

2 million Vietnamese are estimated to have died of starvation during 1944–45 alone). One consequence of this was that it drove many to join radical groups such as the Vietminh, which expanded its influence. Finally, the Vietminh rapidly grew in size and influence throughout the 1940s as it drew support from the United States in their common war against Japan. By 1945, the Vietminh was not only the most influential nationalist force within Vietnam but also in the entire Indochinese Union.

TABLE 1.2 The emergence of new Indochinese nationalist movements

Vietminh (Vietnam)	The fiercest and most successful of the Indochinese anti-colonial movements arose in Vietnam. Here, opposition to the French had been present since they first arrived, but it was the Vietminh, created in 1941 as a broad-based nationalist movement, that gained ultimate success. From the beginning, it was clear that the Vietminh was dominated by communists such as Ho Chi Minh, but it was successful in uniting a range of anti-colonialists across Vietnam.
Khmer Issarak (Cambodia)	For most of the period of French control over Cambodia, there was little aggressive challenge from local movements. In the early 1940s, this changed. Moderate anti-colonialists began calling openly for independence during the Japanese occupation. Two of the most prominent were the intellectual Son Ngoc Thanh and the former monk Tou Samouth. In 1942, a popular protest also erupted in the capital, Phnom Penh, involving about 2000 civilians and 500 monks. The most aggressive of Cambodian nationalists, however, were the Khmer Issarak ('Free Khmer'), which grew out of earlier nationalist movements. This was a loose collection of anti-colonial groups that challenged French authority in Cambodia. A minority were openly communist, while others supported different political ideas. Although it never equalled the size, organisation or influence of the Vietminh, the Khmer Issarak still gained some significant influence in parts of Cambodia during the 1940s and 1950s.
Lao Issara (Laos)	As in Cambodia, Laotian anti-colonialism did not equal that of the Vietnamese movements during the existence of the Indochinese Union. It was, nevertheless, still clearly part of the political landscape in the mid-20th century. In 1945, for example, a group of well-educated Laotian nationalists formed the Lao Issara ('Free Laos') and challenged the rule of the Japanese-appointed King Sisavangvong by proclaiming their own government led by Prince Phetsarath. The Lao Issara developed a weak government in 1945 that remained in power for several months before the French returned to direct Laotian affairs in 1946. The Lao Issara disbanded in the late 1940s. Many fled to Thailand, but others were integrated into other Laotian political movements.

The end of Japanese occupation

By August 1945, it was becoming increasingly clear that the Japanese war effort was failing. Its key ally in Europe, Nazi Germany, had been defeated and Allied forces in the Pacific were steadily liberating areas formerly occupied by Japan. In August 1945, the Vietminh declared a national uprising against Japan in Vietnam. With Japanese and French forces in Indochina seriously weakened, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence on 2 September.

The end of World War II and the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1944–45

- 1944**
 - June** Allied powers invade German-occupied France, and by September have liberated Paris
 - September** Paris is liberated, the Vichy French Government (allied to Nazi Germany) is replaced and the strength of Nazi Germany rapidly deteriorates
- 1945**
 - March** Fearing that French forces in Indochina might turn against them, the Japanese imprison local French soldiers, bureaucrats and officials. Japan uses Emperor Bao Dai (of the Nguyen Dynasty) to control Vietnam and urges him to proclaim Vietnamese independence from France. In reality, he is given no real power to rule as long as Japan remains in Indochina.
 - August** The Vietminh declares a national uprising and Japan is defeated by the United States and its allies. A power vacuum opens up in Vietnam, as Bao Dai is in no position to effectively rule Vietnam, French administrators are locked up and Japan has announced its surrender.
 - September** On 2 September, Ho Chi Minh proclaims independence and announces the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in a speech in Hanoi. This speech is made on the same day that Japan surrenders to the Allied powers.



Ho Chi Minh's Declaration of Independence on 2 September was a very symbolic event. There was no guarantee that his new government would be recognised internationally, but it would at least give the Vietminh some bargaining power if France decided to reimpose colonial rule in Vietnam. His speech was made in Hanoi but broadcast all over the nation, and it began with words taken directly from the American Declaration of Independence of 1776.



Bao Dai



Ho Chi Minh's Declaration of Independence

SOURCE 17 Bao Dai was a descendant of the Nguyen emperors who had ruled an independent and unified Vietnam prior to French occupation in the mid-19th century. He was used as a 'puppet' ruler in Vietnam during the Japanese occupation and he continued to play an important role in Vietnamese politics after the Japanese departure in 1945.

- 1 What were the main ideas agreed upon in the Pac Bo Plenum?
- 2 Describe the activities of the Vietminh from 1941 to 1945.
- 3 Outline some of the general effects of Japanese occupation on Indochina.
- 4 Assess the importance of the Japanese occupation of Indochina for the growing influence of the Vietminh.

War and decolonisation, 1945–54

In 1945 and 1946, the organisation of the Indochinese Union had to be renegotiated. World War II fundamentally altered the political landscape in Indochina:

- French power was severely weakened by Japanese occupation.
- The Vietminh's popularity and influence had grown rapidly in Vietnam and it had declared Vietnam an independent state.
- The Lao Issara created a new, albeit weak, alternative government in Laos.
- Cambodian nationalists were calling for independence and elections in 1945.

Nevertheless, France was determined to return to control its former colonies. This was partly a result of pressure from French colonials who moved to Indochina to set up businesses and were concerned for their future if independence was granted. It was also motivated by a desire to rebuild France's international prestige after a humiliating war. The problem for the French Government was that it now had to contend with more powerful and determined anti-colonial movements across Indochina.

In Laos and Cambodia, the process of re-establishing French rule was achieved mainly through diplomacy and promises of limited autonomy; only minimal force was necessary. The Vietminh, however, was determined to defend its newly declared independence by military action if necessary, and its most radical members were not prepared to compromise on this fundamental goal.

The road to war, 1945–46

Both the Vietminh and French colonialists faced major challenges in 1945–46. The Vietminh enjoyed considerable influence in parts of Vietnam but it was weak in the southern territories, where it had built few networks during Japanese occupation. There was also major disagreement among its leadership about how quickly it should push for complete national unification and whether it should go to war if the French did not agree to its demands. Finally, British, French and Chinese forces moved into Vietnam in 1945 to manage the disarmament of Japanese forces, and none of these powers were particularly supportive of the Vietminh's claim to outright independence.

For their part, the French now had to negotiate with the Vietminh, the strongest resistance movement they encountered in the history of the Indochinese Union. France was also severely weakened during World War II, and many French leaders were keen to avoid a new struggle to reclaim Indochina. Still, many French officials believed that the reconstruction of France after 1945 required a restoration of its empire.

Almost immediately following Ho's declaration of independence in September, a series of problems began to exacerbate the tensions between French colonials and the Vietminh. French troops who arrived in Cochinchina in October 1945 treated Vietnamese locals harshly. Many 'suspicious' Vietnamese civilians were beaten and imprisoned. Members of the Vietminh and others affected by these activities began to organise and put pressure on their leaders to respond to France's initiatives with greater force. Formal negotiations between France and the Vietminh were carried out at the Fontainebleau conference (July–September 1946), which failed to satisfy the hardliners on either side. Then, in November 1946, a major French attack on the northern city of Haiphong resulted in about 6000 Vietnamese casualties. In December, Ho Chi Minh issued a call for all Vietnamese people to rise against French colonialism. Ho and his commanders fled north to the Viet Bac mountains near the Chinese border to prepare for all-out war. The First Indochina War had begun.



SOURCE 1.8 Ho Chi Minh and Marius Moutet (hat in hand), the Minister of Overseas France, during Ho Chi Minh's official visit to France between June and September 1946. The visit was within the framework of the Fontainebleau conference, and later of the Modus Vivendi, a few months before the beginning of the First Indochina War.

- 1 What were some of the reasons motivating France's attempt to regain its colonies in Indochina after World War II?
- 2 Outline the challenges facing France in its attempt to re-establish control over Indochina at the end of World War II.
- 3 Although it was determined to defend its independence, what weaknesses did the Vietminh have in 1945–46?
- 4 Account for the outbreak of the First Indochina War in 1946.

The First Indochina War, 1946–54

The First Indochina War was an eight-year struggle, primarily for control of Vietnam. Fighting on a smaller scale did break out in Laos and Cambodia as the Vietminh formed some alliances with sympathetic groups throughout Indochina, but major military activity was confined to Vietnam. The war was a drawn-out military and political contest that ended in a humiliating French defeat in 1954.

The First Indochina War moved through two main stages: the colonial war from 1946 to 1949, which almost exclusively involved the Vietminh (and its allies in Cambodia and Laos) and France; then, from 1950 to 1954, an ‘internationalised’ period in which other global powers became involved on both sides.

TABLE 1.3 The main belligerents in the First Indochina War

	FRENCH UNION	NATIONALIST
French and Indochinese forces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • France (soldiers gathered from France and its other colonies, such as Senegal, Tunisia and Algeria) • National armies created with French assistance: Vietnamese National Army, Khmer National Army (Cambodia) and the Royal Lao Army 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Vietminh created the largest anti-colonial military force during the First Indochina War • Other anti-colonial forces included the Khmer Issarak (Cambodia), the Lao Issara and, later, the Pathet Lao (both in Laos)
Later international support	Later international support was provided to the French war effort mainly by the United States. This only came in the form of funds, supplies, logistical support and military training – no US combat troops were deployed in Indochina during this war.	International support was provided to nationalist forces mainly through China after 1949. As with the United States, China did not provide combat forces but supplied money and resources for the Vietminh war effort.

The colonial war, 1946–49

When open warfare broke out in northern Vietnam in late 1946, Vietminh commanders were well aware that they did not have the resources to defeat France quickly. Instead, the Vietminh planned for a prolonged war that would make extensive use of **guerilla warfare** before moving to larger offensives when it had built up strength and resources.

As a general plan for its war against France, the Vietminh adapted strategies developed by Chinese communists led by Mao Zedong. These strategies planned for a war that would move through three overlapping phases:

- 1 Defensive (*phong ngu*) – mostly reliant on guerilla warfare
- 2 Equilibrium (*cam cu*) – Vietminh forces would begin to clash more openly with French forces
- 3 Offensive (*tong phan cong*) – the Vietminh would mount large offensives against France as its confidence and power grew.

Even with these well-thought-out plans, the Vietminh did not enjoy great success in this first phase of the war. French firepower caused much damage to its forces and it was hard to coordinate a national war effort when Vietminh communications between northern, central and southern Vietnam were disrupted by French military activity.

The Vietminh also attempted to gain international support by sending diplomatic missions to regional powers. These included Thailand, India, Indonesia and the Philippines; but as the Cold War intensified, these efforts failed to result in any support that significantly improved the Vietminh’s war effort in the early years.

guerilla warfare

Usually conducted by small groups fighting a larger, more powerful enemy. Guerilla forces often use quick hit-and-run tactics, secrecy and surprise to wear down an opponent over a long period.

The Resistance Will Win

Truong Chinh was a leading member of the DRV who remained an important politician in North Vietnam for many years. He was known for his radical beliefs and his absolute dedication to nationalism and communism. The following extract is taken from the preface to Chinh's book *The Resistance Will Win*, published in 1947.

A foul and savage enemy is riding roughshod over the soil of Viet Nam. The Vietnamese people are waging a heroic war of resistance, determined to avenge the blood shed. Will Viet Nam survive? Will the Vietnamese people succeed? These are the questions being asked by our compatriots and many people in other countries.

Here is our answer: the Vietnamese will not be reduced to bondage! The movement for the liberation of Viet Nam is an integral part of the new democratic movement surging through the world. As for the enemy of Viet Nam, the French colonialist, they represent out-of-date decadent imperialism, whose fate has been sealed by history.

At present the Vietnamese armed forces are still weaker than those of the enemy; it is therefore necessary to prolong the war of resistance. In the course of the fighting we will develop our forces, and gradually wear down the enemy's strength, until the day we can crush him completely. This war of resistance must be waged by the whole people, in every field – military, political, economic and cultural! – so that, wherever the enemy goes he meets our fierce resistance, which encircles and chokes him, giving him not a moment's respite in our country.

Truong Chinh, *Selected Writings*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Hanoi, 1977, p. 85



alg-images/Pictures From History

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why does Truong Chinh suggest that it is 'necessary to prolong the war of resistance'?
- 2 Analyse the perspective of this source.
- 3 Evaluate this extract as evidence of Vietnamese nationalism.
- 4 Using the ideas included in this extract and other evidence, explain the main aims and strategies of the Vietminh in the First Indochina War.

The French war effort in this first, colonial phase enjoyed some distinct advantages. On a one-to-one basis, French units were far more powerful than the Vietminh. They enjoyed the support of artillery and an air force capable of inflicting heavy casualties on their opponents.

Nevertheless, the French also faced many obstacles in fighting this war, which was never popular in France. In fact, over time, the French people and their parliament became increasingly critical of efforts to reintroduce colonial control through force – especially as the costs and casualties mounted. In addition, French forces often found it difficult to gain the trust and support of the local populations in parts of Vietnam. Finding the Vietminh guerillas in the countryside was often very difficult. To overcome this, French forces increasingly turned to tactics such as torture, which further alienated the Vietnamese people.

A French account

The following extract is taken from an account provided by a French soldier, Henry Ainley, who was stationed near Saigon in southern Vietnam during the First Indochina War. It is not known exactly how widespread the practices he describes were.

Torture and brutality were routine matters in the questioning of suspects ... Rape, beating, burning, torturing on entirely harmless peasants and villagers were of common occurrence in the course of punitive patrols and operations by French troops, throughout the length and breadth of Indochina. Not only were these measures exclusively applied by the men; officers and NCOs [non-commissioned officers] assumed an active and frequently dominating role.

Henry Ainley, quoted in Adrian D Gilbert, *Voices of the French Foreign Legion: The History of the World's Most Famous Fighting Corps*, Skyhorse Publishing, New York, 2010, p. 216

QUESTIONS

- 1 According to Henry Ainley, what tactics were sometimes used by French forces to gain information about the Vietminh during the First Indochina War?
- 2 Explain why a historian would need to be cautious of relying on this source as evidence of the behaviour of French forces.
- 3 Using evidence from this extract and other evidence you have gathered so far, outline the strengths and weaknesses of the French war effort in the first, colonial phase of this war.

The internationalised war, 1950–54

The strengths and weaknesses of both the Vietminh and French forces meant that, by the late 1940s, no victory for either side was in sight. During 1949 and 1950, however, the war began to change character as a result of three major developments.

Firstly, in 1949 Chinese communists (to Vietnam's north) triumphed in a civil war that had been raging for many years. In early 1950, the communist governments in China and the Soviet Union (USSR) both formally recognised the DRV as the legitimate government of an independent Vietnam. China and the USSR went on to supply the Vietminh with large amounts of civilian and military aid.

TABLE 1.4 The growth of the Vietminh's armed forces, 1945–54

YEAR	TOTAL FORCE STRENGTH
1945	31 000
1946	95 000
1950	245 000
1952	305 000
1954	339 000

Based on figures provided in Charles R Shrader, *A War of Logistics: Parachutes and Porters in Indochina, 1945–54*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2015, p. 43

After 1949, France also began to change its political approach to Indochina. In 1949, Cambodia and Laos were given greater autonomy within the Indochinese Union. In the same year, this was extended to Vietnam through the 'Bao Dai solution'. French officials convinced Bao Dai to return as the leader of a new government based in southern Vietnam. He reluctantly agreed and his government had very close ties to France, which led many Vietnamese to regard Bao Dai as a mere puppet of French colonialism.

In part, the Bao Dai solution was an attempt to create a non-communist government as an alternative to the Vietminh. It was also designed to convince international critics of colonialism that France was fighting to defend a genuine Vietnamese government and not its own imperial interests. French diplomats used this to step up requests, mainly to the United States and Britain, for greater international support for their war against the Vietminh. Both the United States and Britain formally recognised Bao Dai's government in 1950 in response to the diplomatic recognition extended to the DRV by China and the USSR.

Finally, the United States was drawn into the conflict in a more direct manner. Closely linked with its Cold War politics and its desire to limit communist influence in Asia, the United States began supporting the French war effort through financial and logistical means. It set up a Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) in Saigon to help organise the French Army in 1950. Initially, in August, it included four personnel, but by the end of the year it included well over 100. In addition, the US Government under President Truman (1945–53) and then President Eisenhower (1953–61) provided vast sums of money to fund French military efforts in Vietnam. By the end of the war, nearly three-quarters of the total cost of the war was financed by the United States. One historian, Fredrik Logevall, has gone so far as to say that: 'By 1953, if not before, American planners were ... far more committed to the French war effort than the French were.'¹

The Cold War

The Cold War is the name given to the period of extreme political, military and economic tension between the United States and its allies (Britain, France, Australia, etc.) and the communist bloc (first the Soviet Union and its allies and later expanded when communism began to spread to nations including China, North Korea and Cuba). Generally, it is considered to have lasted from the late 1940s to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

One of the major elements of the Cold War was the attempt by the superpowers to extend their influence into the non-European world. So, although the stand-off began in Europe at the end of World War II, it came to affect the Middle East, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. In Asia, two events raised extreme concern in the United States: the fall of China to communists in 1949 and the Korean War (1950–53). This conflict saw an open attempt to impose communism on Korea and was only thwarted by a large-scale military intervention by United Nations forces led by the US military. These events raised major concerns that communists were trying to forcefully expand their control and that this needed to be stopped.

These developments had important consequences for the events unfolding in Indochina. Because many American officials saw Ho Chi Minh primarily as a communist, a potential Vietminh victory against France also caused widespread concern in the United States. **Containing** communist expansion became a powerful factor influencing President Truman's decision to begin supporting France against the Vietminh even though he was a vocal critic of European colonialism. The following chapter will examine the development of US policies towards Indochina in much greater detail.

containment

A major US policy developed during the Cold War, aimed at preventing the expansion of communist influence beyond the Soviet Union. The idea was not to topple existing communist governments (often called 'rollback') but to ensure that nations did not become communist.

The United States' financial support of France

Table 1.5 outlines the approximate funding supplied by the United States to France during the international phase of the First Indochina War (1950–54).

TABLE 1.5 US financial aid to France during the First Indochina War

YEAR	AMOUNT (FRENCH FRANCS)	% OF TOTAL WAR EFFORT
1950	52 million	19.5
1951	62 million	16.0
1952	200 million	35.4
1953	285 million	43.8
1954	555 million	73.9

Based on figures provided in Pham Hong Tung, 'The Cold War and Vietnam 1945–54: How did a nationalist struggle turn into a class struggle?', in Albert Lau (ed.), *Southeast Asia and the Cold War*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2012, p. 168

QUESTIONS

- 1 Explain how France began to change its political relationship with its colonies in Indochina in 1949?
- 2 Assess the impact of the communist victory in China on the First Indochina War.
- 3 Account for the United States' increased intervention in Indochina from 1950.
- 4 Outline how the United States was involved in the First Indochina War. In your answer refer to Table 1.5.

The end of the First Indochina War

Despite the attempt to reshape Indochina's political landscape, the large contributions of the United States towards France's war effort and a number of successful military campaigns against the Vietminh, by late 1953 it was clear that France could not continue to fight the war for much longer. With Chinese support, the Vietminh was now able to maintain its war effort indefinitely, and supplies of Chinese weaponry increased its firepower. In addition, by 1953 France had suffered 150 000 casualties and the war was very unpopular among the French population.

French commanders were, therefore, given the task of rapidly improving their military position so that their diplomats could enter negotiations to end the war from a position of strength. At the same time, the Vietminh was hoping to force the French to extend their area of operations by taking the war into Laos (which it believed France would be obliged to defend). The French commander, Henri Navarre, decided to try to draw the Vietminh into an enormous confrontation at Dien Bien Phu, near the Laotian border, in the hope of inflicting severe damage on his opponent.

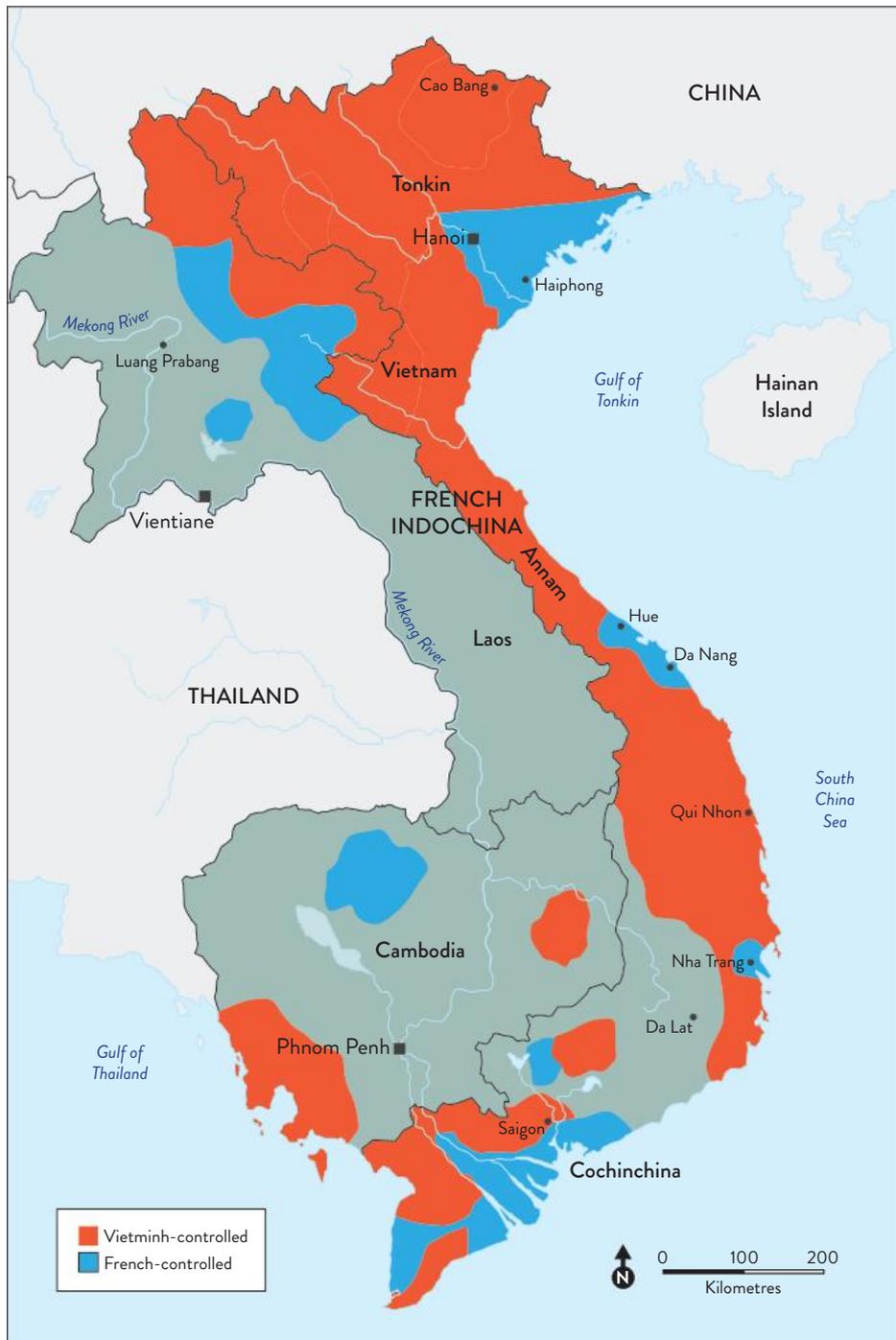
The Battle of Dien Bien Phu, 1954

French preparations for the Battle of Dien Bien Phu began with Operation Castor in late 1953. In this operation, a large force was parachuted into Dien Bien Phu valley, followed by the rapid construction of a series of French bases in the area using the **hedgehog strategy**. Once complete, French defences centred on a series of bases in the middle of the valley, which included airstrips, fortifications, trenches and bunkers.

Fighting broke out in Dien Bien Phu in early March 1954 when the Vietminh launched a massive assault on French positions. It quickly became apparent that French defences were insufficient against the Vietminh, which had surrounded the valley and deployed artillery. The battle turned into a siege,

hedgehog strategy

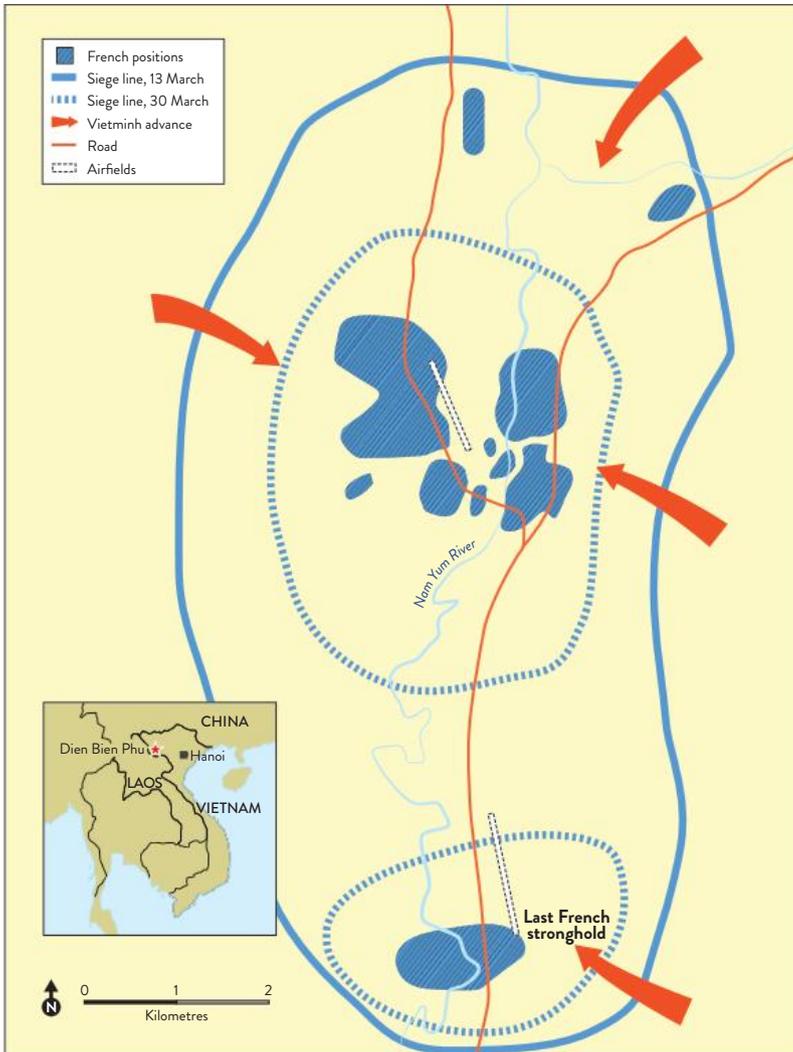
A military strategy used by French Union forces in the First Indochina War during and after the Battle of Na San (December 1952). The idea was to build a series of fortified bases and draw the Vietminh into an open attack. This would prevent the Vietminh's use of guerilla tactics and allow French Union forces to inflict heavy casualties.



SOURCE 1.9 Although the Vietminh had many difficulties in fighting an open war with French forces, its reliance on protracted struggle and guerilla tactics had served it well. By 1953, the Vietminh controlled large parts of Indochina and made important links with other nationalist and communist groups in Cambodia and Laos.

and by May, French commanders were forced to evacuate all but a few of their bases in the valley. By choosing such an isolated location to fight a large-scale battle, the French could only resupply their bases from the air, which became increasingly difficult as they lost ground to the Vietminh.

In this situation, French diplomats desperately appealed to both Britain and the United States for military support. US President Eisenhower was willing to contribute air support (perhaps even tactical nuclear weapons) to France, provided it was a joint action with Britain. Believing that Indochina was a lost cause, Britain refused to contribute, and Eisenhower refused to escalate US involvement. Without additional support, France had no hope of turning the tide. On 7 May 1954, the garrison at Dien Bien Phu surrendered and about 15 000 French Union personnel were captured.



SOURCE 1.10 Battle of Dien Bien Phu, 13 March – 7 May 1954



SOURCE 1.11 French paratroopers landing at Dien Bien Phu, November 1953

Getty Images/ullstein bild/Dtl.

The outcome of Dien Bien Phu

The Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu was a humiliation for France and showed that the war was turning against it by 1954. However, it did not amount to a total victory for the Vietminh. French Union forces still had some 470 000 soldiers in Indochina and they maintained control of some of the most important cities in Vietnam. In other words, it was possible for France to continue fighting the war even after Dien Bien Phu. Given France's declining success and the war's growing unpopularity at home, however, it would have been foolish to do so. The Vietminh fought a successful war of **attrition**, wearing down French resources and resolve. Dien Bien Phu certainly put the Vietminh in a strong position for the upcoming negotiations at Geneva, but it did not give them the power to dictate the terms of peace.

attrition

A military strategy that aims to gradually wear down an opponent in the hope that they will surrender or attempt to bring an end to a war through negotiation. This is usually contrasted with a strategy of annihilation in which one army attempts to completely eliminate an opponent and conquer their entire territory.

Explaining the Vietnamese victory in the First Indochina War

Historians point to a range of factors to explain why the Vietminh was more successful in the First Indochina War. Some of the most important factors include:

- **The role of nationalism:** Vietminh forces enjoyed a greater sense of purpose, since they were fighting a war of 'national liberation'. This meant that they had more stable morale and their soldiers were generally more committed to fighting.
- **Material support from China and the Soviet Union from 1950:** This was crucial in allowing the Vietminh to wage a longer war and it provided its military with much-needed firepower in the later stages of the conflict. Without this support, it is difficult to imagine that the Vietminh could have overcome the French, especially considering the amount of US support that France received by 1954.
- **More appropriate strategy and tactics for the type of war it was fighting:** The Vietminh's use of guerilla tactics, which helped to wear down the morale of French Union forces, was crucial to the overall outcome of the First Indochina War.
- **Support received from other nationalist groups, such as the Pathet Lao and the Khmer Issarak:** Although most of Laos and Cambodia remained under French control throughout the conflict, pockets of resistance developed, which the Vietminh exploited to its advantage.
- **The superior logistical organisation of the Vietminh war effort:** During the First Indochina War, the Vietminh quickly developed a large and highly organised military machine. With superior knowledge of the region and connections with local populations, the Vietminh gained a powerful advantage over the French.



Dien Bien Phu

- 1 Describe France's position in the First Indochina War by 1953.
- 2 Why was the Vietminh increasingly interested in expanding the war further into Laos in 1953?
- 3 What did French commanders hope to achieve by setting up a new 'hedgehog' in Dien Bien Phu in late 1953?
- 4 Outline the main events of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in a flow chart, brief timeline or written summary.
- 5 Evaluate the importance of the Vietminh victory at Dien Bien Phu to the First Indochina War.
- 6 'Vietminh victory in the First Indochina War was primarily the result of good military organisation.' How accurate is this statement in relation to the events between 1946 and 1954? (Your answer should be at least one paragraph in length.)

The Geneva Conference and the end of the First Indochina War, 1954

The peace conference at Geneva in 1954 was not solely convened to discuss the conflict in Indochina. When the conference opened on 26 April, the first matters considered related to the Korean War (1950–53). From 8 May, however, negotiations over Indochina became the central concern.

The negotiations at Geneva

The negotiations at Geneva were tense and complex. As with many other international peace conferences, Geneva in 1954 brought together a diverse range of diplomats from different parts of the world. Not all of these diplomats remained at the conference for the entire process; many attended only when discussions immediately related to their national interests. For the most part, however, the larger powers (the United States, China, the Soviet Union, Britain, France and the Vietminh) were permanently represented.

The main delegates at the Geneva Conference to discuss Indochina

- Pham van Dong – Vietminh
- John Foster Dulles – United States
- Zhou Enlai – People’s Republic of China
- Vyacheslav Molotov – Soviet Union
- Georges Bidault – France (replaced in June by new Prime Minister, Pierre Mendès France)
- Anthony Eden – United Kingdom



SOURCE 1.12 Negotiations at the Geneva Conference

From the outset, tensions at Geneva were high. For example, the American delegate, John Foster Dulles, refused to shake hands with Zhou Enlai from China at their first meeting. There were also many disagreements that were difficult to overcome. One key recommendation put forward was to divide Vietnam temporarily, but there was little agreement over where the division would be located. The DRV proposed the 13th parallel of latitude, whereas France demanded the 18th, much further to the north. It took considerable intervention from other delegates to arrange a compromise, and the line was finally set at the 17th parallel.

All powers involved in the Geneva Conference were heavily invested. The

outcome had the potential to dramatically affect the future of the Indochinese nations and to disrupt the global ambitions of the international powers.

'Making sure he can't clear it' by Edwin Marcus



By Permission of the Marcus Family Marcus, E. (1954) Making Sure He Can't Clear It. Soviet Union, 1954. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/201668558/>.

SOURCE 1.13 American cartoonist Edwin Marcus depicts the Russian delegate to Geneva, Vyacheslav Molotov, 'raising the bar' so high that it will be impossible for agreement to be reached, 1954.

QUESTIONS



Geneva Conference

- 1 The Russian delegate to Geneva, Molotov, is depicted at the top of the ladder in this cartoon. Describe what he is doing in the image.
- 2 Analyse the perspective of this source.

The Accords

After more than a month of negotiation and some major compromises, the conference at Geneva delivered the final Accords. These consisted of 10 main documents that were designed to peacefully manage the region's formal decolonisation from French imperial control. The main agreements on Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were signed on 20 July 1954, followed by a statement signed on 21 July that summarised the conference's main conclusions.

The main plan contained in these documents set out to achieve peace and security in Indochina by including the following measures:

- A ceasefire line was to be enforced in Vietnam at the 17th parallel. Vietminh forces were required to retreat into the area north of this line under the supervision of the DRV, and French Union forces were required to retreat to the area south of the line under the supervision of the State of Vietnam, which was governed by Emperor Bao Dai. This decision effectively divided Vietnam in two (North and South).



Definitions

- A demilitarised zone (DMZ) spanning the 5 kilometres either side of the 17th parallel was to be established. No military forces were allowed to gather in the DMZ.
- A period of 300 days was granted for all military forces to move into their designated areas, and all foreign troops were also required to evacuate Cambodia and Laos in this time. Civilians could also use this time to move between North and South Vietnam.
- National elections for Vietnam were to take place in July 1956 through the agreement and cooperation of the DRV and the State of Vietnam. The aim of the elections was to reunify Vietnam by creating one national government in Vietnam and removing the temporary ceasefire line along with the DMZ.
- National elections in Cambodia and Laos would take place in 1955, and both nations were formally recognised as independent and neutral – they were to be free of foreign military intervention.
- An International Control Commission was established to monitor the enforcement of the major clauses. The Commission was made up of personnel from India, Poland and Canada.

The agreements were not acceptable to all parties involved in the discussions. In fact, the final Agreement on Vietnam was signed by the DRV, China, the Soviet Union, Britain and France, but both the United States and Bao Dai refused to formally endorse it. It also took considerable pressure from China and the Soviet Union for the Vietminh to agree to the terms, as some radical members believed that they should push for immediate control of the entire country, not just its northern regions. In the end, the final agreements were a fragile and temporary solution to decades of colonial rule and a bitter war.

- 1 Use Source 1.13 on page 29 and other evidence to describe the process of negotiations at Geneva in 1954.
- 2 Create a mind map or set of structured notes that outlines the main clauses of the Geneva Accords.
- 3 How did the final decisions at Geneva affect the following?
 - a The Vietminh
 - b The French Union
 - c Bao Dai
 - d Cambodia and Laos
- 4 How were the Geneva Accords meant to be monitored?

The nature and significance of Vietnamese victory

Vietnamese victory against the French and the Geneva Accords that followed were very significant for all the people of Indochina. The Vietminh made several important gains in its struggle against the French. It had forced the French to agree to give up their colonies and gained much-needed military and political experience that would be drawn upon in the future. The Vietminh also created a national myth out of its 'sacred war' (*chiến tranh thần thánh*) and dramatically increased its power and prestige in many parts of the region. This was particularly important for some DRV officials such as Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap, who were practically raised to celebrity status.



Getty Images/Howard Sotuhrek/The LIFE Picture Collection

SOURCE 1.14 Vietminh troops celebrate independence from the French, 1954.

The Vietnamese victory in 1954 also essentially guaranteed the complete independence and neutrality of Laos and Cambodia – at least in the short term. This was a long-term goal of the nationalists in both countries, who now set about trying to construct new governments and new post-colonial societies.

Nevertheless, many historians consider the Vietminh to have won only a limited victory by the end of 1954. The Vietminh did not emerge from the war or the peace conference in control of a united Vietnam, and this was fundamentally disagreeable to many of the group’s radical members. In addition, the outcome of the First Indochina War strengthened, rather than weakened, American resolve to prevent communist expansion in Indochina. Ho Chi Minh himself acknowledged this when, in July 1954, he warned his colleagues:

“ [W]e should not be complacent. Our victory [in the First Indochina War] has wakened the Yankee imperialist. He is adjusting his conspiracy and plan to prolong the war ... [He wants to] wreck the [Geneva] Agreements, expel the French to take over Indochina, enslave Indochinese people, and create more tension in the world.

”

Ho Chi Minh, ‘Report at the Sixth Central Committee Plenum’, 15 July 1954, quoted in Tuong Vu, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2017, p. 131

Those living in the southern parts of Vietnam who did not support the Vietminh also won hope through the Geneva Accords. For the immediate future, they remained under the control of Bao Dai, hoping that the elections of 1956 would see the defeat of Ho Chi Minh and the creation of a permanent, non-communist nation in Vietnam.

Chapter summary

- Indochina is the region made up of the modern states of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.
- This region was colonised by France through a lengthy process beginning in the 17th century.
- France ruled the region directly from 1887, after proclaiming the Indochinese Union.
- In general, the French Empire exploited the people of Indochina, which helped to inspire the growth of many anti-colonial movements in the region.
- Nationalism and communism became two of the most powerful ideas shaping Indochina in the 20th century.
- The Vietminh became the most successful nationalist organisation during Japanese occupation of Indochina.
- In 1946, a major war between the Vietminh and France broke out, which was transformed by international intervention in 1950 as Indochina became part of the global Cold War.
- In 1954, delegates tried to find a peaceful solution to the problems in Indochina at the Geneva Conference.
- The Geneva Accords delivered on 20 July 1954 established a fragile peace in Indochina, and many key stakeholders were not entirely pleased with the outcomes of the conference.

Further resources

- Bradley, Mark Philip, *Vietnam at War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009
- Brocheux, Pierre and Hemery, Daniel, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2011
- Fall, Bernard, *Street Without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina*, Stackpole, Mechanicsburg, 1961
- Lawrence, Mark Atwood, 'Explaining the Early Decisions: The United States and the French War, 1945–1954', in Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn B Young (eds), *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National and Transnational Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2008
- Lawrence, Mark Atwood, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009
- Logevall, Fredrik, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, Random House, New York, 2012
- Shrader, Charles R, *A War of Logistics: Parachutes and Porters in Indochina, 1945–54*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2015

Endnotes

- 1 Fredrik Logevall, 'The Indochina wars and the Cold War, 1945–1975', in Melvyn P Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Vol. II: Crises and Détente*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, p. 288.

CHAPTER REVISION QUESTIONS

- 1 Create three brief timelines outlining Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos's transition from colonialism to independence. The timelines should cover the same period, from the creation of the Indochinese Union in 1887 to the Geneva Accords in 1954. Each timeline should include 10–15 events.
- 2 Explain the role of the following in shaping events in Indochina for the period 1887–1954:
 - a Nationalism
 - b Communism.
- 3 Assess the importance of the Vietnamese victory in 1954 for the following:
 - a Vietnam
 - b Laos
 - c Cambodia.

EXTENDED WRITING EXERCISES

- 4 To what extent could the Geneva Accords be considered a 'fragile solution' to the problems in Indochina in 1954?
- 5 Evaluate the contribution of international powers in shaping Indochina in the period 1946–54.

02

The emergence of the Second Indochina War, 1954–64

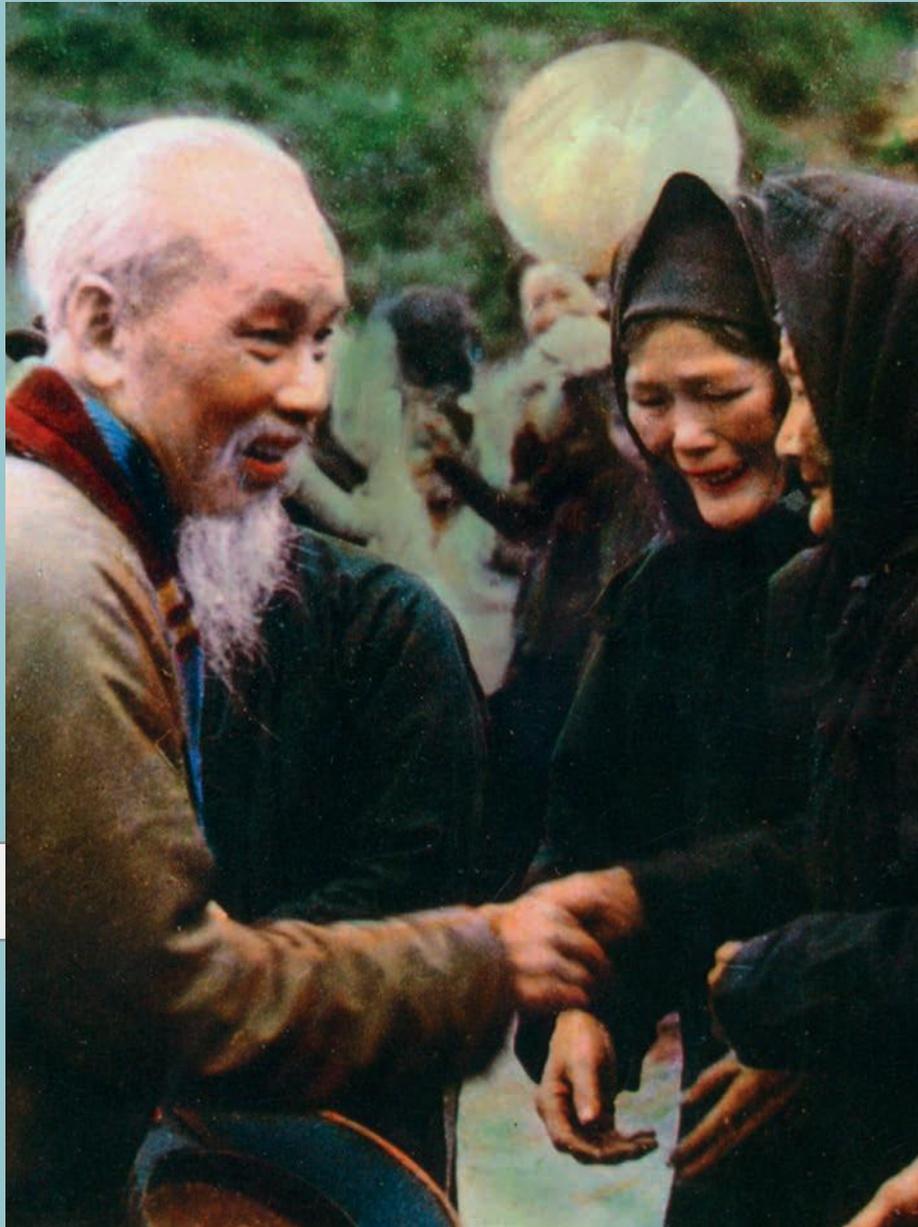
STUDENTS WILL INVESTIGATE

- the developments in both North and South Vietnam up to 1964
- the policies of the United States towards Vietnam and the region up to 1964.



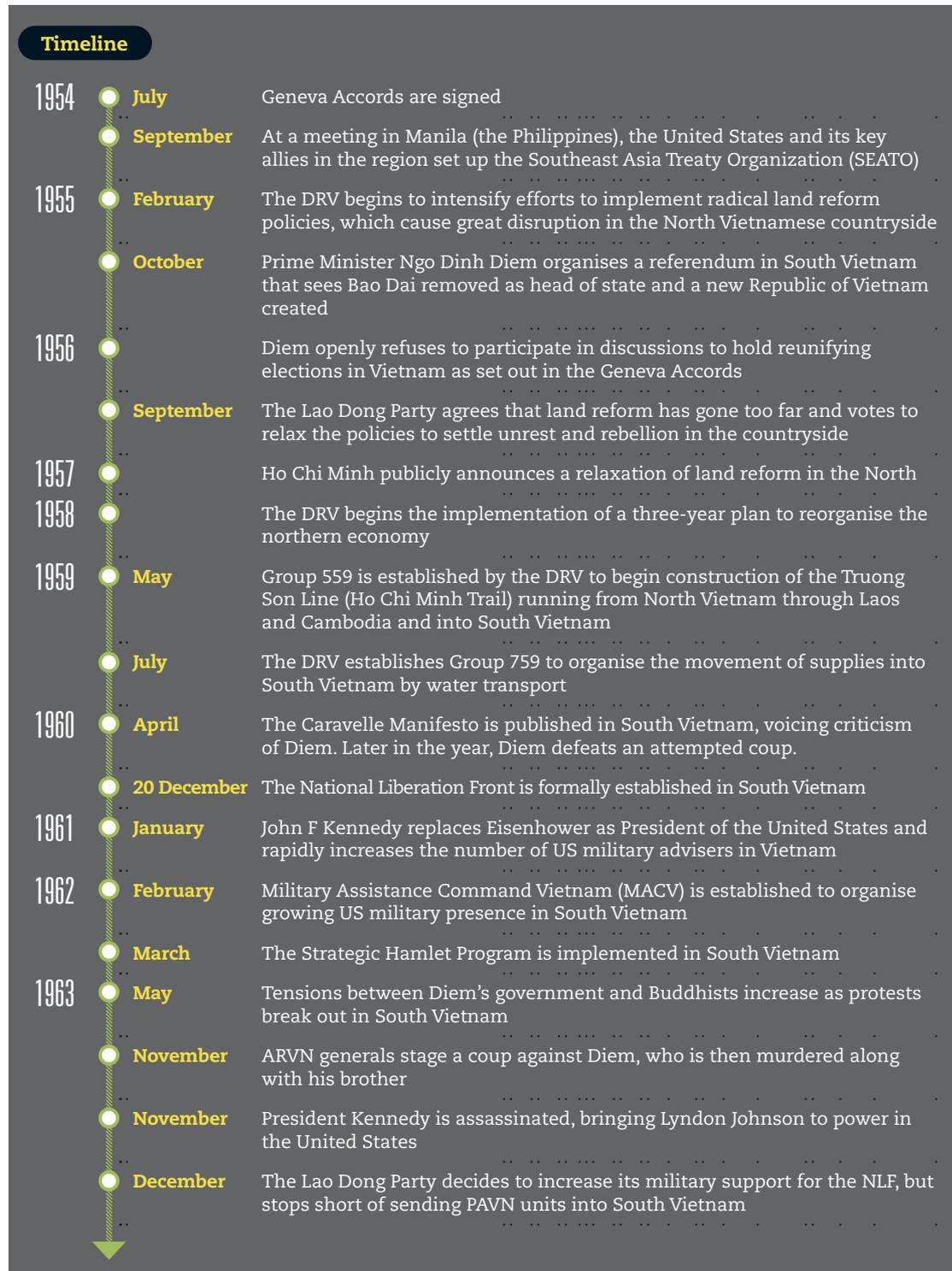
Modern History
Syllabus

President Ho Chi Minh greeting
villagers in Pac Bo, Cao Bang province,
in 1961



Indochina after Geneva

Few of the real problems across Indochina were solved at the Geneva Conference, and the next decade saw many of these intensify. Various governments, opposition groups and international powers tried to manipulate the circumstances to suit their interests and goals. Although the developments in Laos and Cambodia are crucial to understanding post-Geneva developments, it was in North and South Vietnam that some of the most important changes took place during these early years.





SOURCE 2.1 Indochina in the 1950s

North Vietnam after Geneva

When the First Indochina War ended in 1954, the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was given formal control north of the 17th parallel. It immediately took power in the capital, Hanoi, and faced the incredible challenge of postwar reconstruction. This was a difficult task for many reasons:

- The northern sectors of Vietnam suffered the most brutal and devastating consequences of the fighting throughout 1946–54, and the region's infrastructure was severely damaged.
- The DRV lost about 800 000 Catholic civilians throughout 1954–55 during the period in which people were allowed to move across the DMZ. At the same time, about 100 000 civilians had chosen to move from the South to the DRV.
- The growing presence of the United States in South Vietnam meant that developments in the North were closely monitored and the DRV had to be cautious.

During the years immediately following the Geneva Accords, there were also major disagreements within the DRV leadership over how best to approach the issues of reconstruction and **reunification**. Although the Vietminh played the central role in the defeat of France, it was dominated by communists, and after 1954 the communist Lao Dong Party began to direct affairs in the DRV more openly. Within this party, there was a split between those who promoted moderate policies and those who took more radical views. This split was particularly evident in the period between 1954 and 1957.



Getty Images/Bettmann

SOURCE 2.2 A busy Hanoi street in 1956. Bicycles and walking are the principal means of transportation.

The Lao Dong Party

In November 1945, the Indochinese Communist Party was officially dissolved. In its place a number of local parties emerged in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The Lao Dong Party (Vietnam Workers' Party) was established in 1951 as the main communist party in Vietnam. The party's founding manifesto emphasised the need for ongoing anti-colonial struggle and a need to transform the Vietnamese economy in the interest of all people. After 1954, the majority of the DRV's most influential leaders came from the Lao Dong Party, and it gradually came to establish **one-party rule** in North Vietnam.

MODERATES AND RADICALS IN THE DRV

Moderates

The moderates within the DRV stressed the need to work patiently towards the goals of building socialism and reunifying North and South Vietnam. They tended to emphasise certain reasons for this: the nation had been through one war already and suffered much hardship; trying to build socialism too quickly could jeopardise the stability of the new nation; and attempting to force reunification could provoke a military response from the United States. In the years immediately following Geneva, the moderates had the support of the Soviet Union and China, which wanted to avoid a military confrontation with the United States in Vietnam. Although moderate influence was particularly evident in the DRV's approach to reunification after Geneva, in some areas of domestic policy they were overshadowed by the radicals.

Radicals

Others within the DRV were critical of this approach. They believed that the DRV leadership had compromised too much at Geneva by allowing the South to be taken over by Bao Dai. They wanted this issue solved as soon as possible. Inspired by the example of China's Communist Party, this group wanted to move towards socialism in the DRV quickly and was influential in planning the radical land reforms that were implemented in North Vietnam from 1954. Over time, the influence of the radicals in the Lao Dong Party appears to have become even stronger, and many of the party's newer members began to promote military solutions to the problem of reunification. In 1957, a communist from South Vietnam, Le Duan, moved to the DRV and began to play a dominant role in promoting the radical cause. Eventually, this faction came to be the most powerful in the Lao Dong Party.

reunification

The process of bringing two regions that were formerly united back together under the rule of one government. In the case of Vietnam, the aim of many nationalists was to unite North and South Vietnam under the control of the DRV after 1954.

one-party rule

A political system in which a single political party controls the government. Groups with alternative views are usually made illegal and, in the worst cases, punished by imprisonment, exile or execution.

SOURCE 2.3 Moderates and radicals in the Lao Dong Party



SOURCE 2.4 Nikita Khrushchev replaced Joseph Stalin as leader of the USSR after Stalin's death in 1953. He tried to relax some of Stalin's more aggressive policies and urged the DRV to avoid military confrontation with South Vietnam and the United States.

Approaching reunification

Moderates within the Lao Dong Party dominated the DRV's approach to reunification during the early years. In September 1954, the party issued a resolution entitled 'The New Situation, the New Mission, and the New Policy of the Party' that made peace and stability the nation's main priority. This resolution called on the DRV to make a transition from war to peace and to try to work cooperatively to build support for its claim to reunify Vietnam. Importantly, the Lao Dong Party planned to avoid using military measures to force reunification but resolved to maintain a 'political struggle' to achieve this goal – it remained resolutely nationalist.

International pressure also played an important role in the party's decision to take this moderate path in the 1950s. In the Soviet Union, hardliner Joseph Stalin died in 1953, and by 1956 his replacement, Nikita Khrushchev, called for communists to develop a strategy of 'peaceful co-existence' with the non-communist world. This idea relaxed the most aggressive approaches the USSR encouraged earlier in the Cold War. For the next few years, the Soviet Union put

pressure on the DRV to avoid unnecessary antagonisms with South Vietnam as part of this general approach. Although Ho Chi Minh and many leaders in the DRV strongly disagreed with some of Khrushchev's ideas, the DRV was forced to approach the issue of reunification with some caution.

Reconstruction in North Vietnam

In the process of reconstruction, however, the more radical elements of the Lao Dong Party had earlier success by implementing some reforms that attempted to build **socialism** rapidly in the North. The radicals, led by Party Secretary Truong Chinh, were inspired by the example of Mao Zedong and the communists in China, who made agricultural reform one of their party's first priorities after taking power in 1949.

Between 1954 and 1957, the DRV rolled out its own set of land reforms, aiming to eliminate peasants and landlords in the countryside who were deemed a threat to the DRV. Those considered dangerous were wealthier landowners who had collaborated with the French or those accused, rightly or wrongly, of exploiting peasants. In 1955, Agricultural Reform Tribunals (mobile courts) were established and many people were put on trial. Although the government tried to make the process orderly, it was chaotic. The trials were often conducted unfairly and provided opportunities for revenge, manipulation and corruption. Peasants tried to settle old scores by making up accusations aimed at local rivals, and others made allegations against members of their village simply to avoid their own arrest. Those found guilty by the tribunals were sent to work in labour camps or executed. Although estimates vary widely, many historians would agree that over 100 000 civilians in the DRV died as part of the government's land reform process. Many of these victims were caught up in violent acts of revenge as the situation descended into chaos.

socialism

For Marxists, socialism is the first stage in the move away from capitalism. Although many interpret socialism differently, it generally involves a new government beginning to take greater control of agriculture and important industries to steer the nation towards its ultimate goal of communism.

Political crisis in the DRV

The policies implemented by the DRV in the 1950s caused a great deal of disruption in North Vietnam. In addition to the land reforms that affected peasants, the government also began to take a more generally repressive approach in the North. Freedom of speech was severely limited and any criticism of the government was dealt with harshly. In 1955 and 1956, resistance to the land reforms became serious and a group of intellectuals staged a revolt in the North. They were met with a swift and savage response from the government.

In a state of chaos, the Lao Dong Party realised that changes needed to be made to bring some stability back to the DRV. The government made a formal acknowledgement of its failures and released many prisoners found guilty through the Agricultural Reform Tribunals. The party replaced the tribunals with more moderate Co-operativisation Plans and forced Truong Chinh to resign as Party Secretary. At this point, Ho Chi Minh took a more active role in the day-to-day politics of the DRV, and in 1958 the DRV implemented a Three-Year Plan designed to reorganise the economy. As a result of these changes, the DRV's agriculture (mainly rice) and industrial economy (electrical production, mining, oil refineries and cement factories) generally improved by the early 1960s.



SOURCE 2.5 President Ho Chi Minh in his office at the Presidential Palace in Hanoi on 27 May 1955

International assistance for the DRV

In the period immediately following the Geneva Conference, both the USSR and China offered support to the DRV. As the North's agriculture suffered from the chaotic land reforms, rice was imported from China, and the Soviet Union supplied technical experts such as engineers to help develop the North's industrial sector. The DRV also received military supplies from the USSR and China that helped build the capacity of the **North Vietnamese Army (NVA)**. These supplies included weapons, ammunition and vehicles. Collectively, these various contributions played an important role in the DRV's attempt to overcome the challenges it confronted after Geneva.



SOURCE 2.6 Chairman Mao Zedong and President Ho Chi Minh toast the signing of the joint communiqué between their countries in Beijing in June 1955.

North Vietnamese Army (NVA)

Also known as the People's Army of Vietnam, the NVA was the regular army of the DRV. Like most modern conventional armies, it was organised into units with commanders, officers and a large body of soldiers. This army came to play a very important role in the region as conflict spread after the Geneva Conference.

- 1 Outline some of the challenges faced by the DRV after the Geneva Accords.
- 2 Analyse the role of the Lao Dong Party in the DRV.
- 3 Outline the main differences between the moderate and radical groups within the Lao Dong Party.
- 4 Explain why the Lao Dong Party decided to seek political solutions to reunification rather than military solutions in the years immediately following the Geneva Conference.
- 5 Evaluate the DRV's attempt at land reform.
- 6 How was the political crisis in the DRV overcome?
- 7 Assess the role of China and the USSR in the DRV following the Geneva Conference.

South Vietnam after Geneva

Although the South had not experienced as much devastation during the First Indochina War, the new government in Saigon also faced many challenges after 1954. These included:

- The need to build a new nation with a government that had very limited experience of ruling an independent state.
- Managing the influx of over 800 000 civilians from North Vietnam who migrated south during the 300-day period of free movement across the DMZ. Many of these refugees were brought to the South on US Navy ships as part of Operation Passage to Freedom.
- The opposition of groups within South Vietnam that had built up powerful networks during the First Indochina War. The three most notable were the political-religious sects the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai and a largely criminal organisation called the Binh Xuyen. These groups built up significant influence across the South during the Japanese occupation and the First Indochina War, and they controlled about 30 per cent of South Vietnam's land and population in 1954.

- In addition to these opposition groups, about 15 000 Vietminh supporters remained in South Vietnam after Geneva. Over time, this group grew larger and created serious problems for the southern government.
- The overwhelmingly poor condition of South Vietnam's institutions, such as courts, schools and the army. All of these needed to change, but many, particularly the army, resisted attempts at reform.

In addition to these local challenges, the new government in South Vietnam had to contend with the withdrawal of France's colonial system, including civilian administrators and security forces such as police. The South also had to manage the growing presence of the United States after the Geneva Conference. This began to grow steadily after 1954, and US involvement in South Vietnam expanded into almost all areas of the new nation's political and social life.

From Dai to Diem

One of the most important developments in South Vietnam after the Geneva Conference was the creation of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) under the leadership of Ngo Dinh Diem. When Bao Dai was

Alamy Stock Photo/PJF Military Collection



SOURCE 2.7 Refugees board LST 516 in Haiphong, North Vietnam, to be evacuated to Saigon, South Vietnam, during Operation Passage to Freedom, October 1954.

confirmed as leader of the southern government at Geneva, Diem was made Prime Minister. The working relationship between Dai and Diem was always strained, and in October 1955 Diem organised a referendum to remove Bao Dai. The referendum required citizens to decide whether the South should remain a monarchy under Bao Dai or be changed to a republic with a president (Diem) as head of state.

NGO DINH DIEM (1901–63)

Ngo Dinh Diem had been a colonial employee in Vietnam, but he also developed a reputation as a nationalist and a staunch anti-communist. He had, for example, refused to serve under Japan during its occupation from 1940 to 1945. During the First Indochina War, Diem travelled outside Vietnam and spent time in a Catholic seminary in New Jersey (1950–53) in the United States, where he met several prominent Americans. His anti-communism made a strong impression on many American politicians, and the Catholic Church put pressure on Bao Dai to take Diem on as Prime Minister in 1954. Diem was not universally liked, however, and there were several prominent

Americans, including the ambassador to South Vietnam, who objected to his appointment. His first two years as President were extremely difficult, as he had to overcome the open challenge of opposition groups including the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and Binh Xuyen. His rule stabilised in the late 1950s, only to be challenged again by a more powerful nationalist-communist movement. In 1960, Diem survived a coup attempt, but his relationship with the United States deteriorated markedly from this point. He was overthrown and murdered in November 1963.



The referendum enjoyed the support of American advisers to South Vietnam, who never looked favourably on Bao Dai – many saw him as an incompetent leader who was poorly chosen by French officials in the 1940s. The referendum was announced on 6 October, with the voting set to take place in under three weeks. Supported by members of the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Diem launched a savage campaign against Bao Dai. In the media, in speeches and on flyers and posters Diem criticised the emperor for selfishness, sexual depravity and softness towards France, Japan and Vietnamese communists. Alternatively, Diem presented himself as a devout nationalist and a morally upright leader who would faithfully serve the Vietnamese people.

The CIA in Indochina

The Central Intelligence Agency is the main foreign intelligence organisation in the United States. It played an important role throughout Indochina in the period following the Geneva Conference. In fact, the CIA continued to be involved in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos throughout the entire period of conflict. Its activities ranged from providing secret military assistance and training to anti-communist forces to helping anti-communist governments in Indochina build their power after 1954. In Vietnam, for example, Colonel Edward Lansdale and a team of CIA operatives helped Diem build a national profile, win the referendum in 1955 and fight opposition groups in the South. It would, however, be a mistake to consider Diem a mere 'puppet' of the CIA, as he refused to follow much of their advice. Throughout the 1960s, the CIA continued to become more heavily involved as a key part of US intervention in Indochina.



akg-images/Pictures From History

SOURCE 2.8 Colonel Edward Lansdale was stationed in Saigon from 1954 to 1957 as the head of the Saigon Military Mission. He retired from the US Air Force in 1963 with the rank of Major General.



CIA

On 23 October 1955, citizens of South Vietnam cast their vote. By modern standards, the process was very suspicious. Voting was overseen by Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu and required citizens to vote using coloured paper – red for Bao Dai to remain monarch or green for the creation of a republic with Diem as President. In Vietnamese culture, the colour red often has negative (even evil) connotations, which automatically discouraged voters from choosing the Bao Dai ticket. In addition, Bao Dai's photo was unflattering compared with the statesmanlike image of Diem.

Upon final count, the vote was over 98 per cent in favour of Diem and his republic. In the capital, Saigon, more votes were cast than there were citizens, a clear sign that the final stages of the referendum were also manipulated. Nevertheless, the new Republic of Vietnam was proclaimed with Ngo Dinh Diem as its first president, and many citizens were genuinely pleased.



Getty Images/Hulton Deutscher/Corbis Historical

SOURCE 2.9 Citizens gather to hear news of the final count in the referendum of October 1955. The success of the referendum meant that Bao Dai was replaced as the head of state in South Vietnam by Diem, who became President.

personalism

A philosophy made popular in France by Catholic scholars. The ideas criticised communism and modern liberalism and claimed to find a new path to social and personal development.

oligarchy

A political system in which a small group of individuals hold most of the nation's power. In Diem's case, the oligarchy was made up of his family and a small collection of his political allies within the Can Lao Party.

nepotism

The practice of promoting family and close friends to positions of power over others who may be more qualified

Diem's rule

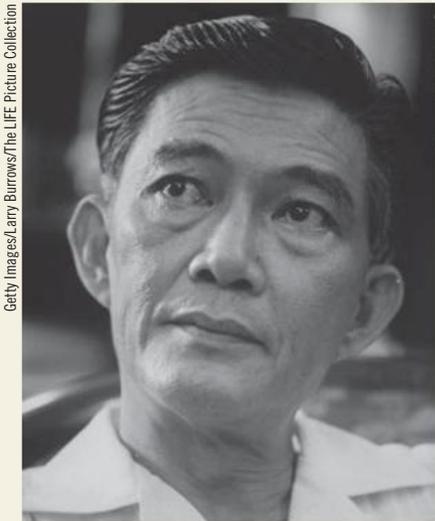
As President, Diem began to rule the RVN in a manner that caused tension and controversy. There is no doubt that any ruler of South Vietnam after 1954 faced great difficulty in building a peaceful, stable nation, and Diem certainly wanted to build a strong republic that could resist pressure from the DRV to reunify Vietnam. Nevertheless, his approach to ruling and the reforms that he introduced alienated many civilians in South Vietnam.

Diem had little interest in creating a conventional 'democratic society' but sought to rule on the basis of a hybrid of **personalist** and Confucian ideas. He often behaved more like a traditional Vietnamese emperor than a modern American president. Diem increasingly surrounded himself with family members and close political allies. To his American and Vietnamese critics, his government began to look more like an **oligarchy** than a genuine democracy. This **nepotism** frustrated many

politically active members of the nation. In addition, some of Diem's reforms favoured the Catholic minorities in South Vietnam, which caused great frustration among the majority Buddhist population. Diem's outright refusal to discuss reunifying elections in July 1956 also angered those in the South who wanted a united Vietnam under one government. Finally, Diem's close alliance with the United States and his reliance on its military and civilian aid divided the community. Those who wanted to remain free of North Vietnamese control supported the alliance, while those who wanted a genuinely independent Vietnam were critical.

The Ngo family

Diem's family were prominent Catholics from South Vietnam. During Diem's presidency, many of his family members were given great influence in the South. Some of these individuals were not appointed to formal positions within the government, but this did not reduce the power they had within certain sectors. Diem's younger brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, for example, had command of parts of the army and he also ran the Can Lao Party, which was the secretive political organisation that supported Diem. Since Diem was not married, his sister-in-law, Madame Nhu, became a kind of de facto first lady. In this role, she caused great controversy by openly criticising South Vietnam's Buddhist community and staunchly defending Diem's government. Although much of this activity was secretive, it did not take long for the South Vietnamese public or Diem's American advisers to recognise that his rule fell far short of the democratic ideals they had believed he would attempt to realise.



Getty Images/Larry Burrows/The LIFE Picture Collection

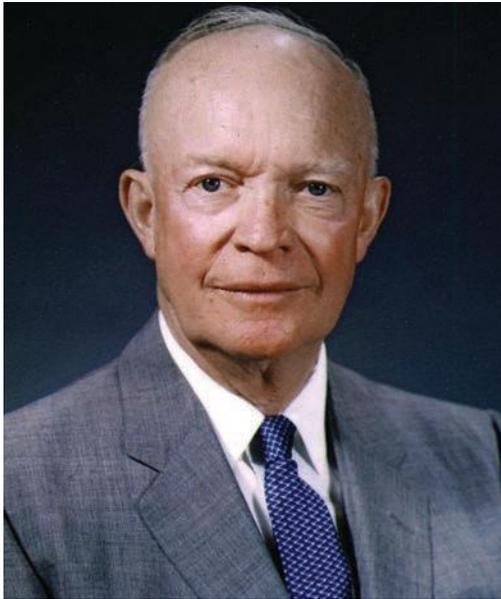
SOURCE 2.10 Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's brother and close political ally. Nhu was a controversial figure in South Vietnamese politics during Diem's rule.



Getty Images/AFP

SOURCE 2.11 Madame Nhu was the wife of Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. Since Diem was unmarried, Madame Nhu was widely regarded as the republic's first lady. She was, however, a very divisive figure who added to the tensions in South Vietnam.

- 1 What were some of the main challenges facing South Vietnam after the Geneva Conference?
- 2 What were Ngo Dinh Diem's political views?
- 3 Outline the process through which Diem became President of South Vietnam.
- 4 Describe Diem's rule of the Republic of Vietnam.



The Eisenhower administration and US involvement in Indochina

SOURCE 2.12 Dwight Eisenhower was the 34th President of the United States. He took over from Harry Truman, who had already committed the United States to Indochina by providing financial support to France during its war against the Vietminh beginning in 1950.

In Chapter 1, we saw that since 1950 Indochina had become an increasingly important part of US foreign policy. The United States provided nearly three-quarters of the funds required for France's war effort against the Vietminh and placed its support firmly behind anti-communists in Vietnam at the Geneva Conference in 1954. Under the Eisenhower administration (1953–61), the United States continued to expand its support for non-communists in the Asia Pacific by establishing the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in September 1954. This aimed to bring anti-communist powers in the region, such as Australia, New Zealand, Thailand and the Philippines, into

closer alliance. The administration also began to increase its involvement in Indochina by implementing a variety of new policies.

TABLE 2.1 Key features of US policy in Indochina during the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower, 1953–61

Diem	During Eisenhower's presidency, a number of important advisers, such as John Foster Dulles, and members of the diplomatic community in South Vietnam provided vocal support for Diem. The administration began pouring money, material supplies and military aid into the South in an effort to help modernise the new Republic. This money was crucial in helping Diem's government survive for so long, but it also caused some friction between Diem and the Americans, who did not always agree on how the money should be spent or how the republic should be managed.
Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG)	In 1950, the United States established MAAG in Indochina to help train and support anti-communist forces across the region. In 1955, this was renamed MAAG Vietnam, as its efforts began to focus more directly on supporting Diem and the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF). Separate advisory groups were also established in Laos and Cambodia for similar purposes. MAAG Vietnam grew steadily during Eisenhower's presidency, and by 1960 there were more than 680 US military advisers stationed permanently in South Vietnam. Their role was to train the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and help it expand into a self-sufficient fighting force. Over time, however, MAAG bases also became the target of aggression from opposition groups in South Vietnam.
Laos	In the late 1950s, the longstanding political problems in Laos intensified. In 1955, the Eisenhower administration established the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) to help support the Royal Lao Government (RLG) as it struggled against the communist Pathet Lao. Since Laotian neutrality was affirmed at Geneva in 1954, much of this activity was conducted in secret. The PEO supplied the RLG with weapons and training in the art of counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare.
Cambodia	Between 1955 and 1963, the United States had a MAAG in operation in Cambodia. This was much smaller than the efforts in Vietnam and Laos, as the threat was seen to be more immediate in those parts of Indochina. In addition, Cambodia's King Sihanouk was attempting to maintain a general position of neutrality in the Cold War, which meant that he tried to prevent the expansion of US presence in his kingdom.

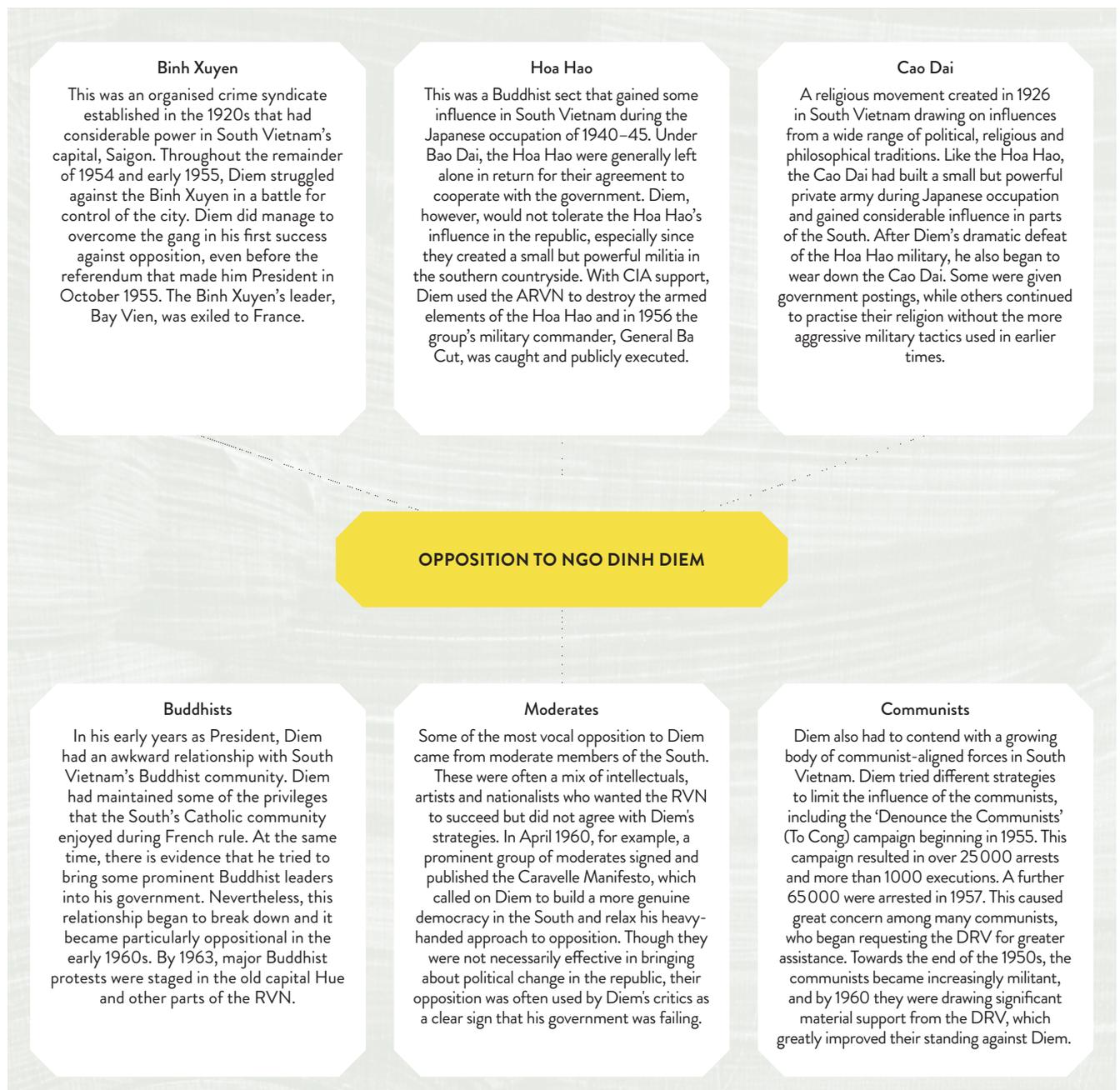
counterinsurgency (COIN)

Combined military and civilian action taken to limit the effects of rebel groups within a nation. These usually include military patrols and community development programs.

Opposition to Diem

Due to the region's unstable history and the new president's divisive rule, Diem's government was forced to contend with a range of opposition groups within South Vietnam. Diem was more successful in challenging some of these groups than others; however, combined, they put great strain on his leadership and provided a constant threat to the stability of South Vietnam.

In general, Diem took a hardline approach to opposition. In May 1959, for example, he introduced law 10/59, which dramatically expanded the government's ability to arrest citizens for 'political crimes'. This was effective in reducing the influence of some opposition groups in the short term, especially the communists. It also contributed to the growing alienation of others who were critical of Diem's authoritarian tendencies.



SOURCE 2.13 Opposition to Diem

The Caravelle Manifesto

The following is an extract from the Caravelle Manifesto signed by 18 prominent members of the South Vietnamese community, most of whom had served under Bao Dai or were former members of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao. Diem refused to allow the manifesto to be published, but it was circulated widely in the RVN in April 1960 and reproduced in the international media.

To the President of the Republic of Vietnam ...

We the undersigned, representing a group of eminent citizens and personalities, intellectuals of all tendencies, and men of good will, recognise in the face of the gravity of the present political situation that we can no longer remain indifferent to the realities of life in our country.

... In spite of the fact that the bastard regime created and protected by colonialism has been overthrown, and that many of the feudal organisations of factions and parties which oppress the population were destroyed, the people do not know a better life or more freedom under the republican regime which you have created. A constitution has been established in form only. A National Assembly exists whose deliberations always fall into line with the government.

... Today the people want freedom. You should, Mr. President, liberalise the regime, promote democracy, guarantee minimum civil rights, recognise the opposition so as to permit the citizens to express themselves without fear ... When this occurs, the people of South Vietnam, in comparing their position to that of the North, will appreciate the value of true liberty and of authentic democracy.

... We hold firm hope that the Vietnamese people shall know a brilliant future in which it will enjoy peace and prosperity in freedom and progress.

Caravelle Manifesto, 1960, <http://alphahistory.com/vietnamwar/caravelle-manifesto-1960>

QUESTIONS

Closely examine the above extract from the Caravelle Manifesto.

- 1 List the main criticisms that the authors of the Caravelle Manifesto include in this document.
- 2 What do the authors of the Caravelle Manifesto ask Diem to specifically change?
- 3 How might this source be used by a historian to investigate the rule of Ngo Dinh Diem?

- 1 What were some of the different opposition groups in South Vietnam? How did Diem deal with these groups?
- 2 Outline the various ways in which the United States became involved in Indochina during Eisenhower's presidency.
- 3 As a class or in small groups, create an infographic to compare and contrast North and South Vietnam in the period immediately following the Geneva Conference (1954–60).

The DRV increases pressure on the Republic of Vietnam

Amid the growing turmoil in South Vietnam, the DRV began to change its policy towards reunification with the South. In 1956, Diem flatly rejected any possibility of the national elections promised by the Geneva Accords. By the late 1950s, many southern communists were becoming increasingly vocal in their demands that the DRV take action against Diem. The figure from the South who emerged as one of the most important leaders in this regard was Le Duan.

LE DUAN (1907–86)

Le Duan was born in Quang Tri province in central Vietnam. He developed a strong commitment to nationalist struggle at a young age. He was imprisoned by the French in the 1930s and later became a member of the Communist Party, serving throughout the First Indochina War. Perhaps most importantly, Le Duan became the party's chief organiser in the South in 1951. Throughout the 1950s, he gradually began to gain more influence in the Lao Dong Party. In 1956, he published *The Path to Revolution in the South* and in 1957 he moved to North Vietnam, becoming the party's General Secretary

in 1959. When Ho Chi Minh stepped out of the day-to-day political activity of the DRV in 1960, Le Duan replaced him as head of the party and his influence continued to grow. Le Duan's radical approach to reunification helped to push the DRV to take more militaristic measures against Diem in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Most historians now consider Le Duan to be one of the most important North Vietnamese leaders of this period.



Image: Wikimedia Commons

At this time, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was still urging caution on the part of the DRV. He did not want to risk a military confrontation with the United States, and the USSR still had many other global issues to solve. Nevertheless, many leaders in Hanoi recognised that the situation in South Vietnam required the DRV's intervention. Diem's brutal approach to the communists in South Vietnam began to cause concern, and the pressure from Le Duan and other radicals became impossible to ignore.

In January 1959, the Lao Dong Party made a crucial decision at its 15th Plenum to step up the DRV's support for its southern allies. The new plan aimed to begin supporting a guerilla war against Diem without committing the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) to fight in the South. Instead, the DRV decided to begin sending supplies to southerners who were already taking military action against Diem. In May, the DRV established Group 559 to build an overland supply route, called the Truong Son Strategic Transportation Line, to South Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia. The Truong Son Line is more commonly known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The DRV also created Group 759 in July to develop sea transportation routes from the DRV to the South. These decisions marked an important shift in the DRV's approach towards reunification.



SOURCE 2.14 The Ho Chi Minh Trail



The danger of resistance

The National Liberation Front and the growing insurgency in South Vietnam

Viet Cong

Applied to communists in South Vietnam and is a shorter version of Viet Nam Cong-san, which means 'Vietnamese communist'. Although not all of the NLF members were communists, Diem and his American supporters saw the movement as controlled by North Vietnam from the beginning.

insurgency

An uprising against a government, usually making use of secret organisations, guerilla war and propaganda

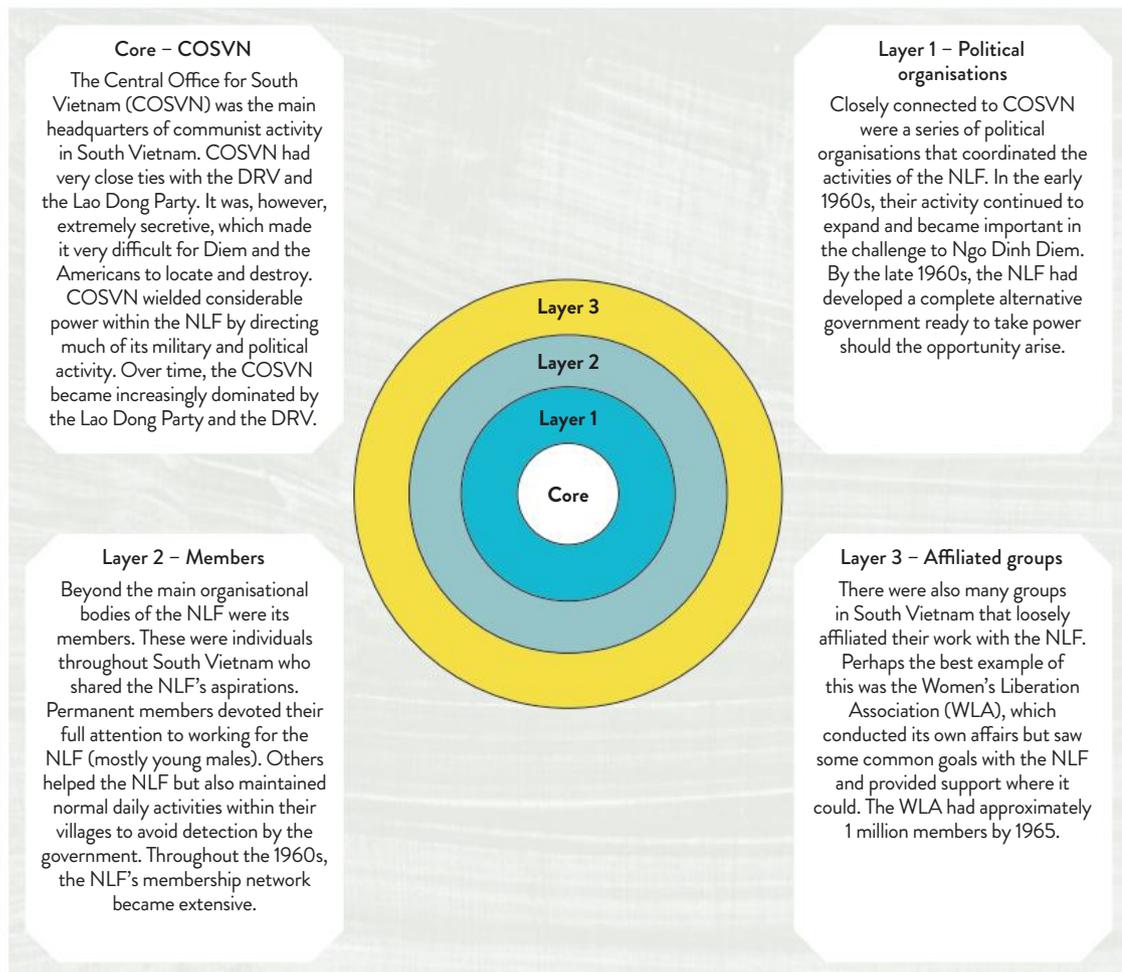


Key elements of the NLF program

By 1960, Diem had built a semi-functional government and increased his personal power in South Vietnam. He had not, however, managed to overcome the tendency towards corruption and he failed to redress many of the criticisms of different groups in the South. Despite his nationalist aspirations, Diem had not yet managed to develop a strong and cohesive nation in South Vietnam. In December 1960, anti-Diem forces established a new nationalist group in South Vietnam with the secret support of the DRV: the National Liberation Front (NLF), also known as the **Viet Cong**.

The NLF resembled the earlier nationalist organisation the Vietminh. It was dominated by communists but included individuals and groups from a range of other political movements. Like the Vietminh, the NLF also tried to play down the most radical communist ideals and stressed the importance of the nationalist goals of independence, self-government and an end to foreign presence in South Vietnam. To achieve this, the NLF saw the overthrow of Diem's regime and opposition to the growing US intervention in Vietnam as key priorities.

Although everyone who joined the NLF shared a vision of radical nationalism, it was not a tightly unified movement in the beginning; some individuals and groups affiliated with the NLF were far more radical than others. Nevertheless, over time and with logistical support from the DRV, the NLF grew into a powerful **insurgency** that used political and military means to destabilise the Diem regime.



SOURCE 2.15 The general structure of the National Liberation Front

The NLF unleashed a widespread propaganda campaign against the RVN. It claimed that Diem was a puppet of the United States, calling his government the 'My-Diem regime', Vietnamese for 'the American-Diem regime'. The NLF also openly criticised Diem's rule as corrupt and dictatorial.

In the areas it controlled, the NLF began to institute reforms aimed at addressing many peasant grievances. These included two of the most important concerns of South Vietnamese peasants: land use and land rent. In addition, the NLF used ruthless terror tactics such as assassinations, kidnappings and bombings against any opposition it encountered. By the mid-1960s, the NLF had assassinated about 6000 RVN officials and murdered more than 25 000 civilians.

The People's Liberation Armed Forces

The NLF also developed a dedicated military force: the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF). In its early stages, the PLAF was made up almost entirely of southerners. It was divided into 'guerilla' and 'regional/main' forces, which had the following responsibilities:

- **Guerilla forces:** These were essentially part-time soldiers who often worked in their villages and conducted military and political activity as needed. They helped bring in recruits to the NLF and conducted military operations when required.
- **Regional and main forces:** These members of the PLAF operated on a more full-time basis. They were usually organised into groups of between 20 and 200. Regional forces tended to operate within a specific province within South Vietnam, and main forces could be moved around as needed.

It is important to remember that in larger operations these groups could be combined, so the distinctions outlined here should not be treated as absolute.



- 1 Why did the DRV begin to take a more aggressive approach to South Vietnam in the late 1950s?
- 2 Explain the significance of the following to the growth of the southern insurgency:
 - a Le Duan
 - b 15th Plenum of the Lao Dong Party.
- 3 How did the DRV begin to provide logistical support to southern insurgents from 1959?
- 4 With specific reference to Source 2.15 on page 48, explain the role of the COSVN in the NLF.
- 5 Outline the main aims and methods of the NLF.

Diem's final years, 1960–63

With the growth of the NLF, South Vietnam steadily became the site of an open political and military struggle. On one side were those who sought to overthrow the RVN and reunify Vietnam. On the other were those who wished to preserve the RVN as a non-communist nation. After the DRV began to support and supply the insurgency against the southern regime, Diem's position came under serious pressure. Some historians would even argue that the NLF insurgency effectively destroyed Diem's ability to rule.

With US assistance, Diem employed various strategies to fight the NLF. American advisers were used to train the South's main infantry force, the ARVN, in the use of counterinsurgency (COIN) measures, which were employed throughout the southern countryside. Diem also implemented the Agrovillage Program in 1959, which involved separating villagers into different locations depending on their political affiliation. The villagers who allegedly supported the NLF or DRV were moved to one location and those who supported the RVN were moved elsewhere. The program was widely criticised by peasants who did not want to be forcibly removed from their homelands and it was shut down within a year.





Geddy Images/Bettmann

SOURCE 2.16 US Army Captain Linton Beasley (right) instructs an ARVN rifle squad on 26 March 1962.

The Kennedy administration and US involvement in South Vietnam

By the time John F Kennedy became US President in 1961, US attempts at nation-building in Indochina had failed to produce many clear gains. In Laos, the position of anti-communists was rapidly deteriorating as the Pathet Lao continued to gain influence with the support of the DRV. In their final meetings to arrange the handover of the presidency, Eisenhower warned Kennedy that the situation in Laos presented the greatest immediate threat to Indochina.

JOHN F KENNEDY (1917–63)



Geddy Images/Bettmann

John F Kennedy succeeded Eisenhower as the 35th President of the United States (1961–63). He was a Democrat who promised a fresh approach to leadership in the US and the wider world. He was young, ambitious and intelligent but also relatively inexperienced. JFK took a cautious approach to Indochina, and more specifically to Vietnam. While many of his advisers wanted him to take a militant approach, Kennedy preferred political solutions. Nevertheless, JFK's policies deepened US involvement in

Indochina by increasing the aid budget, sending more American advisers to Vietnam and increasing US involvement in Laos. He also increased American rhetoric about Vietnam, going so far as to call it the 'cornerstone of the free world in southeast Asia'.¹ Kennedy was tragically shot and killed in November 1963, bringing a premature end to his life and political career. Although there is some evidence that he wanted to scale down US involvement in Indochina, what he would have done in 1964 and beyond is a matter of great contention.

In regard to US policy on Indochina, Kennedy did not radically change course from the strategies Eisenhower had already implemented: economic and civilian aid, military assistance and diplomatic pressure. He did, however, rapidly expand US commitments to anti-communists in the region, but the relationship between American advisers and the Diem regime deteriorated.

TABLE 2.2 Key features of US intervention during the presidency of John F Kennedy, 1961–63

<p>South Vietnam</p>	<p>The Kennedy administration continued to support Diem but put increasing pressure on him to make his government more democratic so that he could restore stable government to the RVN. Kennedy continued to pour US money into the South, hoping to modernise the country and support the growth of the nation's economy and the RVNAF. The relationship between Kennedy and Diem, however, became increasingly difficult as American advisers were frustrated at Diem's lack of progress and reform.</p>
<p>Military assistance</p>	<p>One of Kennedy's most important contributions to the growing conflict in Vietnam was his rapid increase of US military presence in South Vietnam. When Kennedy took office, there were about 900 US advisers stationed in South Vietnam. By the end of his presidency in 1963, there were over 16 000. In addition, Kennedy expanded US operations in the South by approving the use of US helicopters to transport the ARVN. He also established Operation Ranch Hand in January 1962, which involved the use of US aircraft to drop chemical defoliants on the jungles of South Vietnam and Laos in order to deprive the NLF of bases, transport and cover. With US support, Diem tried to implement new programs to deprive the NLF of support. He instigated the Strategic Hamlet Program in 1962 to replace the Agroville Program but, although better organised, it was no more successful in attempting to separate the NLF from other villagers and it was abolished in 1964. With US assistance, Diem also introduced the Chieu Hoi ('open arms') program in 1963 to encourage NLF members to defect. Small leaflets, often dropped from aircraft, informed the NLF that they would receive money, jobs or other incentives if they chose to leave the NLF and pledge allegiance to the RVN. The increase in US presence in South Vietnam required changes to the organisation of US military structures in Vietnam. In February 1962, the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) was established and in 1964 MAAG was completely disbanded.</p>
<p>Laos</p>	<p>When Kennedy took office, Eisenhower considered Laos to be a greater threat to the stability of Indochina than Vietnam. Partly on the basis of this advice, the Kennedy administration began supplying anti-communist forces with more weapons and military hardware to combat the Pathet Lao. Through the CIA, the United States began building an anti-communist army in Laos led by Vang Pao. At the same time, the DRV and other communist nations increased their support to the Pathet Lao, which brought the nation to the brink of all-out civil war. In 1962, Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev organised a ceasefire in Laos, but this did not last long and by 1963 a 'secret war' flared up again. Over the course of the next decade, the United States expanded its involvement in Laos through the CIA and by 1970 was spending \$500 million a year in Laos alone.</p>
<p>Cambodia</p>	<p>The only part of Indochina that saw a reduction in US involvement in this period was Cambodia. When he took power, Kennedy continued to support the programs established under Eisenhower, including MAAG, and he met personally with King Norodom Sihanouk. Nevertheless, Sihanouk was still hoping to keep Cambodia out of the growing conflict in Vietnam and he was suspicious of how the US Government treated regional leaders such as Diem. In 1963, MAAG Cambodia was completely shut down and Sihanouk stopped taking US aid to reduce the nation's reliance on the United States.</p>



SOURCE 2.17 Although a renewed peace agreement on Laos was signed in July 1962, this was largely ignored. The DRV continued supporting the Pathet Lao and using eastern Laos for the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In response, the United States began expanding a 'secret army' to oppose the communists through the CIA. The commander of that army, Vang Pao, is shown here directing his forces.



With permission from the Australian Government Department of Defence. Australian War Memorial ref no. ATF-029-70

SOURCE 2.18 A leaflet issued by the Australian 1st Psychological Operations Unit encourages members of the NLF to defect as part of the Chieu Hoi program (1963–71). It reads: Your family is longing for you. Chieu Hoi flyers often included instructions for reporting to the RVN on the reverse side. Millions of leaflets like this were dropped over South Vietnam during the life of the program.



Image courtesy of the AATV Association. Australian War Memorial ref no. P00963.009

SOURCE 2.19 A small fortified village (strategic hamlet) in South Vietnam in the 1960s

The crisis of 1963

In 1963, South Vietnam saw a new political crisis emerge in addition to the growing strength of the NLF insurgency. Although Diem made some attempt to establish good relations with South Vietnam's Buddhist community in the early parts of his rule, in the 1960s many Buddhists came out in open criticism of his government.

The Buddhists

In May 1963, tension quickly escalated when Diem enforced Decree Number 10 preventing Buddhists from publicly displaying their religious flags. Protesters gathered in Hue, where eight people were shot by government security forces. These shootings set off a wave of protests throughout South Vietnam, followed by a series of violent retaliations from the government.

Two international controversies following these events severely damaged Diem's reputation and his relationship with the Kennedy administration. The first was the dramatic self-immolation of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc on 11 June 1963. Images of this scene in Saigon spread quickly through the international media, raising questions about Diem's management of the South. Then, in August, approximately 15 000 Buddhist protesters gathered at Saigon's main temple, the Xa Loi Pagoda. On 18 August, Diem used the ARVN to break up the protests. Over 1400 people were arrested, unleashing widespread criticism of Diem's treatment of the Buddhist community.



SOURCE 2.20 The scene of Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation in June 1963

The emboldened insurgency

The NLF had grown in strength during this period. Douglas Pike suggests that in 1963 alone the NLF organised over 172 000 secret 'struggle movement' meetings. US intelligence reports claimed that the NLF was in control of about 80 per cent of rural South Vietnam by the end of that year.² It is possible that about 50 per cent of the entire population was living in NLF-controlled territories by the end of 1963.

The NLF was also beginning to act with greater boldness. In January 1963, a force of just 350 NLF soldiers defeated a much larger ARVN unit with US helicopter support at Ap Bac. Throughout the year, the NLF continued to put pressure on the ARVN, and in October 1963 State Department official Thomas Hughes created a report that read:

“ Statistics on the insurgency in South Vietnam ... indicate an unfavorable shift in the military balance. Since July 1963, the trend in Viet Cong casualties, weapons losses, and defections has been downward while the number of Viet Cong armed attacks and other incidents has been upward. Comparison with earlier periods suggests that the military position of the government of Vietnam may have been set back ...

Thomas Hughes, 22 October 1963, Memorandum RFE-90, 'Statistics on the War Effort in South Vietnam Show Unfavorable Trends', <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v04/d205>

Many American officials, commanders of the ARVN and other politicians in South Vietnam were becoming increasingly concerned.

Qiang Zhai on China's support for the DRV

In his book *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–75* (2000), Chinese historian Qiang Zhai argues that international influences on the Lao Dong Party were crucial to the DRV's decisions in the early 1960s. He notes that there were regular meetings between Chinese and North Vietnamese officials and that, in 1961, China urged some caution on the part of the DRV because it did not want to provoke a major US retaliation. Qiang Zhai claims that a meeting between China and communist delegates from the DRV, Laos and Indonesia in September 1963 in Conghua (southern China) changed this. At this meeting, the Premier of the People's Republic of China (PRC) told communist delegates that it was time to challenge US intervention in South-East Asia with more open aggression. Then, in December 1963, Chinese military officials visited the DRV and developed detailed plans to increase China's assistance to the North. In 1964, China also sent military teams into Laos to expand its commitment to the Pathet Lao. All of this, according to Qiang Zhai, amounted to an important change in China's relationship with communists in Indochina and, in turn, emboldened both the DRV and its allies in South Vietnam. In December 1963, the Lao Dong Party passed the 9th Plenum, which increased the DRV's military assistance to the NLF.

Alamy Stock Photo/Everett Collection Inc



SOURCE 2.21 Henry Cabot Lodge, US Ambassador to South Vietnam, confers with South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem at the Presidential Palace in Saigon in 1963.

coup

A rapid takeover of a government, usually involving military force

The end of Diem

In 1962 and 1963, the Kennedy administration became increasingly divided over the rule of Diem. Some officials had developed serious doubts about his leadership, while others were optimistic that he would improve with greater pressure and guidance. Kennedy sent several fact-finding missions to South Vietnam in search of a solution to the growing crisis, but these failed to produce a clear plan of action that was agreeable.

An important change in the American relationship with Diem came when Henry Cabot Lodge Jr replaced Frederick Nolting as the US ambassador in South Vietnam in August 1963. Cabot Lodge was instantly critical of Diem, who he deemed incapable of solving South Vietnam's political problems. After the Xa Loi Pagoda incident on 18 August 1963, Cabot Lodge was sent Cable 243 from the US State Department, which required him to sternly warn Diem to make rapid changes to his treatment of South Vietnam's Buddhists.

The tension created by Cable 243 and Cabot Lodge's discussions with Diem ultimately pushed the Kennedy administration towards a decision to support an ARVN **coup** against Diem. Various

discussions between US officials and army commanders began to take place. Eventually, CIA agent Lucien Conein was given \$40 000 to pass on to ARVN generals to support a coup against Diem. On 1 November, General Duong Van Minh led a military takeover of South Vietnam, beginning with the Gia Long Palace in Saigon. The next day, Diem and his brother Nhu were arrested and brutally murdered by ARVN soldiers. The coup marked the beginning of military rule in South Vietnam, but it soon became obvious that this did not improve the political situation in the RVN.



Getty Images/Larry Burrows/The LIFE Picture Collection

SOURCE 2.22 General Duong Van Minh celebrating the overthrow with the troops, 1 November 1963



- 1 What evidence is there that the NLF insurgency was gaining influence in Vietnam by 1963?
- 2 How was China's support to the DRV important to the growing strength of the insurgency in South Vietnam?
- 3 What strategies did Diem use to try to limit and destroy this insurgency?
- 4 Compare Kennedy's approach to Indochina and Vietnam with that of President Eisenhower. To what extent did US involvement in the region change under JFK's leadership?
- 5 Using Source 2.20 on page 53, explain how the Buddhist crisis in South Vietnam during 1963 contributed to Diem's downfall as President of the RVN.
- 6 According to historian Qiang Zhai, how did China contribute to the developments in Indochina and in Vietnam specifically?
- 7 Outline the key events that ended in the coup against Diem in November 1963.

The decade after Geneva

In the decade following the Geneva Conference in 1954, the situation in Indochina had deteriorated appreciably. The Accords created in 1954 were designed to peacefully manage the region's decolonisation. From the outset, the plans ran into major obstacles. The conference itself was tense, and almost all the features included in the final Accords were ignored. The first major attempt to bring peace to Indochina was a complete failure.

In Vietnam, the situation was dire. Diem's rule caused great division in South Vietnam and the North began to support a mass, nationalist insurgency that grew into a powerful regional force. The most optimistic observers hoped that Diem's assassination in 1963 would improve many of these problems, but it was about to usher in a new period of instability that would see the conflict in Indochina significantly escalate.



SOURCE 2.23 Indochina in 1964

The Cold War and the United States' role in Indochina

Since the United States became involved in the First Indochina War in 1950, three successive presidents deepened their engagement with the region. By the end of Kennedy's presidency in November 1963, Indochina was a major issue in US foreign policy. The United States spent billions of dollars trying to build a non-communist South Vietnam, deployed thousands of advisers to help fight the insurgency against Diem and became deeply involved in the civil war in Laos. At this point, it is important to consider more thoroughly *why* the United States followed this path and whether it was necessary.

The Cold War

The Cold War shaped many decisions taken by the world's great powers after 1945. The tensions that defined the Cold War were a complex mix of **ideological**, economic, cultural and **geopolitical** issues.

ideology

The set of ideas and principles that guides an individual, group or nation's decision making

geopolitics

Political issues relating to a specific region, often including territorial competition, conflict over resource use and alliances

TABLE 2.3 Central tensions of the Cold War

IDEOLOGICAL	ECONOMIC	CULTURAL	GEOPOLITICAL
<p>One of the main differences between the Eastern and Western blocs was the ideas they claimed to promote. The Western bloc generally espoused an ideology of liberal democracy, which saw multiple parties compete in elections and an emphasis placed on individual freedoms. The Eastern bloc generally followed Soviet communism, which saw the emergence of single-party states that exercised tight control over their populations.</p>	<p>As part of the ideological outlook, the Western and Eastern blocs tended to organise their economies according to different principles. The liberal democracies in the West claimed to maintain free markets, which promoted competition and innovation. The communist nations of the Eastern bloc tended to plan their economies and set limits on what could be produced. They also limited the amount of wealth that could be accumulated by individuals in their societies.</p>	<p>Many historians have also pointed out that there were important cultural differences between the liberal democracies and the Eastern bloc. One of the most important was, perhaps, that communist governments were seen to be ‘atheist’ as they followed the ideas of Karl Marx, who was an ardent critic of religion. In many liberal democracies, however, Christianity still played an important part in public life. Many people in the West, therefore, saw communism as a cultural as well as a political threat.</p>	<p>The struggle between the liberal democracies and the communist bloc was not just about ideas and principles, it was also a struggle for power and influence. The stand-offs that emerged in Europe after World War II then began to spread worldwide as the great powers tried to expand their influence into other regions. They did this by trying to find allies in other parts of the world and by expanding their military presence. The United States, for example, had air force and naval bases all over the world.</p>



The Cold War



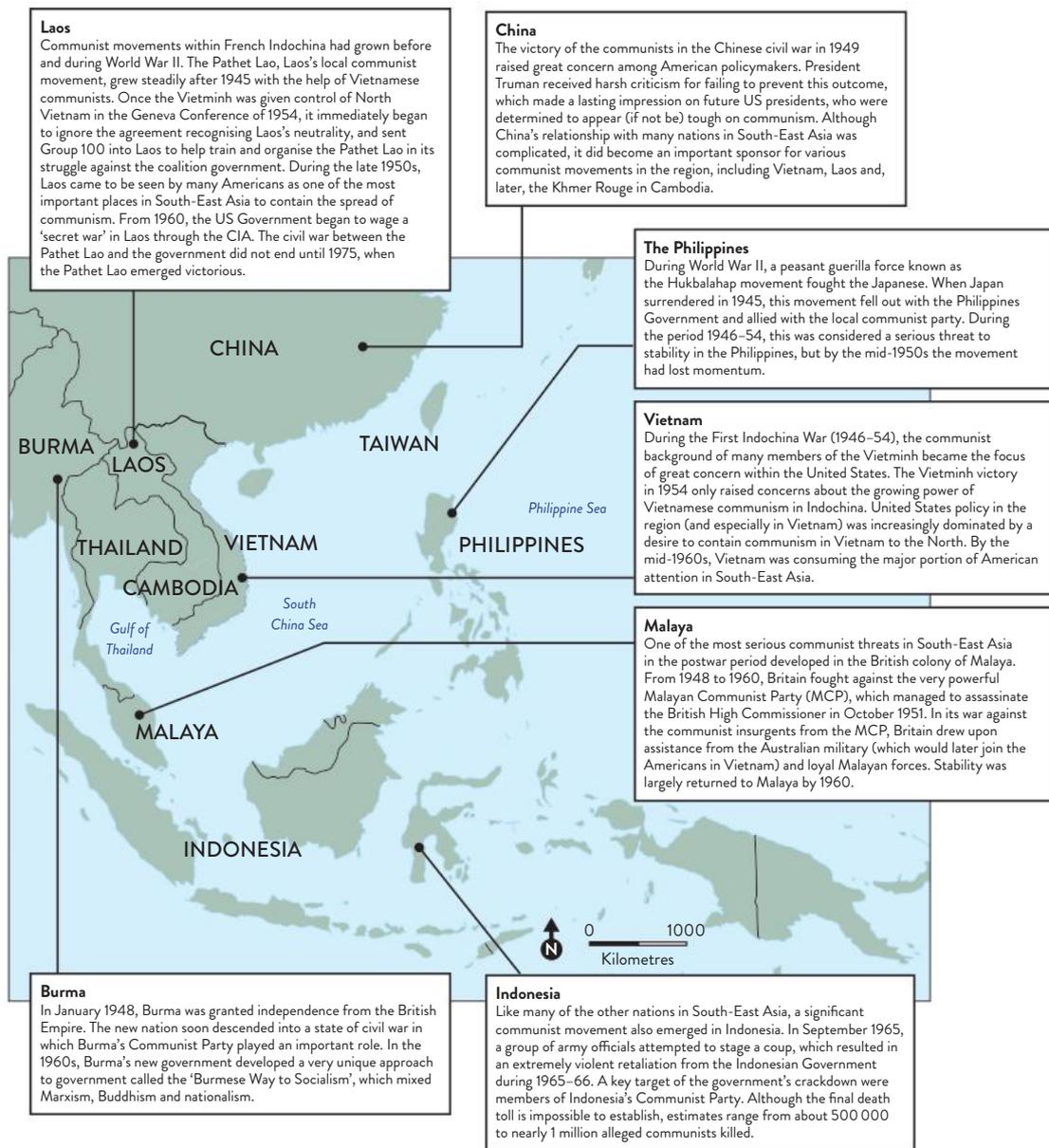
SOURCE 2.24 Europe divided: the 1950s



South-East Asia

During the early 1950s, the communist threat moved well beyond Europe. For many Americans, the fall of China to communism in 1949 was perceived as a major concern and a failure of the 'containment' strategy. In their view, not only did this see Asia's most populous nation come under communist control, it also endangered the entire region. Events throughout Asia seemed to confirm their greatest fears that the 'domino theory' would see more nations fall to communism if drastic action were not taken.

These general concerns for the future political make-up of Asia were a powerful influence on the Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. Despite its criticism of French colonialism, the US Government was far more concerned that Vietnam might fall under the spell of communist China and that this would put further pressure on the United States' allies in the Asia Pacific. It was concerned that Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and, further to the south, Indonesia could not resist communist pressure if Vietnam was lost. In response, the United States began to rapidly expand its support for France in its war against the Vietminh from 1950 in a renewed effort to contain the spread of communism in Asia.



SOURCE 2.25 The communist threat in South-East Asia

How did the Cold War influence the United States' decision to engage with Indochina?

The Cold War does not entirely explain why the United States began to increase its involvement in Indochina during the 1950s, but it was certainly one powerful influence on its decision making in this period. Source 2.26 outlines some of the major developments in the Cold War that drew American attention to Asia and Indochina.

World War II (1939–45)

During World War II, the Western Allies (mainly the United States and Britain) developed a practical alliance with the communist Soviet Union. Both were fighting a common enemy: Nazi Germany. The alliance was, however, never entirely comfortable. As the war approached its end, the alliance showed clear signs of strain as the major powers began to disagree on aspects of how to manage the postwar world.

Divisions in Europe

From 1945, the friction in the Western Allies' relationship with the Soviet Union began to escalate. Both the Western Allies and the Soviet Union accused each other of breaking agreements and attempting to expand their influence. In 1946, Winston Churchill famously proclaimed that an Iron Curtain between Eastern and Western Europe divided the postwar world. In the first decade after the war ended, there were several major military stand-offs, such as the Greek Civil War (1947), the Berlin blockade (1948–49) and the Soviet invasion of Hungary (1956), which increased the tension. By the mid-1950s, two alliance systems had developed, marking a clear division in Europe between the non-communist West (including the United States) and the communist-aligned East (the most powerful member being the USSR). The West had organised the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949 and the communist East organised the Warsaw Pact in 1955. Both alliances attempted to discourage military action in Europe, but they also heightened the possibility of another large conflict.

Development of US anti-communism

Although some anti-communist ideas in the US predated World War II, they became very pronounced after 1945. During the 1940s and 1950s, anti-communist ideas in the United States became central to the nation's political landscape, and they had a profound effect on US foreign policy in this period. Some of the most important anti-communist ideas and initiatives included:

- **Containment:** The idea of containment was first clearly articulated in public by President Harry Truman (the Truman Doctrine, 1947). The aim was to find ways in which the United States and its allies could prevent the Soviet Union from expanding its influence in Europe and other parts of the world. Truman (and later presidents) made a public commitment to provide aid to nations that were at risk of Soviet aggression.
- **The Marshall Plan:** This was the US plan named after the Secretary of State, George C Marshall, who implemented it in 1948. On the surface, the plan was designed to offer economic aid (about \$13 billion worth) to nations in Europe to help with the process of reconstruction after World War II. The Soviet Union, and many later historians, saw this as an attempt by the United States to increase its influence in Europe and prevent Soviet expansion in the region. There is no doubt, however, that the money and material provided by the United States helped many European nations to recover from the war.
- **The domino theory:** This was a popular way of expressing a deep concern among many American analysts about the threat posed by communist expansion. In their view, once a nation fell to communism it was likely that neighbouring countries could follow. Many events throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s seemed to suggest that this was the case. Not only had many countries close to the Soviet Union fallen to communism, after China became communist in 1949 many Asian nations, such as Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Malaya and Indonesia, came under serious pressure from their local communist parties. It was President Eisenhower who gave this idea the title 'domino theory'. During a press conference on 7 April 1954, he said: 'You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.'³

Turning points for the United States' anti-communism in Asia

Four major developments in Asia heightened concern in the US regarding the potential of communist expansion:

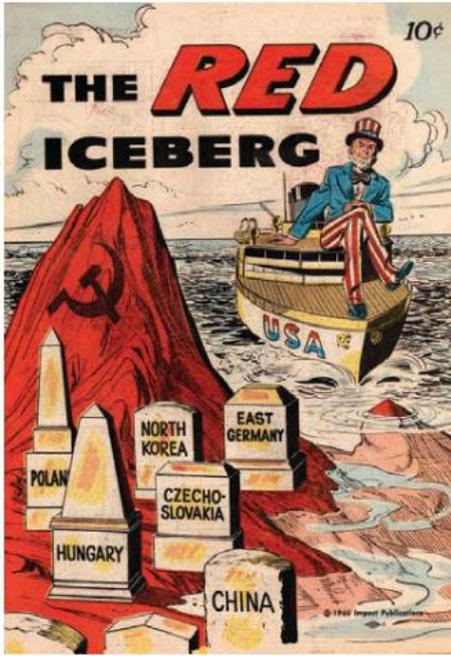
- 1 China's fall to communism in 1949, which saw Asia's largest nation come under the control of Mao Zedong
- 2 The Korean War (1950–53), which saw China support North Korean communists in a bloody war against non-communist South Korea and its allies. For many Americans, this war seemed to prove the willingness and ability of China to support communist movements in Asia.
- 3 The diplomatic recognition of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1950 by China and the Soviet Union, which was soon followed by large injections of military and economic aid (especially from China)
- 4 The growing influence of the communist Pathet Lao in Laos in the early 1950s as civil war and local tensions intensified.

SOURCE 2.26 Factors influencing US policy in Indochina



In response to all of these developments, many US Government officials began to argue strongly for initiatives to contain the spread of communism in Asia. Providing military and economic aid to France in its war against the Vietminh was one of the strategies decided upon by President Truman and then expanded by President Eisenhower.

'The Red Iceberg', (St. Paul, MN: Impact Publishing, 1960). American Social History Project / Center for Media Learning (<http://mh.ashp.cuny.edu>)



SOURCE 2.27 Anti-communist rhetoric was a feature in comics during the Cold War.

After the Geneva Conference, the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations continued to deepen the United States' involvement in Indochina by supporting anti-communists in Vietnam and Laos and by increasing the United States' military presence in the region. Although neither Eisenhower nor Kennedy committed US combat troops to Indochina, their policies meant that the region, and Vietnam more specifically, became a major foreign policy issue in the United States. In short, by 1964 any major US decision regarding Indochina was seen to carry serious consequences. If a government decided to *increase* US involvement, it would likely mean committing US combat troops. If, on the other hand, a government decided to *decrease* US involvement, it created an opportunity for critics to claim that the United States had abandoned an ally to communism. It was precisely this difficult decision that Lyndon Johnson inherited when he took over as US President following Kennedy's assassination in November 1963 (see Chapter 3).

- 1 In your own words, summarise the main tensions of the Cold War.
- 2 Why did many American officials see communism as a threat to Asia?
- 3 Explain why many American officials regarded Indochina as an important place to stop the spread of communism. Refer to Source 2.25 in your response.

A necessary engagement?

For many years, the history of the Second Indochina War was dominated by 'orthodox' and 'revisionist' interpretations. Orthodox historians tend to be very critical of US intervention in Indochina. Revisionist historians, on the other hand, generally attempt to defend US involvement in Indochina as a 'necessary engagement' designed to prevent a genuine political disaster in Asia. Although this group of historians is much smaller, their interpretations have forced historians to rethink their views on some aspects of this period.

GEORGE HERRING, AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR

George Herring is an American historian who is best known for his writing on the Second Indochina War. His book *America's Longest War* (1979) was one of the most widely read accounts of the conflict for many years. In this book, Herring makes some important claims about US involvement



→ in Vietnam that are generally considered to be a good example of an orthodox interpretation of US involvement in Indochina up to 1964. These include:

- US presidents and their advisers developed many false assumptions about Vietnam. Herring claims that the Americans assumed Ho Chi Minh was controlled by larger communist powers such as China and the USSR. In Herring's view, this was false because he believes that Ho's most important commitment, at least in the 1950s, was nationalism.
- Herring is also critical of the American decision to support Ngo Dinh Diem, who he regards as incompetent and corrupt.
- Although Herring recognises that the DRV supported the NLF, he believes that it was a creation of individuals and groups in the South who wanted genuine change in Vietnam.

In general, Herring suggests that American efforts in South Vietnam were horribly misguided and unnecessary. He writes: 'The American effort to create a bastion of anti-Communism south of the seventeenth parallel [after Geneva] was probably doomed from the start.'⁴

MICHAEL LIND, VIETNAM: THE NECESSARY WAR

Another American historian, Michael Lind, has developed an opposing interpretation of these issues. His book *Vietnam: The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (1999) is a strong example of a revisionist interpretation of US intervention in Indochina. Some of his most important claims include the following:

- Ho Chi Minh was a 'clone' of communist dictators such as Stalin in the USSR and Mao in China and he was trying to impose communist rule on South Vietnam by creating and controlling the NLF.
- The USSR and China were helping Ho Chi Minh achieve this goal by providing the DRV with supplies, including 270 000 guns, 200 million bullets, 10 000 pieces of artillery and 28 ships between 1954 and 1963. In short, Lind argues that this was a clear-cut case of communist aggression and expansionism.
- If South Vietnam fell to the communist DRV in the 1950s or 1960s, this would have created a major problem for the United States in Asia. It would have lost trading partners, and the fall of South Vietnam would have threatened some of the United States' key allies, such as Australia, Japan, Thailand and the Philippines. It may also have helped communists to take power in Indonesia, South-East Asia's most populous nation.

For Lind, the growing crisis in South Vietnam was created largely by the DRV with Soviet and Chinese support. He argues that in 1950 the United States was obligated to step in to prevent communists taking over South Vietnam and that it had to keep supporting anti-communism in the region if it wished to avoid catastrophe in Asia. US intervention in Vietnam was, for Lind, a necessary engagement.

Chapter summary

- After the Geneva Conference, the Lao Dong Party consolidated power in the DRV (North) and began trying to build a communist state with support from China and the Soviet Union.
- In 1955, Ngo Dinh Diem took over South Vietnam as President and caused great controversy as he attacked the various opposition groups within the nation.
- During the presidencies of Dwight Eisenhower and John F Kennedy, the United States steadily increased its involvement in Indochina, especially in Laos and South Vietnam.
- In the early 1960s, the CIA was building a 'secret army' in Laos to fight the communist Pathet Lao, which was supported by the DRV and China.
- By 1963, South Vietnam was in crisis as the DRV helped the National Liberation Front wage guerrilla war against Diem, and other groups, such as the Buddhist community, began to challenge his rule more openly.
- Although Kennedy's administration was divided over Diem, in November 1963 it supported a military coup that saw Diem replaced by generals from the ARVN.
- The 10 years following the Geneva Conference had produced very little peace or stability for the region.
- Historians are divided over how best to interpret these events. Some argue that US intervention was misguided and helped to create a larger conflict in Indochina, while others claim that the conflict was caused by the expansionist aims of the DRV and communist China.

Further resources

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Endnotes

- 1 Remarks of Senator John F Kennedy at the Conference on Vietnam Luncheon in the Hotel Willard, Washington, DC, June 1, 1956, https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/JFK-Speeches/Vietnam-Conference-Washington-DC_19560601.aspx.
- 2 Douglas Pike, *PAVN*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1991, p. 238.
- 3 President Dwight D Eisenhower – The President's News Conference April 7, 1954
- 4 George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–75*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1979, p. 268.

CHAPTER REVIEW

CHAPTER REVISION QUESTIONS

- 1 Individually or in pairs, create three timelines (10–15 events each) for the period 1954–64:
 - a North Vietnam
 - b South Vietnam
 - c International developments.
- 2 Using Sources 2.1 (page 36) and 2.23 (page 56) and your own timelines, identify and explain the most important changes that took place in Indochina between 1954 and 1964.
- 3 Compare and contrast the political, social, economic and military developments in North and South Vietnam in the period up to 1964.
- 4 What were the main developments in the policy of the United States towards the following in the period 1954–64?
 - a Vietnam
 - b Laos
 - c Cambodia
- 5 Explain how nationalism continued to shape Vietnam after 1954.
- 6 Draw up a table like the following to summarise the interpretations of George Herring and Michael Lind (see pages 60–1) regarding US involvement in Indochina up to 1964.

	GEORGE HERRING	MICHAEL LIND
Views on Ho Chi Minh		
Views on the NLF		
Views on the importance of South Vietnam to the United States		

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 7 Conduct some research into other historians who have written on this period. How do their interpretations compare with those of Herring and Lind on the following? You may wish to consult the 'Further resources' section on page 62 to help guide your research.
 - a Ho Chi Minh
 - b The rule of Ngo Dinh Diem
 - c Reasons for US involvement in Indochina up to 1964
 - d The role of the United States in South Vietnam
 - e The role of the PRC and the USSR in the expanding conflict

EXTENDED WRITING EXERCISE

- 8 Construct an essay responding to one of the following questions:
 - a Account for the failure of the Geneva Accords by 1964.
 - b Evaluate the importance of communism to the developments in Indochina up to 1964.
 - c Evaluate the importance of nationalism to the developments in Indochina up to 1964.
 - d Assess the role of the Cold War in shaping US policy towards Indochina in the period 1954–64.
 - e To what extent was US intervention responsible for the growing crisis in Vietnam in the period 1954–64?



Essay planning 1

03

The Second Indochina War, 1964–68

STUDENTS WILL INVESTIGATE

- the nature of US policy on Vietnam, 1964–68
- the strategies and tactics of the PLAF–NVA and the US–ARVN, 1964–68
- the Tet Offensive, 1968.



Modern History
Syllabus

Local people in Cholon (Saigon) picking through the wreckage after the destruction caused by the Tet Offensive of 1968



Introduction

As 1964 opened, tensions in Indochina were already extremely high. The United States was spending over \$2 million per day to support South Vietnam, and its involvement in Laos continued to expand. Although there were some isolated signs of progress in the South, the situation was deteriorating and the removal of Diem did little to improve stability. In fact, the South had 12 different governments between November 1963 and 1965.

To find a solution to the crisis in South Vietnam, both the DRV and the United States turned towards a policy of military **escalation** during 1964 and 1965. With support from China and the USSR, the DRV began sending larger units of the NVA down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to support the NLF insurgency. With this increased support, a period of bold attacks on the ARVN opened, seriously threatening South Vietnam's survival.

Under the new president Lyndon Johnson, the United States also made a series of crucial decisions that dramatically changed its relationship with Indochina. The United States began bombing North Vietnam, initiated a naval blockade to protect South Vietnam and, in March 1965, committed the first 3500 US combat soldiers to aid in the defence of the South. By the end of that year, there were more than 180 000 US troops in Vietnam, a number that would continue to grow to over 500 000 by 1969.

In January 1968, communist forces launched a mass offensive during Vietnam's most important national holiday, Tet (the lunar new year). Although they failed to achieve any of their immediate aims, the offensive had important consequences for both the DRV and the US-ARVN. Collectively, these decisions fundamentally changed the conflict in Indochina but, like earlier attempts to solve the crisis, they failed to bring about a decisive short-term advantage for either side.

escalation

A gradual process of increasing military presence and pressure in a conflict zone

Timeline

- 1964**
 - January** President Johnson approves OPLAN 34A raids against North Vietnam
 - June** China promises the DRV direct military assistance if the United States invades North Vietnam. General Westmoreland takes command of MACV.
 - August** Gulf of Tonkin incident results in a swift increase in China's military presence in the DRV and an increase in the US President's power to use military force in Vietnam through the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed on 7 August
- 1965**
 - February** NLF attacks the US air base at Pleiku in South Vietnam, prompting a swift military response in the form of a small US bombing campaign called Operation Flaming Dart
 - 2 March** President Johnson launches Operation Rolling Thunder, a continuous bombing campaign against North Vietnam
 - 8 March** First US combat troops arrive in Vietnam
 - June** China begins sending soldiers into North Vietnam to act as a deterrent to a US invasion of the DRV
 - First Australian combat troops arrive in South Vietnam
- 1966**
 - Period of expanded US-ARVN military operations throughout South Vietnam
- 1967**
 - January** The largest US search-and-destroy mission of the Second Indochina War takes place: Operation Cedar Falls
 - May** Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) is established to coordinate US-ARVN pacification efforts in South Vietnam



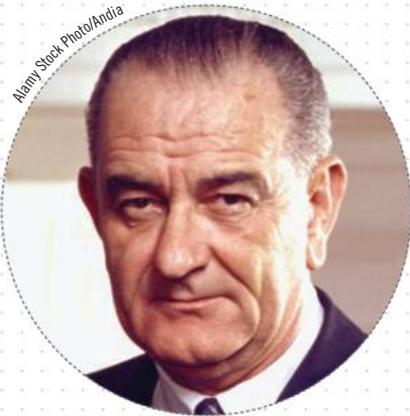
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1968

- November** US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara resigns and is replaced by Clark Clifford
- 21 January** The NVA launches a major attack on Khe Sanh in Quang Tri province
- 30 January** The NLF–NVA launch a mass offensive across the South during the Vietnamese holiday of Tet
- March** Johnson announces his decision to halt the bombing over parts of North Vietnam and invites the DRV to new peace talks. He also announces that he will not recontest the US presidency.
- May** Formal peace negotiations begin in Paris between the United States, South Vietnam and the DRV

↓

LYNDON JOHNSON (1908–73)



Lyndon Baines Johnson (US President 1963–69) entered politics in 1937. He quickly gained a reputation as an effective and forceful negotiator with a strong understanding of the workings of the US Government. He became John F Kennedy's Vice-Presidential candidate in 1960, bringing strong support from Democrats in the southern states. This helped to secure Kennedy's victory over Richard Nixon. After Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, Johnson was sworn in as the new non-elect President of the United States. He was cautious in the first few months, but after winning a strong victory over Barry Goldwater in the 1964

election, Johnson began to assert his own domestic and foreign policies. He introduced a suite of programs known as the Great Society, aimed at improving the living standards of poorer citizens in the United States and improving racial equality across the country. Johnson did, however, inherit a mess in Indochina that required decisive leadership. Throughout 1964–65, Johnson, with the support of his advisers, ultimately decided on a path of direct US military intervention. Amid controversy, Johnson refused to stand for re-election in 1968, instead choosing to retire to his home in Texas. He died of a heart attack in 1973.

Escalation in Vietnam, 1964–65



The process of military escalation in Vietnam was gradual. Throughout 1964 and 1965, both the DRV and the United States made a series of decisions that expanded the use of their militaries throughout the region far beyond previous commitments.

The decision to escalate: North Vietnam



In 1959 and again in 1963, the DRV increased its material support for the insurgency in South Vietnam, but it had not yet committed to the use of the NVA in combat roles in the South. During 1964, the leaders of the DRV finally changed this, and in the latter half of the year units of NVA regulars began moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to take up active duty. The reasons for this decision were complex and influenced by both international and local factors.

START 1964

1964 DEVELOPMENTS: DRV

DRV support for the southern insurgency stretched as far back as 1959 (and probably before), when the Lao Dong Party made the decision to move from a political struggle against Diem to a more openly military struggle. During 1964, the DRV's commitment deepened as it began to send larger numbers of NVA units down the Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam and take more direct control over COSVN, the heart of the NLF. Initially, the NVA was used to fill out and support PLAF units as they began to intensify their attacks on the ARVN and US air bases. With increased support, the PLAF staged major attacks in Tay Ninh province (October) and Binh Gia (December). Then, in November, the PLAF attacked the US air base at Bien Hoa, just 30 kilometres from the capital Saigon, destroying five planes and killing four Americans. At the end of 1964, the DRV decided to send four full regiments (about 8000 men in total) of the NVA into the South, marking a clear change in the North's approach to the conflict. In addition, during 1964 Group 559 was ordered to expand the Ho Chi Minh Trail to prepare for the use of trucks and other heavy vehicles.

1964 DEVELOPMENTS: USA

At the start of 1964, the United States rallied around the new government in Saigon led by General Nguyen Khan. President Johnson approved the deployment of more US military advisers, taking the total number from 16 000 to 23 000 in the first nine months of the year. In January, Johnson also approved the use of DESOTO navy patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin, aiming to gather military intelligence for use by the ARVN. At the same time, he approved OPLAN 34A raids into the DRV using South Vietnamese commandos. In early August, a confrontation between North Vietnamese patrol boats and the US Navy took place, after which US military officials claimed that the navy was attacked in an unprovoked manner. Johnson used this Gulf of Tonkin incident to request congressional approval for greater US military action against the DRV. This came in the form of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed on 7 August, which gave the President a 'blank cheque' to use US military forces in Vietnam. Johnson was still a non-elect president (having taken over from John F Kennedy after his assassination) and was not confident to immediately use these powers and increase direct US involvement in the region. The resolution did, however, provide the foundation for major decisions taken in 1965.

1965 DEVELOPMENTS: DRV

During early 1965, the PLAF with increasing NVA support continued attacking the ARVN and US bases. The most important of these attacks came at Camp Holloway near Pleiku in the Central Highlands on 7 February, in which nine US servicemen were killed and over 20 aircraft were destroyed. On 30 March, the NLF detonated a car bomb outside the US embassy in Saigon, killing two Americans and 19 Vietnamese and injuring nearly 200 others, forcing the United States to relocate and rebuild its embassy. Perhaps more concerning, an additional 35 000 NVA soldiers were deployed to South Vietnam throughout 1965. NVA regulars now made up a crucial part of the military struggle against the RVN. These developments did not go unnoticed in Saigon or the United States, and it was becoming increasingly clear that the insurgency was growing in strength and influence in South Vietnam.

1965 DEVELOPMENTS: USA

On 27 January, two of President Johnson's key advisers, McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara, sent him the 'Fork in the Road' memo, which argued that the current US commitment to limited military action in Vietnam was failing. After the February attack on Pleiku air base, Johnson decided to step up US military activity by authorising retaliatory air strikes against the DRV in Operation Flaming Dart. He then expanded this in a permanent bombing campaign of the DRV called Operation Rolling Thunder, which lasted until 1968. This campaign began using US bombers to attack strategic locations just above the DMZ and gradually moving north towards Hanoi. Johnson's aim was to pressure the DRV into negotiations that might end the conflict in Vietnam. In April 1965, Operation Rolling Thunder saw more than 3600 individual bombing missions flown into North Vietnam, but they did not produce the desired result. Following the request in February from MACV's commander, General William Westmoreland, for US soldiers, Johnson then approved the deployment of the first US combat forces to South Vietnam. Two marine battalions (about 3500 soldiers) landed at China Beach near Da Nang on 8 March. On 21 April, Johnson approved another 40 000 US soldiers for deployment in Vietnam, followed by another 50 000 in July. During 1965, US soldiers began to take over a large portion of the fighting against the PLAF and NVA. It is because of this drastic increase in the deployment of US forces in Vietnam that many historians argue that the war in South Vietnam had become 'Americanised' by the end of 1965.

END 1965

SOURCE 3.1 The process of escalation, 1964–65

Sino-Soviet split

This refers to the growing diplomatic tension between the USSR and China that emerged after the death of Stalin in 1953. Increasingly, Chinese and Soviet leaders competed for primacy as the world's most influential communist nation. Although both continued to support North Vietnam, by the mid-1960s the Soviet Union was the North's most important ally and remained so until well after the war (see Table 3.1).

Internationally, the DRV's relationship with the USSR changed in 1964 when Nikita Khrushchev, who urged Hanoi to take a cautious approach to reunification, was removed from power. He was replaced by Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin, who promised greater Soviet support to the DRV. In competition with the USSR growing out of the Sino-Soviet split, China again increased its support by stepping up deliveries of supplies and moving its own soldiers into North Vietnam to act as a deterrent to an invasion of the DRV. Over the next several years, both nations provided crucial support to North Vietnam as it became increasingly involved in the military struggle for South Vietnam.

TABLE 3.1 Aid to North Vietnam from the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, 1954–71 (in US\$ millions)

AID FROM SOVIET UNION								
	1954–64	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971
Military	–	210	360	505	290	120	75	100
Economic	–	85	150	200	240	250	345	315
Total	365	295	510	705	530	370	420	415
AID FROM PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA								
	1954–64	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971
Military	–	60	85	145	100	105	90	75
Economic	–	50	75	80	100	90	60	100
Total	670	110	160	225	200	195	150	175

Copyright Australian War Memorial Table 1.1 – Chinese and Soviet Aid to North Vietnam, 1954–1971 from *On the Offensive: The Australian Army in the Vietnam War, January 1967 – June 1968*, Australian War Memorial and Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2003, p. 12

There were also more local reasons for the DRV's decision to escalate. The first was that the NLF was becoming more successful against the ARVN during 1964. This gave the DRV leadership confidence that the government in Saigon might collapse with an added push. In addition, DRV leaders were keen to avoid a mass US military build-up in South Vietnam and believed that if this collapse came sooner the Americans might withdraw before they committed too many combat forces.

The growing influence of radicals in the DRV

In *Hanoi's War* (2012), Lien-Hang Nguyen argues that another important reason behind the DRV's decision to increase military action in the South was the growing influence of Le Duan, Le Duc Tho and other radicals in the Lao Dong Party. She points out that during 1960–63 this group steadily marginalised moderate members of the party such as Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap, who had been highly influential in the 1940s and 1950s. Nguyen claims that once these radicals had achieved dominance, they began to control DRV policy. This group fundamentally believed that war was the only solution to reunification in Vietnam, and it was this policy that dominated future decision making in the North.

- 1 What does the term 'escalation' mean?
- 2 How did the DRV escalate its military involvement in South Vietnam throughout 1964 and 1965?
- 3 Closely examine Table 3.1.
 - a Which nation provided the most support to the DRV from 1954 to 1964?
 - b How did this change from 1965?
- 4 Using Table 3.1 and other evidence, assess the influence of international factors behind the DRV's increased involvement in South Vietnam.



Report to
President Johnson

The decision to escalate: the United States

In public, the Johnson administration promoted various reasons for the decision to escalate US military involvement in Vietnam. Many of the themes emphasised were similar to those that were endorsed by earlier presidents: the threat of communist expansion, the United States' commitment to an ally (South Vietnam) and the promotion of freedom and democracy.

President Johnson defends US policy on Vietnam

The following is an extract from President Johnson's 'Peace without Conquest' speech, delivered at Johns Hopkins University on 7 April 1965. This speech was televised across the United States and came at a time when a small but vocal group was beginning to seriously question US policy towards Indochina. In the speech, Johnson tried to justify US military activity in Vietnam and demonstrate that he wanted peace in the region. Like other presidents before him, he promised vast sums of economic aid to Vietnam, including \$1 billion for projects designed to develop the Mekong River basin. Although the speech did not change the minds of his harshest critics, 'Peace without Conquest' is widely considered to have been a great success for Johnson in the short term.

Over this war – and all Asia – is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China. The rulers in Hanoi are urged on by Peking [Beijing]. This is a regime which has destroyed freedom in Tibet, which has attacked India, and has been condemned by the United Nations for aggression in Korea. It is a nation which is helping the forces of violence in almost every continent. The contest in Viet-Nam is part of a wider pattern of aggressive purposes.

Why are these realities our concern? Why are we in South Viet-Nam?

We are there because we have a promise to keep. Since 1954 every American President has offered support to the people of South Viet-Nam. We have helped to build, and we have helped to defend ...

And I intend to keep that promise.

To dishonor that pledge, to abandon this small and brave nation to its enemies, and to the terror that must follow, would be an unforgivable wrong.

The President's Address at Johns Hopkins University: Peace without Conquest, April 7 1965 LBJ Presidential Library, <http://www.lbjlibrary.org/exhibits/the-presidents-address-at-johns-hopkins-university-peace-without-conquest>

There is no doubt that the international competition between the United States and its allies and the communist bloc continued to influence decision making in the United States during the 1960s. Many historians have, however, shown that a general fear of communist expansion in Asia cannot fully explain President Johnson's decision to escalate in Vietnam in 1965.

American credibility

One additional explanation that historians have offered for US escalation is Johnson's desire to preserve its international **credibility**. They suggest that by the 1960s many US leaders were increasingly concerned that if the United States abandoned South Vietnam it would appear weak. In the same speech by President Johnson quoted above, he went on to add:

“ We are also there [Vietnam] to strengthen world order. Around the globe, from Berlin to Thailand, are people whose well-being rests, in part, on the belief that they can count on us if they are attacked. To leave Viet-Nam to its fate would shake the confidence of all these people in the value of an American commitment and in the value of America's word. The result would be increased unrest and instability, and even wider war.

The President's Address at Johns Hopkins University: Peace without Conquest, April 7 1965 LBJ Presidential Library, <http://www.lbjlibrary.org/exhibits/the-presidents-address-at-johns-hopkins-university-peace-without-conquest> ”

credibility

In this context, some scholars use this term to refer to the trust and confidence that some nations had come to place in the United States after World War II. This trust was crucial to gaining and maintaining a network of allies across the globe, which gave the United States trading partners, military allies and greater global influence.

As a global superpower, it was in the United States' interest to remain committed to its ally in South Vietnam; otherwise, it might risk losing the trust of friendly nations in the region, such as Japan and Thailand. In addition, US leaders worried that this would leave them unable to use the threat of force to influence events in other parts of the world. According to some historians, therefore, a key motivation for US escalation in Vietnam was to prove to the world that the United States was committed to its allies and to demonstrate that it had the ability to decisively influence world affairs.

Reasons for US intervention in Vietnam

On 24 March 1965, US Assistant Secretary of Defense John T McNaughton sent the following draft memorandum to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara:

U.S. aims [in Vietnam]:

- 70 percent to avoid a humiliating US defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor);
 - 20 percent to keep SVN [South Vietnam] (and the adjacent) territory from Chinese hands;
 - 10 percent to permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life.
- ALSO to emerge from crisis without unacceptable taint from methods used.
NOT to 'help a friend,' although it would be hard to stay in if asked out.

Draft Memorandum from McNaughton to Robert McNamara, 'Proposed Course of Action re: Vietnam', (draft) 24 March 1965
The Pentagon Papers, Gravel Edition, Volume 3, pp. 694–702, <https://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers>



Why the United States went to Vietnam



Explaining US involvement in Indochina

The role of prominent advisers

Johnson also retained many of Kennedy's national security staff. This group was divided into two broad categories: the 'hawks', who favoured military solutions to the problems developing in South Vietnam, and the 'doves', who wanted to avoid direct US military intervention in Indochina and pursue more peaceful measures. The debates between these groups could be extremely intense and it often took days of heated discussion to reach a decision by the president.

During his time in office, JFK resisted the strongest calls from the hawks to use US combat forces in Vietnam. Under Johnson, this pressure intensified as the political situation in South Vietnam

deteriorated. At crucial points in 1964 and 1965, the more hawkish advisers such as McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara succeeded in convincing Johnson to escalate US military involvement incrementally (first by using air strikes against the North and then by sending US ground forces at the request of General Westmoreland). Other leading members of Johnson's administration such as George Ball and some foreign heads of state such as French President Charles de Gaulle were, however, strongly urging Johnson to pursue diplomatic solutions and disengage from Indochina.

In the end, Johnson decided on a path of direct but limited US military intervention even though he was also nervous about the consequences of such a plan. Many historians, therefore, consider the influence of the hawkish advisers to have been crucial to the final decision for US escalation.



SOURCE 3.2 US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara briefing the media on US and South Vietnamese air strikes against the North Vietnamese in Dong Hoi, 7 February 1965

Gareth Porter: *The Perils of Dominance*

In his book *The Perils of Dominance* (2004), Gareth Porter argues that a group of advisers in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations played a crucial role in escalating the United States' war in Vietnam. Porter suggests that both presidents wanted to avoid military intervention and preferred to open peace negotiations with the DRV but that the hawkish advisers believed that military solutions would be more effective. According to Porter, both presidents firmly believed that the United States enjoyed significant military dominance over the USSR, China and the DRV and that, if it deployed its forces effectively, the United States would almost certainly succeed in realising its interests in Vietnam. For Gareth Porter, therefore, it is the hawkish advisers and not the presidents or the general 'fear of communism' that were an important factor in the United States' gradual path to escalation.



Robert McNamara

- 1 In what specific ways did President Johnson escalate US military involvement in Vietnam?
- 2 Closely examine the extract from President Johnson's 'Peace without Conquest' speech in the source study box on page 69.
 - a What reasons does Johnson outline for his commitment to South Vietnam?
 - b How do Johnson's reasons compare with those offered by earlier US presidents?
- 3 According to some historians, what role did the desire to preserve American credibility play in the decisions to escalate in Vietnam?
- 4 Closely examine the extract from the draft memorandum to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara on page 70.
 - a What does John T McNaughton suggest was the *most* influential factor behind US involvement in Vietnam by 1965?
 - b What does McNaughton specifically identify as a reason that did *not* motivate United States involvement in Vietnam? Does this seem strange? Explain your answer.
 - c Why might the United States' 'reputation as a guarantor' have been important in the context of the Cold War?
 - d Compare and contrast the evidence in this source with that provided by Johnson's speech on page 69.
- 5 According to Gareth Porter, what role did US political advisers play in the US escalation of 1964–65?
- 6 As a class, discuss the following question: Assess the importance of the fear of communism to US intervention in Indochina in the period up to 1965. Once you have finished the discussion and considered different points of view, explain your personal response to the question in a detailed paragraph.

The US–ARVN war effort

As President Johnson began to escalate US intervention in Indochina, he was keen to ensure that America did not 'go it alone'. In April 1964, he introduced a policy called 'more flags', aimed at gaining international support for US efforts in South Vietnam. Originally, Johnson hoped to gain support for US nation-building efforts in Indochina, but by 1965 this transformed into a greater focus on acquiring combat support for an escalated war. Many of the United States' Cold War allies, including Britain and France, refused to take part in the US war effort in Vietnam because they did not believe it could succeed. It was also impossible for France to consider returning to Indochina after the disastrous war of 1946–54. Nevertheless, some of the United States' regional allies, such as South Korea, Australia, Thailand, the Philippines and New Zealand, answered Johnson's call.



Speech: justifying escalation



Getty Images/David Hume Kennerly/3rd Party – Misc

SOURCE 3.3 South Korean soldiers advance on an enemy position near Nha Trang, Vietnam, in 1972.

International troop numbers supporting the United States and South Vietnam in the Second Indochina War

TABLE 3.2 Troop numbers in Vietnam

YEAR	SOUTH KOREA	THAILAND	AUSTRALIA	PHILIPPINES	NEW ZEALAND
1964	Less than 130	---	Less than 200	17	30
1965	20620	16	1557	72	119
1966	44566	244	4525	2061	115
1967	47829	2205	6818	2020	534
1968	50003	6005	7661	1576	516
1969	48869	11568	7672	189	552
1970	48537	11586	6763	77	441
1971	45700	6000	2000	50	100
1972	36790	40	130	50	50

Robert M Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's 'More Flags': The Hiring of Korean, Filipino and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 1994, p. 158

QUESTIONS

- 1 What was the 'more flags' policy and why did President Johnson want to implement it?
- 2 According to Table 3.2, which nation contributed the most combat troops in support of the United States and South Vietnam?
- 3 What was that nation's peak troop strength and in what year was this reached?
- 4 Explain how data such as that provided in Table 3.2 would be useful to a historian studying the escalation of the Second Indochina War.

Australia and the Second Indochina War, 1962–73

Australia became involved in the Second Indochina War in 1962, well before Johnson announced 'more flags'. In that year, Prime Minister Robert Menzies deployed the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) to South Vietnam; initially, a group of 30 military advisers was sent to help train the ARVN. The commitment was largely made in an attempt to strengthen Australia's alliance with the United States and to prevent the spread of communism in South-East Asia. In June 1965, Australia followed the United States in committing combat troops to Vietnam when it deployed the 1st Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) to Bien Hoa Province, South Vietnam. Australian forces in Vietnam were then reorganised and expanded in 1966 and the 1st Australian Task Force (1ATF) was given command of Phuoc Thuy province. Australia's peak troop strength reached about 8000 men in 1968. Australia used volunteers and conscripts in Vietnam, and both performed well under the circumstances. In addition to these troops, members of the Australian Navy and Air Force also served in Vietnam. The last unit of Australian soldiers was withdrawn from Vietnam in June 1973.



Australian War Memorial



AAP Image/Australian War Memorial

SOURCE 3.4 Australian Warrant Officer Class 2 adjusting a Vietnamese soldier's shooting position in the light of a flare during a night shooting practice in the Mekong Delta, South Vietnam, in November 1971

The strategies and tactics of the US–ARVN

The US–ARVN war effort in South Vietnam had one main objective: to preserve a non-communist South Vietnam. To do this, the Americans hoped to use their advantages in firepower and mobility to:

- force the DRV to give up support for the insurgency
- negotiate a settlement that guaranteed the autonomy of South Vietnam.

The Johnson administration considered but rejected the possibility of invading North Vietnam due to fears of Chinese retaliation; this was to be a 'limited war'. This decision left the United States with only one option: to concentrate the vast majority of its effort on South Vietnam.

strategy

A broader plan that a military develops to achieve its overall objective. For example, the military might decide on a strategy of attrition, which aims to wear down an opponent so that they surrender or agree to a ceasefire.

attrition

A military strategy aimed at defeating an opponent by wearing down their defences and morale over time. This is usually contrasted with a strategy of annihilation, which aims to completely destroy an enemy by invading their territory.

Limited war

This is often contrasted with 'total war', in which nations mobilise their entire societies and economies for war and place few restrictions on their military as they pursue victory. For example, in World War II, the United States and the Western Allies used everything in their power to defeat Nazi Germany and Japan. On the battlefield, this even included nuclear weapons.

Limited wars are different because military activity is more restrained and they are generally less demanding on the society involved. The concept of limited war gained influence during the Cold War because there was a fear that unrestrained military action could lead to nuclear devastation. In limited wars, military power is often used to force an opponent to change its behaviour, but there is a conscious attempt to avoid unnecessary destruction. In Indochina, US leaders would not allow the army to invade North Vietnam and they stopped short of using nuclear weapons.

There were four main interlocking features of US–ARVN **strategy** used against the insurgency in South Vietnam:

- **Isolate** South Vietnam and insurgent forces from the DRV. This involved an attempt to stop, or at least severely reduce, the infiltration of men and equipment into South Vietnam from the North.
- **Attrition** of enemy forces within South Vietnam
- **Pacification** of the South Vietnamese civilian population by trying to improve their living standards and quality of life
- **Destabilise** the DRV through the use of US air power and secret operations run against the North.

With the exception of nuclear weapons, the United States employed almost every piece of military technology it had available during the Second Indochina War (and nuclear weapons were considered at several points throughout the conflict).

Isolating South Vietnam

Isolating South Vietnam was not an easy task. US–ARVN forces and their allies were required to cut the movement of communist forces and supplies across the DMZ, down the Ho Chi Minh Trail running through Laos and Cambodia and the sea routes from the Gulf of Tonkin (north) to the Gulf of Thailand (south). Some aspects of this objective were achieved. For example, the naval operations, mainly Market Time and Game Warden, severely damaged the ability of communist forces to use the oceans and waterways of Vietnam. Bombing campaigns directed at the Ho Chi Minh Trail, such as Operation Steel Tiger (1965–68), also had some effect on the movement of men and supplies from North to South; however, the DRV showed great ingenuity in adapting the trail, which remained open for the entire war. Despite some success, the United States was never able to fully isolate South Vietnam from communist infiltration, which meant that casualties, although heavy, could be replaced almost indefinitely. In 1965, only one NVA **division** was deployed in the South, but by 1968 the DRV had moved another eight into various positions throughout the RVN.

division

A division is one of the largest military formations, consisting of many smaller parts. During the Second Indochina War, NVA divisions usually contained about 8000–10000 personnel.



SOURCE 3.5 US patrol boats on active duty on South Vietnam's river system. Patrols were looking to disrupt the transport of enemy soldiers and supplies. Thousands of boats were used as part of this operation.

The use of US air power in Vietnam

The United States made considerable use of air power during JFK's presidency. He approved the use of helicopters in support of the ARVN and the use of US aircraft to drop **defoliants** over Vietnamese jungles. During Johnson's presidency, the use of US air power increased dramatically. From bases in South Vietnam and South-East Asia, US tactical bombers began targeting communist positions in South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and the DRV. In 1965, the US Air Force also began using the enormous B-52 strategic bomber in Vietnam. These planes could drop more than 30 000 kilograms of explosives in one mission.



Imagofolk/Underwood Archives

SOURCE 3.6 The F-4 Phantom tactical bomber and similar aircraft were used to strike specific targets in Vietnam, such as enemy strongholds, bridges, railways, depots and factories.

defoliants

Chemicals used to destroy plant life in an attempt to clear jungles or farmland. The United States used thousands of litres of defoliants in South Vietnam.

Westmoreland's war of attrition

One central component of the US–ARVN war effort in the South during the command of General Westmoreland was the strategy of attrition. This strategy aimed to use superior US firepower and mobility, such as artillery and helicopters, to inflict a large 'body count' on communist forces in South Vietnam. Westmoreland thought that, once these casualties reached a 'tipping point', the DRV would recognise that it could not sustain its support for the southern insurgency and would disengage from South Vietnam. This tipping point was never reached.

GENERAL WILLIAM WESTMORELAND (1914–2005)

General Westmoreland studied at the United States Military Academy (West Point, New York) in the early 1930s. After graduating, he went on to serve in World War II (1941–45) and the Korean War (1950–53). In 1963, Westmoreland was appointed deputy commander of MACV, which was then overseen by General Paul Harkin. In 1964, he replaced Harkin as head of MACV, and in this position he oversaw the dramatic escalation of US military forces in Vietnam. Westmoreland's strategy largely defined the US war effort from 1965 to 1968. During this time, Westmoreland made many bold statements of US progress in Vietnam and repeatedly requested permission to expand the Vietnam War into Cambodia and Laos. As a result of the battles at Khe Sanh

in 1967 and the Tet Offensive in 1968, Westmoreland came under increasing criticism and he returned to the United States. He was promoted to the position of Chief of Staff of the US Army. Until his death in 2005, Westmoreland defended the record of US forces under his command in Vietnam, but his legacy in that role is a matter of great debate. Critics point to the large casualties, civilian suffering and overconfidence they believe to have defined his command. Those seeking to defend Westmoreland argue that he performed well in spite of the many restrictions placed on him by the United States' civilian leadership.



Getty Images/OC Remington/The LIFE Picture Collection

To increase the communist body count and reach the so-called tipping point, Westmoreland planned for three overlapping phases of action on the ground:

- **Phase 1:** The first phase began in 1965 as US troop numbers in Vietnam grew rapidly. In this foundational period of Westmoreland's plan, US forces aimed to seize coastal 'enclaves' surrounding military bases and populated areas. These bases were designed to provide a safe context for US forces to build up and begin more active operations.
- **Phase 2:** The second phase envisaged US-ARVN forces taking a more aggressive role. This would involve the use of US forces and their allies to identify, separate and protect non-communist South Vietnamese civilians and to stage targeted attacks on NLF and NVA strongholds. In this phase, Westmoreland hoped to engage communist forces and inflict heavy casualties that would be difficult for the enemy to replace.
- **Phase 3:** The third phase aimed to broaden the US-ARVN attack on communist forces who, Westmoreland imagined, would now have fled to more remote areas in South Vietnam. In this latter period of the war, Westmoreland hoped that the South Vietnamese military could play a greater role, perhaps even pursuing communist forces into Laos and North Vietnam.

In February 1966, US and South Vietnamese leaders met in Honolulu (Hawaii) to review the progress of the war in South Vietnam. At this meeting, the delegates, including President Johnson, agreed that the policy of escalation was effective and, therefore, the only viable solution in Vietnam. Importantly, the meeting also formally recognised Westmoreland's strategy of attrition as the main US strategy against communist forces.



Getty Images/fin page/Conbis Historical

SOURCE 3.7 ARVN rangers, supported by US helicopters, make their way through long grass during an assault into the Mekong Delta.



Infantry units, both US and ARVN, were used in South Vietnam to protect military bases and civilian populations and to engage the NLF-NVA. To do this, the infantry conducted patrols throughout the rural areas to find and, if possible, destroy NLF-NVA units and deprive them of their bases. As the US troop numbers grew throughout 1965 and 1966, Westmoreland increasingly used them in large-scale operations against communist positions.

The US infantry in Vietnam

Most US infantrymen in Vietnam were volunteers. US ground forces in Vietnam were made up of different components, including the Marines, airborne divisions and the regular army. Marines were some of the most rigorously trained soldiers and were often used for aggressive action stationed in the most hostile areas of South Vietnam (just below the DMZ). The regular army was made up of both volunteers and men who were drafted into the armed forces under the 'selective service system'. The draft was a conscription system originally used to draw men between the ages of 18 and 26 into the army to help maintain the size of the force required to fulfil the many US military obligations around the world, including Vietnam.

Westmoreland assigned US infantry units specific **tactical** roles in South Vietnam. They established secure defensive positions and then completed 'search-and-destroy' missions. In these missions the US infantry attacked the PLAF–NVA using the support of helicopters, artillery from fire-support bases and US aircraft. When patrolling, US–ARVN infantry often performed a 'cordon and search' of villages. During these searches, US soldiers were on the lookout for NLF agents, stored weapons and any signs of collusion with the insurgency. In many parts of the country, these patrols could be very dangerous.



Getty Images/Beitmann

tactics

The range of specific, day-to-day methods that are used to reach strategic goals

SOURCE 3.8 Marines relax after a three-day battle with the North Vietnamese, 29 April 1967.

The largest US–ARVN search-and-destroy mission of the Second Indochina War was Operation Cedar Falls in the Iron Triangle west of Saigon. This operation was conducted in January 1967 and involved more than 30 000 soldiers. Cedar Falls resulted in as many as 750 enemy kills, more than 500 NLF defections and the capture of large amounts of military hardware. Although considered a short-term success for the US–ARVN, soon after the operation communist forces re-established control over most of the Iron Triangle and the operation created many refugees. These problems point to some of the key weaknesses with US–ARVN ground operations in South Vietnam during this period: under Westmoreland's strategy, it was difficult to consolidate control of the countryside and avoid severely disrupting the lives of civilians, many of whom were not involved in the insurgency.



Getty Images/Beitmann

SOURCE 3.9 US Marines on patrol in the Mekong Delta, 1968

An American infantryman recalls life on the ground in South Vietnam, 1965–66

Philip Caputo was a lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps from 1965 to 1967. His service included combat duty in South Vietnam in 1965 and 1966. After three years with the Marines, Caputo became a journalist and returned to Vietnam to report on the communist victory in 1975. In 1977, he published a memoir of his time in Vietnam, *A Rumor of War*, which became a bestselling account of the American soldiers' life in Vietnam.

... the [US] rifle companies kept to a schedule almost as regular as that of office clerks or factory workers. In effect, we commuted to and from the war. We went into the bush for a day or two or three, returned for a brief rest, and went out again.

There was no pattern to these patrols and operations. Without a front, flanks, or rear, we fought a formless war against a formless enemy who evaporated like the morning jungle mists, only to materialize in some unexpected place. It was a haphazard, episodic sort of combat. Most of the time, nothing happened; but when it did, it happened instantaneously and without warning. Rifle or machine-gun fire would erupt with heart-stopping suddenness ... Or mortar shells would come in from nowhere ...

In those weeks we did not see heavy fighting; the battalion's casualties averaged no more than twenty a month, out of a total combat strength of about a thousand men. But we saw enough to learn those lessons that could not be taught in training camps ... We began to change, to lose the boyish awkwardness we had brought to Vietnam ...

...
With my new platoon, I sloshed up to the line. The shells ripped the air over our heads and the rain, slanting before a high monsoon wind, pelted our faces. The platoon moved up the track at the steady, plodding pace that is one of the signs of veteran infantry ... Looking at them, it was hard to believe that most of them were only nineteen or twenty ... They struggled each day to keep dry, to keep their skin from boiling up with jungle rot, and to stay alive. In the sodden world they inhabited, the mere act of walking, an act almost as unconscious as breathing, could bring death. The trails they had to patrol were sewn with mines. One misstep, and you were blasted to bits or crippled for life ...

Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, Arrow Books, London, 1978: 1991, pp. 95–6, 234–5

QUESTIONS

- 1 How does Philip Caputo describe the nature of combat for the US infantry in Vietnam?
- 2 What dangers for US infantry does Caputo identify that are not immediately related to combat?
- 3 According to Caputo, what kinds of psychological effects could this kind of warfare have on American soldiers?
- 4 Using this source and other evidence gathered from your investigation so far, explain the role of the US infantry in the Second Indochina War under the command of Westmoreland.



Behind the lines

There is no doubt that US ground forces enjoyed superior firepower and mobility in South Vietnam. This enabled them to inflict heavy casualties on the NLF–NVA. In almost every major confrontation between large units, US forces inflicted far more casualties than they suffered. Often US units would make contact with the enemy, break off and call on the artillery or air support to strike enemy positions. When done effectively, this resulted in devastating losses for the NLF–NVA. In this sense, US–ARVN tactics were certainly effective.

Nevertheless, NLF–NVA units quickly learnt to adapt to US firepower. One way to do this was to avoid major confrontation altogether. Since this was not always possible, their commanders also developed tactics such as 'grabbing the belt-buckle', which involved the NLF–NVA staying very close to the US–ARVN during combat. This prevented the US–ARVN from calling in artillery or air support in case they hit their own troops.

It is also important to note that the ability to win individual battles and inflict heavy casualties on the enemy, although a sign of clear tactical success, did not translate into an overall advantage for the US–ARVN. They were often unable to permanently destroy communist bases or kill enough soldiers to sharply reduce the size of the NLF–NVA’s fighting force. Every year, new conscripts filled the ranks of the NVA and more soldiers were sent south. Air attacks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail certainly caused damage to the supply routes from the North, but they were unable to completely stop the flow of men and supplies into South Vietnam.



Getty Images/Bettmann

SOURCE 3.10 A Chinook helicopter delivers supplies to Fire Support Base Gladiator on 26 April 1971.

US–ARVN relations

In addition to staging joint operations in South Vietnam, the US Army continued to train the ARVN in the hope that it could become an independent force capable of defending South Vietnam on its own. The working relationship between the two armies was not always pleasant. Some American officers distrusted their ARVN counterparts and, after US escalation during 1964–65, some ARVN commanders felt that they had been sidelined by US forces. Resentment and suspicion could easily develop and this added to the already difficult task of fighting the NLF–NVA. Nevertheless, there were also many examples of the two armies working productively throughout the Second Indochina War.

Pacification

Another key dimension of US strategy in Vietnam was pacification. Put simply, this was the attempt to aid the political development of South Vietnam in trying to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of the civilian population. The Agroville and the Strategic Hamlet programs largely failed in this respect, but from 1964 pacification efforts were renewed under Westmoreland’s command. People’s Action Teams tried to develop policies aimed at improving support for the South Vietnamese Government, including land reforms and other incentives that were successfully used by the NLF. In 1966, Revolutionary Development Cadres were also established.



Getty Images/Co. Reminester/The LIFE Picture Collection

SOURCE 3.11 US Marines and South Vietnamese soldiers in a village during pacification efforts, 1 August 1967

This initiative involved teams of about 60 people working in villages to improve the lives of civilians. The programs implemented targeted health, education, transport and sanitation.

In May 1967, the United States and the South Vietnamese Government launched a major pacification project called Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS). The main innovation of CORDS was that it brought pacification more directly under the control of MACV

in an attempt to coordinate military and civilian efforts in the South. The first director of CORDS, Robert Komer, had some success in implementing more effective pacification programs, but the task of improving the government's relationship with civilians was very difficult. Perhaps the greatest challenge to pacification was overcoming the perception among many Vietnamese people that the US presence in South Vietnam was largely destructive. In other words, the attempt to win hearts and minds was difficult to reconcile with aggressive US-ARVN military activity.

Covert operations

As early as 1961, the United States began organising secret activities against the DRV through the CIA. These included small raids into North Vietnamese territory, which were expanded in 1964 under the supervision of MACV's Studies and Observation Group (MACVSOG). This organisation extended these raids throughout the 1960s into areas that were part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. MACVSOG also dropped propaganda over the DRV aimed at weakening the government's authority. There is some evidence to suggest that the government in Hanoi felt threatened by these attempts to subvert its power, but it also built its own propaganda machine that was effective in portraying the US war effort as 'imperialist'. The dictatorial tendencies of the northern government were also effective in limiting any opposition to the rule of the Lao Dong

Party. US covert operations were, therefore, unable to severely damage the political power of the Lao Dong Party or destabilise the DRV government.

Associated Press photo. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, NYWT&S Collection, [reproduction number LC-USZ62-112146]



SOURCE 3.12 Propaganda leaflets dropped on North Vietnam by US planes. At top: a skull and the words, in Vietnamese: 'This is one of more than 2000 Northern soldiers who died at Plei Me in November 1965.' Below: 'These are some of your comrades-in-arms who are enjoying good treatment in the South.'

TABLE 3.3 A selection of major US military operations in Vietnam

NAME	DATES	REGION	DETAILS
Barrel Roll (air)	14 December 1964 – 29 March 1973	Laos	Attempt to support non-communist forces in Laos and disrupt the Ho Chi Minh Trail.
Rolling Thunder (air)	2 March 1965 – 2 November 1968	DRV	Air attacks on North Vietnam aiming to force the DRV to negotiate an end to the conflict.
Market Time (naval)	11 March 1965	Oceans surrounding Vietnam	Part of the wider US effort to isolate South Vietnam from communist infiltration. Market Time aimed to prevent the arrival of goods to communist forces via the sea (essentially a blockade). Patrols from the Gulf of Tonkin to the Gulf of Thailand. Evolved into 'Sealords' in October 1968.
Starlite	18–24 August 1965	I CTZ, Chu Lai	Search-and-destroy mission aiming to knock out an NLF battalion near Chu Lai. Caused damage to infrastructure but most of the battalion escaped.
Game Warden (naval)	18 December 1965 – March 1973	Mekong Delta region	Brown-water river operations around the Mekong Delta. Action included patrolling, minesweeping and destruction of enemy infrastructure.
Thayer	7 September to 1 October 1966	II CTZ, Binh Dinh Province	Search-and-destroy mission in which the United States claimed over 200 enemy kills.
Attleboro	14 September – 24 November 1966	III CTZ	Over 1000 enemy kills reported with a loss of 155 lives; large quantities of equipment captured, including rice, guns and grenades.

→ Irving	2–24 October 1966	II CTZ, Binh Dinh	US and Republic of Korea forces, tunnel complexes uncovered and cleared by tunnel rats; claimed over 2000 enemy kills.
Cedar Falls	8–28 January 1967	III CTZ, Iron Triangle	The largest US ground operation of the war (more than 30000 personnel involved); HQ of NLF Military Region 4 was the target; more than 700 enemy killed with minimal casualties.
Junction City	22 February – 14 May 1967	III CTZ, Iron Triangle	The only US airborne assault of the war; 700 paratroopers dropped into the Iron Triangle, aiming to find the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) headquarters; over 1700 enemy killed, with 282 US deaths.
Buffalo	2–14 July 1967	I CTZ, Con Thien	Around Con Thien, 159 Marines killed, 1290 reported enemy kills.
Kingfisher	16 July – 31 October 1967	I CTZ, Con Thien	Near Con Thien, 340 Marines died, with over 1100 enemy kills reported.
Kentucky	1 November 1967 – 28 February 1969	I CTZ, Quang Tri	Over 3800 enemy reported killed at a cost of 520 Marine deaths.



SOURCE 3.13 Location of major US military operations

- ❶ What was the overall objective of the US–ARVN in the Second Indochina War?
- ❷ Explain how the US war effort in Vietnam reflected the principles of limited war.
- ❸ What role did the navy play in the US war effort in Indochina?
- ❹ Attrition was an important part of US strategy in Vietnam. Explain how Westmoreland designed this strategy and outline some of the tactics used to achieve it.
- ❺ What tensions were evident in the relationship between US forces and the ARVN?
- ❻ Assess pacification as an element of US strategy in Vietnam in the period 1965–68.
- ❼ Outline the attempts made to destabilise the DRV throughout this period of the war.
- ❽ Closely examine Table 3.3. What patterns are evident in the casualty figures supplied?
- ❾ Evaluate US–ARVN strategies and tactics in Vietnam up to 1968.

Strategies and tactics of the NLF–NVA

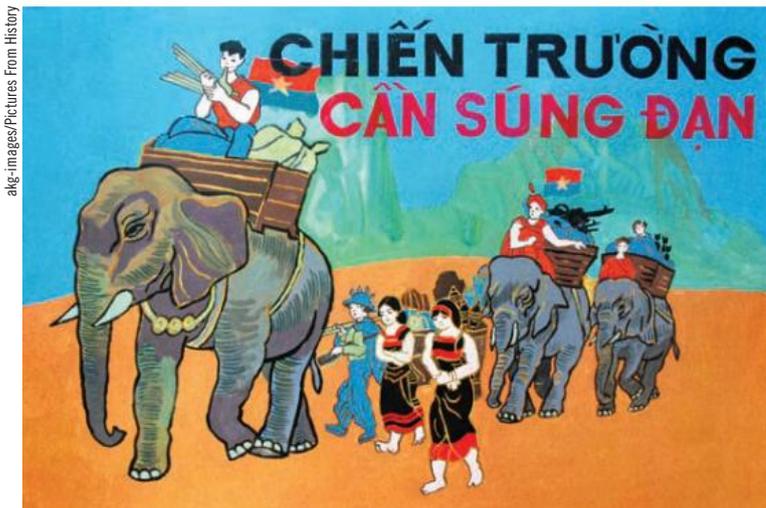


The overarching aim of the NLF–NVA in the Second Indochina War was to wear down the United States so that its troops would withdraw. This, in turn, would provide an opportunity for the DRV to reunify Vietnam. To achieve this goal, the DRV’s military commanders adapted some approaches that underpinned Vietminh success against France in the First Indochina War.

Firstly, NVA commanders planned for another protracted (longer-term) ‘people’s war’. As in the war against France, NVA commanders knew that, even with Soviet and Chinese support, they could not quickly overcome the large and heavily armed militaries of the US–ARVN. Instead, the DRV planned to draw the Americans deep into a long and complex war that depended as much as anything on the support of the civilian population. In 1964, one NVA commander, General Hoang Van Thai, claimed:

“Regardless of the circumstances, regardless of the relative balance of military power between U.S. and our army ... the kind of war we fight will be people’s war. Our main strength will come from the people. Our most important weapon will be the will of our people [to fight].”

General Hoang Van Thai, ‘Understanding the Party’s military policy, blocking the influence of revisionism in military affairs’, *Hoc Tap*, April 1964, p. 24, quoted in Tuong Vu, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2017, p. 181



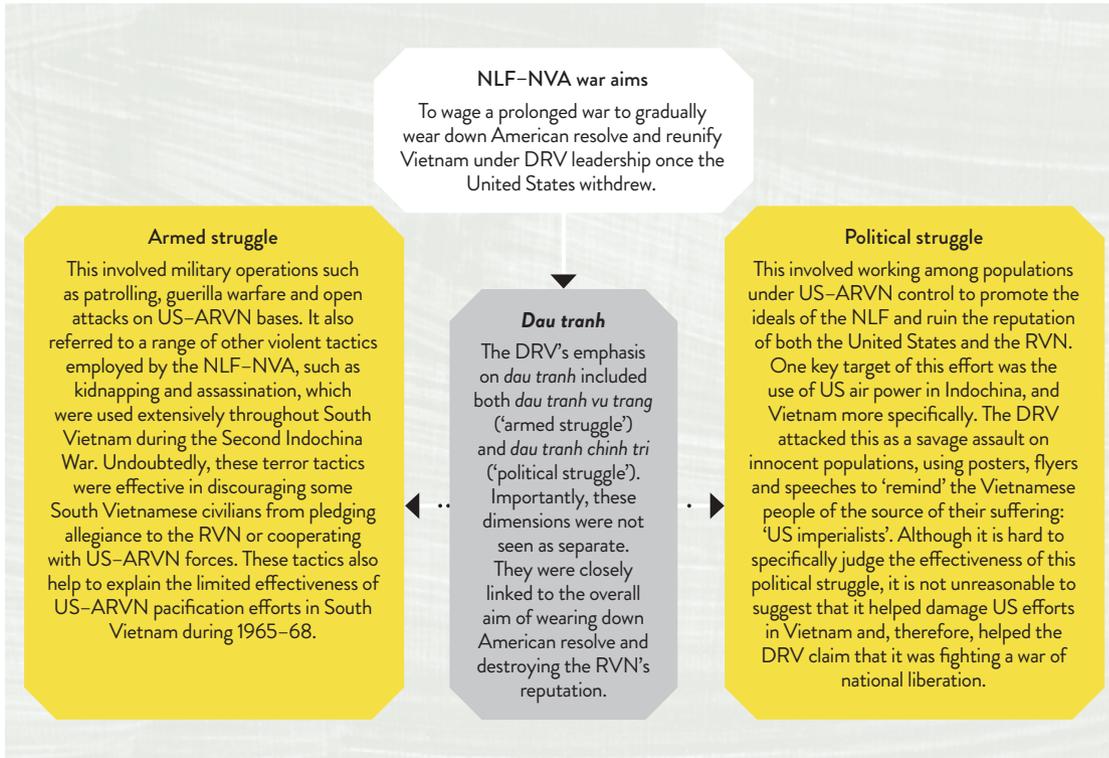
SOURCE 3.14 Communist propaganda poster: ‘The Battlefield Needs Weapons and Munitions’

The logic of this new people’s war was that, over time, American resolve would weaken as progress was slow or nonexistent. In addition, the DRV aimed to significantly weaken the RVN government, allowing it to expand its control over South Vietnam.

In the process of escalation, the DRV immediately remobilised the ‘sacred war’ myth (*chien tranh than thanh*), claiming that Vietnam had heroically resisted many foreign forces and that the war against the United States was the latest round in this long, nationalist tradition. The government also strictly managed the civilian population in the North by closely censoring information distributed in public and producing large volumes of propaganda.

Dau tranh

Perhaps the most important element of the NVA's strategy in the Second Indochina War was *dau tranh*, which roughly translated means 'struggle'. Most historians point out, however, that *dau tranh* meant more than 'work' or 'effort' and reflected something more psychological, and even spiritual.



SOURCE 3.15 The key elements of *dau tranh*

TABLE 3.4 Number of communist operatives in South Vietnam and their role

PERIOD	NUMBER OF OPERATIVES	POLITICAL DAU TRANH	ARMED DAU TRANH
1959-63	15 000-20 000	90%	10%
1964-68	35 000-40 000	60%	40%

Statistics adapted from Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1986, p. 234



SOURCE 3.16 Two female NLF fighters salvage wreckage from a downed US Air Force plane, c. 1968.

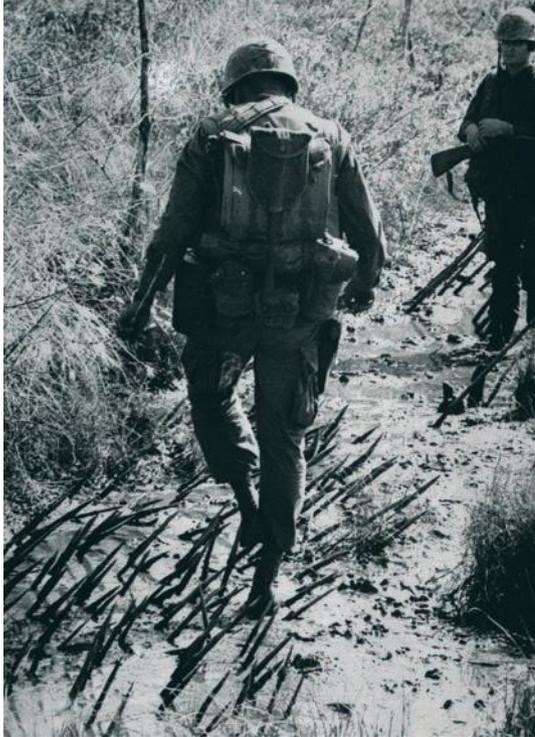
Tactical innovation of the NLF–NVA

During this first part of the Second Indochina War (1965–68), the NLF–NVA developed a reputation as highly innovative and adaptable. Throughout this period, the forces aligned with the DRV found many ways to counter the US–ARVN’s vast superiority in firepower and mobility, expanding on lessons learnt during the First Indochina War. These included but were not limited to:

- a general reliance on hit-and-run attacks (ambushes) against US–ARVN forces
- confining many attacks to the night or during poor weather so that it was difficult for US air power to be used effectively
- the use of extensive tunnel networks that allowed the storage and transport of men and matériel around South Vietnam without detection. The largest of these networks was in Cu Chi, west of Saigon.
- the use of traps designed to kill and injure US–ARVN soldiers patrolling the countryside. These were highly effective in helping to reduce NLF–NVA casualties while also wearing down the morale of enemy forces, who feared treading on landmines and **punji spikes** or setting off other devices that could inflict serious injury or death.

Nevertheless, these innovations did not completely neutralise the destructive power of the US–ARVN, and by 1968 the war of attrition was beginning to take a serious toll on the NLF–NVA.

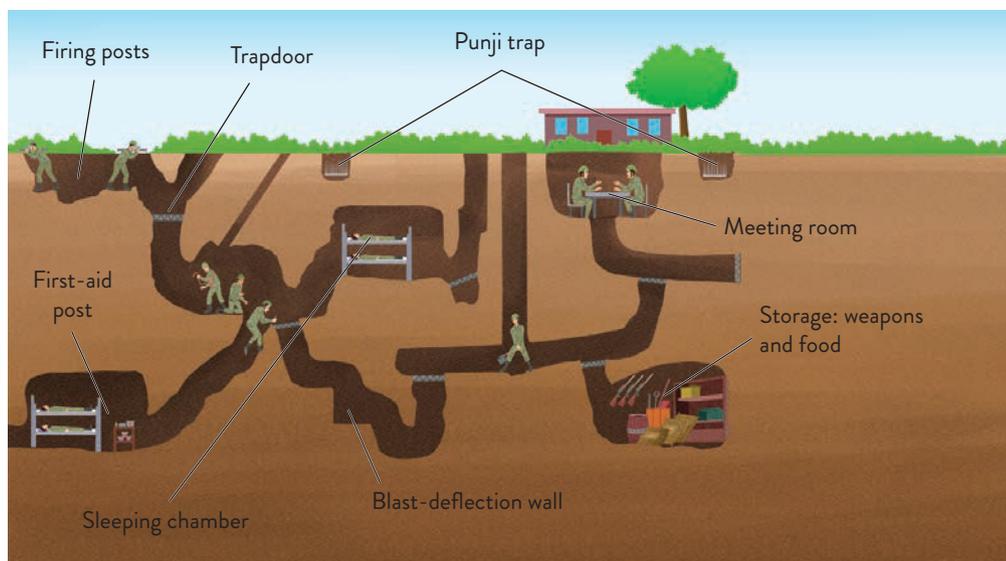
Getty Images/Bettmann



SOURCE 3.17 A US soldier carefully makes his way through a punji trap left by the NLF–NVA in a drained canal, 15 November 1965.

punji spikes

Sharpened bamboo shoots designed to puncture a boot and inflict serious injury to a soldier’s foot and leg. These were often set up as a trap by placing them at the bottom of a pit, which was then covered over with sticks and leaves.



SOURCE 3.18 NLF–NVA tunnel network. The tunnels used by the NLF–NVA are now one of the most well-known features of the Second Indochina War. The large network at Cu Chi near Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) is a popular tourist attraction, providing some insight into how the system worked.





Getty Images/Bettmann

SOURCE 3.19 US Marines searching tunnels for NLF–NVA soldiers, 2 August 1965



Military stalemate

By the end of 1967, it was clear to many observers that a stalemate was emerging in South Vietnam. Both sides enjoyed certain advantages but neither was in a position to win a swift victory.

The Americans had built a very powerful presence in South Vietnam, with nearly 500 000 US soldiers and a series of military headquarters, fire support bases and airfields across the entire country. In addition, the government in Saigon began to stabilise around President Nguyen Van Thieu (1967–75) and the ARVN was continuing to improve. In tactical terms, its war of attrition had already resulted in thousands of NLF–NVA casualties and there is little doubt that US military intervention in South Vietnam saved the government from near collapse in 1965. In November 1967, General Westmoreland returned to the United States for a brief visit, promising the American people that ‘tremendous progress has been made’ in Vietnam.¹

For their part, the NLF–NVA continued to expand the Ho Chi Minh Trail and complement this with a new supply network running across Cambodia, the Sihanouk Trail. By the end of 1967, the will to fight in the DRV was not seriously weakened and their nationalist resolve remained strong. In addition, despite their inferior firepower, the NLF–NVA were still able to persistently harass US–ARVN forces throughout South Vietnam. Although their own losses were vastly higher, the NLF–NVA also managed



Getty Images/Bettmann

SOURCE 3.20 ARVN college cadets marching in formation during an Independence Day parade in Saigon, 6 November 1967



Vietnam, 1967

to kill more than 20 000 Americans (and even more ARVN) by this stage. These losses were beginning to weigh heavily on the United States' civilian leadership, who were desperate to avoid further casualties.

- 1 What was the overall objective of the DRV in the Second Indochina War?
- 2 How did the DRV plan to use 'people's war' against the US-ARVN?
- 3 Explain how the DRV promoted the Second Indochina War as part of its nationalist 'sacred war' tradition.
- 4 Explain how *dau tranh* guided the NLF-NVA war effort during 1965-67.
- 5 Using any two of the sources provided, outline some of the tactics used by the NLF-NVA in this period of the war.
- 6 What evidence is there to suggest that a military stalemate existed in Vietnam by the end of 1967?
- 7 Evaluate the strategies and tactics of the NLF-NVA in the period 1964-68.

The Tet Offensive, 1968

Although historians disagree on many aspects of this campaign, there is a general consensus that the DRV leadership decided on the **Tet** Offensive for two main reasons. Firstly, they were aware that the prolonged confrontation with the United States was beginning to wear down their forces. Secondly, there was a strong belief in the DRV that the urban population of South Vietnam was growing increasingly frustrated with the RVN government and its US ally. The DRV leadership thought that a bold attack on the US-ARVN would result in a widespread uprising in support of the NLF.

Tet

Shorthand for Tet Nguyen Dan, often referred to as Vietnamese New Year. Tet is Vietnam's major national holiday and is held on different dates each year, as it follows the lunar calendar and marks the beginning of spring. Up to 1968, there had been an informal understanding that no major attacks would be staged during Tet.

TABLE 3.5 Overview of events in the 1968 Tet Offensive

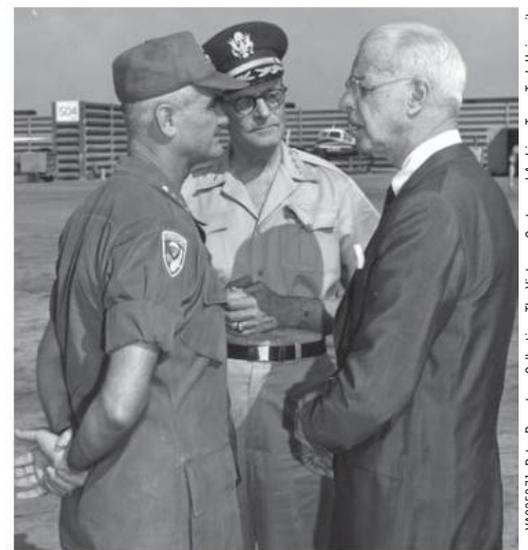
Aims	The main aim of the Tet Offensive was to stage a series of coordinated surprise attacks against South Vietnam's urban centres. These attacks were designed to demonstrate the weakness of the RVN and inspire a widespread uprising throughout South Vietnam resulting in the overthrow of Nguyen Van Thieu's government.
Preparation	An essential part of NLF-NVA preparations for the Tet Offensive was the staging of large-scale diversionary attacks throughout South Vietnam. In late 1967, they struck at Con Thien, Dak To, Loc Ninh, Khe Sanh and elsewhere to draw US-ARVN forces away from the cities. Most of the major fighting throughout 1967 had, therefore, been in more remote parts of the South Vietnamese countryside.
Main events	<p>The main offensive began on 30 January 1968. The attackers (approximately 84 000 in total) were able to strike 36 of 44 provincial capitals, 64 district capitals and over 50 hamlets known to have been loyal to the RVN. In other words, the attacks hit the most important areas in South Vietnam.</p> <p>The main attacks certainly achieved the desired effect of shock and surprise, but two stand out as the most important. Firstly, communist forces broke into the US embassy in Saigon and took control of the main building for several hours. The televised scenes were a shock to many Americans, who had been led to believe that the United States was in firm control of the situation in Vietnam. Secondly, a force of about 7500 took over the old imperial capital in Hue, just south of the DMZ. The effort to dislodge this group resulted in some of the bloodiest fighting of the entire offensive. It took US-ARVN forces more than three weeks to reclaim Hue after a bitter street-to-street, house-to-house contest.</p>
Immediate outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None of the NLF-NVA's main objectives were realised. • About 40 000 NLF-NVA personnel were killed. • Approximately 1100 US and 2300 ARVN personnel were killed. • An estimated 12 500 civilians were also killed, and some historians estimate that as many as 1 million refugees were created as a result of the fighting. • The Tet Offensive was widely reported in the United States and international media, setting off a major new controversy. The Johnson administration and Westmoreland came under immediate pressure to explain the situation.



SOURCE 3.21 The 1968 Tet Offensive



SOURCE 3.22 In some parts of South Vietnam, the Tet Offensive resulted in major destruction. This image was taken in 1968 in Cholon, one of the most damaged neighbourhoods in Saigon.



SOURCE 3.23 (Left to right) General Westmoreland, General Earle Wheeler and US Ambassador to South Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker meet in February 1968.



SOURCE 3.24 The front page of the *Chicago Tribune* on 1 April 1968 announces President Johnson's decision not to run for re-election.

announced that the United States would temporarily halt the bombing of North Vietnam (Operation Rolling Thunder) and indicated that it was willing to negotiate with the DRV to bring an end to the fighting in Vietnam. In his final statement, Johnson then announced that he would not run again for the presidency.

Evaluating the impacts of the Tet Offensive



The Tet Offensive of 1968 failed to achieve its immediate objectives. There was no general uprising and no overthrow of Nguyen Van Thieu's government in the South. In this sense, there is no doubt that the offensive was a failure for the communists.

Nevertheless, the DRV used the announcement of the temporary halt in Rolling Thunder to claim victory. However, there were many communist soldiers in South Vietnam who became critical of the DRV for the obvious failures of the Tet Offensive, and considerable tensions emerged between COSVN leaders and the DRV.

Westmoreland publicly claimed victory at the end of the Tet Offensive. The Americans suffered about 1100 dead and the ARVN just over twice that number, but they did inflict heavy casualties on their opponents and prevented the Saigon government from collapsing.

Regardless of Westmoreland's confidence, the Tet Offensive created serious problems for the United States' war effort in Vietnam. The fact that communist forces could stage such a large series of attacks after he claimed that the US-ARVN had made so much progress just months before was, at best, confusing. Popular American media outlets also seemed to take a critical reading of the events that took place during the offensive. It is often said, therefore, that even though the United States won the Tet Offensive militarily, it lost it politically.

In February 1968, Westmoreland made a request for 200 000 more US troops and a new offensive against the NLF-NVA. He believed that a major push against the communists would provide the US-ARVN with an overwhelming advantage. His request was rejected by President Johnson and his new Secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford, who already had concerns about further US escalation in Indochina.

President Johnson had long held doubts about the United States' ability to win in Vietnam. White House tapes reveal some of his frustration: 'I can't get out [of Vietnam], and I can't finish it with what I have got. And I don't know what the hell to do!', he said to his wife in a private conversation.² Then, on 31 March, President Johnson addressed the American public via television. He

- 1 Explain why the DRV leadership decided to stage a mass offensive targeting the urban centres of the South in 1968.
- 2 Why did they choose the Tet holiday to launch these attacks?
- 3 Outline the preparations that were made for the Tet Offensive.
- 4 Describe the fighting in the Tet Offensive.
- 5 Create a mind map or set of structured notes that summarises the impact of the Tet Offensive.
- 6 What evidence is there to suggest that the United States *won* the Tet Offensive militarily?
- 7 What evidence is there to suggest that the United States *lost* the Tet Offensive politically?

A media exaggeration, a missed opportunity or a genuine crisis for the United States?

Most historians tend to agree on the following ideas in relation to the Tet Offensive:

- It was one of the most important events of the Second Indochina War.
- The diversionary attacks succeeded in making the Tet Offensive a surprise.
- The Tet Offensive failed to achieve most, if not all, of its stated aims.
- It was a tactical failure for the communists, but it became a political defeat for the United States.

For orthodox historians, who tend to be more critical of US intervention in Vietnam, the Tet Offensive was a genuine surprise that drew fundamental problems of the US effort in Vietnam to the surface. The crisis exposed by the Tet Offensive was real and the decisions by Johnson and later presidents to begin disengaging from Vietnam were, therefore, appropriate.

Revisionist historians tend to argue that the Tet Offensive was misrepresented by the media and politicians and that this unfairly impacted US public opinion. They argue that this ruined the momentum the Tet Offensive had created for the US–ARVN, which could have led to an earlier and more favourable end to the war. It was, in their view, a wasted opportunity.

Peter Braestrup

Peter Braestrup was a journalist who worked for major American newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. He was stationed in Saigon for part of the war. After retiring from journalism, he worked on a variety of projects, including a large two-volume coverage of the American media's portrayal of the 1968 Tet Offensive, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam and Washington* (1977). In *Big Story*, he argues that the media misrepresented the Tet Offensive due to ignorance or, more alarmingly, a systematic, anti-war bias. According to Braestrup, news programs overlooked the victories that the US–ARVN won during the Tet Offensive, instead choosing to tell a story of Tet that



SOURCE 3.25 Associated Press photographer Eddie Adams captured this shocking scene in Saigon on 1 February 1968. General Nguyen Ngoc Loan (Chief of National Police) shoots and kills a captured NLF agent who had been allegedly involved in the murder of prominent police officers and their families in the RVN. This image became one of the most iconic photographs of the entire war.

emphasised general chaos as well as the successes of the NLF–NVA. Although many later historians, such as William Hammond, have argued strongly against the idea that the media was systematically biased or that it changed public opinion, revisionist historians still regard Braestrup’s work as an important explanation for the ‘missed opportunity’ of the Tet Offensive.

David Schmitz

In *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War and Public Opinion* (2005), David Schmitz argues that President Johnson was almost totally restricted by his own domestic problems in 1968. He claims that the US economy was beginning to suffer due to the monetary cost of maintaining a large military presence in Vietnam. Inflation in the United States increased dramatically prior to 1968 and, if the same spending patterns were continued, it was likely that US efforts in Vietnam would cost a further \$2.5 billion in 1968 and even more in 1969. Johnson had already been forced to significantly reduce his Great Society program. In addition, Schmitz argues against the idea that the media changed public opinion. He suggests that the importance of the Tet Offensive lies in its direct influence on Johnson and his advisers, who came to believe that the war was a genuine stalemate and that ultimate victory could only come at too high a price. He writes:

“ ... the Tet Offensive was the decisive moment in the Vietnam War due to its impact on senior officials in the Johnson administration and elite opinion that brought about Johnson’s dramatic decisions and change in policy. Their views on the war ... changed dramatically. ”

David Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War and Public Opinion*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2005, p. xv



Tet: who won?

In short, Schmitz argues that the Tet Offensive clearly revealed the weaknesses in the policy of limited war and it forced the government to finally decide between a policy of continued escalation or reduction in US involvement. In Schmitz’s view, Johnson appropriately chose to begin planning for reduction.

- 1 Explain how David Schmitz’s interpretation of the Tet Offensive differs from Peter Braestrup’s.
- 2 As a class, discuss the following question: To what extent was the Tet Offensive a missed opportunity for the United States? Once you have finished your discussion, write your own response in one detailed paragraph.

The home fronts by the end of 1968

One of the obvious effects of escalation in Vietnam, apart from the dramatic increase in military casualties, was the cost to the nations involved. Both North and South Vietnam suffered heavily as a result of the increased military activity, and the war severely disrupted traditional ways of life.

Although the ground war did not come directly to North Vietnam, the DRV was targeted by bombing campaigns such as Rolling Thunder. Some estimates suggest that by 1968 as many as 50 000 North Vietnamese civilians had been killed and countless more lives were disrupted. The war caused increased tension within the DRV leadership but, on the whole, North Vietnam remained fundamentally unified. The government continued to promote the war effort and the sacrifice deemed necessary for its protracted war of national reunification. In short, three years of escalated war did not blunt the resolve of the nationalists, who wanted to see the United States withdraw from Vietnam and overthrow the RVN.

**General Vo
Nguyen Giap's
call for continued
resistance,
September 1967**

The following extract comes from General Vo Nguyen Giap's 'The Big Victory, the Great Task', an article published in the North Vietnamese journal *Nhan Dan* in September 1967. The content was also broadcast on Radio Hanoi's domestic service a week later.

Our people are living the most glorious years and months in the history of our people's millennia-old struggle against foreign aggression and the decades-old revolutionary struggle under the leadership of our party. In the heroic South ... our people are defeating more than a million troops of the U.S. imperialist aggressors and their lackeys [allies] ... In the North, our army and people are defeating the U.S. imperialist's war of destruction and thwarting their basic plots while pursuing socialist construction and economic development ... These glorious victories reflect the mountain-moving and river-filling power of our nation and our people.

Vo Nguyen Giap, 'The Big Victory, the Great Task', September 1967, in Patrick J McGarvey, *Visions of Victory: Selected Vietnamese Communist Military Writings, 1964–68*, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford University, Stanford, 1969, pp. 199, 251

QUESTIONS

- 1 What specific words does Giap use to describe the following?
 - a The communist war effort
 - b The Vietnamese people
 - c The United States
- 2 Critically discuss the perspective of this source.
- 3 To what extent can this source be used as evidence of the ongoing influence of nationalism in Vietnam?

In addition to the fighting, southerners faced unique challenges, including the presence of thousands of foreign soldiers and the changes brought about by the rapid influx of US money. Many families were forced to move from their villages, sons and fathers were conscripted into the armed forces and many civilians moved to the cities, where life drastically changed with the influx of US personnel and money. (See Chapter 7 for more detail on the effects of the war on civilians.)

Despite the growing stability of the South Vietnamese Government under the leadership of Nguyen Van Thieu, there was an increasing sense of war weariness in the South by the end of 1968. Many civilians living in rural areas were caught between the government and the NLF, and others were becoming more openly critical of the United States. By this time, the anti-war songs of South Vietnamese artists such as Trinh Cong Son and the CBC Band were becoming popular, reflecting the strain caused by war. The most vocal critics in the South even began to stage anti-war demonstrations.

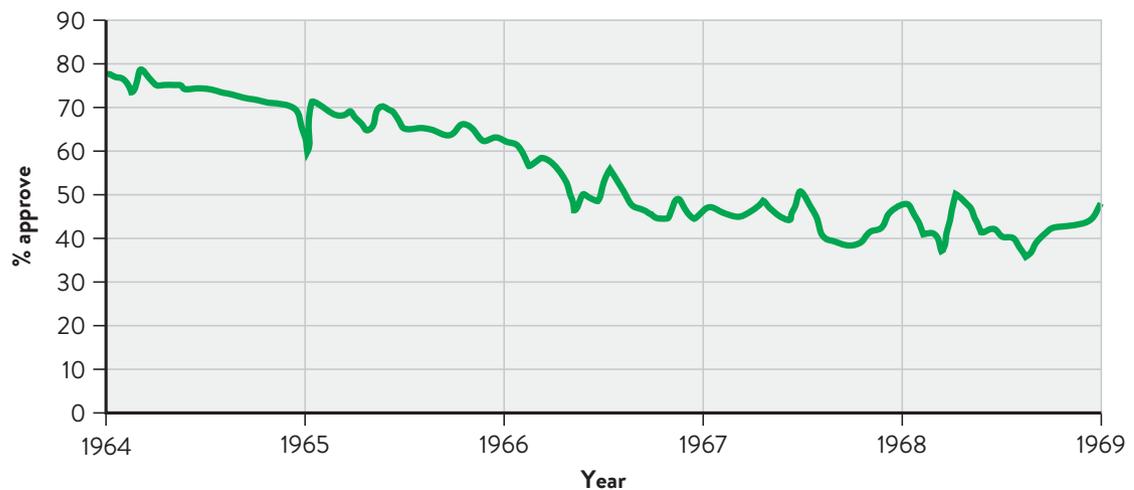
In the United States, the war also became increasingly contentious, especially after the Tet Offensive. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara resigned in



SOURCE 3.26 Anti-war protest in Saigon on May Day (1 May) 1966

Anti-war demonstration in Saigon, 1966. Photo by Bill Wingell

November 1967 amid growing doubts about the possibility of success in Vietnam, and his replacement, Clark Clifford, quickly developed a critical outlook regarding US military efforts in South Vietnam. The Tet Offensive confirmed his views and during 1968 Clifford became a strong advocate for changes to US conduct in the war. Throughout the remainder of 1968, other important changes took place. Westmoreland was replaced by General Creighton Abrams as commander of MACV and, as already noted, Johnson refused to stand for re-election to the presidency. In November, a new Republican president, Richard Nixon, was elected. He took office in January the following year. On the streets of the United States, a growing anti-war movement began to assert itself with greater confidence.



Source: Lyndon B Johnson's Job Approval Ratings Trend, Presidential Approval Ratings – Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx>

SOURCE 3.27 Although the decline of Johnson's approval rating was not only related to his management of the escalated war in Indochina, this was an important factor in his growing unpopularity and his ultimate refusal to stand as the Democratic nominee in the presidential election of 1968.



SOURCE 3.28 Female demonstrator offers a flower to military police during the March on the Pentagon. 50 000 anti-Vietnam War demonstrators marched from the Lincoln Memorial to the Pentagon on 21 October 1967.

Chapter summary

- Throughout 1964 and 1965, the DRV and the United States escalated their military involvement in South Vietnam. They were joined by several allies, including Australia, South Korea and the Philippines.
- The United States waged war from 1965 in an attempt to force the DRV into negotiations by using superior resources and military power to inflict heavy casualties on the NLF–NVA.
- The DRV planned for a protracted war that focused as much on political campaigning as on military strategies and tactics.
- In the first part of the escalated war in Vietnam, fighting was mainly conducted in the regional areas (the countryside) for control of the villages.
- By the end of 1967, a military stalemate emerged in South Vietnam, as neither side had developed a clear advantage in the war.
- In January 1968, the DRV launched a major offensive across South Vietnam during the Tet holiday.
- The Tet Offensive failed to achieve its immediate military objectives, but it also caused many political problems for the United States.
- By the end of 1968, the home fronts in North and South Vietnam and the United States were all beginning to show the strains of war, but the NLF and the DRV remained defiant.

Further resources

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Endnotes

- 1 Gregory Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*, Oxford University Press, New York, p. 88.
- 2 <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/vietnam/lbjrr.htm>.

CHAPTER REVISION QUESTIONS

- 1 Explain how US policy towards Vietnam changed in the period 1964–65.
- 2 In pairs or on your own, create a photo essay of 10–15 images that describes the nature of combat in the Second Indochina War. Your photo essay may focus on the US–ARVN or NLF–NVA war effort, or examine them both. Each photograph should be accompanied by a caption of 100–150 words, adding information to the images selected.
- 3 Use the following statement as a discussion point for the Tet Offensive: ‘The Tet Offensive achieved none of its major objectives and, therefore, it can only be regarded as a failure.’ Write a one-paragraph evaluation of the statement once you have finished your discussion.
- 4 Describe the effects of the Second Indochina War by 1968 on the following:
 - a North Vietnam
 - b South Vietnam
 - c The United States.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 5 Select one of the major US military operations outlined in Table 3.3 on pages 80–1. Prepare a brief presentation on this operation, outlining its aims and what it reveals about US–ARVN and/or NLF–NVA strategies and tactics in Vietnam up to 1968.
- 6 Conduct some further research into General Westmoreland’s command of MACV. What were the strengths and weaknesses of his approach to directing US military efforts in the Second Indochina War? How would you evaluate his command overall?
- 7 Research the anti-war songs of Trinh Cong Son. Find one set of lyrics, analyse the themes contained in the song and evaluate the lyrics as evidence of the impact of the war on Vietnamese civilians. Share your findings with the class.

EXTENDED WRITING EXERCISE

- 8 Construct an essay in response to one or more of the following questions:
 - a Account for US escalation in Vietnam during 1964–65.
 - b To what extent was the escalation of the Second Indochina War the result of US policies?
 - c Evaluate the strategies and tactics of the US–ARVN and NLF–NVA in the period 1965–68.
 - d Evaluate the view that the Tet Offensive was a victory for the US and RVN.

The Second Indochina War, 1969–73

STUDENTS WILL INVESTIGATE

- the nature of American policy on Vietnam, 1969–73
- the strategies and tactics of the PLAF–NVA and the US–ARVN, 1969–73
- the expansion of the war into Cambodia and Laos
- the US and Australian anti-war movements.



Modern History
Syllabus

A US soldier reads *Stars and Stripes* in downtime during the US–South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, 1970.



Introduction

The United States' military intervention in Indochina failed to decisively bring an end to the local and regional problems that emerged from decolonisation by the end of 1968. If anything, those problems became worse after more than a decade of tension. All-out war did little to weaken nationalist resolve.

In Vietnam, both sides stubbornly refused to back down and the war increasingly came to affect the developments in Cambodia and Laos. The civil war in Laos intensified during the late 1960s as US support for the RLG and Vang Pao's secret army continued, as did the DRV's support for its communist ally, the Pathet Lao. Through the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the Sihanouk Trail and the establishment of bases in eastern Cambodia, the presence of Vietnamese communist forces could now, more than ever before, be felt across the region. This frustrated many US leaders who were unable to formally expand the war into Cambodia and Laos.

In the United States, the war became divisive and the 1968 elections made it clear that candidates were looking for a way to disengage the United States from Indochina. The fundamental goal of supporting a non-communist South Vietnam remained after 1968, but many Americans now took the view that the South would need to take primary responsibility for its own future. The difficult task of withdrawing the United States fell to the new Republican president, Richard Nixon, who was sworn in on 20 January 1969. The policies of his administration were crucial in shaping the final years of the Second Indochina War.

Timeline

1969

- **20 January** Richard Nixon sworn in as the 37th President of the United States
- **22 February** The NVA launches a new offensive against US–ARVN positions in South Vietnam
- **18 March** US bombing of communist bases in eastern Cambodia (Operation Menu) begins. The bombings are terminated on 26 May 1970.
- **10 May – 7 June** US–ARVN Operation Apache Snow targets a communist stronghold in the A Shau Valley ('Hamburger Hill'), but is widely criticised in the US media
- **8 June** The Provisional Revolutionary Government is set up by the NLF as an alternative government to Nguyen Van Thieu's regime
- **4 August** Secret discussions between US and DRV diplomats begin, while public negotiations continue in Paris
- **2 September** Ho Chi Minh dies
- **15 November** Major anti-war demonstrations, the Moratorium marches, take place across the US

1970

- **18 March** Cambodia's leader, Norodom Sihanouk, is overthrown by Lon Nol and Sirik Matak, who want to bring Cambodia into an anti-communist alliance with the United States. The event marks the beginning of a major war in Cambodia between pro- and anti-communist forces.
- **29 April** US–ARVN forces invade eastern Cambodia. The operation is brought to an official close on 22 July.
- **May** Australian Moratorium marches take place, inspired by the American demonstrations of November 1969
- **4 May** Four students protesting at Kent State University in Ohio are shot and killed by members of the National Guard. Two students are shot under similar circumstances 10 days later in Mississippi.
- **20 December** A revised version of the Cooper–Church Amendment is passed by the US Congress. This was the first successful attempt to begin restricting the President's freedom of action in Indochina.



1971

8 February

The ARVN launches an invasion of Laos (Operation Lam Son 719) in an attempt to disrupt communist supply lines

1972

February

President Nixon visits China to encourage communist leaders to pressure the DRV into negotiations

30 March – 22 October

The NVA launches the Easter Offensive (Operation Nguyen Hue) in South Vietnam

May

Nixon visits the Soviet Union. Meetings with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev produce the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I).

9 May – 23 October

Nixon launches a new bombing campaign, Operation Linebacker, in an attempt to pressure the DRV to finalise peace negotiations and bring an end to the Second Indochina War

July

Secret peace negotiations in Paris renew. In the face of Linebacker, the North Vietnamese concede to some US-ARVN demands.

26 October

Henry Kissinger announces to the American media that 'we believe peace is at hand', as negotiations appear close to reaching an agreement¹

November

Nixon is re-elected to the presidency in a landslide victory against Democrat George McGovern

18–29 December

Nixon launches Operation Linebacker II (the 'Christmas bombings') in a final push to force the DRV to agree to a peace settlement

1973

27 January

The Paris Peace Accords are signed, bringing a formal end to the Second Indochina War

29 March

Last US combat forces depart from South Vietnam

31 May

US Congress votes to cut funds for the bombing of Cambodia

15 August

US bombing of Cambodia ceases

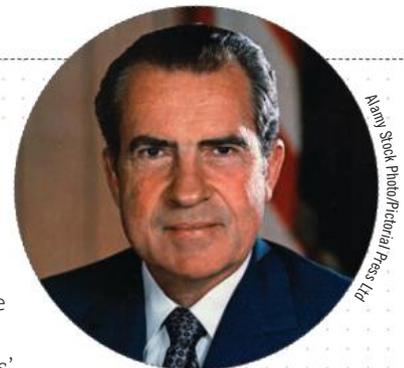
7 November

US Congress passes the War Powers Resolution Act of 1973, which overrides the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (1964) and limits the power of the President to use the US military in foreign countries

RICHARD MILHOUS NIXON (1913–94)

Richard Nixon was the 37th President of the United States. He was narrowly elected in November 1968 over Democrat candidate Hubert Humphrey. Prior to becoming president, Nixon had a long career as a lawyer and a politician, even serving as Vice President to Dwight Eisenhower (1953–60) and running unsuccessfully for President in 1960. He was a tough politician with a strong anti-communist record. During the election campaign of 1968, Nixon claimed to have a 'secret plan' to bring about a resolution in Indochina. Most historians believe that this plan was unfinished before he was elected and may not have even existed.

Nixon's handling of Indochina was marked by great controversy. He promised to bring about 'peace with honor' in Vietnam and began a process of downsizing the United States' military presence there.² At the same time, Nixon tried to intimidate the United States' enemies by making them believe he was willing to use any means necessary to see its interest realised; an approach he called the 'madman theory'.³ Perhaps most controversially, Nixon also expanded the war into Cambodia and Laos, which



AP Photo/Phil Donnelly



→ inspired a new wave of mass anti-war protests in the United States.

Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, made serious efforts to reach a peace agreement in Vietnam by attempting to build a closer relationship with China and the Soviet Union. He hoped they might put pressure on the DRV to give up its military struggle in Vietnam. Nixon also pursued negotiations with the DRV. An agreement, the Paris Peace Accords, was signed on 27 January 1973, but it was widely criticised because it left the Republic of Vietnam in a severely weakened position.

After re-election in 1972, Nixon resigned in August 1974 in disgrace. US media discovered that during the election campaign Nixon's team used dirty and illegal tactics to improve his chances of winning. Although he maintained his innocence, the American public and the US Congress were unconvinced. Threatened with the prospect of **impeachment**, Nixon resigned. He was succeeded by his Vice President, Gerald Ford, who gave Nixon a full pardon for his alleged crimes. Nixon died in 1994.

impeachment

When a high-ranking US Government official is charged with serious offences. It is a lengthy process that does not automatically mean the accused individual is removed from office, but in Nixon's case it was very likely. He voluntarily resigned before he would have been forced by US Congress to step down.

Nixon's team on Indochina

- Spiro Agnew: Nixon's Vice President (1969 – October 1973). He was forced to resign in 1973 amid controversy surrounding corruption charges dating back to his early political career.
- Gerald Ford: Replaced Spiro Agnew as Vice President in December 1973 and then took over as President after Nixon's resignation in August 1974.
- Henry Kissinger: The National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State to Nixon (one of Nixon's most important advisers on Indochina).
- Melvin Laird: Secretary of Defense (1969–73).
- General Creighton Abrams: Commander of MACV (1968–72), who replaced General Westmoreland in 1968.

Problems and strategies

Nixon's administration faced a daunting challenge from the start. These problems were related to Vietnam but also Cambodia, Laos and the American home front.

In May, Nixon came under sharp criticism after the failed military offensive Operation Apache Snow. In this operation, US armed forces attacked an NVA stronghold in the A Shau Valley near the DMZ. Despite inflicting heavy casualties on the NVA, more than 70 Americans died and a further 370 were wounded. The offensive became widely known as 'Hamburger Hill', named after the bloody attempt to capture Hill 937, which formed the central part of the battle. Most of the ground taken in Apache Snow was soon abandoned and reoccupied by the NVA. US media reports on Hamburger Hill questioned the wisdom and execution of the attacks, fuelling the already bold public calls for de-escalation.

From the beginning, Nixon stated that his aim was to bring about an 'honorable peace' in Vietnam (later called 'peace with honor').⁴ He claimed that he wanted to see an end to the war but that he was not willing to abandon US allies in Indochina.

In general, Nixon's plan for Indochina revolved around four key approaches to resolving the conflict:

- **Negotiation:** Nixon was open about his willingness to negotiate with the DRV to reach a settlement on Vietnam. In the beginning, he took a stubborn approach to this and refused to compromise on key issues. As time went on and demands in the United States grew stronger, Nixon did give away some of his original ideals.

- **Great power diplomacy:** To aid the negotiation process, Nixon also reached out to China and the Soviet Union. He hoped that he could use international issues such as weapons proliferation to gain their support in pressuring the DRV to compromise and end the war.
- **Intimidation:** In addition to these strategies, Nixon was quite open to using military measures to intimidate and force the DRV into giving up. As part of this approach, Nixon actively promoted the ‘madman theory’ of foreign policy, in which he aimed to present himself as unpredictable and willing to use ‘any means necessary’ to achieve his goals.
- **Vietnamisation:** By mid-1969, it was clear to Nixon that the United States’ current course in Vietnam could not be sustained. Consequently, Nixon announced that he would pursue a policy of ‘Vietnamisation’. This aimed to shift primary responsibility for military operations in South Vietnam onto the RVNAF. The plan involved an increase in the supply of US money and matériel to the RVN while the United States simultaneously scaled down its direct military presence in the South.



SOURCE 4.1 Main challenges facing the new president in 1969



Nixon and the 1968 peace talks

Did Nixon disrupt peace negotiations in 1968?

In the 1970s, claims emerged that Nixon deliberately tried to ruin the peace talks between President Johnson and the DRV in 1968 to help improve his own chances of election. In 2013 and 2017, new evidence emerged supporting parts of these claims. This included handwritten notes from one of Nixon's senior advisers discussing the possibility of interfering with the peace talks. Some believe that Nixon wanted to prolong the war in 1968 because it gave him the best opportunity to defeat his opponent, Hubert Humphrey, who was then serving as Johnson's Vice President. If Johnson and Humphrey succeeded in their negotiations, it would have dealt a major blow to Nixon's campaign.

- 1 Describe the problems facing the new president Richard Nixon when he took office in January 1969.
- 2 Explain what Nixon meant by his attempt to find an honourable peace in Vietnam.
- 3 How was each of the following designed to contribute to Nixon's plan for bringing about peace in Indochina?
 - a Negotiations and diplomacy
 - b Military force and intimidation
- 4 Explain the policy of Vietnamisation and what it meant for the United States and for the RVN's military forces.

Vietnam

The main policy affecting South Vietnam during Nixon's first term as president was Vietnamisation. This policy is often contrasted with President Johnson's 'Americanisation' of the war because it aimed to reduce the number of American personnel in Vietnam and transfer the primary responsibility for fighting the NLF–NVA to the South Vietnamese.

The Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, and the commander of MACV, General Creighton Abrams, took the primary role in implementing Vietnamisation. They planned to gradually withdraw US forces over 14 stages, beginning in July 1969. By the end of August, 25 000 troops were withdrawn. At the same time, the RVNAF was reorganised and expanded. Within two years of the policy's implementation, more than 1 million men served in the ARVN and new modern aircraft, boats and weapons flooded into South Vietnam.

TABLE 4.1 US–ARVN troop strengths, 1969–73

YEAR	UNITED STATES	ARVN
1969	475 200	897 000
1970	334 600	968 000
1971	156 800	1 046 250
1972	24 200	1 048 000
1973	50	1 111 000

Based on data from US Department of Defense Manpower Data Center made available through the US National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/electronic-data-files.html#vietnamese>

Continuing the war in South Vietnam

While Vietnamisation was taking place, US–ARVN forces continued military activity in the South and there is evidence that their position began to improve in some areas. To a large degree, this was the result of initiatives introduced by the new MACV commander, General Abrams, who took over in June 1968. Although he continued Westmoreland’s attempt to inflict heavy casualties on the NLF–NVA through search-and-destroy operations, he also began to focus more on permanently securing villages and towns through **clear-and-hold** missions. Abrams also tried to bring US–ARVN combat and pacification efforts together under a ‘one war’ policy so that they were more organised and effective.

Under Abrams, about 500 000 ARVN soldiers were reassigned to security roles in the South Vietnamese countryside and two US divisions were removed from provinces near the DMZ to take up defensive positions further south. These measures increased stability in particular areas. Some estimates suggest that by about 1972, US–ARVN forces securely controlled about 80 per cent of South Vietnam.

The CIA also renewed its assault on the NLF through the Phoenix Program. The Tet Offensive weakened the NLF but it remained operational and created a **Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG)** as an alternative to Thieu’s regime in the South. The Phoenix Program used secret agents from the United States, Australia and South Vietnam to gather information on NLF operatives and then arrest, interrogate and execute them. Coupled with Abrams’s renewed emphasis on pacification, the program had a measurable effect on NLF activity. Over 60 000 operatives were eliminated, and by 1972 only 10 South Vietnamese provinces (of about 44 in total) still reported strong NLF activity.

Ongoing challenges for the US war effort

These signs of progress masked significant challenges for the US–ARVN that continued after 1969. Although it remained a generally cohesive fighting force, the US Army began to show clear signs of fatigue after Vietnamisation was implemented. There were several reasons for this:

- Firstly, the war had been raging since 1965 and many American soldiers failed to see clear progress, which made some overtly war-weary.
- Secondly, the war continued to be very costly for the United States military. In fact, about 30 per cent of all US casualties from the war occurred during Nixon’s presidency. The intensity of fighting wore down some units in the most dangerous areas.



SOURCE 4.2 General Creighton Abrams walks with some of his troops, Vietnam, 1968.



SOURCE 4.3 Vietnamese soldiers question a suspected NLF member in the Mekong Delta, July 1967. An American soldier working with them stands to the right.

clear and hold

An approach that focused on taking small areas and permanently securing them from the NLF–NVA. Then, inside these areas, pacification efforts would be implemented in an attempt to ensure that civilians would remain committed to the South Vietnamese Government.

Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG)

This was an alternative government established by the NLF in June 1969. It was designed to be ready for a complete takeover of Nguyen Van Thieu’s government in the South and played an increasingly important role in peace negotiations from 1969.

- Thirdly, some soldiers did not see the point to fighting when they knew US forces were undergoing gradual withdrawal. This did not seriously affect the army's defensive activity, but some soldiers sought to avoid participating in offensives for fear of losing their lives in a war that was ending (at least for Americans). Many simply wanted to serve out their tour of duty and return home. In some scenarios, soldiers would resist their officers' orders to attack, and there were cases in which officers were killed or wounded by their men (called 'fragging') in open protest.
- Finally, when the first US combat forces were deployed in Vietnam in 1965, the American public overwhelmingly supported this decision. By the 1970s, support for the war was declining and many soldiers were aware that they were fighting an unpopular war. This added another drag on morale.

Did drug use seriously undermine the performance of the US Army in Vietnam?

In *Shooting Up: A Short History of Drugs and War* (2016), Lukasz Kamienski makes a strong case to show that drug use was very common among US combat personnel in Indochina. Kamienski uses US Department of Defense reports to show that by 1973 about 70 per cent of all American personnel regularly took some kind of drug, including alcohol, marijuana and heroin, while serving in Vietnam.

TABLE 4.2 Percentage of US soldiers reportedly using drugs in Vietnam

YEAR	PERCENTAGE OF US SOLDIERS USING DRUGS
1968	50 (approx.)
1970	60 (approx.)
1973	70 (approx.)

Based on figures provided in Lukasz Kamienski, *Shooting Up: A Short History of Drugs and War*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2016, p. 188

Kamienski argues, however, that many people have incorrectly assumed that this drug use negatively affected the fighting capacity of the US infantry in Vietnam. His conclusion is that drug use did *not* seriously undermine the performance of US forces during the Second Indochina War.

The drug problem gave rise to the myth of a weak and degenerated, addicted American army. According to widespread opinion, drugs made most soldiers unfit for combat ... the truth was far more different from the popular view ... Soldiers usually reached for drugs in situations where it was not too risky ... They did not go carelessly into action on drugs; that would go against the natural instinct of self-preservation ... contrary to the popular view, drug use did not, overall, seriously interfere with [American] combat performance [in Vietnam].

Lukasz Kamienski, *Shooting Up: A Short History of Drugs and War*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2016, pp. 211–13

QUESTIONS

- In your own words, summarise what Lukasz Kamienski argues about drug use in the US military during the Second Indochina War.
- Using the ideas of Kamienski and other information gathered, assess the state of US forces in Vietnam by the early 1970s.

In addition to the US–ARVN’s internal problems, and despite some clear signs of progress against communist forces, there were still limitations to what military solutions in South Vietnam could achieve. The Phoenix Program had a devastating effect on the NLF, but this mostly affected lower ranking members. The NLF’s leadership remained elusive. Perhaps most importantly, South Vietnam’s leader, Nguyen Van Thieu, managed to stabilise his control over South Vietnam, but he remained a controversial figure who found it difficult to unite southerners into a cohesive national community. Put simply, Thieu failed to develop a nationalist vision for Vietnam that could compete with the northern regime. Many American observers, including some military commanders, seriously doubted the chances of the South’s long-term survival once the United States withdrew.



SOURCE 4.4 President of South Vietnam Nguyen Van Thieu at a rally in Saigon, 1972



Nguyen Van Thieu

Assessing Vietnamisation: Mark Philip Bradley

The impact of Vietnamization in Vietnam was ambiguous. By 1970 it was in full swing and most observers agreed that some gains had been made. Almost overnight ARVN had become one of the largest and best-equipped armies in the world. When properly led, ARVN units could fight well, and some American advisers noted that perhaps out of necessity ARVN performance began to improve as US support units were withdrawn. But if on paper ARVN was a formidable force, many of its fundamental weaknesses persisted. The process of ‘ghosting’, by which names of dead and deserted soldiers were kept on pay rosters so that the officer in charge could pocket the pay, ran as high as 20 per cent. Desertion remained a chronic problem, as was the severe shortage of qualified, competent, and honest officers at all levels. Even the stronger ARVN units sometimes manifested an unwillingness to engage the enemy in sustained combat ...

Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009, p. 155

- 1 Explain how the new commander of MACV, General Creighton Abrams, changed US strategy in Vietnam.
- 2 What was the Phoenix Program and what problems did it cause for the NLF?
- 3 What evidence is there that the new approach to the US–ARVN war effort in South Vietnam was making progress by the early 1970s?
- 4 Describe the problems that the following experienced after 1969:
 - a The US military
 - b The ARVN
 - c Nguyen van Thieu.
- 5 Using the ideas of Mark Bradley and other evidence, evaluate the policy of Vietnamisation.

Expansion of the war into Cambodia

Since the Geneva Accords in 1954, Cambodia was considered an independent and neutral nation. The King, Norodom Sihanouk, tried to maintain this neutrality, but by the mid-1960s it became impossible.

PRINCE NORODOM SIHANOUK (1922–2012)

Alamy Stock Photo/Keystone Pictures USA



Norodom Sihanouk was born in Phnom Penh in 1922. He became king of Cambodia in 1941 when his grandfather King Monivong (ruled 1927–41) died. As a strong nationalist, Sihanouk negotiated Cambodian independence, which was confirmed at the Geneva Conference in 1954. In 1955, he abdicated the throne to take up the more active political position of Prime Minister. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, he tried to maintain Cambodian neutrality by attempting to avoid overly close ties with the major Cold War powers such as the United States, the USSR or China.

Maintaining neutrality became more difficult after the escalation of the Second Indochina War in 1965. The growing disruption caused by the war in Vietnam made Cambodia increasingly unstable. Sihanouk tried to eliminate his political rivals through both political and violent means. Cambodia's secretive and essentially powerless communists, whom Sihanouk called the Khmer Rouge ('Red Khmers'), fled to remote parts of the country but Sihanouk was unable to combat some of the pro-American politicians and military leaders. While he was abroad in 1970, a group of these leaders, led by General Lon Nol and Sihanouk's cousin Prince Sirik Matak, staged a coup, removing Sihanouk from power. In exile, Sihanouk hoped to return to power and formed a pragmatic alliance with the Khmer Rouge.

LON NOL (1913–85)

Cetty Images/Ian Brodie/Milton Archive



Lon Nol served in the French colonial service and joined the Cambodian Army in the early 1950s. During the First Indochina War (1946–54), he fought against Vietminh units that attempted to use Cambodia in their war against France. Lon Nol then enjoyed a successful military career, assuming the position of Commander-in-Chief of the Cambodian Army in 1960. He served as Sihanouk's Minister of Defence but then joined Sihanouk's cousin Sirik Matak in a coup in March 1970, creating the Khmer Republic in October. Many historians have argued that the CIA supported the coup because it would result in a break from Sihanouk's policy of neutrality and provide the United States with greater freedom of action in Cambodia. Although some dispute the

evidence for direct and systematic US involvement in the coup, it is generally accepted that American policymakers were pleased with its results.

In 1971, Lon Nol abolished the National Assembly and merged the roles of President and Prime Minister the following year, effectively giving him dictatorial power. He failed to eliminate corruption and completely rejected Sihanouk's attempt to keep Cambodia neutral. Lon Nol developed a strong alliance with the United States and attempted to wage war against Vietnamese and Khmer communists inside Cambodia. This war turned out to be a disaster and the country quickly fell apart. Once the Americans began to disengage from Indochina after the Paris Peace Accords were signed in January 1973, Lon Nol's position became very fragile. Facing almost certain defeat by communist forces, he fled Cambodia on 1 April 1975 and took up residence in the United States, where he remained until his death in 1985.

In 1966, Sihanouk came under pressure from the DRV to create a secret alliance allowing communist forces to move supplies through Cambodia (along the Sihanouk Trail), which soon led to the creation of more NLF–NVA depots and bases inside Cambodian territory. This deal contradicted Sihanouk’s public declarations of neutrality and it increasingly frustrated US and South Vietnamese military commanders, who were unable to openly attack these bases for fear of international criticism.

In the 1960s, Sihanouk became increasingly unpopular among parts of the Cambodian population. There was strong nationalist sentiment in Cambodia, which led some people to seek the expulsion of Vietnamese bases from Cambodian soil. On 18 March 1970, amid growing political tension, Sihanouk was overthrown in a military coup. The new government, led by Lon Nol, broke with Sihanouk’s public statements of neutrality and took a strong anti-communist and anti-Vietnamese position. This drastically changed Cambodia’s political landscape and its relationship with the United States.

The Nixon bombings of Cambodia

In the 1990s, it became known that President Johnson had authorised secret US military activity in Cambodia during 1965–68 to attack communist positions. These included about 2000 clandestine ground operations and tactical bombing missions that dropped about 214 tons of bombs. From 1969, however, Nixon dramatically escalated these bombings, beginning on 18 May with Operation Menu (made up of several smaller parts called ‘Breakfast’, ‘Lunch’, ‘Snack’, ‘Dinner’, ‘Supper’ and ‘Dessert’). The Nixon administration tried to keep Operation Menu secret, but reports were impossible to completely smother.

Nixon could increase these US bombings because of the new political developments in Cambodia following Sihanouk’s overthrow. Lon Nol openly requested Nixon’s help in attacking Vietnamese communists inside Cambodia and, in May 1970, the United States launched a reorganised and much larger continuous bombing campaign of Cambodia that made extensive use of B-52 strategic bombers: Operation Freedom Deal, which lasted until 15 August 1973. According to US Air Force data declassified in the year 2000, over 2.7 million tons of bombs were dropped on Cambodia during Nixon’s presidency.

There is no doubt that these bombing raids did significant damage to communist bases or that they helped Lon Nol’s regime survive for as long as it did. Tragically, the Nixon bombings also had a devastating effect on the Cambodian people. Since the B-52s could not control where their bombs landed with precision, large tracts of Cambodian land were obliterated. As villages and towns were destroyed, thousands of Cambodians lost their lives and many more became refugees forced to move away from affected areas and into the major cities such as Phnom Penh. This put immense pressure on the Lon Nol government and living conditions in Cambodia declined rapidly.



SOURCE 4.5 In 1965, the Boeing B-52 Stratofortress bomber was first used by the United States in Vietnam. The B-52 could fly long distances and drop its payload from such a height that it could not be heard from the ground. This was one of the most destructive weapons used by the United States during the Second Indochina War.

Getty Images/Getty Images



SOURCE 4.6 President Nixon at a press conference on 30 April 1970 to announce American soldiers entering Cambodia



SOURCE 4.7 ARVN soldiers board a US Army UH-1D helicopter for a ground operation in the Fishhook area of Cambodia on 8 May 1970.

The US–ARVN invasion of Cambodia

With an anti-communist government in Cambodia that welcomed US aggression against communist forces, Nixon was less constrained than Johnson in his field of activity in Indochina. In April 1970, he decided to stage a full-scale ground invasion of Cambodia. Using 90 000 US troops with an additional 40 000 from the ARVN, the invasion force was tasked with locating and eliminating the COSVN headquarters, believed to be in eastern Cambodia.

Like the bombings, the invasion enjoyed only mixed success. US–ARVN forces destroyed many bases and captured large quantities of military supplies, including rifles, ammunition and artillery pieces. At the same time, the invasion failed to eliminate the highest ranking COSVN leaders and some communist forces moved deeper into Cambodian territory. Combined with the US bombings, the invasion undoubtedly contributed to the deteriorating situation in Cambodia and it drove many to support Cambodia's own radical communist movement, the Khmer Rouge, who were the main beneficiaries of the chaos. (This will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6.)



US invasion of Cambodia

- 1 Briefly explain how the war in Vietnam began to affect Cambodian neutrality in the early 1960s.
- 2 Explain how the overthrow of Norodom Sihanouk in 1970 changed Cambodia's relationship with the United States and with communists in the region.
- 3 Using Source 4.5 on page 105, describe the bombings of Cambodia during Richard Nixon's presidency.
- 4 Explain why the US–ARVN forces invaded Cambodia in April 1970.
- 5 Assess the immediate impact of the bombings and the invasion of 1970 on Cambodia.

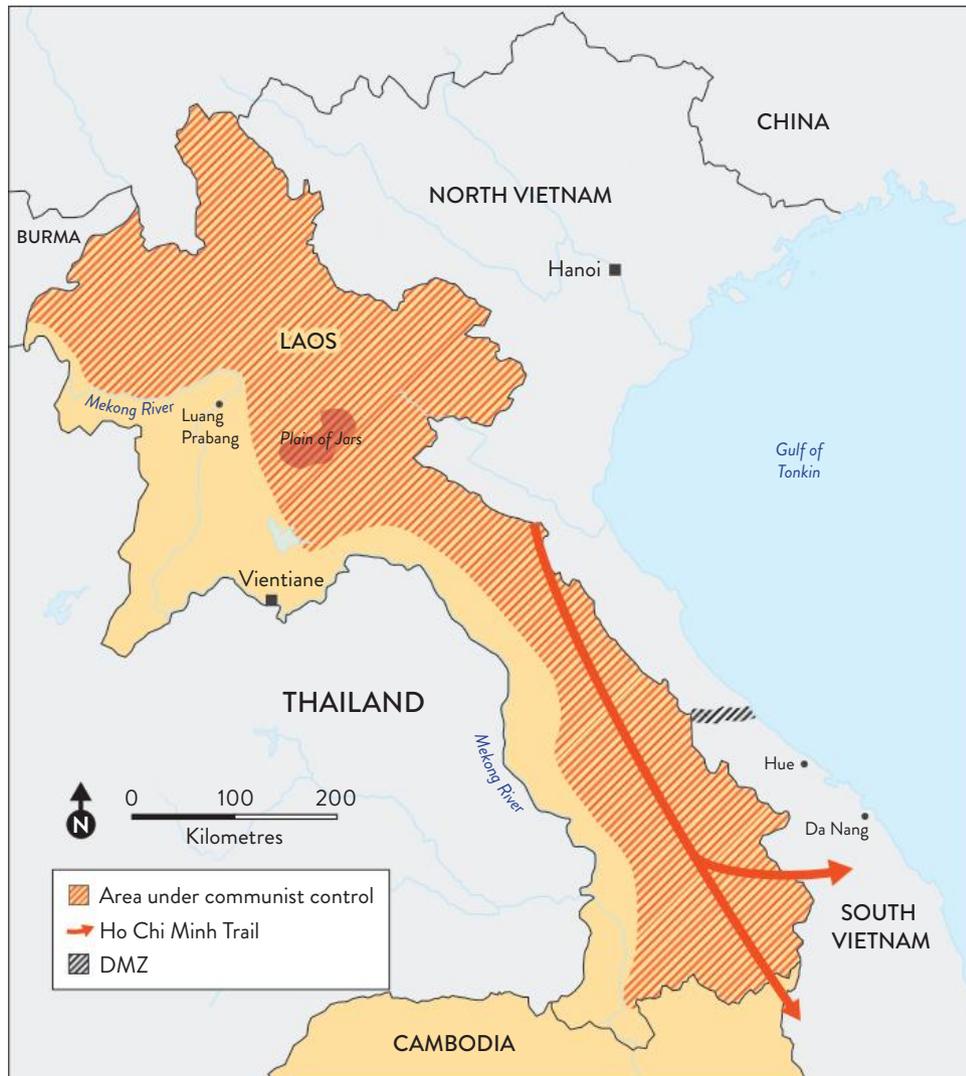
Expansion of the war into Laos

As these developments were occurring in Vietnam and Cambodia, the civil war in Laos also intensified. Primarily the civil war was fought by the Pathet Lao (communist forces supported by the DRV), who were seeking to take control of the country from the Royal Lao Government (RLG). The RLG was supported by the United States.

The DRV supported the Pathet Lao for two primary reasons:

- It gave the DRV another communist ally in the region.
- The areas controlled by the Pathet Lao were used for the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which kept the DRV's supply lines to the south open.

For the United States, its interest in Laos was precisely the opposite. It was hoping to limit the influence of communists in Indochina and to cut off the DRV's supply lines to South Vietnam.



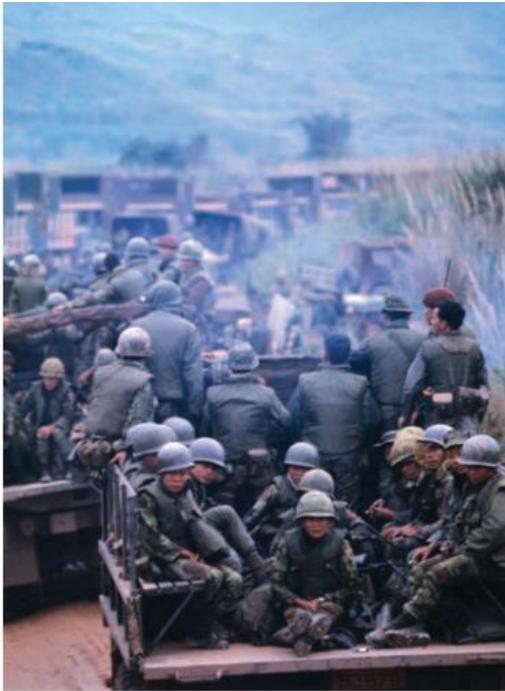
SOURCE 4.8 Civil war in Laos

To achieve this, Nixon followed Johnson's strategy of bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail and other strategic targets inside Laos. Again, what set Nixon's approach apart from earlier presidents was the scale and the greater reliance on larger bombers such as the B-52. Funded by the CIA, the United States also maintained a **Hmong** army of over 30 000 members, who fought against the Pathet Lao using US arms and training.

Given the mixed success of Nixon's bombing of Laos, he also approved an ARVN invasion in 1971 in what became an important 'test' for Vietnamisation. Unlike the invasion of Cambodia, no US ground forces were used. The new operation, called Lam Son 719, began on 8 February when 17 000 soldiers from the ARVN's better trained units moved across the border in an attempt to disrupt a major transport of men and supplies moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Hmong

An ethnic minority living in the mountains around southern China, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos



SOURCE 4.9 American and Vietnamese soldiers travel in personnel carriers during Operation Dewey Canyon II/Lam Son 719 to reopen and secure Route 9 and reoccupy Khe Sanh as a forward supply base, 7 February 1971.

As with many any other operations targeting communist positions, Lam Son 719 produced evidence of both success and failure. MACV claimed that the ARVN eliminated over 14 000 enemy soldiers. Its reports also stated that 6600 weapons and 176 000 tons of ammunition were captured during a campaign that lasted only about six weeks. They were impressive figures, and both Nixon and Thieu used them to claim a stunning victory.

At the same time, ARVN operations in Lam Son 719 raised other concerns. The campaign failed to permanently deprive the DRV of its supply lines or its bases throughout the areas targeted. The ARVN performed well in some battles, but it was also clear that it was still reliant on US air support in the most severe confrontations. Some observers worried about the long-term ability of the ARVN to provide adequate protection for South Vietnam if US military assistance was completely cut off.

- 1 Briefly outline the key features of the civil war in Laos.
- 2 Consider Operation Lam Son 719.
 - a What evidence was there to claim an ARVN victory?
 - b What problems did the operation also reveal?
- 3 Explain how the Second Indochina War expanded during the first years of Nixon's presidency (1969–71).
- 4 Evaluate the consequences of the expansion of the war into Cambodia and Laos.

The anti-war movements in the United States and Australia

Critics of US intervention in Indochina emerged in the early 1960s as the number of advisers increased through the policies of Eisenhower and Kennedy. These critics did not begin to organise into large groups, however, until Johnson's escalation in 1965. Even then, most Americans supported US intervention in Indochina.

It is important to remember that criticism of US policies towards Indochina was not confined to the United States. The leaders of some Cold War allies, such as Britain and France, were openly critical of the decision to use military force in Vietnam. In those nations that chose to support the United States in Indochina, particularly Australia and New Zealand, anti-war movements also developed. It is equally important, however, to remember that some groups remained vocal in their *support* of US intervention in Indochina.



Alamy Stock Photo/Keystone Pictures USA

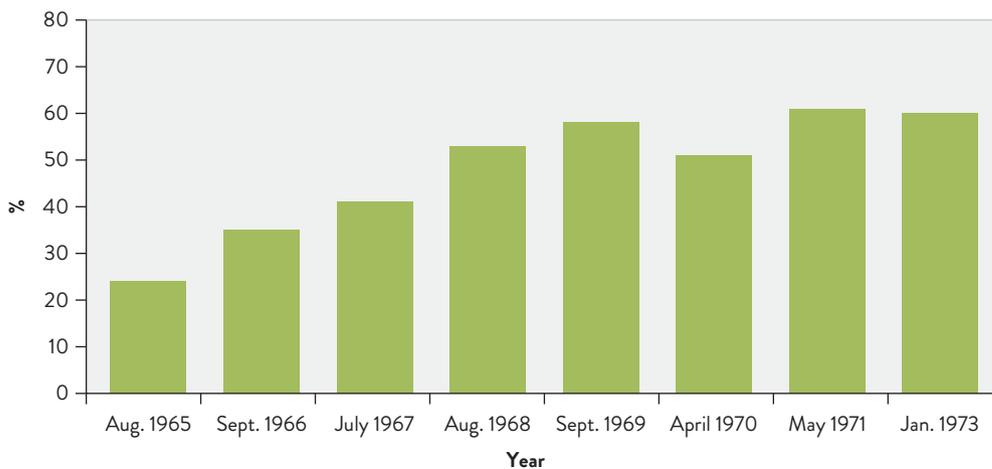
SOURCE 4.10 Anti-war rally in London on 20 May 1967

The emergence of large-scale anti-war activities in the United States and Australia

Many early protesters against US policy on Indochina were drawn from **pacifist** and radical movements that existed prior to 1960. Some were critical of military activity during World War II and simply turned their attention to Indochina as events continued to escalate.

pacifist
The belief that all war and violence is immoral and should be avoided

Few historians would disagree, however, that the number of Americans and Australians who turned against the war grew over time. Many of these people did not take radical views, but polls from the late 1960s show an undeniable growth in critical attitudes across both nations. There were at least four fundamental reasons for this (see Table 4.3).



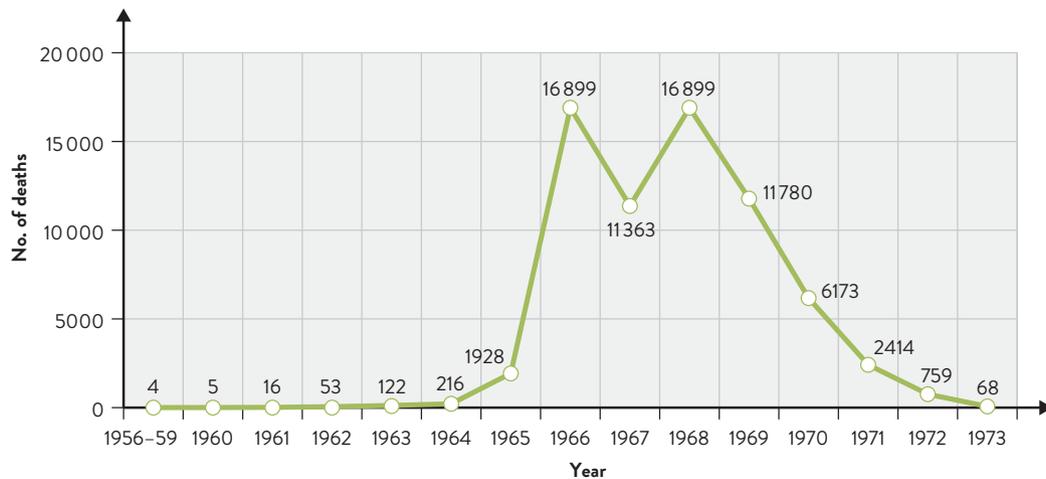
Source: The Iraq–Vietnam Comparison, GALLUP News, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/11998/iraqvietnam-comparison.aspx>

SOURCE 4.11 This graph provides an insight into American public thinking on the Second Indochina War in the 1960s and 1970s. The numbers provided represent the percentage of Americans who answered ‘yes’ to the following question: ‘Was it a mistake sending troops to Vietnam?’

TABLE 4.3 Key factors causing the intensification of anti-war attitudes in the United States and Australia

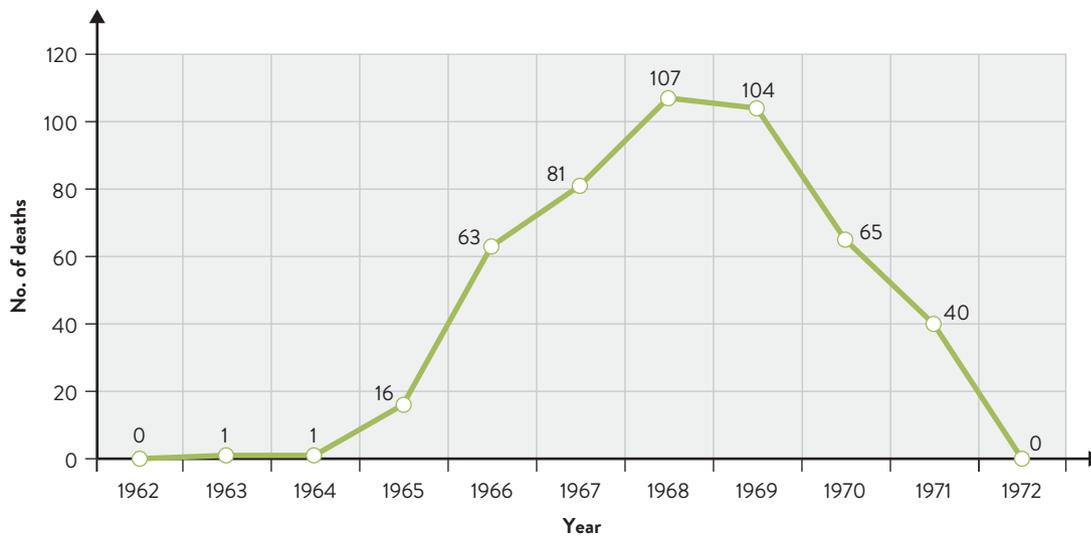
<p>The failure of military intervention</p>	<p>When escalation began to expand during 1965, Americans and Australians overwhelmingly supported military intervention in Vietnam. Part of their reasoning for this was that they were convinced that the domino theory was real and that communism was a genuine threat. Many also believed that military intervention would improve the security of South Vietnam and ensure a better life for its citizens. The slow progress of the war and, especially, the Tet Offensive in 1968 challenged the belief that military intervention could bring about positive change. Many began to favour disengagement.</p>
<p>The rising human and financial cost of the war</p>	<p>As the war continued to drag on, the death toll on all sides grew. In the United States and Australia, the human cost of the war was beginning to raise questions about whether the cause for which these young men were dying was justified. In addition, to support large military operations in Vietnam both the US and Australian governments were spending large sums of money. Particularly in the United States, the financial burden of the war was beginning to create economic strains that many citizens found unacceptable.</p>
<p>Troubling revelations</p>	<p>During Nixon's presidency, several major controversies emerged related to US involvement in Vietnam. Many of these came through mainstream media outlets, which has led some to argue that the media played a crucial role in changing attitudes to the war. The Second Indochina War is often called the first 'televised war' because footage of key battles and graphic scenes of the horrible conditions could be immediately transmitted into lounge rooms around the world.</p> <p>In November 1969, American journalist Seymour Hersh published details of an alleged US massacre in the village of My Lai in South Vietnam. The events took place in March 1968, resulting in the death of about 500 civilians, including children and the elderly. The information was provided by an American soldier, Ron Ridenhour, who had already tried several times to make the news public. Once the news broke, the American people were understandably horrified. Americans were, after all, supposed to be <i>protecting</i> the South Vietnamese people. Only one second lieutenant, William Calley, was found guilty for the entire atrocity.</p> <p>In 1971, several major newspapers released copies of secret government files known as the Pentagon Papers. These papers had been collated by a team working for the former Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, and covered the period 1945–67. Their release was the work of Daniel Ellsberg, who secretly copied the files while working for the RAND Corporation, which was closely connected to the US Government. The primary importance of the documents lay in the fact that they contradicted many of the details that were used to justify the US military build-up in Vietnam during the 1960s. In doing this, the papers contributed to the widening 'credibility gap' that was explicitly revealed in the 1968 Tet Offensive.</p>
<p>Continued escalation</p>	<p>Perhaps one of the most powerful factors that underpinned the growth of critical attitudes towards the war was, however, the expansion of the war under Richard Nixon. The bombing of Cambodia and Laos and the two invasions (1970 and 1971) created a huge upswell in public criticism of US military intervention in Indochina. Although Nixon and Kissinger made several attempts to justify the expansion of military activity, many civilians could not accept this when Nixon had promised to find an honourable peace in Indochina.</p>





Data based on information provided by the US National Archives' Vietnam Conflict Extract Data File, updated on 29 April 2008

SOURCE 4.12 US deaths by year in the Second Indochina War, 1956–73



Data based on information provided in Ian McNeil and Ashley Ekins, *On the Offensive: The Australian Army in the Vietnam War 1967–1968*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2003, Appendix F, 'Statistics' made available on the Australian War Memorial Website, August 2017

SOURCE 4.13 Australian deaths by year in the Second Indochina War, 1962–72

In addition to these factors, the 1960s had more broadly witnessed larger and more public protests relating to a range of different social concerns. These included the racial divisions in the United States and Australia that were still prevalent. In the 1960s, many prominent civil rights leaders in the United States and Australia, such as Martin Luther King Jr, came to criticise the Second Indochina War. This growing era of social unrest is often referred to as the **zeitgeist** of the 1960s and was pushed along by artists, musicians, academics and the growing body of university students in the United States, Europe and Australia.

Perhaps one of the sharpest issues drawing criticism in both the United States and Australia was **the draft** (often referred to as conscription). The two nations used different systems to organise the draft, but the issue was fundamentally divisive. By creating a system in which young men faced the possibility of forced military service in Vietnam, the governments of Australia and the United States made the war personal for thousands of citizens.

zeitgeist

German, literally 'time spirit'; the ideas, mood and culture that dominate a society in a particular period

the draft

The draft system in the United States had been in place before escalation in Vietnam. Men drafted into the US armed forces could be sent to any of the Cold War hot spots, including Germany, Korea and Vietnam. For Australia, the idea of a conscription system was relatively new. Although drafting into the armed forces had occurred previously, it was only used in situations where Australia was under direct threat. In both nations, forced military service created heated debates and contributed significantly to the growth of opposition to the war.

The shootings at Kent State and Jackson State universities, May 1970

US Government treatment of some protesters also became the target of widespread criticism. Perhaps the most extreme example of this came after Nixon broke news of the US invasion of Cambodia to the American public on 30 April 1970. The news sparked a massive wave of protests, especially on college and university campuses. At one demonstration at Kent State University in Ohio, tensions escalated and the Ohio **National Guard** was used to disperse the demonstrators. Amid the chaos, troops opened fire and killed four students on 4 May. Under similar circumstances just over one week later, two students were killed by security forces at Jackson State University in Mississippi. These incidents created a public outcry, forming one of the bleakest moments of Nixon's early presidency.



Getty Images/Bettmann

SOURCE 4.14 Young men make the Black Power salute with their fists following memorial services for Phillip Gibbs (21) and James Green (17) on 21 May 1970. The two were killed when police fired upon demonstrators just after midnight on 15 May at Alexander Hall, Jackson State University, after an anti-war protest turned into rioting. Green had been walking home from work when he was killed.

National Guard

These are reserve military units mostly made up of part-time members. They can be used to support the US Army in times of war, as security forces in the United States in times of emergency or in disaster relief roles.

The variety of strategies used to protest

In both the United States and Australia, anti-war demonstrations took a variety of forms. Some of these included:

- **Petitions:** These were especially popular among groups such as academics and the business community, who tried to use their public influence to put pressure on the governments of the United States and Australia.
- **Refusing the draft:** Some young men dramatically burned their draft cards in open defiance of the government's attempt to conscript them. Others tried to find loopholes in the draft system, and some tried to hide from the government by moving towns or even moving to another country.
- **Small local demonstrations:** These included events such as 'sit-ins', in which participants would gather in a public space to raise awareness of a political issue. These often ended in arrest for failing to move once police were called in.
- **Student organisations:** Many anti-war groups emerged on the campuses of the United States, Australia and other nations. The most famous of these was Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which was founded in 1960 to campaign for greater equality in the United States and a more peaceful foreign policy. The group's leader, Tom Hayden, secretly visited Hanoi in 1965.



SOURCE 4.15 University of Chicago student burning his draft card at an anti-war rally in Chicago, 9 October 1967

WS
Anti-war movements
in Australia and the
United States

Anti-war
movements

- Mass demonstrations:** These are probably one of the most widely remembered forms of protest in this period. Many cities and towns across the United States and Australia held demonstrations, especially after 1966. The largest of these were the **Moratorium** marches, which took place in the United States in November 1969 involving over 500 000 people and about 1200 cities (the main march was held in the capital, Washington DC). The following May, the first Moratorium march in Australia was held, which involved over 200 000 people. The largest turnout was in Melbourne, where 70 000 Australians gathered to put pressure on the government to end its involvement in the Second Indochina War. A second Moratorium march took place in Australia in September 1970 and a third in June 1971.
- Extreme measures:** Some individuals and groups resorted to extreme measures in a desperate attempt to force the government to change its policy. In 1965, there were two public self-immolations (burnings) in the United States, inspired by the actions of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc in Vietnam in 1963. Also, a group in the United States known as the Weathermen (or the Weather Underground) began to promote openly violent strategies for protesting the war. The group attempted a number of bombings, break-ins and public riots. In July 1970, 13 members of the Weathermen were formally charged with attempting to organise terrorist activity and many other members of the group went into hiding.

Moratorium

Technically defined as a suspension of normal activity. The mass demonstrations during the Second Indochina War took the name to reflect the widespread opposition to military intervention in Indochina and the fact that the movement drew people from a wide variety of backgrounds, including students and professionals rather than radicals.



NewsPix/News Ltd

SOURCE 4.16 Moratorium march in Melbourne, Australia, on 30 June 1971



The anti-war movement in Australia

In the following extract, Australian historian Peter Edwards outlines some of the key features of the anti-war movement that developed in Australia during the Second Indochina War.

... changes were taking place in Australia ... By the mid-1960s, a generation of Australians had come to adulthood with no personal experience of the world wars and the 1930s [Great] depression that had shaped the views of their elders ... [instead they were] largely shaped by a significant growth in university education ... Some young Australians drew inspiration from the counter-culture being shaped by radical students and intellectuals in American and European universities. Across the country, middle-class Australians challenged the





traditional values ... The protest movement in Australia drew encouragement from the growth in mass protest in major American cities ... During 1967 two distinct streams of dissent appeared over the Vietnam War. The moderate wing continued to argue about the strategic and legal justification for the war ... [and] generally used legal tactics with a view to changing the [Australian] government's policies ... [the other stream] sought revolution rather than reform. Many identified with the 'new-left' ... based in universities ... In Sydney and Melbourne, students formed groups called Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), adopting the name of radical student groups in the United States ...

The moderate and militant wings of the protest movement came into conflict over both aims and tactics. The militants aimed to promote confrontation with the police and other authorities ... the moderates regarded these tactics as counter-productive.

Protests and demonstrations in Australia in 1968 and 1969 followed the pattern established in 1966 and 1967. Australian protesters adopted tactics and slogans from protesters around the world, often with a time-lag, more violent ... Radicals infiltrated demonstrations and protests by non-violent groups such as clergy [the churches] or Save Our Sons; they then provoked confrontation with the police and other authorities by throwing rocks, placing marbles or firecrackers under the feet of police horses, or occupying offices and buildings in 'sit-ins' ... These tactics were denounced not only by governments and other institutions but also by many student leaders ...

Support for the war in Australia was also eroded by more soundly based criticisms, such as the number of Australian casualties caused by mines ... Australians were also disturbed when they heard of Australian soldiers being involved in American-led operations outside Phouc Thuy province [their area of operations in South Vietnam] ...

The greatest source of dissent, however, remained the system of selective conscription. Defiance of the National Service Act, which was rare ... in the early years, became more widespread ...

Peter Edwards, *Australia and the Vietnam War*, NewSouth, Sydney, 2014, pp. 163–5, 199, 201

QUESTIONS

- 1 How does Peter Edwards describe the nature of the anti-war movement in Australia?
- 2 According to Edwards, what were the factors inspiring the growth of Australia's anti-war movement?
- 3 Using the ideas set out by Edwards in the extract, what were some of the main similarities of the Australian and American anti-war movements?
- 4 Conduct some further research into one of the groups mentioned by Edwards, such as Students for a Democratic Society, Save Our Sons or the Moratorium movement. Present a brief report to the class that addresses the following:
 - a What were the group's main aims?
 - b What were the group's main strategies for protest and resistance?
 - c Provide a brief assessment of the group's influence and significance within Australia.



Recollections

Vietnam Veterans Against the War

Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) was established in 1967 by a small group of American soldiers who had served in Vietnam. As with many other anti-war groups in the United States and Australia, its activities were diverse. VVAW conducted interviews with other former soldiers to expose

alleged American crimes in Indochina, staged public demonstrations and joined the activities of many other protesters in criticising the war. By 1971, VVAW had over 8000 members, including Ron Kovic (whose story was made famous in the book and film *Born on the Fourth of July*) and John Kerry (later a prominent US politician who made a failed bid for the presidency in 2004).

VVAW added a new and powerful dimension to the anti-war movement because its members could claim to have seen first-hand what was taking place in Indochina. It is, however, important to remember that VVAW made up only a small percentage of the entire number of US troops who returned home from the war.



SOURCE 4.17 Members of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War gather at the Peace Monument in Washington DC on 28 December 1971 to protest the renewal of American bombings in North Vietnam.

US Congress

The general decline in support for US military intervention in Vietnam was also increasingly reflected in the US Congress. By the late 1960s, many elected members wanted to limit US activity in Indochina, and a growing number wanted a full withdrawal. Prominent anti-war politicians included Robert Kennedy (JFK's brother, who was shot and killed in 1968), William Fulbright, Eugene McCarthy, Mark Hatfield and Mike Mansfield. Significantly, these members represented both the Republican and Democratic parties in Congress.

- 1 Create a mind map or set of structured notes that outlines the key factors influencing the growth of anti-war movements in the United States and Australia during the Second Indochina War.
- 2 Explain why some people consider the media to be particularly important to the growth of anti-war movements in this period.
- 3 Explain how the following made a unique contribution to criticism of the Second Indochina War:
 - a the Moratorium movement
 - b Vietnam Veterans Against the War
 - c US Congress.

Evaluating the significance of the anti-war movements

Historians agree on many aspects of the anti-war movements in the United States and Australia. These include claims that:

- the movements grew larger over time
- more radical elements emerged towards the late 1960s
- a majority of civilians in the United States and Australia came to be critical of the war, even if they did not participate in public protests
- a sizeable minority also continued to support military intervention in Vietnam, and many strongly criticised the policies leading to withdrawal.

Nevertheless, there is much disagreement about the precise significance of the US and Australian anti-war movements. In broad terms, two major interpretations have been offered.

The first argues that the anti-war movements put added pressure on the governments of the United States and Australia to speed up the process of withdrawal. In short, this view suggests that the anti-war movements played a significant role in bringing a more rapid end to the Second Indochina War.

The second interpretation argues that the anti-war movements became unproductive because they grew too radical in the late 1960s. This view suggests that, by pursuing radical measures to protest the war, anti-war campaigners alienated the majority of the Australian and American populations, who did not agree with their approach. In short, this argument claims that if the anti-war movements remained peaceful and moderate they would have had greater success in bringing an end to the war *even earlier* and that by becoming radical the movements unintentionally prolonged the war.

The anti-war movements: historians in contest

The following historians put forward different interpretations of the significance of the anti-war movements reflecting the views outlined above. Read each interpretation carefully and answer the questions that follow the extracts.

TOM WELLS

This extract comes from Tom Wells's book *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam* (1994). The book provides a detailed analysis of the American anti-war movement that developed in response to US intervention in Indochina. The extract comes from the final pages of the book.

The American movement against the Vietnam War was perhaps the most successful antiwar movement in history. The movement did not exert its influence in any neat way, but its impact was clearly considerable ... it played a major role in restricting, deescalating, and ending the war ...

For those who took part in the movement, their success was intertwined with great frustration and pain. Many were unaware of the full extent of their impact on their government during the war, and those who recognized their power anguished over whether they were doing enough ...

The protesters' victory over the war makers was not, of course, absolute. And that it was not fueled their pain. They had not prevented the war's steady upward climb during the Johnson years, nor had they prevented Nixon's assorted escalations of the conflict ... Nonetheless, their influence on their government had been profound. Had they not acted, the death and destruction they mourned would have been immensely greater.

Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994, pp. 579–80

QUESTIONS

- 1 According to Wells:
 - a In what specific ways was the US anti-war movement successful?
 - b What were the limitations to the anti-war movement's success?
- 2 Overall, how significant do you think Wells believes the US anti-war movement to have been? Explain your answer.

ADAM GARFINKLE

In Adam Garfinkle's view, the anti-war movement was *least* effective when it became *most* radical. In his interpretation, the anti-war movement was quite moderate up to 1966 and then again from late 1969 to 1975. During the period in between (1966 to mid-1969), Garfinkle



- argues that the American anti-war movement was at its most radical and that this actually prolonged the war.

Contrary to the great weight of common knowledge, the Vietnam antiwar movement at its radical height was counterproductive in limiting U.S. military operations in Southeast Asia. It was not decisively counterproductive [because] ... other factors strongly drove American public opinion against the war: mounting casualties, mounting costs, the failure to win, the credibility gap ... But the antiwar movement, at least between 1966 and 1969, was not among these factors. It did not help stop the war but rather prolong it.

... between 1966 and 1969 the antiwar movement's centre of gravity grew increasingly radical and counterproductive to its goal of stopping U.S. military activity ... At the very time when the war's unpopularity was growing in the country at large, the image of irresponsibility ... conveyed by the antiwar movement had the general effect of muting disaffection [criticism of the war].

Adam Garfinkle, 'Movement Myths', in Robert J McMahon (ed.), *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, 4th edn, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 2008, p. 429

QUESTIONS

- 1 According to Garfinkle:
 - a How did the anti-war movement change during 1966–69?
 - b What impact did this have on the movement?
- 2 Overall, how significant do you think Garfinkle believes the US anti-war movement to have been? Explain your answer.

- 1 As a class:
 - a Compare and contrast the views of Wells and Garfinkle by creating a Venn diagram or similar infographic.
 - b Conduct a class vote to see which historian's interpretation is most agreeable to you and your classmates. Discuss the reasons for your views.
- 2 After completing the above activities, construct a detailed paragraph responding to the following question: Assess the significance of the anti-war movements in the United States and Australia to the developments in the Second Indochina War.

Renewed attempts to negotiate peace, 1972–73

During 1972, Nixon and Kissinger doubled their efforts to finalise a negotiated settlement to the Second Indochina War. By this stage, the diplomatic strategies of Nixon and Kissinger were beginning to show signs of success. They planned to develop a closer relationship with China and then **détente** with the Soviet Union, hoping that these two powers would put pressure on the DRV in the negotiation process (as they had done at Geneva in 1954).

To this end, they employed a strategy of 'triangulation', which involved exploiting the long-standing competition between China and the USSR growing out of the Sino–Soviet split. First, Nixon made a historic visit to China in February 1972 and held discussions aimed at developing closer diplomatic ties between the two countries. The trip caused concern in the USSR, where Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev worried that the Soviet Union might be left behind in any new global initiatives.

détente

An attempt to ease tensions between the United States and the USSR during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Nixon's visit to the Soviet Union in May 1972 was part of his attempt to achieve this.

Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I)

The first of two major arms limitations treaties aimed at reducing the number of weapons produced by the United States and the USSR. By this stage, it was clear that an 'arms race' had dramatically increased the firepower of both nations and that this posed a threat to world security. The limitations talks were designed to reverse that trend.



What were the major issues hindering peace negotiations?



Key individuals and groups

Nixon then visited Moscow in May that same year, producing a new arms agreement between the United States and the USSR, the **Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I)**.

These global manoeuvres brought some small but significant gains in the peace negotiations on Vietnam. Both China and the Soviet Union began to encourage the DRV to make a greater effort to find compromises with the United States and the South Vietnamese. Nevertheless, the negotiations in Paris remained heated and it would be nearly another year before an agreement was finally reached.

The final year of negotiations, 1972

The negotiations in Paris throughout 1972 formed part of the third major attempt to bring about a peaceful settlement to the unrest in Indochina (the first was completed at Geneva in 1954 and the second took place during Johnson's presidency). All three attempts were difficult and exposed significant tension between the delegates involved. Nevertheless, in 1972 the deadlock was broken and a formal peace settlement was signed in January 1973.

Negotiating peace, 1972–73

1972

- 26 January** Nixon announces to the public an eight-point peace plan, which was secretly issued to the DRV in October 1971
- 31 January** The DRV responds with its own nine-point peace plan
- February** Nixon visits the People's Republic of China in an attempt to improve relations between the United States and major communist powers, hoping they would put pressure on the DRV to compromise on a settlement in Vietnam
- 30 March – 22 October** The DRV conducts a major offensive on South Vietnam to demonstrate the weakness of the ARVN, taking further ground and improving its position at the negotiations taking place in Paris. The Easter Offensive was an initial success, but US firepower (especially in the form of air support) was too strong. The NVA advance was halted and then driven back, making the entire episode very costly for both sides. The offensive did reveal, however, that the DRV was now placing greater emphasis on conventional military strategies and tactics (such as the use of tanks and large infantry units in open attack) in contrast with earlier periods, in which they relied more on guerilla warfare.
- 9 May – 23 October** Nixon launches a new bombing campaign on North Vietnam, Operation Linebacker, aiming to pressure the DRV to call off its offensive, finalise peace negotiations and bring an end to the Second Indochina War
- 22 May** Nixon visits the Soviet Union as part of his wider attempt to improve US relations with the communist powers
- July** Negotiations in Paris renew. In the face of the Linebacker bombings, the North Vietnamese concede to some of the demands made by the United States and South Vietnam.
- 26 October** Henry Kissinger announces to the American media that 'we believe peace is at hand' as negotiations appear to be close to reaching a final agreement⁵
- 18–29 December** Nixon launches Operation Linebacker II (the 'Christmas bombings') in a final push to force the DRV to agree to a peace settlement

1973

- 27 January** The Paris Peace Accords are signed, bringing a formal end to the Second Indochina War. The settlement is officially implemented the following day.

The final Paris Peace Accords, January 1973

After months of heated debate, the main negotiators reached an agreement, which was signed on 27 January 1973. At best, it was an inconclusive peace. It facilitated a US withdrawal, which pleased most members of the American and Australian publics; the anti-war movements in the United States and Australia quickly died down after this. Yet, almost no-one believed that the Paris Peace Accords would bring an end to the problems in Indochina.



TABLE 4.4 Main clauses of the Paris Peace Accords

	UNITED STATES	DRV (NORTH)	RVN (SOUTH)
Main requirements and/or concessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Was required to withdraw all ground forces from Vietnam. Also required to halt bombing runs on the DRV. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreed to release US POWs (mainly held in North Vietnam and Laos). Was required to cease military action in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Had to accept the withdrawal of US forces (now responsible for its own defence). Was forced to accept that NVA forces would remain in RVN territory.
Main gains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secured the release of all US POWs in Vietnam. Was allowed to continue supplying aid to the RVN. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NVA troops were allowed to remain in South Vietnam. Gained an end to the US bombing of the North. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Was allowed to continue receiving indirect US support (Nixon tried to assure Thieu that South Vietnam would not be completely abandoned).
Managing peace		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both nations had to agree to obey an International Control Commission brought in to manage the Accords. A new body, the Council of National Reconciliation and Concord, was set up to resolve ongoing disputes that might arise. 	

Assessing the Paris Peace Accords signed in January 1973

Jeffrey Kimball assesses the Paris Peace Accords.

The [Paris] agreement was in reality a compromise settlement – a compromise, however, that left North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam and acknowledged ... the Provisional Revolutionary Government, with both sides fully aware that a civil war in new guise [form] would ensue for the future of Vietnam. Nixon and Kissinger knew ... that, after an agreement, the Vietnamese parties would be left to 'slug it out between themselves ...' Although the South Vietnamese army had become more effective, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces had reoccupied many of their base areas in the South, 'from which it would be more difficult to dislodge them than in the 1969–70 period; and they are patient.' American troop withdrawals would have the effect of undermining Saigon's psychological confidence and resolve ... What Nixon had won in his four years of war was a decent interval. It was not a decent interval for Thieu, whose government would be driven from power within two years, but it was a long enough interval to permit Nixon and Kissinger to claim that they had provided Thieu with a chance to survive ...

Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 1998, pp. 369–70

- 1 What effect did the Paris Peace Accords have on the anti-war movements in the United States and Australia?
- 2 Closely examine Table 4.4. Which parts of the Paris Peace Accords would have been most likely to cause alarm for Nguyen Van Thieu and the RVN? Explain your answer.
- 3 Closely examine the interpretation of Jeffrey Kimball.
 - a According to Kimball, who benefited most from the Paris Peace Accords?
 - b Considering his claims and Table 4.4, to what extent do you think this is a reasonable assessment of the Paris Peace Accords?

Chapter summary

- US policy towards Indochina and Vietnam underwent major changes when Richard Nixon assumed office as President in January 1969.
- Nixon aimed to bring an honourable peace to Vietnam by pursuing negotiations and a policy of Vietnamisation.
- During Nixon's presidency, US military activity escalated in Cambodia and Laos.
- In the late 1960s and early 1970s, opposition to US intervention in Indochina reached its peak. Large and more radical anti-war movements in the United States, Australia and other parts of the world put significant pressure on governments to reach a peace agreement and stage a military withdrawal from Vietnam.
- Negotiations throughout 1971 and 1972 intensified, and in January 1973 a formal peace agreement was reached outlining a plan to end the Second Indochina War.
- The last remaining US and Australian combat units were withdrawn from Vietnam in 1973, fundamentally changing the nature of the conflict.

Further resources

- Chalmers, David, *And the Crooked Places Made Straight: The Struggle for Social Change in the 1960s*, 2nd edn (Chapter 8: The Antiwar Movement), Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2013
- Ehrlich, Judith and Goldsmith, Rock, *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers*, 2009 (documentary)
- Kennedy, Rory, *Last Days in Vietnam*, 2014 (documentary)
- Kissinger, Henry, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2003
- Scanlon, Sandra, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 2013

Endnotes

- 1 http://higher.ed.mheducation.com/sites/dl/free/0072849037/35275/11_2.html.
- 2 <http://watergate.info/1973/01/23/nixon-peace-with-honor-broadcast.html>.
- 3 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/25/madman-in-the-white-house>.
- 4 <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2708>.
- 5 http://higher.ed.mheducation.com/sites/dl/free/0072849037/35275/11_2.html.

CHAPTER REVIEW

CHAPTER REVISION QUESTIONS

- 1 Explain how US policy towards Vietnam changed in the period 1969–73.
- 2 Draw a table to compare and contrast the Second Indochina War in the periods 1965–68 and 1969–73.
- 3 Explain how the overthrow of Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia in 1970 contributed to the changing nature of the Second Indochina War.
- 4 Explain the significance of the civil war in Laos to the following:
 - a The DRV
 - b The United States.
- 5 Create a photo essay of 10 images that describes the nature of the anti-war movements in the United States and/or Australia. Each image should be accompanied by a 100-word statement explaining the importance of the image to understanding the anti-war movement(s).
- 6 Assess the significance of the media during the Second Indochina War.
- 7 What was the 'Sino–Soviet split' and how was this beginning to impact developments in Indochina by the late 1960s?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 8 Conduct some further research into the significance of the following:
 - a The Nixon bombings of Cambodia
 - b The US–ARVN invasion of Cambodia (1970)
 - c The ARVN invasion of Laos.

EXTENDED WRITING EXERCISE

- 9 Construct an essay in response to one or more of the following questions:
 - a To what extent did the Second Indochina War change after the 1968 Tet Offensive?
 - b Evaluate the strategies and tactics employed during Creighton Abrams's command of MACV (1968–72).
 - c Assess the significance of the anti-war movements in the United States and Australia to the developments in the Second Indochina War up to 1973.
 - d Evaluate the impact of the spread of the war to Cambodia and Laos.
 - e Critically evaluate the following statement: 'The Paris Peace Accords of 1973 mainly benefited the United States and the DRV.'



05

Communist victories in Indochina, 1973–75

STUDENTS WILL INVESTIGATE

- the US withdrawal from Indochina
- the reasons for communist victory in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.



A helicopter is pushed over the side of a US Navy carrier to make way for further evacuation aircraft during Operation Frequent Wind, April 1975.



Introduction

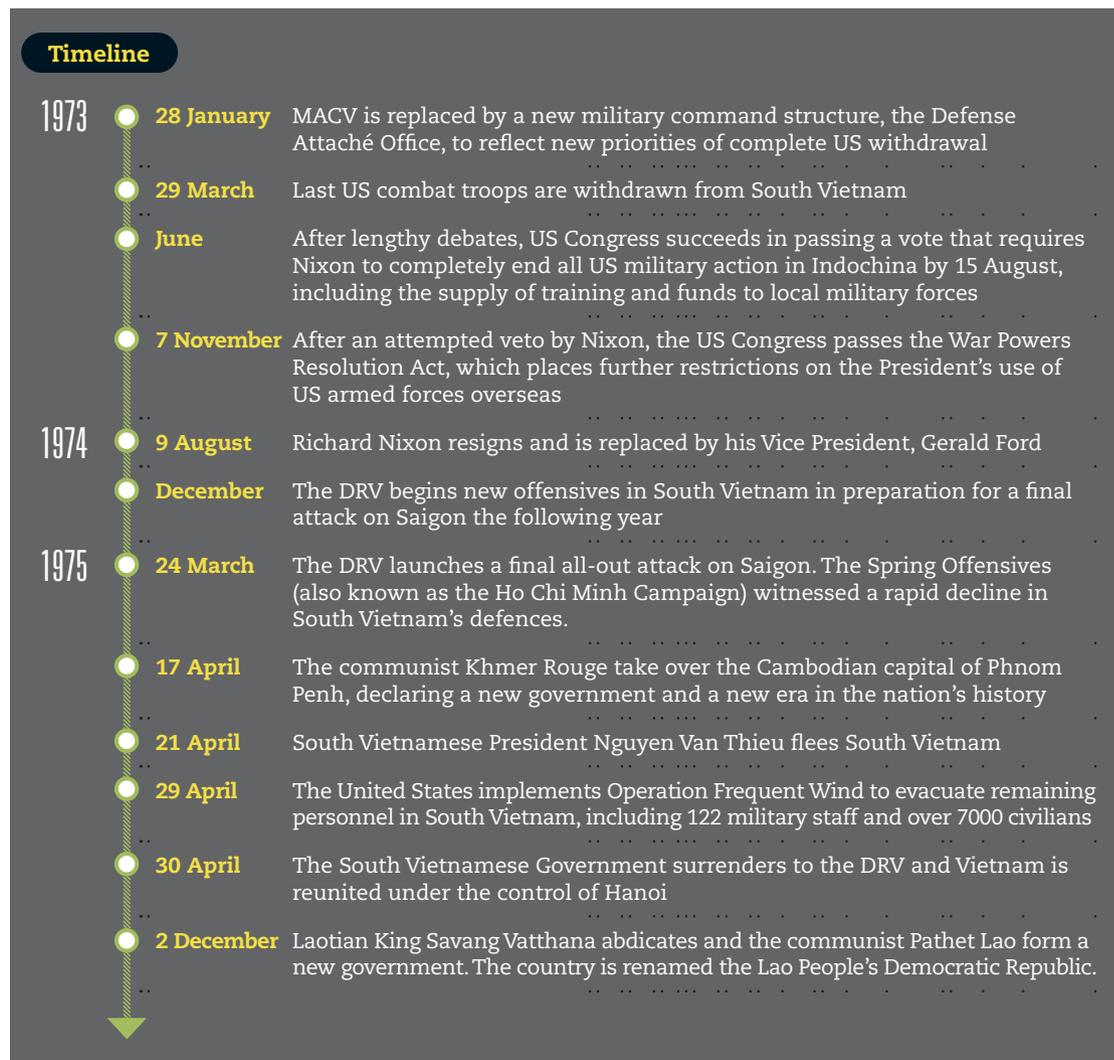
After the Paris Peace Accords were signed in January 1973, the situation in Indochina began to change rapidly once again. Final US ground forces were withdrawn in March and the US Congress began to severely restrict President Nixon's power to support anti-communists in the region.

In August 1974, amid sharp criticism relating to the Watergate scandal, Nixon resigned and his Vice President, Gerald Ford, took over. Ford was more agreeable to a quick end to US engagement in Indochina than Nixon had been. He oversaw the final removal of all US military personnel throughout Indochina and the reduction to US funding and military aid offered to anti-communist forces.

Left on their own, the governments resisting communist aggression in Indochina did not last long. In 1975, three communist movements came to power in Indochina:

- On 17 April, the Khmer Rouge overthrew Lon Nol's government in Cambodia.
- Less than two weeks later, on 30 April, the DRV forcefully reunited Vietnam when the South Vietnamese Government surrendered.
- On 2 December, the Pathet Lao forced the RLG to surrender and the king to abdicate, leaving the communists to form a new government.

After decades of fighting and negotiations, the fall of Laos to communist forces marked the end of anti-communist resistance and the beginning of new hardship for the people of Indochina.





SOURCE 5.1 Communist victories in Indochina, 1975

The end of US intervention

Throughout 1973 and 1974, US engagement in Indochina was steadily reduced. Combat troops were withdrawn and US funding for anti-communist regimes and military forces was progressively cut. By 1975, all US support for its allies in Indochina effectively vanished; only small sums of aid money were provided, but no military support. As the major supporter of South Vietnam, Lon Nol's pro-Western government in Cambodia and the RLG in Laos, the United States' disengagement from Indochina had a devastating effect on the ability of these governments to survive in the face of increasing communist pressure.

TABLE 5.1 The nature of the US withdrawal from Indochina

	DESCRIPTION
Combat troops	US combat troops began to withdraw from Vietnam when Vietnamisation was implemented in mid-1969. This staged withdrawal continued until March 1973, when the final US troops were sent home. After this, a small group of US troops remained inside the US embassy in Saigon to protect diplomatic staff. After March 1973, no US ground operations in Indochina took place.
Presidential powers	<p>Two congressional decisions in 1973 fundamentally changed the US President's powers over the military.</p> <p>In June 1973, Congress imposed a deadline on all US military activity in Indochina. The date set was 15 August 1973, by which time all direct US military action had to cease and all programs involving US advisers and funding had to be shut down. US troops left Vietnam, support for the RLG evaporated and the bombing of Cambodia came to an end. Nixon and Kissinger fought hard against this but failed.</p> <p>In November 1973, Congress then passed the War Powers Resolution Act, which required all future presidents to provide Congress with a 48-hour warning before sending the US military to international conflict zones. It also required the President to continue informing Congress of all major developments if the military were deployed (there could be no secrets as there had been with both Johnson and Nixon). Congress now had the power to stop the deployment of US military forces or require them to be brought home in no less than 60 days if they had already been sent to a foreign region. This Act destroyed the President's power to reintroduce the US military into Indochina without congressional approval.</p>
US financial assistance	Part of Nixon and Kissinger's plan through Vietnamisation and the Paris Peace Accords was that financial assistance would continue to flow into South Vietnam to help sustain its defence against communist aggression. In fact, hundreds of millions of US dollars continued to reach South Vietnam, but this amount was steadily reduced by Congress, which was becoming more convinced that Indochina could not be 'saved'. In August 1974, Congress only approved \$750 million of aid to South Vietnam, less than half the amount that Nixon requested earlier in the year. This was again reduced in 1975 to just \$300 million and the money could only be used for humanitarian programs. Without this funding, it was impossible for Thieu to sustain well-equipped forces in South Vietnam in the long term.
A new president	When Gerald Ford took office in August 1974, he brought a much less aggressive attitude to the White House. Although he still sought to uphold some of Nixon's promises to the anti-communists in Indochina, he did not try to assert his power over Congress the way Nixon did. Effectively, this meant that Ford had no real ability to provide meaningful support to Thieu and other anti-communist leaders in Indochina, and this severely undermined their ability to hold on to power.



Create a flow chart, mind map or detailed paragraph that outlines the process of the United States' disengagement from Indochina following the Paris Peace Accords of January 1973.

Communist victory in Cambodia, 17 April 1975

The first anti-communist government in Indochina to fall in 1975 was the Lon Nol regime in Cambodia. Lon Nol came to power in a coup overthrowing Norodom Sihanouk in 1970 and he invited greater US involvement in Cambodia, which resulted in a dramatic expansion of the Second Indochina War. After the Paris Peace Accords, Lon Nol's government was locked into a fight for its survival against Cambodia's communists, the Khmer Rouge.

Cambodia's radical communists: the Khmer Rouge

The Khmer Rouge emerged from the anti-colonial movement in Cambodia (see timeline on page 127). By 1970, they had built up a powerful network of supporters in the Cambodian countryside and began to exploit the chaos that followed the Lon Nol coup. The Khmer Rouge formed an alliance with the exiled Prince Norodom Sihanouk in 1970, who established a government in exile in Beijing, China: the Royal Government of the National Union of Kampuchea (GRUNK). This alliance with Sihanouk provided the Khmer Rouge with a powerful public image, as many Cambodians still supported the prince after the coup of 1970. When Sihanouk visited Cambodia from exile in Beijing during 1973, the Khmer Rouge promoted the event to enhance their popularity. The Khmer Rouge also used the corruption that was rife in Lon Nol's government and the US bombings of Cambodia as powerful propaganda to continue expanding their movement. Although they would later deny this, the Khmer Rouge also benefited from the support of Vietnamese communists in their war against Lon Nol. Not only did Vietnamese communists conduct much of the heavy fighting against Lon Nol before withdrawing after the Paris Peace Accords, they also supplied the Khmer Rouge with much-needed supplies and weaponry.

akg-images/Pictures From History



SOURCE 5.2 Prince Norodom Sihanouk (right) with one of the highest ranking Khmer Rouge leaders, Khieu Samphan, in a 'liberated zone' during his visit to Cambodia in 1973. This visit was used by the Khmer Rouge to help expand their popularity, as many people still supported the exiled prince.

The emergence of Cambodia's radical communists, the Khmer Rouge

- 1945 ● Cambodian nationalists and communists establish the Khmer Issarak ('Free Khmer'). The anti-colonial movement was led by communists and worked closely with the Vietminh against the French during the First Indochina War (1946–54).
- 1951 ● The Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) is created under the guidance and assistance of Vietnamese communists. The KPRP's leaders were older Khmer who were loyal to the Vietminh; many of them had lived in Vietnam and some would return there in the 1950s and 1960s.
- 1955 ● Cambodia's leader, Norodom Sihanouk, begins a sustained attempt to eliminate radical groups from Cambodia, including the communists. During this period, about 90 per cent of the KPRP membership disappear. Most went into exile, while others are believed to have been arrested and/or killed by 1960. Most of the older, more moderate communists who had links with Vietnam were eliminated, and a younger generation of radicals, such as Saloth Sar ('Pol Pot'), began to take control of the Cambodian communist movement.
- 1960 ● **28–30 September** Twenty-one surviving members of the KPRP meet in secret in Phnom Penh. They agree to change the party's aims and activities and rename the movement the Workers' Party of Kampuchea (WPK).
- 1963 ● Pol Pot is elected the WPK secretary. While serving in this role, Pol Pot remains in hiding in Vietnamese communist bases in Cambodia.
- 1965 ● Pol Pot visits Hanoi, China and North Korea in an attempt to strengthen the WPK's alliance with larger communist movements.
- 1966 ● **September** Pol Pot returns to Cambodia after visiting communist allies and secretly renames the WPK the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). In doing this, Pol Pot wanted to distance the Cambodian communist movement from Vietnam in order to improve the CPK's relationship with China.
- The CPK establishes its headquarters in the north-east of Cambodia. Here the CPK begins to slowly introduce some of the reforms that defined its government after it took power in April 1975.
- 1970 ● **March** Norodom Sihanouk is overthrown by Lon Nol and other pro-Western leaders in Cambodia. A new era of bitter fighting in Cambodia develops. Immediately, the CPK gains the support of Sihanouk, who believes the CPK can help him return to power. In addition, the CPK receives support from the DRV and China. With this assistance, the CPK begins recruiting large numbers of Cambodians into the communist movement. Between 1970 and 1973, the CPK army grows from about 3000 members to over 40000.

Khmer Rouge propaganda

Pol Pot himself described the Khmer Rouge during that [earlier] period as ‘fewer than five thousand poorly armed guerrillas ... scattered across the Cambodian landscape, uncertain about their strategy, tactics, loyalty, and leaders.’

Years after the war ended, journalist Bruce Palling asked Chhit Do, a former Khmer Rouge officer, if his forces had used the bombing as anti-American propaganda. Chhit Do replied: ‘Every time after there had been bombing, they would take the people to see the craters, to see how big and deep the craters were, to see how the earth had been gouged out and scorched ... The ordinary people sometimes literally ... [poo] their pants when the big bombs and shells came. Their minds just froze up and they would wander around mute for three or four days. Terrified and half crazy, the people were ready to believe what they were told. It was because of their dissatisfaction with the bombing that they kept on co-operating with the Khmer Rouge, joining up with the Khmer Rouge, sending their children off to go with them ... Sometimes the bombs fell and hit little children, and their fathers would be all for the Khmer Rouge.’

Taylor Owen and Ben Kiernan, ‘Bombs Over Cambodia: New Light on US Air War’, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Volume 5, Issue 5, May 2007, <http://apjif.org/-Taylor-Owen/2420/article.html>

QUESTIONS

- 1 How did radicals come to control the Khmer Rouge in the lead-up to 1970?
- 2 According to the extract, how did the Khmer Rouge use the US bombings in Cambodia to build support for their war against Lon Nol?
- 3 Using this extract and other evidence you have gathered so far, explain how the Khmer Rouge increased their popularity and power during the period 1970–75.

War in Cambodia, 1970–75

After the Lon Nol coup in March 1970, the political, economic and social conditions in the Khmer Republic became increasingly chaotic. Vietnamese and Cambodian communist forces had already taken over large portions of the country, including some of the nation’s most productive agricultural areas. To win these back, Lon Nol’s government requested greater assistance from the United States before launching a series of large-scale military operations against communist positions.

Responding to Lon Nol’s request, the United States stepped up its bombing campaigns on communist bases in Cambodia and then staged a massive US–ARVN invasion in April 1970. The invasion forces destroyed many communist bases and confiscated many weapons, but did not severely damage the NLF–NVA. The attack drove Vietnamese communists deeper into Cambodian territory, creating further problems for the leaders of the new Khmer Republic.

With US funding and supplies, Lon Nol then launched his own attack on the communists with operations Chenla I (August 1970 to February 1971) and Chenla II (August to December 1971). These revealed serious weaknesses in the Khmer National Armed Forces (FANK). Although FANK



SOURCE 5.3 Cambodian soldiers in position along Highway 4 just outside of Kampong Speu, 15 June 1970

troops fought bravely, their commanders lacked experience, the army was poorly organised and, over time, morale suffered terribly. The Chenla operations produced some victories for the new government, but not enough to seriously weaken either the Vietnamese or Khmer Rouge forces. These operations also revealed that, just like the ARVN in South Vietnam, FANK was heavily dependent on US air power.

The final stages of the war in Cambodia, 1973–75

The war in Cambodia changed again after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973. US forces were finally withdrawn from Vietnam and US air support for the Khmer Republic was completely cut off on 15 August. At the same time, the NLF–NVA gradually withdrew their forces from Cambodia and turned their full attention to conquering South Vietnam. These developments meant that the war in Cambodia became a more genuine civil war. Without US support, FANK was now facing one main enemy, the Khmer Rouge, who began a series of large-scale attacks on government strongholds, including the capital, Phnom Penh.

By this stage, the Khmer Rouge had built up a very powerful position in Cambodia. With the support of North Vietnam and China, they developed a well-equipped army and actively built a large network of members throughout Cambodia. Some estimates suggest that by 1973 the size of the Khmer Rouge armed forces may have reached about 100 000 and that they controlled 70–80 per cent of the Cambodian countryside.



SOURCE 5.4 Areas remaining under government control in 1970. The areas shaded red were generally under Vietnamese or Khmer communist control by 1970. By 1973, the Khmer communists led by Pol Pot had begun to implement reforms according to their radical communist ideology. In some parts of the country these were welcomed, while in others many Cambodian peasants resisted the Khmer Rouge.



SOURCE 5.5 Guerillas celebrate after Phnom Penh falls to the Khmer Rouge on 17 April 1975.

The end of the Khmer Republic

By 1975, the Khmer Republic was under serious threat. About 40 000 Khmer Rouge soldiers surrounded the capital and Lon Nol's government was under siege. Khmer Rouge forces continuously attacked key locations in the city, including the main airport, shipping yards and highways. The capital was flooded with about 1 million refugees who fled zones controlled by the Khmer Rouge. The influx of these refugees put incredible strain on the city's infrastructure and resources such as clean water. In the midst of the chaos, Lon Nol fled Cambodia on 1 April and a ceasefire was arranged. Sixteen days later, the Khmer Rouge entered the capital and many

Cambodians celebrated the end of five exhausting years of war. Unfortunately, this was only the beginning of an even darker period of Cambodian history.

Reasons for communist victory in Cambodia

There are many factors that led to the communist victory in Cambodia in 1975. Four factors stand out as the most important (see Table 5.2).

TABLE 5.2 Reasons for communist victory in Cambodia

International factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The assistance of US air power during 1969–73 was crucial to the survival of the Lon Nol regime. As Congress turned against the war and limited US military activity in Indochina, this air support completely disappeared in August 1973. Alone, the Khmer Republic was simply no match for communist forces.
Regional factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sihanouk was able to maintain Cambodian neutrality up to the early 1960s. As the conflict in Vietnam escalated, this became increasingly difficult. The massive influx of NVA and US troops into South Vietnam from 1965 created great instability, as did the large-scale US bombing after 1969. Cambodian resources such as rice were increasingly sold on the black market to Vietnamese communists, depriving the Cambodian Government of food and tax revenue. Vietnamese communists were also determined to use Cambodia to develop a network of bases and transport routes to help in their war against South Vietnam. Sihanouk was in no position to resist them. Many Cambodians resented the presence of Vietnamese communists and wanted them removed. In combination, these problems ultimately led to the coup overthrowing Sihanouk in March 1970.
Failure of the Lon Nol regime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no doubt that Lon Nol wanted to solve some of the problems outlined above. He was, however, a very ineffective ruler who never managed to win widespread support from the Cambodian people. As the problems intensified after 1970, he increasingly turned to authoritarian approaches to rule, and the disastrous military campaigns against communist forces damaged his reputation even further. Perhaps most importantly, however, Lon Nol's government became even more corrupt than Sihanouk's had been, and this severely limited his regime's popularity.



→ **The activity of the Khmer Rouge**

The communist victory in Cambodia cannot be explained without acknowledging that the Khmer Rouge effectively exploited the circumstances already discussed. Although the Khmer Rouge leadership made many mistakes in the period leading up to April 1975, they continually improved their organisation and tried to manage their political profile carefully. By joining the GRUNK coalition with Sihanouk, their popularity improved, and their continuous use of propaganda proved highly effective in increasing their influence and destroying that of the Lon Nol regime. Finally, the Khmer Rouge managed to organise a powerful military campaign against the Khmer Republic in the lead-up to April 1975.



- 1 Briefly outline the main stages of the war in Cambodia from 1970 to 1975.
- 2 Explain why the Khmer Rouge were victorious in Cambodia in 1975.
- 3 Evaluate the importance of US involvement in Cambodia to the rise to power of the Khmer Rouge.

Communist victory in Vietnam, 30 April 1975

The second anti-communist government to fall in 1975 was South Vietnam. Throughout the Paris negotiations, Nixon and Kissinger continually promised President Nguyen Van Thieu ongoing support, but this became increasingly difficult to supply. For most of 1973, the North Vietnamese did not initiate any major military action against South Vietnam, but instead used the time to rebuild, reorganise and rearm. Then, in October 1973, the DRV leadership passed Resolution 21 claiming that the ideal time to launch a major attack on South Vietnam had arrived.

The final communist campaigns against the RVN

Thieu's government securely controlled more than three-quarters of South Vietnam when the Paris Peace Accords were signed in January 1973. Renewed aggression from the NLF–NVA and dwindling US assistance meant that South Vietnamese forces steadily lost ground throughout 1974. Then, on 13 December, the NLF–NVA launched a major preliminary attack in Phuoc Long province. Not only did ARVN defences crumble quickly, no US air power came to the South's aid, confirming communist suspicions that the new US President, Gerald Ford, would not aggressively defend the RVN as Nixon had done.

NVA commanders now pushed for a final offensive on South Vietnam. On 24 March 1975, they launched the Spring Offensive (also called the Ho Chi Minh Campaign). Beginning with Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands, communist forces began to rapidly overrun South Vietnam.



SOURCE 5.6 Vietnamese citizens attempt to enter the US Embassy to join the evacuation of Saigon, 29 April 1975.

Getty Images/Bettmann



Evacuating
Saigon

By 27 April, communist forces had surrounded the RVN capital, Saigon. On 29 April, the US implemented Operation Frequent Wind, evacuating remaining US personnel in South Vietnam, including 122 military staff. In this operation, US aircraft also evacuated more than 7000 South Vietnamese civilians who had been working for the Americans. On 30 April, NVA tanks broke through the gates of the Presidential Palace in Saigon. Nguyen Van Thieu had already fled the country but his replacement, General Nguyen Khan, formally surrendered to the North Vietnamese.

The collapse of South Vietnam in 1975

A FORMER US MARINE WHO BECAME A JOURNALIST RECALLS THE NVA'S FINAL OFFENSIVES AGAINST SOUTH VIETNAM IN 1975

An accurate description of the final month of North Vietnam's final campaign would require a book in itself. I am not even sure if what occurred could be called a campaign; a migration, rather. The North Vietnamese Army [NVA] simply rolled over the countryside, driving on Saigon. Except for a brief, hopeless stand made by a single division at the provincial capital of Xuan Loc, the ARVN offered no significant resistance. The South Vietnamese Army broke into pieces. It dissolved. There were terrible scenes of panicked soldiers beating and trampling civilians as they fled from the advancing enemy. Late in the month, the atmosphere of disintegration became palpable. Not just an army, but an entire country was crumbling, collapsing before our eyes. The roads were jammed with refugees and routed soldiers. Some of the columns were twenty miles long, winding out of the hills and rubber plantations toward the flat marshlands around Saigon. They stretched along the roads for as far as we could see ... And from behind those columns came the sound of bombs and shellfire, the guttural rumbling of the beast, war, devouring its victims.

There was so much human suffering in these scenes I could not respond to it. It was numbing. Regardless of the outcome, I wanted to see it end ...

Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, Arrow Books, London, 1978: 1991, pp. 341–2

QUESTIONS

- 1 Who was Philip Caputo and what was his relationship to the events in Vietnam? How might this enhance the reliability of his observations made in this extract?
- 2 How does Caputo describe South Vietnamese defences during the Spring Offensive of 1975?
- 3 According to Caputo, how did the Spring Offensive affect the people of South Vietnam?

A SOUTH VIETNAMESE CIVILIAN REMEMBERS THE COLLAPSE OF THE RVN

Every night I cry for Vietnam. I remember and I cry. In the darkness my memories turn into tears. There are tears for my dad and my mom and for my brother and my sisters, and for all of the people who ran away from Vietnam and for all of those who could not run away. I don't want my memories to be lost, like tears in the rain ...

I was sixteen in the Spring of 1975. At that time in school kids were starting to worry about the Communists taking over. Some of them talked about leaving the country. Some days, on the way home from school, I saw long lines of people trying to get papers or trying to change their money so they could leave the country.

... My dad told my brother and me that he wanted us to leave the country for a while. 'You are young,' he said. 'You have a future. And when everything is safe again you can come back.' He thought we should go to the United States to study ... But it was very difficult to get out of Vietnam ...

Then at ten in the morning on April 28, she [a family friend who worked at the US embassy] came to our house and said, 'Sonny, you had better get ready, because you will be leaving in one hour.' She told us where we were supposed to go. A bus was going to pick us up and take us to the airport. We could only bring one bag each for clothes ...





We were driven to the airport. It was really crowded. We had to get off the bus and stand outside ... Lots of people were crying and lots of them were shocked because they didn't really know what was happening or where they were going.

We didn't really know what would happen. Then all of a sudden they called our names over the loudspeaker ... they asked us to stand in a long line. After a little time they led us out to an airplane ... It was a big C-130. We walked up the back ramp. When we got inside we saw that there were no seats.

... I heard a lot of explosions outside, around the plane ... the door was still open and I saw an explosion right behind the plane. A big explosion. Then the airplane started to move with the door still open ...

As we took off, all of us could see out the back, and on the ground it looked like there were hundreds of explosions and fires and people were running in all directions. It looked like the whole airport was going crazy.

... Anyway, that was my last look at my country. I saw Vietnam as we flew away and at the back door of the plane was a soldier with a gun shooting at it.

Oral history of Duong Quang Son, in Larry Engelmann, *Tears before the Rain*,
Oxford University Press, New York, 1990

QUESTIONS

- 1 How does the South Vietnamese civilian describe the process of leaving South Vietnam in 1975?
- 2 How does the perspective of the South Vietnamese civilian quoted above differ from Philip Caputo's?
- 3 To what extent is the evidence in this source similar to that provided by Philip Caputo?
- 4 Using evidence from *both* extracts and other evidence, outline the events leading to the collapse of South Vietnam in April 1975.



Fall of Saigon



Getty Images/Francoise De Muiter/Roger Viollet

SOURCE 5.7 NVA tank entering the Presidential Palace in Saigon, 30 April 1975

Reasons for communist victory in Vietnam: some differing interpretations

Some historians argue that the US intervention in Vietnam was doomed to fail from its early stages. Even the CIA's own official history of the conflict stated:

“ The North Vietnamese tanks rolling into Saigon on 30 April 1975 sealed a victory that the Southern insurgents had won more than a decade before. ”
Quoted in Ben Kiernan, *Viet Nam: A History from the Earliest Times to the Present*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017, p. 450

Others would disagree, and since 1975 there has been an ongoing historical debate regarding the reasons for communist victory in Vietnam. Historians and commentators have offered a wide range of explanations for the communist success in Vietnam, including:

- the strength of Vietnamese nationalism
- failure of US–ARVN strategy in Vietnam
- the unstable and unviable nature of South Vietnamese governments following the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem
- international support provided to communist forces in Vietnam from China and the Soviet Union
- constraints imposed on the US Army by politicians (for example, it could not expand the war beyond South Vietnam in the mid-1960s despite the fact that the DRV did)
- declining support for the war on the American home front, including the influence of the anti-war movements.

North Vietnam's official explanation

In 2002, an English-language version of the NVA's official history of the Second Indochina War was published. The book offers intimate details of how the military organised its war and a unique insight into how the government of Vietnam explains its victory against the US–ARVN. Put simply, the official history argues that communist victory in Vietnam was underpinned by the unbreakable commitment of the Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian people to defeat intervention by the United States.

The official history of the North Vietnamese Army

With a steadfast resolve to fight and to win and with remarkable revolutionary fortitude, our cadre and soldiers responded promptly to the Party's and Chairman Ho Chi Minh's appeal to conduct a resistance war against the Americans to save the nation with an all-out effort to hone their skills; to master military science, the military arts ...; and to victoriously complete the great, glorious mission entrusted to them by the Party and the people.

Arm in arm with the entire population, our army defeated 'special warfare' [counterinsurgency], 'limited warfare' [US escalation] and 'Vietnamization' strategies that the American imperialists formulated and implemented in the southern half of our nation. We brought American airpower to its knees during our people's war ... We crushed the American plots and actions designed to cripple our main force units in the South and to blockade our sea lanes and destroy our land routes ...

Fighting alongside the revolutionary armies and patriotic citizens of Laos and Cambodia, our army contributed to the development of the revolutionary organizations and the people's armed forces of our allies, and our army, together with our allies, systematically escalated the scale of revolutionary warfare. Our army also received tremendous assistance from the peoples of these two friendly countries ...

→ Besides carrying out its combat role, our army devoted time and personnel to participate in the mobilization of the masses to perform basic construction tasks ... The army participated in the restoration and development of our economy and culture ...

After more than 20 years of simultaneously fighting and building during the resistance war against the Americans to save the nation, our army inscribed another glorious feat of arms into the pages of history: Working with the entire population, the army defeated the large army of the rash and powerful leader of the imperialist clique, liberated South Vietnam, defended North Vietnam, unified the nation, and completely fulfilled its international duties in the fraternal nations of Laos and Cambodia.

The loyalty of our army to the revolutionary cause of our Party and to our people is boundless, because it had brought independence and sovereignty to our nation and freedom and happiness to our people ... Because of its devotion to the cause of winning the independence and freedom of our nation, our army, fearing neither hardship nor difficulty, not retreating from danger and violence, built the glorious tradition of *determined to fight, determined to win*.

Our devious enemy wanted to isolate the sacred resistance war of the people of Vietnam and divide the peoples of the three Indochinese nations. Our army, on the other hand, always understood, strengthened, and displayed our Party's and our people's tradition of *pure international solidarity*.

Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975 the Military History Institute of Vietnam, translated by Merle L Pribbenow, published by the University Press of Kansas © 2002. www.kansaspress.ku.edu. Used by permission of the publisher.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Consider the official history from which the above extract is taken.
 - a Why could an official history like this be useful to historians studying the reasons for communist victory in the Second Indochina War?
 - b What concerns might a historian have regarding a source like this?
- 2 How does the official history describe the following?
 - a The United States
 - b The Vietnamese people
 - c The people of Laos and Cambodia
 - d The North Vietnamese Army (referred to as the People's Army of Vietnam in this text)
- 3 In your own words, summarise the explanation for the communist victory in Vietnam offered by this book.
- 4 Evaluate this extract as evidence of the reasons for communist victory in the Second Indochina War.

International factors

Many historians have tried to explain the Vietnamese communist victory by taking a broader perspective of the Second Indochina War. In this approach, historians analyse the conflict's international dimensions and argue that the support North Vietnam received from China and the Soviet Union was crucial to its ultimate victory. They also point out that the United States failed to gain widespread support for its military intervention in Indochina and that this was very damaging for the US–ARVN war effort.

George Herring

George Herring is one historian who argues that international factors played a very important role in the outcome of the war. He has written extensively on the conflict and made similar arguments in many books, lectures and articles. In 2002, Herring contributed a chapter to the book *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, arguing that: 'America's failure in Vietnam was as much diplomatic as military.'¹ Herring's main point is that, during its intervention in Indochina, the United States failed to find widespread international support for its policies in the region. In contrast, he notes that the DRV maintained close ties with both China and the USSR, which 'contributed mightily to North Vietnam's ability to resist the United States'.² They provided essential material and moral support. Herring therefore concludes that:

International factors thus played an important role in the outcome of the war. International opposition to U.S. policy, including that from some of America's key allies, limited the nation's freedom of action militarily and undermined its will to persist.

George Herring, 'Fighting without Allies: The International Dimensions of America's Failure in Vietnam', in Marc Gilbert (ed.), *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, Palgrave, New York, 2002, p. 92

Although Herring would not disregard other factors in an explanation of communist victory in 1975, he clearly believes that international factors were extremely significant.

QUESTIONS

According to Herring's interpretation, how did the following contribute to North Vietnam's success in the Second Indochina War?

- 1 Support provided to the DRV by China and the Soviet Union
- 2 The inability of the United States to gain broad support for its war in Indochina from the international community

Political factors

Other commentators emphasise political factors in explaining the communist victory in Vietnam. These historians generally agree that US involvement in Indochina helped to unify North Vietnam, which drew upon a long history of nationalist resistance to foreign intervention. They also suggest that US intervention damaged the reputation of the governments in South Vietnam, as many Vietnamese civilians saw them as puppets of the United States.

Colonel Bui Tin

Some commentators also argue that the South Vietnamese governments supported by the United States after 1954 were ineffective. Because these governments performed so poorly, they never achieved popularity with the South Vietnamese people and could not, therefore, build a powerful nationalist vision to match that of the DRV. In this view, no amount of military activity could solve that problem. In his book *Following Ho Chi Minh* (1995), former North Vietnamese military commander Bui Tin claims:

... [The Americans'] greatest mistake was to put too much faith in weapons and firepower while disregarding the human element. This was very evident in the way the Americans treated the Saigon regime. Their greatest problem was to find a political structure and

→ leaders with the ability to represent the South. Although Lyndon Johnson hailed Ngo Dinh Diem as the ‘Churchill of Asia’, he had many limitations. Southern intellectuals viewed him as a traditional mandarin who was outdated. He was also Roman Catholic in a population where the large majority of people are Buddhist. And his style of ruling through his family ... was taking things too far.

Colonel Bui Tin, *Following Ho Chi Minh: The Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1995, p. 58

In Bui Tin’s view, the United States failed in Vietnam because it could not solve the political problems in the South by building a strong and viable government that appealed to the nationalist aspirations of the Vietnamese people. This gave the communists a great advantage in the Second Indochina War and contributed to their ultimate success in 1975.

QUESTIONS

- 1 According to this interpretation:
 - a How did US intervention in Indochina benefit the cause of North Vietnam?
 - b How did it damage South Vietnamese governments?
- 2 According to Bui Tin, what were some of the specific problems with the governments that the United States supported in South Vietnam?

The power of communist strategy

A popular explanation for communist victory in Vietnam focuses on strategy. Some historians taking this view believe that the strategies developed by communist forces were better suited to the conflict than those developed by the US–ARVN. Although most historians accept that the communists made many mistakes and that the US–ARVN won many victories in battle, some deem the NLF–NVA more effective overall.

One of the main strengths of communist strategy was that they planned for a long, protracted war, which the United States could not afford. Because the communist forces were able to prolong the conflict and continue to increase American casualties, the war became more unpopular in the United States, which made it difficult to sustain. At the same time, US strategies could not win the war quickly and this played right into the hands of the enemy, who were prepared for a longer war.

It is important to note that most historians believe that on a tactical level, US–ARVN forces were generally more effective than the NLF–NVA. They claim that in all major encounters of the opposing forces the US–ARVN were more successful because they always inflicted heavier casualties on the enemy. They could not, however, translate this tactical strength into an overall victory in the conflict because it became too costly to sustain for the United States.

Phillip B Davidson on strategy

To sum it all up, the United States lost the war in the way that all wars are lost – to a superior strategy which availed itself of our political and psychological vulnerabilities while negating our great military strength. We failed to take advantage of the Communist vulnerabilities, and, in fact, fought the war in such a way as to intensify enemy strengths and our own weaknesses. We lost because the United States government was unable to comprehend the strategy of revolutionary war, and, thus, unable to counter it.

Phillip B Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946–1975*, Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1989, p. 811

- 1 According to this general view, what were some of the strengths of communist strategy in the Second Indochina War?
- 2 What evidence is there of US tactical superiority in the Second Indochina War?
- 3 Explain why tactical superiority did not translate into US victory.
- 4 How would you summarise Phillip B Davidson's views outlined in the extract?

A failure of US civilian leadership?

Many historians also argue that the US–ARVN war effort failed in Vietnam because it was not effectively led by US politicians. These historians generally agree that US leaders made several important mistakes in their approach to the Second Indochina War. Some of these include:

- That US presidents did not fully commit the United States military to Indochina. Even with escalation, the Johnson administration decided on a path of gradual escalation, which gave the communist forces time to adapt and prepare.
- That US presidents were too cautious in Indochina. In this view, historians argue that these presidents were too scared by the possibility of Chinese or Soviet intervention if they attacked North Vietnam, which severely limited their options in Indochina.
- Some historians also point out that US leaders placed too many constraints on US military commanders. On many occasions, Westmoreland requested permission to invade Cambodia and Laos to destroy communist bases and supply routes beyond Vietnam, but he was denied. This gave the NLF–NVA a major advantage for several years and allowed them to build up a powerful position by 1970.

In this interpretation, if US political leaders had been more effective, the Second Indochina War could have been won by the United States quickly.



Communist victory in Vietnam: historians debate

C Dale Walton

... US decision-makers enjoyed a large number of military options and had an unusually long time in which to shape an appropriate strategy, but made numerous poor decisions and thus squandered their opportunity to dominate the conflict. These errors occurred over more than a decade, from before the United States actively entered the war until after it disengaged militarily.

... [the US Government's] overall record of strategic decision-making on Vietnam is extraordinarily poor while MACV's is, at best, mediocre. Nevertheless, despite myriad errors, the United States almost succeeded in achieving its goals. By the time that the last US combat troops left Vietnam, the GVN [South Vietnamese Government] had become tolerably stable, the ARVN was a reasonably competent force, the internal communist revolution was on the wane ... and there were many other indications that South Vietnam was a developing country with good long-term prospects.

Nevertheless, US leaders were unwilling to pursue military-political options that were perceived to carry a high risk of causing a great-power confrontation [with China or the USSR]. They opted for war but attempted to limit their liability ... US policymakers trapped their country in a losing cycle because they were unwilling to take risks or make an effort commensurate with [equal to] the importance of their commitment.

The decision to involve US combat forces was questionable, but once taken ... required that the venture be pursued with conviction ... The risk of war with China or other difficulties were an inherent part of the Vietnam endeavor, and the attempt to make the war 'escalation-proof' unacceptably warped and weakened the [American] undertaking.

C Dale Walton, *The Myth of the Inevitable US Defeat in Vietnam*, Frank Cass, London, 2002, pp. 151–2

- 1 Summarise the main criticisms that historians have made of US political leaders in their management of the Second Indochina War.
- 2 Which of these criticisms does C Dale Walton emphasise in the extract above?
- 3 As a class, in small groups or as individuals, create a mind map detailing some of the different explanations for the communist victory in Vietnam.
- 4 In one detailed paragraph, explain why you believe communist forces were successful in Vietnam. Share your ideas with the class and take note of the variety of explanations your peers have offered.

Communist victory in Laos

As in Vietnam and Cambodia, a variety of anti-colonial ideas took root in Laos during French rule. After Laos was recognised as independent at the Geneva Conference in 1954, these different visions for the nation's future came into conflict (see Table 5.3).

TABLE 5.3 Main political groupings in Laos

Pro-Western	This group wanted to see Laos develop close connections with France, the United States and other non-communist European nations. The most prominent of these was Boun Oum, who ruled Laos as Prime Minister from 1948 to 1950 (and again during 1960–62).
Communist	This movement, called the Pathet Lao, developed close connections with the DRV during the First Indochina War (1946–54). It continued this relationship after the Geneva Conference by helping the NVA build and protect the Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1959. Over time, the Pathet Lao grew increasingly powerful with the support of North Vietnam and China. The most prominent leader of the Pathet Lao was Prince Souphanouvong.
Neutralist	The neutralists wanted to pursue a similar policy to Sihanouk in Cambodia to avoid being drawn into the Cold War. Their most prominent leader was Prince Souvanna Phouma. Although this group was influential in the 1950s and early 1960s, as the Second Indochina War intensified it became more difficult for neutralists in Laos, and their influence began to fade.

Internal political conflict in Laos emerged immediately after the Geneva Conference, and there were several attempts to create a coalition government including the different groups. By 1958, the first attempt had clearly failed and political tension turned into the beginning of civil war. In 1959, the alliance between the Pathet Lao and North Vietnam became even stronger as the North began to construct the Ho Chi Minh Trail and needed communist support in Laos to do so. These developments alarmed American observers in Laos, who worried that it could lead to a major strengthening of the Pathet Lao. The United States began to rapidly increase its support to the neutralists in Laos, and by early 1961 civil war in Laos intensified.

In July 1962, a new agreement on Laotian neutrality was signed in Geneva by the RLG, North Vietnam, the United States, China, the USSR and other international governments. The agreement promised that Laos would be respected as a neutral country, but this did little to reduce tensions. NVA forces continued to use Laos for the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the United States began a secret military build-up through the CIA to support anti-communist forces. By the mid-1960s, events in Laos were overshadowed by the escalation in Vietnam, but this did not conceal the fact that a large-scale civil war in Laos was under way or that international intervention was still occurring.

TABLE 5.4 The main forces fighting the civil war in Laos

NON-COMMUNIST	COMMUNIST
Royal Lao Government Vang Pao's Hmong army (supported by the United States through the CIA)	Pathet Lao North Vietnamese Army (NVA) (supported by the DRV and China)



Laos and the CIA



Communist victories in Indochina

abdicate

To give up the right to rule as monarch

Throughout the late 1960s, the Pathet Lao expanded its control over much of northern and eastern Laos. Bitter fighting took place between government forces and the communists, especially over a region called the Plain of Jars. The United States continued to support the anti-communists in Laos by supplying their militaries and providing mass US air support against the Pathet Lao.

When the Paris Peace Accords were signed in January 1973, the anti-communist position in Laos was severely weakened. All major US support evaporated, while the DRV and China continued to work closely with the Pathet Lao. RLG forces and Vang Pao's CIA-backed secret army were seriously undermined.

Aware of its growing weakness, the RLG made one last attempt to create a coalition government with Pathet Lao members but, again, this fell apart. In 1975, the Pathet Lao prepared for a last major push on RLG positions. On 2 December 1975, about seven months after the communist victories in Cambodia and Vietnam, King Savang Vatthana **abdicated** the throne and a new communist government was installed. Savang Vatthana was secretly executed in 1978.

The final collapse of anti-communist resistance in Laos, 1973–75

The war was not actually over yet, though it had been all but over after the 1973 accords ... The communists had overwhelmed most of the country.

The country's defense minister begged Vang Pao to send his men ... Yet even as he begged ... the government could not offer the general any more air support or reserves of troops called in from anywhere else. There were none. Vang Pao himself had only a handful of planes at his command.

... In addition to Hanoi's forces, arms and nonlethal aid, China had been increasing its assistance to the communist side in Laos dramatically since the late 1960s, with three divisions of Chinese troops entering the country to help the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese build roads, lay mines, and operate heavy weapons such as anti-aircraft guns. Vang Pao's army in early 1975 was a thin shadow of the fighting force it had been a decade ago ...

US bombers no longer flew over to provide Vang Pao and his men with cover, and US planes no longer dropped him new ammunition, parts, and weapons. Vang Pao could not rely on any Americans for advice either: the CIA station in the country had shrunk, and there were only four Americans left at the Hmong base ... The national leadership in Vientiane was crumbling, with Souvanna [Phouma] ailing – he had suffered a heart attack in 1974.

Joshua Kurlantzick, *A Great Place to Have a War: America in Laos and the Birth of a Military CIA*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2016, pp. 228–9

QUESTIONS

- 1 According to Kurlantzick, how were Vang Pao's forces weakened in the period following the Paris Peace Accords of 1973?
- 2 Outline the ways in which the Pathet Lao had become stronger in this period.
- 3 In what specific ways did the Pathet Lao benefit from international support?
- 4 With specific reference to the extract from Kurlantzick and other evidence gained from your investigation so far, account for the communist victory in Laos by the end of 1975.

Conclusion

After nearly 30 years of bitter struggle in Indochina, the region's anti-communist movements finally collapsed. All were fundamentally weakened by the declining support of the United States after January 1973. Each also suffered from its own weaknesses, including an inability to form a government that enjoyed widespread support in a time of severe political instability and war. The non-communist governments in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos all became notoriously corrupt and, in some cases, aggressive towards their own populations.

In contrast, the regional communist movements grew stronger throughout the 1960s. They certainly had their own difficulties and disagreements but, overall, they cooperated just enough to present a powerful challenge to the United States and its allies in Indochina. They also enjoyed the support of China and the USSR, which provided much-needed military and civilian aid. Although they were quite different, none of the communist governments that came to power in 1975 upheld decent records in relation to civil liberties or human rights. Some could be considered little more than brutal dictatorships.

Although the United States spent billions in an attempt to contain the spread of communism in South-East Asia, it failed. Some historians would even argue that it was decisively defeated in the process. Regardless, the fall of Cambodia, South Vietnam and Laos to communists in 1975 came as a humiliating loss to the United States but a great triumph for Indochinese communists.



SOURCE 5.8 A US soldier watches South Vietnamese refugees crowding a US Navy boat off the coast of Vietnam at the end of the Second Indochina War, 5 May 1975.

Chapter summary

- After the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, the United States began to disengage from Indochina.
- The withdrawal of US forces and financial assistance severely weakened anti-communist governments in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.
- By the end of 1975, the whole region of Indochina had fallen to communist movements.
- In April 1975, the Khmer Rouge came to power in Cambodia after a five-year war with the Lon Nol government.
- Just under two weeks after the Khmer Rouge victory, communist forces in Vietnam reunited their country under the leadership of the DRV government in Hanoi.
- In December 1975, the communist Pathet Lao overthrew the Royal Lao Government with the support of North Vietnam and China.
- A variety of explanations have been offered for the communist victories in Indochina by a range of different historians since 1975.

Further resources

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- Daddis, Gregory A, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011
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- Willbanks, James, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 2004

Endnotes

- 1 George Herring, 'Fighting without Allies: The International Dimensions of America's Failure in Vietnam', in Marc Gilbert (ed.), *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, Palgrave, New York, 2002, p. 77.
- 2 George Herring, 'Fighting without Allies: The International Dimensions of America's Failure in Vietnam', in Marc Gilbert (ed.), *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, Palgrave, New York, 2002, p. 77.

CHAPTER REVIEW

CHAPTER REVISION QUESTIONS

- 1 Describe the US withdrawal and disengagement from Indochina after 1973.
- 2 Explain the effect of the US withdrawal on the anti-communist movements in Indochina.
- 3 Outline the advantages that the communist movements in Indochina enjoyed that could help to explain their ultimate success in 1975. It may be best to do this separately for Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.
- 4 Compare and contrast the communist victories in Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos.

EXTENDED WRITING EXERCISE

- 5 Construct an essay in response to one or more of the following questions:
 - a Account for the communist victory in Vietnam in April 1975.
 - b Assess the importance of strategies and tactics to communist victory in the Second Indochina War.
 - c Assess the importance of nationalism to the outcome of the Second Indochina War.
 - d To what extent can the communist victories in Indochina be explained by international factors?
 - e 'The key factor explaining the communist victories in Indochina is declining US engagement with the region.' How accurate is this statement in relation to the communist victories in Indochina?



Essay planning 3

06

The Cambodian Revolution, 1975–79

STUDENTS WILL INVESTIGATE

- the rule of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979.



Modern History
Syllabus

An abandoned street in Phnom Penh after the Khmer Rouge fled the city in 1979



Introduction

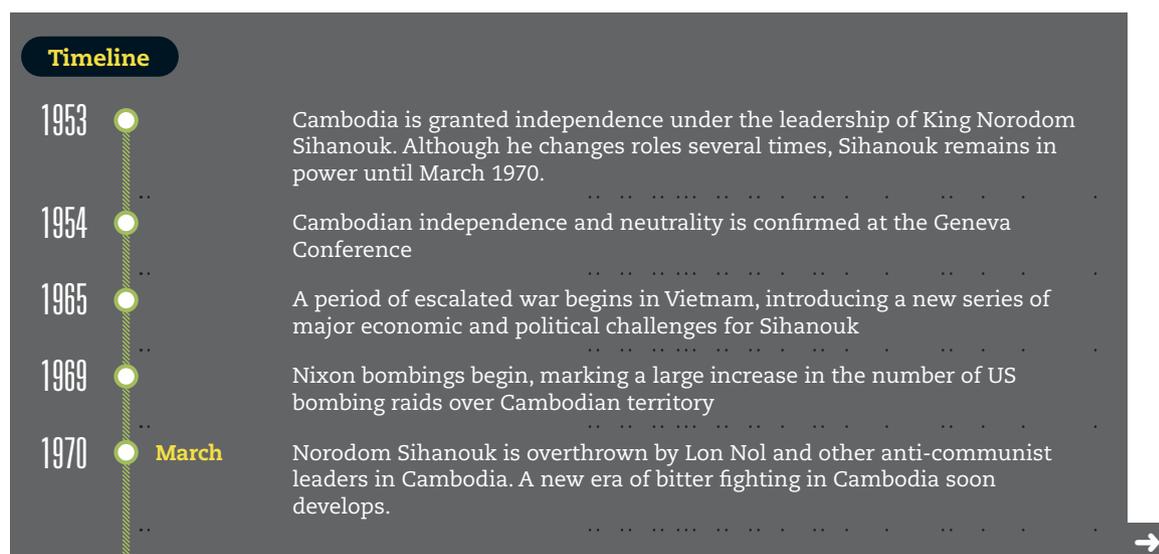
In April 1975, the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh and overthrew the Khmer Republic, which was barely five years old. Under the leadership of Pol Pot, the radical communists pursued a revolutionary path in Cambodia that resulted in unspeakable suffering of the Khmer people.

Although the Khmer Rouge only ruled for three years, nine months and 20 days, they completely overturned old ways of life and literally worked the people to breaking point. Democratic Kampuchea's paranoid leadership believed that spies were everywhere and set up a powerful police force to interrogate civilians. Through a large network of prisons and torture camps, the Khmer Rouge executed tens of thousands of suspected traitors. Hundreds of thousands more starved or were worked to death.

The Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) had a long and divisive history. When it took power in Cambodia, these divisions within the party did not disappear. In fact, in some ways they became worse. As the new government began to implement its policies, some factions within the party became critical of key decisions, and disagreements soon turned violent. Although the group loyal to Pol Pot (Democratic Kampuchea's Prime Minister and Secretary of the CPK) maintained dominance over the party, they did so by using brutal measures to eliminate all threat of opposition within the party and within the nation.

While in power, the Khmer Rouge also inflamed regional tensions in Indochina. The newly installed communist governments of Vietnam and Laos maintained close ties after 1975, adding to fears among some of the Khmer Rouge leadership that Vietnam would try to dominate Cambodia too. Border disputes and persistent Cambodian aggression towards Vietnam turned into all-out war in December 1978 when the Vietnamese military staged an invasion of Cambodia. Within six weeks, the Khmer Rouge were overthrown.

For the third time in less than 10 years, Cambodia's government was replaced in dramatic fashion; this time by an external power. The Khmer Rouge leadership escaped to northern Cambodia, where they remained a threat to the governments that followed. By the late 1990s, many of the Khmer Rouge's most senior leaders had died, but others surrendered to the government and received pardons for their role in the brutal regime. Only a few held out, but by the end of 1999 they were captured too. In the early 21st century, a small group of the Khmer Rouge's senior leadership was brought to trial for crimes against humanity and war crimes. Cambodia still bears the scars of what may be the darkest period of Indochina's modern history.





Four main phases of the Cambodian Revolution, 1975–79

Australian scholar David Chandler was one of the leading commentators on Cambodian history for his long career. His book *A History of Cambodia* remains a standard text on all aspects of the nation's history. In his chapter that covers the revolution of 1975–79, Chandler argues that there were four overlapping phases of this period (see Table 6.1).

TABLE 6.1 Phases of the Cambodian Revolution

PHASE	KEY FEATURES
1 Taking power (April 1975 to early 1976)	During their first months in power, the Khmer Rouge leaders remained hidden from public view and the new government was known only as 'angkar padevat' ('the revolutionary organisation'). They began moving all urban citizens to the countryside, closed the Cambodian borders and began to establish the foundations of a new and extremely brutal regime.
2 Formalising power (up to September 1976)	During 1976, many of the formal aspects of this regime were announced, but the role of CPK leaders remained secret. A new constitution was proclaimed in January 1976 and Cambodia was renamed Democratic Kampuchea (DK). The nation was restructured into seven major 'zones' and a four-year economic plan was designed to rapidly improve the nation's productive capacity, especially in agriculture.
3 Facing enemies and visiting China (September 1976 to 1977)	Partly as a result of opposition to some of the decisions taken in 1976, sharp divisions in the CPK leadership emerged. In December 1976, Pol Pot secretly told the highest ranking members of the CPK that Cambodia was under threat from internal enemies. Waves of violent arrests followed, with thousands of Khmer Rouge members tortured and executed. These attempts to find 'traitors' and 'spies' extended into entire zones whose leaders were considered weak and disloyal. In September 1977, just before visiting China, Pol Pot finally announced that the CPK ruled Democratic Kampuchea. During his visit to China, Pol Pot received a promise of ongoing assistance.
4 Confrontation with external enemies (1977–79)	With growing confidence in the support of China and increased fears in Cambodia that Vietnam was aiming to dominate the region, DK stepped up its antagonism of Vietnam. In response, Vietnam staged a short military invasion of Cambodia in December 1977. Negotiations following the invasion broke down, and China began to back away from unconditional support for Pol Pot. Vietnam launched another invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 after further antagonism by DK. This time, Vietnamese forces did not limit their advance and, instead, captured Phnom Penh and forced the CPK out of government. DK was replaced by a new pro-Vietnamese regime called the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK).

Based on the periodisation provided in David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 4th edn, Westview Press, Boulder, 2008, pp. 255–76



SOURCE 6.1 The day Phnom Penh falls to the Khmer Rouge (17 April 1975) a group of Khmer Rouge soldiers pose outside the French Embassy and are cheered on by civilians.

Taking power, 1975

When they marched into Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975, the Khmer Rouge were met by many Cambodians who welcomed them as heroes. Journalists captured scenes of celebration in some parts of the capital as citizens welcomed the end of the civil war while others were more worried about what communist rule would bring. Those who thought that a communist victory would mean the beginning of peace and stability for Cambodia were soon proved very wrong.

Forced evacuations

Within hours of their victory, Khmer Rouge soldiers began forcefully evacuating Phnom Penh; other major cities and towns soon

followed. The soldiers told civilians that a major US bombing campaign was about to strike the cities and that they would only be safe far from urban centres. The Khmer Rouge also made promises that more food and fresh water were available outside the cities and that, once shortages were overcome, citizens would be allowed to return home.

In Phnom Penh alone, about 2 million people were evacuated after 17 April. No-one was spared. The sick and elderly were forced out of hospitals and children were taken in groups from their schools. Many families were separated in the chaos, as people were prevented from travelling home or contacting their relatives.

The chaos intensified as Khmer Rouge soldiers began to openly target anyone who had worked for the Khmer Republic. Government officials, soldiers and public servants were the first victims of the new regime. Some were murdered in gruesome public executions, but the majority were arrested and dealt with in secret.



Evacuation

The evacuation of Phnom Penh, April 1975

SIM SOTH REMEMBERS THE EVACUATION OF PHNOM PENH IN APRIL 1975

Sim Soth was working as a cyclo rider (bicycle taxi) in the Cambodian capital when the Khmer Rouge entered in 1975. The following is part of his recollection of the experiences that followed, taken from a written statement he made in 2005.

On April 17, 1975, I went out to earn a living as usual. A few hours later, I witnessed Khmer Rouge soldiers entering Phnom Penh. People came out, waving white cloths and white shirts, welcoming the Khmer Rouge. Suddenly, they fired into the air, ordering people to leave the town, alleging there would be American bombing. Like other people, I hastily departed at 10 o'clock with my brother, my colleagues from the pagoda [temple] and the monks. On the crowded road, I heard the voices of people asking for their parents and relatives, and the voices of hungry children asking for food. The Khmer Rouge confiscated people's belongings. Those who refused would be killed or taken away. While I was walking, a female Khmer Rouge soldier grabbed my collar and asked if I was a soldier. She pushed me backward when I told her I was a student. I continued my journey ... On the way, I saw a lot of recently swollen dead bodies. After three days of walking, I reached Takeo province [in the south of Cambodia, bordering South Vietnam].

Sim Soth, quoted in Kamboly Dy, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975–79)*, Documentation Center of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, 2007, p. 15





QUESTIONS

- 1 What concerns might a historian have in working with a statement made by an eyewitness 30 years after an event like this?
- 2 Outline some of the strategies that a historian might use to validate the claims made by Sim Soth in this statement.
- 3 From the extract, make a list of all the events and incidents that Sim Soth claims to have seen on 17 April 1975.

PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE



SOURCE 6.2 Civilians leave Phnom Penh after the Khmer Rouge victory, 17 April 1975

QUESTIONS

- 1 Describe what is happening in this photograph.
- 2 To what extent does this photograph corroborate Sim Soth's testimony?
- 3 Evaluate the photograph as evidence of the evacuation of Phnom Penh in 1975.
- 4 Using *both* sources and other evidence, describe the evacuation of Phnom Penh after the Khmer Rouge victory of April 1975. Your response should be at least one paragraph in length.



Phnom Penh

The new regime

In April 1975, the new government that replaced Lon Nol's Khmer Republic was only known as 'angkar padevat' ('the revolutionary organisation'). The role of the CPK and the identity of its leading figures remained secret for several months. Nevertheless, we now know that the individuals in charge of the Khmer Rouge takeover made all major decisions in Cambodia from April 1975. These individuals included:

- Pol Pot (formerly Saloth Sar): General Secretary of the CPK (often referred to as 'Brother Number One')
- Nuon Chea: Deputy to Pol Pot and one of the most powerful men in the CPK
- Members of the CPK's Central Committee: So Phim, Ieng Sary, Son Sen, Ta Mok and Vorn Vet.

POL POT (1925–98)

Alamy Stock Photo/Lyndon Giffard



Born Saloth Sar in a small Cambodian town, Pol Pot was raised in relative comfort. His parents owned agricultural land and earned enough money for him to receive a good education in Cambodia. In 1949, Pol Pot received a scholarship to a technical school in Paris, France, where he lived for the next four years. During his time there, Pol Pot met young members of the communist movement and

became convinced that Marxist revolution held the answers to Cambodia's anti-colonial future. When he returned to Cambodia in 1953, Pol Pot joined the Khmer communist movement loosely known as the Khmer Rouge or 'Red Khmers' (at that stage, the party was officially called the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party, KPRP) and took up a job as a school teacher.

Throughout the 1960s, Sihanouk tried to eliminate the most radical groups within Cambodia. Many older, more moderate members

of the KPRP were arrested and executed. As positions within the leadership of the Cambodian communist movement opened up, they were increasingly filled by younger radicals such as Pol Pot. In 1960, the KPRP renamed itself the Workers' Party of Kampuchea (WPK) and by the late 1960s Pol Pot was leading an open rebellion against the Cambodian Government. In 1966, the party was renamed the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK).

After successfully winning the Cambodian civil war against the Khmer Republic in April 1975, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge took power in Cambodia. They held government for just under four years and were then overthrown by invading Vietnamese forces. Pol Pot and most of the Khmer Rouge survived by retreating to remote bases in the northern countryside, where they continued to cause many problems for future governments in Cambodia. Pol Pot died in relative obscurity in 1998 after most of his party abandoned him. His last major interview was conducted by an American journalist, Nate Thayer, in which he showed no regret for the rule of his government between 1975 and 1979.

- 1 What role did the CPK play in the government that overthrew the Khmer Republic in 1975?
- 2 Who was Pol Pot and what was his role in the CPK in 1975?
- 3 Account for Pol Pot's rise to the leadership of the CPK.
- 4 Identify some of the other main leaders of the CPK at this stage.
- 5 By what name was the ruling group known in April 1975?

Democratic Kampuchea

During mid-December 1975, the National Congress of Cambodia (mainly members of the CPK) met in Phnom Penh to establish a new constitution. The document agreed upon at this meeting included 16 chapters covering a total of 21 articles outlining the new nation's approach to government, the economy, foreign policy and other key aspects of society. According to the constitution, Cambodia was to be renamed Democratic Kampuchea (DK), and a new government was formally established on 5 January 1976.

In appearance DK's constitution was modern and democratic. It allowed freedom of religion, freedom of speech and promised a fulfilling life of work for all citizens. Article 12 stated the following:

“ Every citizen of Kampuchea enjoys full rights to a constantly improving material, spiritual, and cultural life.

Every citizen of Democratic Kampuchea is guaranteed a living.

All workers are the masters of their factories.

All peasants are the masters of the rice paddies and fields.

All other labourers have the right to work.

There is absolutely no unemployment in Democratic Kampuchea.

The constitution of Democratic Kampuchea, which came into effect on 5 January 1976; made available by the Documentation Center of Cambodia, http://www.dccam.org/Archives/Documents/DK_Policy/DK_Policy_DK_Constitution.htm”

The constitution also included provisions for an elected parliament called the People's Representative Assembly and a series of government ministries such as defence, foreign relations and the economy.

In practice, however, the CPK continued to rule Cambodia in secret, often overriding important features of the constitution when it suited its purposes. In truth, Pol Pot's government never intended to uphold the rights outlined in the constitution. Providing clear evidence that the document was a facade, the People's Representative Assembly met only once, in April 1976.

- 1 What was the new name for Cambodia from 6 January 1976?
- 2 Outline the key features of the new constitution governing Cambodia. Use the link provided to conduct some further reading if necessary.
- 3 Assess the importance of the new constitution to Democratic Kampuchea.



Aims of the regime

Pol Pot's ruling clique (in effect, the CPK party centre) held all powerful positions in DK. Some of this group had spent time in France and were involved in the party's struggle against the Cambodian Government from the late 1960s. During their years in hiding, they developed a radical vision for Cambodia and began to implement some of this in the areas they controlled during the civil war (mainly in the remote countryside). Most of these leaders were heavily influenced by communists in China.

Chinese communism

Chinese communists were led by Mao Zedong, who was Chairman of the People's Republic of China from 1949 to 1959 (though he continued to lead the Communist Party until his death in 1976). Mao believed that China could be rebuilt as a communist state through the revolutionary enthusiasm of the Chinese people and especially the peasants. He collectivised the nation's agriculture and brutally eliminated any opposition to communist rule. In 1966, Mao also tried to revitalise Chinese communism by launching the Cultural Revolution, which attempted to destroy all influences in China that did not support communist ideals. In the decade-long process, China was plunged into chaos and it is likely that over 1 million people died. Despite the destructive outcomes of Mao's policies, many leaders in DK looked up to China's example as they made their own ruthless attempt to recreate Cambodian society.

Once in power, the regime hoped to rebuild Cambodia into a regional power. To realise this goal, the Pol Pot government aimed to achieve the following:

autarky

National self-sufficiency. If a nation achieves autarky, it is essentially free of major dependence on external powers for support. Although DK never achieved this, it was part of its vision for Cambodia.

- **Self-reliance (autarky):** The government aimed to make Cambodia strong with minimum input from outside sources. It believed that the Khmer people could heroically rebuild their nation through hard work and a common purpose. As soon as it took power, the CPK closed the borders and only maintained diplomatic relations with a small collection of communist nations.
- **Rapid economic and social transformation:** To rebuild Cambodia, DK's leaders aimed to transform the nation immediately. In 1975, they evacuated the main cities and towns, moving the entire population into the countryside. Only about 40 000 people remained in urban centres to work in Cambodia's few factories, complete administrative work for the government or protect the capital in military units stationed there. One of the major principles underpinning the CPK's desire to evacuate the cities was an attempt to destroy class divisions in Cambodia by making everyone live as equals. This meant forcing most of the population to live as peasant farmers, a group the Khmer Rouge romanticised for being 'uncorrupted' by modern capitalism. By evacuating the cities, the Khmer Rouge effectively eliminated a major potential for opposition.
- **Racial purity:** Racism was another strong theme of Khmer Rouge ideology. They claimed that: 'there is in Kampuchea one single nation and one single language, the Khmer language ... The various nationalities no longer exist.'¹ In particular, the party centre reserved special hatred for the Vietnamese. They wanted to remove all remaining Vietnamese influence from Cambodia. Soon, anyone with suspected links to the neighbouring country became a target of DK security. Thousands of Vietnamese migrants in Cambodia were targeted and many Cambodians with links to Vietnam suffered a similar fate. But the Khmer Rouge also targeted other minority groups. These included the Muslim Cham and small groups of Thai and Laotians. Although the DK regime did not attempt to develop a modern scientific justification for their racism as the Nazi regime in Germany did, many historians such as Ben Kiernan argue that the Pol Pot regime specifically targeted ethnic minorities and that this amounted to **genocide**.

genocide

The targeted use of violence against a national, ethnic or religious group with an intent to destroy it



The DK national anthem

Nationalism and communism in Democratic Kampuchea

Historians have argued for many years about the most important ideas underpinning Democratic Kampuchea. Because its leaders openly claimed to be Marxist-communists, many scholars have claimed that DK is best understood as a communist regime. Many of the reforms it introduced certainly aimed to achieve a version of a Marxist utopia following the tradition of Mao in China. These included the destruction of economic classes and an attempt to destroy all elements of capitalism in Cambodia. →

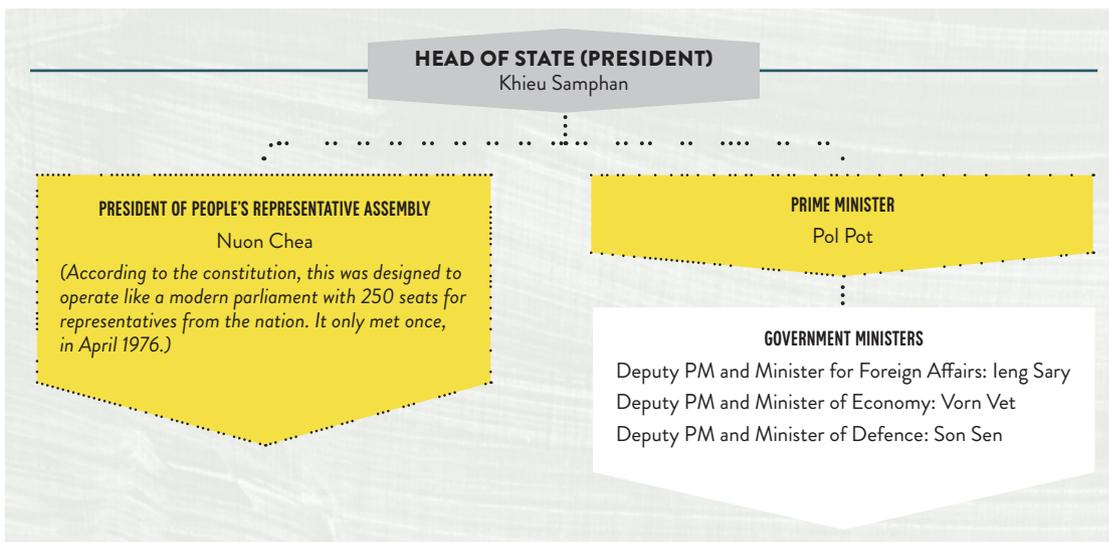


At the same time, historians have also pointed out that the DK regime held strong nationalist goals. They claim that DK's aspirations of self-reliance, racial purity and the creation of a powerful nation demonstrate a stronger influence of nationalism than communism. There is no doubt that the Khmer Rouge also romanticised aspects of Cambodia's past and promoted hatred of certain 'outsiders', such as the Vietnamese.

Like many other communist states such as China, North Korea, Cuba and Vietnam, the DK regime appears to have been a complex blend of *both* nationalism and communism.

Ruling Cambodia

DK was formally organised on the basis of the constitution implemented in January 1976. At the only meeting of the People's Representative Assembly, held in April that year, a new government was declared with a head of state, prime minister and departments designed to manage the nation.



SOURCE 6.3 Political structure of Democratic Kampuchea

Democratic centralism

DK was always run in secret by the CPK, who generally operated according to the principle of **democratic centralism**. In effect, this meant that the highest ranking members of the CPK, Pol Pot and his closest associates, were elected but also made all key decisions. Lower ranking members simply had to follow orders without question or risk being removed from their post or face arrest and possibly even execution.

akg-images/Pictures From History



SOURCE 6.4 Nuon Chea, 'Brother Number Two' and Pol Pot's closest confidant, during the Democratic Kampuchea period, c. 1977

democratic centralism

A process first used openly in the Soviet Union under the leadership of the communist Vladimir Lenin. The main idea in democratic centralism is that once a party decision has been reached at the centre, all members are bound to follow it. Because decision making was controlled by the Pol Pot faction in the CPK, there was hardly any evidence of democratic processes in action during the DK years.

CPK party guidelines on democratic centralism

- a Party leadership at the top echelon [rank] ... is established by a vote. However, in places where conditions are not suitable, the party will make the decisions and appointments ...
- c It is the duty of a member to respect the majority (the lower echelon must respect the upper echelon) ... organisations at all levels of the party must respect the central leadership ...
- d Party members and committees at all levels must respect and carry out all decisions and directives of the party ...

'A Short Guide for the Application of Party Statutes', quoted in Timothy Carney (ed.), *Communist Party Power in Kampuchea (Cambodia): Documents and Discussion*, Data Paper No. 106, Southeast Asia Program, Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1977

QUESTIONS

- 1 In your own words, explain the term 'democratic centralism'.
- 2 From the extract of the CPK's party guidelines provided, what power, rights and responsibilities did the following have?
 - a The party leadership
 - b The party members
- 3 With close reference to this source, explain the role of the Khmer Rouge in Democratic Kampuchea.

Foreign policy

DK's leadership hoped to build Cambodia into a powerful and self-reliant nation. When they took power, the Khmer Rouge shunned most of the wider world by closing their borders, shutting down many embassies and preventing most foreign journalists from entering the country. DK only maintained diplomatic ties with a small number of international powers, including China, North Korea, Cuba, Romania, Yugoslavia, Laos and, until 1978, Vietnam. Its main international alliance was with China, which it hoped would help protect Cambodia against potential Vietnamese aggression.

From the beginning, DK's leaders were extremely overconfident that they could achieve greatness. They were convinced they were building the purest revolution the world had ever seen and that this would underpin the nation's economic transformation and military might. DK's increasing antagonism of Vietnam after 1975 was one expression of this overconfidence, and it came to be a key reason for the regime's overthrow in 1979.

The Sino-Soviet split had a clear impact on DK's foreign policy. The Khmer Rouge developed close links with China, while Vietnam had developed closer ties with the Soviet Union from the late 1960s. The antagonism between China and the Soviet Union was reflected in the growing tension between DK and Vietnam.

The impact of the regime on Cambodia

To achieve its aims, the DK regime:

- divided the people into zones and groups so that they could be more easily controlled
- abolished all private property, including money
- enforced long working hours to achieve the goals set out by the government in its four-year plan
- policed the entire nation through a growing network of secret operatives (the Santebal), who managed DK's extensive prison system



Khmer Rouge
foreign policy

- conducted periodic purges of the party and other key institutions to ensure that only loyal supporters remained in positions of power
- tried to gain and maintain the support of larger communist powers, most importantly China.

The main zones in Democratic Kampuchea

Under DK rule, Cambodia was divided into six major zones in 1976 (a seventh was added in 1977) and other 'special regions'. Each zone was designed to be run by a main administrator who answered directly to the government, following the principle of democratic centralism. Freedom of movement between the zones was forbidden, but groups or individuals could be moved as needed. The zones were used to isolate the people from each other and make it easier for the central government to monitor the activity of the population. Zones that became less productive soon found themselves the target of extreme punishments.



SOURCE 6.5 The new zones imposed on Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge

The four-year plan

During 1976, a group of DK officials designed the government's only economic plan. Ideally, this was the blueprint for the nation's economic development between 1977 and 1980, but it was never published or pursued consistently and the regime was overthrown before the four years were complete.

collectivisation

The process of bringing property under the ownership of a central government or group. This policy had been implemented in the Soviet Union and China in an attempt to destroy the power of wealthy land and factory owners. These experiences became an inspiration to the DK leadership, who took the idea to new extremes after 1975.

The four-year plan required complete **collectivisation** of private property. Land and all other belongings were no longer owned by individuals but by the government, and they were to be used for the common good. In addition, the four-year plan aimed to dramatically increase rice production in Cambodia. At a minimum, zones were required to produce three tonnes of rice per hectare of land. Those believed to be the most fertile areas were required to produce up to seven tonnes per hectare. These were impossible targets in a country where the average yield rarely exceeded two tonnes of rice per hectare.

Beyond collectivisation and rice production, the four-year plan also aimed to develop a range of other industries in Cambodia. These included fishing, timber trade, livestock, rubber and some small factories. By far, however, rice production remained the government's most prized industry. Not only would rice feed a growing population of Khmers but the surplus they planned to create could be sold on the international market. DK leaders hoped that this would provide the government with hard currency that could be used to buy modern weapons and machinery.

Life under the Khmer Rouge

Under DK leadership, almost every aspect of daily life was managed by the government. The Cambodian people were told where they could live, in what industry they could work, what they could eat and often who they could marry.

After 1975, the Cambodian people were divided into two main groups: the 'base people' and the 'new people'. Anyone who had been forced to move to the countryside in 1975 was considered one of the 'new people'. They were generally treated as inferior and rarely reached positions of power within their new communities. Those treated the worst were members of Cambodia's old middle and upper classes, such as doctors, teachers and other professionals who were seen to have been 'corrupted' by wealth and modernity.

DK also attacked traditional Cambodian culture by breaking apart important institutions. One of the most obvious targets of the regime was the family, a very central part of Cambodian life. Children were taught to shun 'family-ism' and devote themselves to Angkar. Many families were broken up by the regime and children were encouraged to report their parents to authorities if they suspected anti-government behaviour.

DK also targeted Cambodia's dominant religion, Buddhism. Monks were defrocked and the Khmer Rouge defaced or destroyed many of the nation's pagodas (temples). The fundamental idea was to 'purify' Cambodia of unwanted people and unwanted traditions, removing all obstacles to the building of a new society in which individuals would think and act differently.

- 1 Identify some of the main aims of the four-year plan developed in 1976.
- 2 Outline the various ways in which the Cambodian people were divided and managed under DK rule.
- 3 Explain how the methods used by the Khmer Rouge expressed the regime's underlying aims.

Working for Democratic Kampuchea

Khmer Rouge leaders believed that with a great outpouring of revolutionary energy the people of Cambodia could rebuild their country into a strong and prosperous nation. As inspiration the regime pointed to the great achievements of the Khmer people in the Angkorian period (c. 800–1431), in which Cambodia was a mighty power whose wealth was based largely on agricultural production. They held a highly romanticised view of the past and an unrealistic view of what could be achieved in the much smaller nation of the 1970s following a brutal civil war.

DK leaders forced everyone in Cambodia to work extremely hard. Most people served in agricultural roles to support the expansion of Cambodia's rice production. Many people completed the traditional activities of planting and harvesting, while thousands of others were forced to build dams and canals to irrigate new land.

On average, Cambodians living under the Khmer Rouge worked for about 12 hours per day, seven days per week. Although conditions varied from zone to zone, they were generally very difficult and became worse over time. No matter how much rice a zone produced, the central government always took its quota for the export market. This often meant that the amount of rice left for daily consumption was inadequate and many people suffered from malnutrition and overwork. When people fell sick, there were rarely any modern medicines available for treatment. Sometimes those who fell ill were suspected of laziness or deliberate obstruction. They could be made to work extra-long hours, beaten or even executed.

During 1975–79, most Cambodian children were also made to work for DK. Some provisions for school and education were made, but these were often a small part of the day and took place before the children were sent out to work.



alg-images/Pictures From History

SOURCE 6.6 Mass forced labour in the Cambodian countryside, 1975–79. Many irrigation projects like this one failed for lack of engineering knowledge, since engineers were frequently killed as 'intellectuals'.

A survivor remembers his experiences under the Khmer Rouge

Sovannora leng lived under DK rule before fleeing to Thailand in the late 1970s. He was resettled in Australia as a refugee, and in 2014 published his memoir of these experiences in a book called *Surviving Year Zero: My Four Years Under the Khmer Rouge*. The following is an extract from that book.

In March 1978, our leaders told us, 'We've got to go and help another district up near the mountains ... We have to help in building canals and dams, because they don't get enough water during the monsoon season.'

I was excited to be going. I thought this might give me a chance to look for my brother.

We were given a meal early the next morning, then we packed and left. We marched in a line along the dykes toward the main road. I felt good. Huor [my friend] was walking behind me, and I was thinking about my brother. I hadn't seen Sivanchan for more than two years. We had a ladies' line following us too. My brother Chandy was with me and my two sisters were in the line behind. I looked around, paid more attention, and discovered that most of the village was there.

We all had baskets on our backs and tools in our arms ... The sky was blue and bright and the sunshine hot ...

... soon we approached the area where I had been caught and jailed. Rice fields were near the road and men were working there under armed guard.

We had been working for the past two and a half years now. We survived basically on toughness – the will to survive.

Finally, we stopped again at an empty place designated for us by a Khmer Rouge man on a bicycle. 'You can rest here,' he said. 'Rest and then you will work.'

I sat back against a tree and watched as our cook made his stove ... We sat around and ate, but the amount was so small it hardly touched our stomach. After the cook cleaned up, many of us went to the cooking area to search for anything that had spilt from the wok or the rice cooker.

... We were told again the consequences of sneaking off to find additional food. And the leaders explained the irrigation system we were going to build, and how it would impact on the rice fields ...

When the leaders left, we spoke among ourselves.

'This is like execution,' said a boy from another village. 'Just another way to execute us without weapons.'

'But we have no choice,' someone else commented.

The first boy spoke again. 'It really is another form of execution,' he said. 'They work us too hard. We don't get enough food. This is how they kill us so they don't have to feed us all.'

I didn't say anything. I knew this boy would be dead soon. I thought about our village, where so many had died. The Khmer Rouge didn't care.

Sovannora leng, *Surviving Year Zero: My Four Years Under the Khmer Rouge*, Five Mile Press, Scoresby, 2014, pp. 180–3, with permission

- 1 How did the DK leadership use a romanticised view of the Angkorian period to guide their vision of the future for Cambodia?
- 2 Closely examine the extract from Sovannora leng's memoir. How could it be used as evidence of daily life in Democratic Kampuchea?
- 3 Using all of the information provided, the evidence from Source 6.6 and the extract from Sovannora leng's memoir, create a detailed description of the working conditions of most Cambodians during the DK period. Your description should be 300–500 words in length.

Internal conflict

For its entire history, the Khmer communist movement experienced major divisions. These continued after 1975. Through secrecy, violence and political skill, the most radical members of the party surrounding Pol Pot maintained their grip on power throughout the entire period of DK, but they were paranoid that the regime was under threat.



There were several rebellions against the DK government from the civilian population. In their first year in power, the Khmer Rouge faced a revolt of the Cham Muslims. Perhaps the largest uprising took place in 1978, when a rebellion broke out in the Eastern Zone lasting several months. The scenario descended into a mini civil war and ended with the indiscriminate killing of tens of thousands of Cambodians from the Eastern Zone by the DK regime.

Purges in Democratic Kampuchea

Although the CPK specifically targeted suspected traitors well before it came to power in 1975, the scale of its brutality was limited. In 1976 and 1977, this changed. There were several reasons for this:

- Tension between DK and Vietnam continued to grow after 1975, leading some in the regime to fear Vietnamese interference in Cambodia. In 1977, Vietnam signed a formal alliance with the communist government in Laos, which only added to the DK leadership's fears that Vietnam intended to dominate all of Indochina.
- During 1976 and 1977, it also became clear that the policies aimed at rapidly improving Cambodia's productive capacity were not working according to plan. Many zones simply could not reach their targets of rice production, starvation became rampant and resistance grew (though not to overwhelming proportions).
- The party centre also wanted to remove all recognition of Vietnamese influence over Cambodian communism, and proposed to change the founding date of the Khmer Rouge to 1960 instead of 1951, when the movement was actually founded with Vietnamese assistance. Anyone suspected of harbouring ongoing affinity with Vietnam was eliminated.

In December 1976, Pol Pot made a speech to an inner circle of CPK leaders during a secret 'study group' in Phnom Penh. In that speech, he said:

“ We cannot locate it precisely. The illness must emerge to be examined ... [previously] we searched for the microbes within the party without success. They are buried. As our socialist revolution advances, however, seeping more strongly into every corner of the party, the army and among the people, we can locate the evil microbes ... Those who defend us must be truly adept ... They must observe everything, but not so that those being observed are aware of it.

An extract from Pol Pot's speech in December 1976, quoted in David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 4th edn, Westview Press, Boulder, 2008, p. 267

The following year, the government initiated major purges of the Northern and Northwestern zones, followed by the Eastern Zone in 1978. Here, famines and other problems occurred, which became the basis for accusations of disloyalty, sabotage and treason. The regime sent military forces in to purge these zones, and a wave of killings ensued. In addition, DK's internal security organisation, the Santebal, began a series of arrests and torture across the country in an attempt to eliminate any disloyal members of society.

The Santebal and the DK prison network

DK developed an extensive network of prisons and interrogation centres across the country run by the Santebal (Special Branch of the state security service). There were about 196 major security centres, broken into three levels: high, middle and low. High-level centres were only in the Central Zone (Phnom Penh), mid-level centres were managed by all seven major zones and the low-level centres were smaller regional operations. When civilians were arrested, they were sent to the different centres depending on their alleged crimes. Thieves might be sent to a low-level prison, while a member of the party accused of treason was likely to be sent to the higher levels.

The Santebal used confessions of tortured suspects to find new 'evil microbes' to arrest. These were often surviving members of the Lon Nol regime, criminals, those suspected of collaborating with the Vietnamese →



or the CIA, members of ethnic minorities and party members believed to have lost faith in the revolution.

By far the single largest security centre was S-21 in Tuol Sleng (a former school in a district of Phnom Penh). At its height, this prison and torture centre had over 1000 staff members who oversaw a well-organised and extremely brutal operation. In 1975, S-21 had only 200 prisoners. By 1977, this reached over 5000. There were 12 known survivors of S-21 from a total of about 14000 prisoners.

As of 2007, the Documentation Center of Cambodia, the leading institution conducting research into the crimes of DK, listed a total of 19733 mass graves uncovered since the overthrow of the regime. There may be more.



Alamy Stock Photo/MA/RKA

SOURCE 6.7 Pictures of victims of the Khmer Rouge regime displayed in the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (S-21)



The Killing Fields Museum



Adapted from: <https://gsp.yale.edu/satellite-maps-mass-grave-and-prison-sites-1975-1979>

SOURCE 6.8 DK regime mass graves and prison sites

- 1 Describe the opposition to the DK regime.
- 2 Explain why the party centre took a more aggressive and violent approach to eliminating 'traitors' during 1977 and 1978.
- 3 Outline the role of the Santebal in Democratic Kampuchea.
- 4 Assess the importance of political violence in Democratic Kampuchea.

The end of Democratic Kampuchea, 1978–79

A major inspiration for the wave of killings in 1977 and 1978 was the growing suspicion that Vietnamese agents had infiltrated Cambodia. Many DK leaders hated and feared the Vietnamese. Pol Pot was highly critical of the Vietnamese communists, who he believed had always acted in their own interests by pursuing Vietnam's independence and revolution *before* offering any major assistance to Cambodia. DK leaders also worried that the newly reunited Vietnam was looking to expand its influence across Indochina.

The issues that brought all of this to a climax were border disputes. Many Khmers believed that southern Vietnam was the rightful possession of Cambodia since it was historically part of the Angkorian Empire in the Middle Ages. They called it Kampuchea Krom ('Lower Cambodia'). DK tried to move the border markers between Vietnam and Cambodia further into South Vietnam to expand the land it owned. In the process, it conducted violent raids of Vietnamese villages, creating as many as 750 000 refugees. Predictably, Vietnam responded with force.



The Vietnamese invasions of Cambodia, 1977 and 1978

In December 1977, Vietnamese forces staged a small-scale invasion of eastern Cambodia as a warning to the DK leadership that their antagonism would not be tolerated. When they retreated to Vietnam, they also took a small group of defectors who left Cambodia and developed close ties with the Vietnamese Government. In effect, this group became a government-in-waiting.

Throughout 1978, however, disputes continued and all attempts to negotiate broke down. After signing a new treaty with the Soviet Union in December, the Vietnamese Government made a final decision to completely overthrow the DK regime. It launched Operation Blooming Lotus on Christmas Day, and by 7 January 1979 Pol Pot and his government had abandoned Phnom Penh, fleeing to northern Cambodia and Thailand.



SOURCE 6.9 In a staged photograph, a troop of Khmer Rouge guerillas file through the jungle of western Cambodia. Pol Pot strides out in the lead, followed by his personal bodyguard and then Brother Number Two, Nuon Chea. Ieng Sary (in black) is 11th from left. The message to the Vietnamese and the outside world: 'We're still here and a viable force'.

The Chinese invasion of Vietnam

By this stage, DK's main international ally was China. Although China was a major supporter of North Vietnam during the Second Indochina War, from the late 1960s North Vietnam sided more with the USSR in the Sino–Soviet split. After 1975 China became increasingly concerned that a reunited Vietnam on its southern border could be dangerous. Partly as a result of this, China provided Pol Pot's regime with military supplies and moral support after 1975.

In response to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in late 1978, China moved to take military action against Vietnam. In a campaign that lasted about one month (17 February – 16 March 1979), Chinese forces invaded the northern provinces of Vietnam. The invasion was designed to be a limited action for fear of drawing Vietnam's ally, the USSR, into the conflict. China primarily aimed to force a Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia and demonstrate to Vietnam that it remained the most powerful nation in the region. China did not, however, demand the reinstatement of Democratic Kampuchea.



Source: <http://www.history.ca>

SOURCE 6.10 The Chinese invasion of Vietnam, February 1979

The Chinese invasion of Vietnam was a disaster. Chinese forces were badly mauled by the NVA and China failed to achieve any of its main objectives before withdrawing. The invasion was another reminder of the ongoing power of nationalism in the region and the growing strength of the reunified Vietnam.

Conclusion

The new government in Cambodia, called the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), was made up largely of Khmer Rouge defectors who pledged loyalty to Vietnam – including the future Prime Minister of Cambodia, Hun Sen. Under the PRK, the forced resettlement and collectivisation imposed on Cambodia under DK were removed and thousands of Cambodians moved back to the cities, while others fled to Thailand as refugees.

Within weeks, some foreign journalists began moving into Cambodia and reports of the severe brutality soon flooded the global media. In October 1979, Australian journalist John Pilger released one of the first full-length documentary films about the rule of the Khmer Rouge: *Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia*. The news of what had taken place shocked the world.

Since 1979, the violence and cruelty of the Khmer Rouge has become even clearer. One of the world's leading historians of this period has concluded:

“ In the Cambodian countryside from 1975 to 1979, the CPK's extreme revolution caused the deaths of approximately 1.7 million people from overwork, diseases, starvation and, in probably 500 000 cases, outright murder of political and ethnic 'enemies'.

Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2007, p. 547



Cambodia now has numerous memorials and monuments dedicated to those who suffered at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, but it has taken a long time for the Cambodian people to come to terms with what happened during those years. The process of national healing is bound to take many more years.

For their part, the Khmer Rouge retreated to northern Cambodia and Thailand in 1979. From there, they regularly conducted kidnappings and assassinated government leaders. The main factor preventing further Khmer Rouge atrocities was the presence of Vietnamese forces, who remained in Cambodia until 1989.

After their overthrow, the Khmer Rouge developed illegal black markets from northern Cambodia, including gambling, prostitution and people-trafficking. During the 1980s and 1990s, many Khmer Rouge leaders surrendered to the government in Phnom Penh and were granted pardons for their role in the DK regime. Some hardliners, such as Pol Pot and Ta Mok, refused to give in. Pol Pot died in obscurity in 1998 and Ta Mok was arrested in 1999 while hiding in a remote base in the province of Anlong Veng.

Cambodia has struggled to throw off decades of colonialism, war and repressive rule. The current Prime Minister, Hun Sen, served with the Khmer Rouge before defecting in 1977. He has increasingly developed dictatorial rule in Cambodia, threatening journalists, opposing politicians with violence and allegedly manipulating elections. He has ruled Cambodia for over 20 years, in which time corruption has grown rife and he has amassed enormous personal wealth.



SOURCE 6.11 Choeng Ek (Killing Fields) Memorial in Phnom Penh, Cambodia



SOURCE 6.12 The site of Pol Pot's cremation and grave in the Anlong Veng district in northern Cambodia



Getty Images/Jason Bleibtreu/Sigma

SOURCE 6.13 Jean-Michel Braquet (France), David Wilson (Australia) and Mark Slater (United Kingdom) were taken hostage by the Khmer Rouge on 26 July 1994 and were killed on 28 September after negotiations to free them failed.

The director of S-21, Comrade Duch, testifies in March 2009

In June 2003, the Royal Government of Cambodia and the United Nations agreed to establish a commission into the brutal rule of the Khmer Rouge (1975–79). In the following years, a specially designed task force began investigating the crimes of the Khmer Rouge, and in 2006 it was agreed to set up an international tribunal (court) in Cambodia to bring the surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge to trial.

The following extract is taken from the statements of apology delivered by the director of S-21 (Tuol Sleng) prison during his trial in 2009. The following year, Comrade Duch (real name Kaing Guek Eav) was found guilty of crimes against humanity and torture. He was sentenced to 35 years in prison. He lost an appeal in 2012.

... I acknowledge my legal responsibility. I would like to make it clear that I am legally responsible for the crimes committed at S-21, especially the acts of torture and the executions. As I have already said, when Co-Investigating Judges took me for the re-enactments at Choeng Ek and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, I sought to express my apology to the victims who survived and to the families of those whose loved ones died miserably in great pains and sufferings at S-21. Now, I would like these people to know that I wish to apologize, and I would like you to consider my intentions. I do not ask that you forgive me here and now. I know that the crimes I committed against the lives of those people, including women and children, are intolerably and unforgivably serious crimes. My plea is that you leave the door open for me to seek forgiveness.





... whenever I recall the past, I am deeply pained and I am racked with remorse. I am appalled whenever I recall the activities which I was ordered to carry out, and the orders I gave to others that affected the lives of many innocent people, including women and children. Though I acted out of respect for Angkar's orders, I am still responsible for the crimes. I have already told the Co-Investigating Judges that I was a hostage, a mere puppet in the criminal regime. I am sure that the general public now regards me as a cowardly and inhumane person. I sincerely and respectfully accept all these arguments ... During that period I never dared even to think about disputing or opposing the orders from the top, despite knowing that they were criminal. It was a matter of life and death for me and my family. As the director of S-21, I did not dare to seek any alternatives to obeying the orders from the upper echelon, despite knowing that carrying them out would lead to the loss of thousands of lives ... As a perpetrator, I know that I am personally guilty before the entire Cambodian people and nation, before the families of all the victims who lost their lives at S-21 and before my own family, some of whom also lost their lives.

'Compilation of statements of apology made by Kaing Guek Eav alias Duch during the proceedings (translated from the Khmer original)',
Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, Statement made 31 March 2009, translated 20 March 2012, pp. 1–2,
https://www.eccc.gov.kh/sites/default/files/documents/courtdoc/F28-1.1_EN.PDF With permission

QUESTIONS

- 1 What was the aim of the tribunal at which Comrade Duch made these statements?
- 2 What was Comrade Duch's role in Democratic Kampuchea?
- 3 In this statement, what kinds of crimes does he accept responsibility and guilt for?
- 4 What explanations does he offer for his actions during 1975–79?
- 5 Analyse the perspective of this source.
- 6 How could this extract be used by a historian investigating the nature of the DK regime?
- 7 Conduct some further research into the Khmer Rouge tribunals. Who else was tried? What witnesses were used? How might these other testimonies contribute to our understanding of the nature and impact of DK?

- 1 Explain why tensions between DK and Vietnam grew after 1975.
- 2 What was the outcome of Vietnam's smaller invasion of Cambodia in late 1977?
- 3 Outline the key events surrounding Operation Blooming Lotus.
- 4 Describe the role of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia after 1979.



Chapter summary

- Communist victory in Cambodia brought the Khmer Rouge to power in April 1975.
- The new communist government, called Democratic Kampuchea, aimed to rebuild Cambodia as a self-reliant, agrarian nation in which all of its citizens were forced to live as equals.
- The policies pursued by DK had a disastrous effect on the Cambodian population, which suffered terribly between 1975 and 1979.
- Many Cambodians died of starvation and overwork.
- Thousands more were brutally murdered by DK soldiers and the national security organisation, the Santebal.
- In early 1979, DK was overthrown by Vietnam after years of dispute and the failure of negotiations.
- The Khmer Rouge fled to northern Cambodia, where they remained until the late 1990s.
- Vietnam's overthrow of the Khmer Rouge inflamed other regional tensions, and China invaded Vietnam in February 1979.

Further resources

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- Chandler, David, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000
- Dy, Kamboly, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975–79)*, Documentation Center of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, 2007
- Kiernan, Ben, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1996
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- Morris, Stephen, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1999
- Pilger, John, *Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia, 1979* (documentary)
- Short, Philip, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, Henry Holt, New York, 2005

Endnotes

- 1 Quoted in Eric D Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2003, p. 170.

CHAPTER REVIEW

CHAPTER REVISION QUESTIONS

- 1 Create a mind map outlining the main ways in which the Khmer Rouge changed Cambodia after taking power in 1975.
- 2 Explain how the following ideas were evident in the rule of the Khmer Rouge:
 - a Nationalism
 - b Communism.
- 3 Account for the declining living conditions in Cambodia during the DK regime.
- 4 Explain why the leaders of DK implemented purges in Cambodia during their rule.
- 5 Outline the main events leading to the overthrow of the DK regime.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 6 Use the material published on the Documentation Center of Cambodia's website to gather more information about the Khmer Rouge and life under their rule. You may like to look at the interviews provided by survivors, by Khmer Rouge members or other information on the site.
- 7 Use the Internet to research some of the obituaries of Pol Pot produced around the time of his death in 1998. Share your research with the class in a brief presentation.



EXTENDED WRITING EXERCISE

- 8 Construct an essay in response to one or more of the following questions:
 - a To what extent was the Cambodian Revolution of 1975–79 motivated by communist ideals?
 - b Evaluate the importance of nationalism in Democratic Kampuchea.
 - c Assess the impact of the Khmer Rouge on Cambodia to 1979.

07

The impact and legacy of the conflict in Indochina

STUDENTS WILL INVESTIGATE

- the effects of the war on Indochinese civilians (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos)
- the ongoing debate about the Second Indochina War.



Modern History
Syllabus

Bomb casings from the Second Indochina War are used as decorations at Craters Bar & Restaurant in Phonsavan, Xieng Khouang Province, Laos.



The impact of the Second Indochina War on civilians

The Second Indochina War had a wide-ranging impact on the civilians of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Obviously, those who joined (or were forced to join) the armies were caught up in a brutal conflict, but the effects of war stretched far beyond military forces. In fact, it is probably fair to say that many civilians suffered at least as much as those who fought in the war.

The impact of military intervention and escalation

One of the underlying reasons for most of the suffering of Indochinese civilians during the Second Indochina War was the direct military intervention of the United States and the escalation of the war in 1964–65. The US military's approach to war in Indochina was incredibly destructive. US bombing of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos destroyed infrastructure such as roads and railways and killed thousands of people caught in affected areas. Key cities in North Vietnam, such as Hanoi and Haiphong, were particularly disrupted, as well as eastern Cambodia and eastern Laos. Some estimates suggest that over 250 000 Cambodian civilians died because of US bombing missions directly related to the war. Beyond destroying infrastructure and killing civilians, these bombing missions also created thousands of refugees across all three nations.

It would be inaccurate, however, to suggest that US military intervention in the region was the sole cause of suffering in Indochina. Communist forces across the region (with support from China and the USSR) also pursued strategies and tactics that destroyed the lives of thousands of civilians. Some of the most brutal atrocities were those committed by communist forces such as the NLF and the Khmer Rouge. These groups were often ruthless in their attacks against anyone who would not join their movements, and they could be incredibly inhumane towards civilians. NLF terror tactics in South Vietnam were directly responsible for as many as 25 000 civilian deaths by the mid-1960s. The Khmer Rouge siege of Phnom Penh in 1974–75 also resulted in the deaths of thousands of Cambodian civilians.



Alamy Stock Photo/Everett Collection Historical

SOURCE 7.1 US officers' quarters in ruins after an NVA bomb attack in Saigon on 1 April 1966. Four Vietnamese and three Americans were killed and dozens of buildings were heavily damaged.

Human life

The Second Indochina War had a devastating cost in human life. Civilian deaths directly linked to the war reached as high as 65 000 in North Vietnam and a staggering 522 000 in the South. For Laos, about 11 000 civilians were dying every year at the height of the conflict (from US bombings and general military activity). Estimates for Cambodian civilian deaths vary widely from 150 000 to 500 000 people in the period 1970 to 1975. No-one doubts that the death toll then rose dramatically under the Khmer Rouge.

Unfortunately, there were many examples of atrocities committed throughout Indochina during this conflict. Well-known examples were My Lai (committed by US forces in Vietnam in March 1968) and Hue (committed by communist forces during the 1968 Tet Offensive in which more than 2800 civilians were killed). Many smaller incidents occurred throughout the region, involving most of the main militaries engaged in the conflict.



Massacres

Economic life

Military escalation in Vietnam during 1964 and 1965 disrupted the entire region. As the US military build-up in South Vietnam took place, an influx of US money created a wide range of new industries and jobs for South Vietnamese civilians. Many local businessmen became wealthy, but there were also much darker sides. Gambling, prostitution and black markets all flourished, along with a range of other criminal activity. With so much US money available, corruption was rife wherever the US military established bases. In addition, US money could indirectly support unwanted international crime, which was the case in Laos, where the CIA-backed army led by Vang Pao ran a lucrative opium (heroin) trade to help fund its campaign against communist forces. Although CIA advisers were aware of the program, their greater fear at the time was a rising communist threat in Indochina.

When the United States began to disengage from Indochina in 1973, many of the industries that developed around the US military collapsed suddenly. With fewer troops in the major cities, bars, casinos and brothels went out of business and many black-market supplies dried up. In South Vietnam, this threw many families into poverty, creating serious strains for the South Vietnamese Government.

Social and cultural life

The escalated war in Vietnam also brought obvious consequences for traditional ways of life in Indochina. All three economies were based largely on agriculture before 1954. With increasing conflict over the countryside, thousands of families in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were forced to flee their homes to other parts of the country. Many villagers made their way to the cities, where life was radically different.

Over time, other problems arose. In Vietnam, for example, thousands of orphans were born to Vietnamese women working in the brothels of the major cities such as Saigon. Many were shunned after the war for having American fathers. Other children were left without families through death. By the end of the war, about 800 000 orphans lived in Vietnam.

In Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, civilians were conscripted in a variety of ways. Young men were often forced to join national armies, but other civilians could also be forced to work for the government. At the conclusion of the war, the governments of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos also had to accommodate a growing number of injured war veterans, which stretched resources even further. By 1975, there were more than 83 000 amputees living in South Vietnam. Many of them needed serious care.



Tram diary extracts

James Carter on the impact of US escalation on South Vietnam

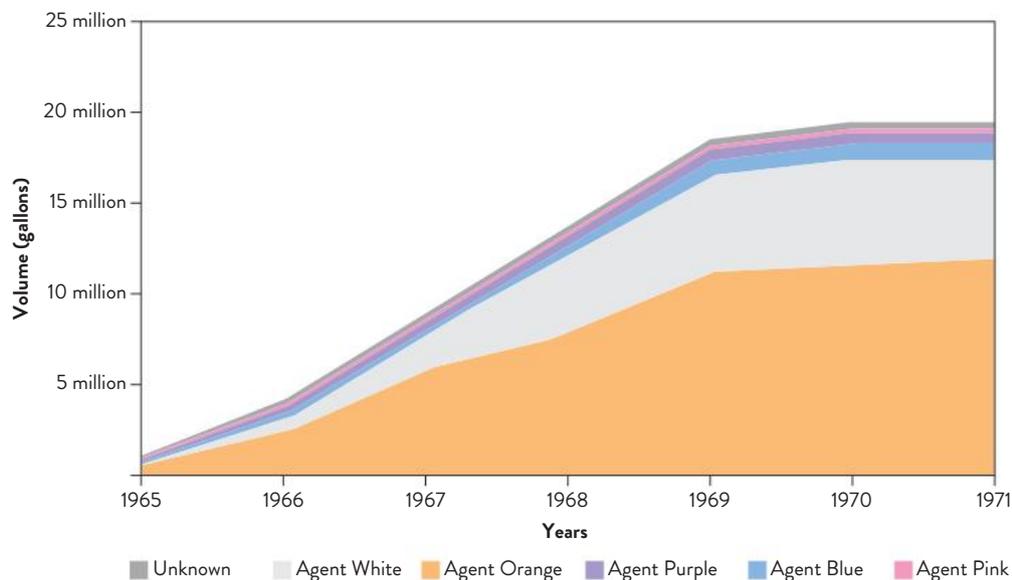
In his book *Inventing Vietnam* (2008), James Carter traces the history of the United States' nation-building efforts in South Vietnam throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Although he is fair-minded in his analysis, Carter is critical of many aspects of US intervention in South Vietnam, and he goes to some length to detail the effects of these initiatives on the people living in the RVN. The following extract provides an insight into Carter's assessment of the effects that US escalation had on the people of Saigon.

The war also created stark contrasts in the urban environments, particularly in Saigon. The flood of American personnel, both military and civilian contractors, created a demand for an array of services from barbershops and restaurants to nightclubs to prostitutes. The level of consumer goods available in the city, in addition to feeding the black market, also brought to Vietnam American goods and, along with them, American consumer culture. Vietnamese children sported Batman T-shirts, men drank Miller and Budweiser beer; many wore American fashions, smoked American cigarettes, traded in American goods, and, for tens of thousands, found employment as part of the sprawling economy of servicing the American military ... The city of Saigon, in fact, contained over one thousand bars and more than one hundred nightclubs ... The nightlife employed twenty-five thousand bar girls, nine hundred orchestral personnel, twenty thousand club/bar employees ... Whatever wealth the war created, however, would evaporate as soon as the United States pulled out of Vietnam.

James M Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 230–1

The environment

Military activity in Indochina also caused serious environmental problems. The bombings destroyed large areas of land, but the United States also made specific attempts to destroy farmland and jungles as part of its war against communist forces. In Vietnam, for example, the use of chemical defoliants and bulldozers damaged approximately 3.2 per cent of the nation's farmland and about



With permission from the War Legacies Project

SOURCE 7.2 An overview of the main chemicals used by the United States in Vietnam from 1965 to 1971 (1 gallon = 3.79 litres). Although the United States began using defoliants such as Agent Orange in Operation Ranch Hand (1962), the use was dramatically increased from 1965.



AAP Image/AP

SOURCE 7.3 After Kennedy approved the use of defoliants in South Vietnam in Operation Ranch Hand, US aircraft dropped thousands of litres of Agent Orange and other chemicals, which had devastating effects on the landscape. This caused much controversy, as some of the chemicals have been linked to long-term problems such as cancers and birth defects.



Agent Orange

46 per cent of forests. US forces also used similar chemicals in Cambodia and Laos, but not to the scale deployed in Vietnam. These environmental impacts were immediately evident, but the use of defoliants also had long-term consequences for Indochinese civilians, as some of the chemicals have been linked to birth defects and a variety of cancers.

Refugees

During the entire period of the conflict, many Indochinese civilians were forced to flee into neighbouring countries. The number of refugees rose sharply in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos around the time communist forces took power in 1975. In Laos, more than 50 000 civilians fled to Thailand by the end of 1975 and a total of 10 per cent of the entire population had fled by 1980. Many civilians were not willing to live under the harsh rule of the new communist governments. One of Indochina's closest neighbours, Thailand, took in a staggering 1.3 million refugees in 1975. Many were resettled in the United States, Australia and other parts of the world.



Vietnamese migration to Australia



Cetty Images/Bettmann

SOURCE 7.4 Cambodian refugee children camped in a forest just inside the Thai border at Ban Laem Village, 160 miles east of Bangkok on 4 July 1979. They have little food, no medicine and are in danger of attack by Vietnamese troops operating nearby.

- 1 Select 5–6 specific facts that are representative of the various impacts of the war on Indochinese civilians. Explain why you chose each one.
- 2 How could Sources 7.2 and 7.3 be used as evidence of the use and impact of chemical weapons in Vietnam during the Second Indochina War?
- 3 Using Source 7.4 and other information you have gathered, describe the impact of the Second Indochina War on the lives of Indochinese civilians.
- 4 Evaluate the following statement: ‘The suffering of Indochinese civilians was primarily caused by US military intervention in Indochina.’
- 5 Use the Internet to conduct further research into Indochinese refugees. Your research should address the following questions and any others you feel are important:
 - a How many refugees left Indochina after the Second Indochina War?
 - b Where did these refugees go after leaving their home nation?
 - c What was life like once they had departed Indochina?

A war without end?

Controversies about the Second Indochina War are abundant in the 21st century. The wisdom of US intervention in Indochina continues to be debated, as well as its consequences. The major US military interventions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) seem to have reinvigorated debates about US foreign policy and the limits of US military power. In polling across the United States, the decision to escalate in 1965 has consistently received criticism by the American public, and the criticism appears to have slightly increased with the passing of time (see Table 7.1).

TABLE 7.1 Responses to Gallup polling in 1973 and 2000

YEAR	YES	NO	NO OPINION
1973	60%	29%	11%
2000	69%	24%	7%

Gallup polling of American citizens, made available 17 November 2000 and accessed 20 August 2017, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/2299/americans-look-back-vietnam-war.aspx>. The responses were made to the following question: ‘Looking back, do you think the United States made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam?’

Nevertheless, there are still many people in the United States and beyond who regard the US attempt to prevent the spread of communism in Asia after World War II as well-intentioned and even noble. In 1988, former President Ronald Reagan (1981–89) called the Americans who served in Vietnam ‘heroes’. He said:

“... today, Veterans Day, as we do every year, we take that moment to embrace the gentle heroes of Vietnam and all our wars ... Unlike the other wars of this century, of course, there were deep divisions about the wisdom and rightness of the Vietnam war. Both sides spoke with honesty and fervor. And what more can we ask in our democracy? And yet after more than a decade of desperate boat people, after the killing fields of Cambodia, after all that has happened in the unhappy part of the world, who can doubt that the cause for which our men fought was just? It was, after all ... the cause of freedom.

President Ronald Reagan’s Veteran’s Day Speech, 11 November 1988, quoted in Robert McMahon (ed.), *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, 4th edn, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 2008, pp. 449–51

Some have gone further to suggest that US intervention was generally positive for South-East Asia even if its military efforts were not successful in Indochina. Lee Kuan Yew, former Prime Minister of Singapore (1959–90), wrote the following in his memoirs:

“ Although American intervention failed in Vietnam, it bought time for the rest of Southeast Asia. In 1965, when the US military moved massively into South Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines faced internal threats from armed communist insurgencies and the communist underground was still active in Singapore ... America’s action enabled noncommunist Southeast Asia to put their own houses in order. Had there been no US intervention, the will of these countries to resist them would have melted and Southeast Asia would most likely have gone communist.

Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965–2000*, Times Editions, Singapore Press, Singapore, 2000, pp. 520–1

In Lee Kuan Yew’s view, US military intervention in Vietnam provided the people of Singapore and other parts of South-East Asia an opportunity to secure their future.

The ongoing effects of the war are also evident across Indochina. Not only are Vietnam and Laos still ruled by the communist governments victorious in 1975 but the region still bears the scars of war. Indochina remains littered with unexploded landmines and bombs; a threat requiring ongoing efforts by many non-government organisations to clear.



SOURCE 7.5 The ‘Miss Landmine’ pageant is now an annual event in Cambodia. The event aims to draw attention to the ongoing effects of war on the people of Cambodia.

In Laos, the ethnic Hmong who fought with CIA support against the Pathet Lao have struggled to find peace and stability after the long civil war of the 1960s and 1970s. In 2003, Australian photographer Philip Blenkinsop travelled to Laos in search of the CIA’s ‘secret army’. After hiking four days into the jungle, Blenkinsop came face to face with a large group of Hmong who were still hiding from the communist government in Laos; they had fought against the Pathet Lao. The group dropped to their knees and begged Blenkinsop for help (see Source 7.6). For these Laotians, life has never been the same.

Alamy Stock Photo/National Geographic Creative



Vietnam: the right war?



Laos bombing

For many American and Australian veterans, life never returned to normal after the Second Indochina War. The rate of returned soldiers suffering from physical and mental illnesses is very high. In Australia, approximately 60 per cent of all veterans who served in Vietnam suffer some degree of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It is only recently that the scale of this has become known and its social effects, such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse and violence, have been widely acknowledged.



In one sense, the legacy of the conflict in Indochina is not unique; most large wars are costly and controversial. With the conflict in living memory and many who participated still producing interviews and memoirs, debates about the Second Indochina War and its legacy are not likely to fade soon.



AAP Image/EPA/Philip Blenkinsop

SOURCE 7.6 Hmong guerrillas in Laos request help from journalists visiting their mountain hide-out, 16 January 2003.



Jonathon Dallimore

SOURCE 7.7 The graves of Vietnamese soldiers killed in the Second Indochina War. The words 'Liet Si' visible on the gravestones means 'martyr' and 'vo danh' means 'unknown'. The bodies of thousands of those who were killed have never been identified.

Chapter summary

- The conflict in Indochina had a wide-ranging impact on civilians in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.
- The reasons for the suffering of civilians included the military escalation of the United States and North Vietnam and the action of specific groups such as the National Liberation Front (NLF).
- Many common themes can be identified in the suffering of Indochinese civilians, including large casualty rates, destruction of traditional ways of life and a range of ongoing problems.
- Each nation also had some unique experiences (the Cambodian people suffered worse under communist rule than did the general populations of Vietnam and Laos).
- The conflict has a long and controversial legacy that has generated strong debate and disagreement since the 1960s.

Further resources

- Jones Griffiths, Philip, *Agent Orange: Collateral Damage in Vietnam*, Trolley Books, London, 2004
- Turley, William S, *The Second Indochina War*, 2nd edn, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2009
- Turse, Nick, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*, Metropolitan Books, New York, 2013
- Wilcox, Fred A, *Scorched Earth: Legacies of Chemical Warfare in Vietnam*, Seven Stories Press, New York, 2011

CHAPTER REVIEW

CHAPTER REVISION QUESTIONS

- 1 Create a table with three columns – one for Vietnam, one for Cambodia and one for Laos. Detail the impact of the war on civilians in each country. You may wish to conduct some further research to add evidence to your notes.
- 2 Compare and contrast the impact of the Second Indochina War on civilians in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.
- 3 Explain why the Second Indochina War continues to be controversial.
- 4 Evaluate the view put forward by former Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew in the extract on page 174.

EXTENDED WRITING EXERCISE

- 5 Construct an essay in response to one or more of the following questions:
 - a Evaluate the impact of the Second Indochina War on Indochinese civilians.
 - b To what extent was US intervention in Indochina responsible for the suffering of Vietnamese civilians?

INDEX

A

Abrams, Gen Creighton 2, 101
Adams, Eddie 89
'American War' 1
anti-war movements in US and Australia 108–17
Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) 5, 54–5
US–ARVN invasion of Cambodia 106
US–ARVN war effort 71–81, 98–9, 100, 134–8
attrition 74, 75–9
Australia
anti-war movements in US and Australia 108–17
and Second Indochina War (1962–73) 73, 175
veterans 175
autarky 152

B

Bao Dai 2, 22–3, 31, 40–3
Binh Xuyen 45
Braestrup, Peter 89–90
Buddhists 45, 52–3, 113

C

Cambodia
1950s 36
Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) 145, 150, 151, 153
communist victory (17 April 1975) 123, 126–31, 141
foreign policy 154
impact of the regime 154–60
internal conflict 158–9
Khmer republic 130, 145
Khmer Rouge 126–8, 130, 145, 148, 152, 162–3
life under the Khmer Rouge 156–8
map 155, 160
Nixon bombings 105
ruling 153–4
timeline 127
and USA 44, 104–6, 128, 169
US–ARVN invasion 106
Vietnamese invasion (1977 and 1978) 161–2, 163
war (1970–75) 128–30
Cambodian revolution (1975–79) 144–66
democratic centralism 153–4
Democratic Kampuchea (DK) 5, 151–4, 156, 157, 159, 161–2
end of democratic Kampuchea (1978–79) 161–2

four main phases 147
four year plan 156
genocide 152, 162–3
impact of the regime 154–60, 162–3
new regime 150
prison network 159–60
taking power 148–50
timeline 145–6
and Vietnamese influences 152, 159
Cao Dai 40, 45
capitalism 13
Caravelle Manifesto (1960) 7, 46
Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) 5, 16, 41, 55, 101
Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) 5, 48
China and North Vietnam 39
Chinese invasion of Vietnam 162
civilians and second Indochina War 169–73
economic life 170
the environment 171–2
human life 170
refugees 172
social and cultural life 170–1
civilising mission 10
clear-and-hold missions 101
Cold War 6, 23
collectivisation 156
colonial war (1946–54) 20–1
colonialism 6
communism 6, 13–14, 45, 141
complication of statements of apology made by Kaing Guek Eav, alias Comrade Duch (2009) 7, 164–5
Confucianism 6, 12
conscription 111
containment 6
counterinsurgency (COIN) 6, 44
covert operations 80–1
cultural life and Second Indochina War 170

D

Dai, Bao 2, 22–3, 31, 40–3
Dau tranh 83
Declaration of Independence (1945) 7
decolonisation in Indochina (1946–54) 8–32
battle of Dien Bien Phu (1954) 24–7
colonial war (1946–49) 20–1
First Indochina war (1946–54) 1, 20–7
French Indochina 10–11
Geneva Conference (1954) 28–30
growth of communism 13–14
Indochina 9

internationalised war (1950–54) 24
Japanese occupation and independence 15–18
nationalism 14–15
nature and significance of Vietnamese victory 30–1
opposition to French rule 11–15
timeline 9, 17
Vietminh 16
and war (1945–54) 18–19
defoliants 75
Democratic Kampuchea (DK) 5, 151–4, 156, 157, 159, 161–2
Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) 5, 17, 36–7, 46–9
1964 developments 67
1965 developments 67
international assistance for 39–40
political crisis 39
détente 6, 117
Diem, Ngo Dinh 2, 40–3, 48, 49–55, 61
Dien Bien Phu (1954) 24–7
draft, the 111, 112
drug use by US army in Vietnam 102
Duong Van Minh 55

E

economic life and Second Indochina War 170
Eisenhower, Dwight D 44–5
Press Conference (April, 1954) 7
environmental problems and Second Indochina War 171–2

F

Final Declaration of the Geneva Press Conference (1954) 7
First Indochina War (1946–54) 1, 20–7, 36
Geneva Conference (1954) 28–30
Vietnamese victory 27, 30–1
French Indochina 10–11
First Indochina war (1946–54) 1, 20–7
opposition to French rule 11–15

G

Geneva Accords 35, 36, 37, 46, 55
Geneva Conference
decade after 55–61
and First Indochina war (1954) 28–30
Indochina after 35–6
North Vietnam after 36–40
and Second Indochina War (1954–64) 35–43, 55–61
South Vietnam after 40–3

genocide 152
Giap, Vo Nguyen 2
Guerrilla warfare 6, 16, 20, 47, 49

H

Hmong 107
Ho Chi Minh 3, 13–14, 17–18, 19, 31, 39
Ho Chi Minh Trail 47, 65, 107
Hoa Hao 40, 45
Hue 170
human life and Second Indochina War 170
Hun Sen 162, 163

I

Indochina 6, 9
1950s 36
and CIA 41
French Indochina 10–11
fusion of nationalism and communism 14–15
after Geneva 35–6
growth of communism 13–14
nationalism and communism 14–15
opposition to French rule 11–15
timeline 35
and USA 41, 44–6, 65, 96
Indochina (communist victories, 1973–75) 122–42
Cambodia (17 April 1975) 123, 126–31, 141
end of US intervention 124–5
Laos 123, 139–40
map 124
timeline 123, 127
Vietnam (30 April 1975) 123, 131–9
Indochina (impact and legacy of the conflict) 168–75
economic life 170
the environment 171–2
human life 170
military intervention and escalation 169–72
refugees 172
second Indochina War on civilians 169–73
social and cultural life 170–1
war without end 173–5
Indochinese Communist Party 14
insurgency 48–9, 53, 65

J

Japanese occupation and independence in Indochina 15–18
Johnson, Lyndon B 3, 65, 66, 69, 70
‘Peace Without Conquest’ speech (April 1965) 7, 69

K

Kennedy, John F 3, 50–1, 70
Kennedy administration 50–1, 54
Khmer 145
Khmer Issarak (Cambodia) 17
Khmer Rouge 5, 7, 126–8, 129, 145, 148, 152, 162–3
Khrushchev, Nikita 3, 38, 47, 68
Kissinger, Henry 3, 131

L

Lansdale, Col Edward 41
Lao Dong Party 37, 38, 39, 47
Lao Issara (Laos) 17, 18
Laos
1950s 36
communist victory 123, 139–40
Royal Lao Government (RLG) 5
Second Indochina War (1969–73) 106–8, 169
and USA 44, 169
Le Duan 2, 46–7
letter to South Vietnamese Communists (1965) 7
Le Duc tho 4
Lenin, Vladimir 13
Leninism 13
limited war 74
Lodge, Henry Cabot 54
Lon Nol 4, 104, 105, 126, 150

M

Maoism 152
Marx, Karl 13
Marxism 13
Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) 5, 44, 100, 108, 123
moderates 45
moratorium 6, 113
My Lai 170

N

National Guard 112
National Liberation Front (NLF) 5, 48–9, 52–3, 131
and Cambodia 105
strategies and tactics 82–6, 137–8
tactical innovation 84–5
nationalism 6, 12, 14–15, 17
Ngo Dinh Diem 2, 40–3, 45, 48, 49–55, 61
Ngo Dinh Nhu 42, 43, 55
Nixon, Richard 4, 97–8, 100
bombings of Cambodia 105
bombings of Laos 107
impeachment 98
‘Silent Majority’ speech (November 1969) 7

support for Thieu 131
team on Indochina 98
Nixon administration 97–100
North Vietnam
Chinese invasion 162
civilian migration 36
after Geneva 36–40
military escalation (1964–5) 66–8
reconstruction 38–9
and USSR 39, 47, 68
North Vietnamese Army (NVA) 5, 39, 131
strategies and tactics 82–6, 137–8
tactical innovation 84–5
victory (1975) 134–5
Nguyen Ai Quoc 13–14

O

Office of Strategic Service (OSS) 16
Operation Apache Snow 98
Operation Cedar Falls 77, 81
Operation Menu 105
Operation Passage to Freedom 40

P

Pac Bo Plenum 16
pacifist 109
pacification 6, 74, 79–80
Paris Peace Accord (January 1973) 119, 123, 126, 129, 131
Pathet Lao 5
peace negotiations (1972–73) 117–20
Pol Pot 4, 145, 147, 150, 151–2, 159, 161, 162, 163
‘Peace Without Conquest’ speech (President Johnson) (April 1965) 7, 69
People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) 49
Program of the National Liberation Front (1960) 7
Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) 5, 101
punji spikes 84

R

refugees and Second Indochina War 172
Republic of Vietnam (RVN) 5, 40–1, 46–9, 131–3
Resistance Will Win (1947) 7
reunification 37, 38
revolution 13
Revolutionary Youth League 13–14
Royal Lao Government (RLG) 5

S

Schmitz, David 90
Second Indochina War (1964–68) 1, 64–93
and Australia 73

- covert operations 80–1
Dau tranh 83
 escalation in Vietnam 66–71
 home fronts (1968) 90–2
 military stalemate 85–6
 Operation Cedar Falls 77, 81
 pacification 6, 74, 79–80
 strategies and tactics of NLF–NVA 82–6
 tactical innovation of NLF–NVA 84–5
 Tet Offensive (1968) 86–90
 timeline 65–6
 troop numbers 72
 US–ARVN war effort 71–81
 US military intervention 96, 169, 173
 and USA 66–81
- Second Indochina War (1969–73) 95–120
 anti-war movements in US and
 Australia 108–17
 Cambodia 104–6
 impact and legacy of the conflict 168–75
 Laos 106–8
 Paris Peace Accord (January 1973) 119
 peace negotiations (1972–73) 117–20
 problems and strategies 98–100
 Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) 118
 timeline 96–7, 118
 US military intervention 96, 169, 173
 Vietnam 100–3
see also Indochina (communist victories, 1973–75)
- Second Indochina War, emergence of (1954–64) 34–62
 decade after Geneva 55–61
 Diem's final years (1960–63) 49–55
 and DRV 38, 46–9
 Eisenhower administration and US involvement 44–6
 Indochina after Geneva 35–6
 Lao Dong Party 37, 38
 North Vietnam after Geneva 36–9
 South Vietnam after Geneva 40–3
 timeline 35
 US military intervention 96
- Sihanouk, Norodom 4, 104, 105, 126
 'Silent Majority' speech (President Nixon) (November 1969) 7
 Sino–Soviet split 6, 68, 117, 154, 162
 social life and Second Indochina War 170
 socialism 38
 South Vietnam
 Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) 5, 48
 and CIA 5, 16, 41, 55, 101
 civilian migration 36, 40
 communist victory (30 April 1975) 123, 131–9
 crisis of 1963 52–4
 after Geneva 40–3
 isolating 74
- National Liberation Front (NLF) 5, 48–9
 Ngo Dinh Diem 2, 40–3, 45, 48, 49–55, 61
 and USA 41, 44–6, 49–55, 65, 66–81, 96–103, 171
- Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) 118
Surviving Year Zero (2014) 7
- ## T
- Tet Offensive (1968) 86–90, 170
 Thieu, Nguyen Van 4, 91, 131
 Third Indochina War 162
 Truong Chinh 21
 two-stage revolution 13
- ## U
- US–ARVN
 invasion of Cambodia 106
 North Vietnam victory 134–5
 war effort 71–81, 98–9, 100, 134–8
- USA
 airpower 75
 anti-war movements 108–17
 and Cambodia 44, 104–6, 128, 169
 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) 5, 16, 41, 55
 credibility 69–70
 the draft 111, 112
 drug use by US army in Vietnam 102
 end of US intervention in Indochina 124–5
 and Indochina 16, 41, 44–6, 65, 124–5, 169, 171, 173
 infantry 77
 and Laos 44, 169
 military intervention 96, 169, 173
 military operations 77, 80–1
 National Guard 112
 shootings at Kent State and Jackson State universities 112
 use of US airpower 75, 128
 and Vietnam 41, 44–6, 49–55, 65, 66–81, 96–103, 108–17, 169, 171
 Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) 114–15
 veterans 114–15, 175
 withdrawal from Indochina 124–5
 USSR and North Vietnam 39, 47, 68
- invasion of Cambodia (1977 and 1978) 161–2, 163
 and USA 41, 44–6, 49–55, 65, 66–81, 96–103, 108–17, 169
see also North Vietnam; South Vietnam
- Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) 114–15, 175
- Vietnam War 1
 1950s 36
 anti-war movements in US and Australia 108–17
 clear-and-hold missions 101
 communist victory (30 April 1975) 123, 131–9
 covert operations 80–1
 defoliants 75
Dau tranh 83
 drug use by US army 102
 home fronts (1968) 90–2
 Hue 170
 Lao Dong Party 37
 Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) 5, 44, 100, 108
 military escalation (1964–5) 66–71
 My Lai 170
 Operation Apache Snow 98
 Operation Cedar Falls 77, 81
 pacification 6, 74, 79–80
 peace negotiations (1972–73) 117–20
 reunification 37, 38
 strategies and tactics of NLF–NVA 82–6
 tactics 78
 Tet Offensive (1968) 86–90, 170
 timeline 65–6
 troop numbers 72
 US airpower 75
 US–ARVN war effort 71–81, 98–9, 100, 134–8
 US infantry 77
 US military intervention 96, 169, 173
 US military operations 77, 80–1
 and USA 66–81, 96–103, 108–17
- Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNQDD) 12
 Vietnamisation 99, 100, 103, 107
- ## W
- Westmoreland, Gen William 5, 75–6
- ## Y
- Yen Bai mutiny 12
- ## Z
- zeitgeist 111
 Zhou Enlai 2



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