

# The vietnam war

[War](#), [Vietnam War](#)



### **Why Did The United States Go To War In Vietnam?**

The Vietnam War was humiliating for America as a developing country defeated a superpower. The Vietnam War has provided a hotbed of debate for historians, who have attempted to come to a consensus as to how America became involved in a conflict. America feared the spread of communism throughout Europe and when it reached Asia, they feared the worst. Were their fears justified? The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu was an indication that communism was growing in Asia, and could and should have America helped the French? The Geneva settlement acknowledged communism, but was America right in neglecting this settlement? When Diem's regime became more corrupt and the influence of the Vietcong increased, Kennedy responded by sending military advisors. Was he right in doing so? There were two catalysts to war: the bombing of the Maddox and Operation Rolling Thunder. Did Johnson react too abruptly, or was force the only way to react to the threat of North Vietnam and the Vietcong?

The importance of the success of the communists in defeating the French at Dien Bien Phu can be debated. The internationalist historian Lawrence believes that this defeat validated America's belief in the Domino theory. American's believed that countries in Asia would slowly fall to communism. Eisenhower stated, ' The possible consequences of the loss..... are incalculable.' The reason why it was ' incalculable' was because of America's fears of communism spreading into countries with poor economic and social stability. Another interpretation could be that American fears were accentuated due to past confrontations with communism. The USSR's expansion into Eastern Europe and fears that expansion may enter Western

Europe was present. Moreover, politicians had experienced the rashness of McCarthyism and so politicians were hostile towards military action. For example, following Dien Bien Phu, 75% of politicians were against force. This suggests that the government wanted to avoid a war. Lee suggests that Eisenhower should not be blamed for starting the war following this French defeat. Indeed, Eisenhower did not resort to force over communists in Vietnam at Dien Bien Phu, as he believed it was 'futile'. Eisenhower may be valid as if he did resort to violence, the war would have come quicker. However, America did give military supplies to the French during the struggle for independence, before this battle. Thus, America did have some involvement in the struggle for Vietnamese independence, but the overall consensus was not to get military involved in the war.

Short believes that the Geneva Settlement should be blamed for continued American involvement. He suggests that America should have had signed the conference: which decided to split Vietnam into the communist North and the non-communist South. This shows that the loss of North Vietnam may have been a giveaway to the communists. However, one can argue that America had a right not to sign because they did not wish to see communism fall to the Vietnamese. Dulles wrote, 'prevent the extension of communism to South East Asia and South Vietnam'. It is a belief that even if America did sign, North Vietnam would have still turned communist. It was better for Eisenhower to ensure that South Vietnam did not fall to communism and how to contain communism in the North of the country, hence preventing a war. Thus, Short's view can be challenged. Lee suggests that Eisenhower helped Diem to retain control of South Vietnam. This view is valid because America

sent 350 advisors into South Vietnam and continued to aid the Diem regime, which became more violent and radical and placed pressure on Kennedy in the 1960's. Cuddy suggests that Geneva accords may have avoided a war, if planned elections took place. Indeed, the elections would have made Vietnam one country, which would have made South Vietnam more stable. It was the instability of South Vietnam which played a part in provoking the war in the future. Some critics stated, ' Who sold Vietnam? We did.' However, if the communists won the elections, then it would have gone against America's aim to stop communism spreading. Another interpretation is that the elections did not even take place, so it is doubtful whether a war would have been prevented.

Overall, Eisenhower's role in making America go to war was minimal. He did the right thing in not giving complete military aid to the French, as the war may have started. He was also valid in not signing the Geneva accord, as it was more fruitful to find a way to restrict communism in Asia. Although he did offer advisors to South Vietnam, he did not know that Diem was going to become more violent in his ruling.

Another area of debate is the role of Kennedy towards the Diem regime and the Vietcong. A communist historian in 1959 describes Diem's regime as an 'oppressive machine.' This was significant in increasing American involvement in Vietnam as it led Kennedy to place American advisors into South Vietnam to help maintain stability. Another interpretation could be that Kennedy may have been an advocate of the domino theory and feared that people in South Vietnam would turn to communism to oppose Diem.

However, Karnow argues that, this fear of Kennedy's was realised when the Vietcong was formed. This is significant because the fact that the Vietcong supported the communist North made it more likely that South Vietnam would turn communist. Secondly, one can question why Kennedy wished to increase American influence in the South. He may have feared communism spreading, but it made Diem more oppressive. For example, he was oppressive towards Buddhist monks because he was a Catholic and wanted South Vietnam to be Catholic. This made war more inevitable, as the opposition to Diem was communism and it was this that Kennedy wished to stop.

Public Opinion in America at Kennedy's decision of offering advisors was one of uncertainty and it did not stop the North Vietnamese government providing the Vietcong in the South with more military supplies via the Ho Chi Minh trail. Thus, Kennedy may have unnecessarily reacted to Diem's regime and the Vietcong. However, some historians have suggested that Kennedy acted with skill when confronted with the Vietcong. Indeed, his 'strategic hamlets' of advisors in villages attempted to restrict the movement of the Vietcong forces. Moreover, he froze loans to Vietnam, which suggests that he wished to take a hard stance over communism, so he did attempt to prevent violent action. Indeed, Malcolm and Wright argue that by the end of Kennedy's presidency there were '16,000 advisors training the South Vietnamese Army.' This figure suggests that firstly, Kennedy wished to contain Communism within North Vietnam. Secondly, this does not mean that America was at war with Vietnam yet, as there was no high scale violence.

Overall, Kennedy can be held more responsible than Eisenhower in making America go to war. However, he did not do enough to make America go to full-scale war. He gave a lot of advisors to South Vietnam which made Diem more dictatorial, and he did lay the platform already for a future war.

However he can be praised for being 'hard' on Communism. For example, he did not reject the overthrow of Diem. If he did oppose it, war may have actually started. For instigation of full-scale war, the role of Lyndon Johnson must be debated.

A trigger factor which speeded up war was when the Maddox was attacked at the Gulf of Tonkin. According to Hall, the attack on the Maddox provided President Johnson with an excuse to attack North Vietnam. Johnson himself declared that the 'future of South Vietnam is not bright.' Indeed, South Vietnam was in a poor economic condition and sanitation for people was poor, as there was no stable government. Secondly, the Vietcong's influence was growing within the South. Another interpretation could be that he wanted to prove to the American people that he would not be 'soft' on Communism and appear determined to rid the world of this threat. Thus, America had to help the South Vietnamese people, and the damage to the Maddox provided this excuse. However, Wiest suggests that it was the alleged bombing of the C. Turner Joy, which made Johnson go to war in Vietnam. Johnson called the attack 'unprovoked', and deployed Operation Pierce Arrow which attacked North Vietnamese coastal facilities. However, there is no clear evidence whether this ship was bombed by North Vietnamese forces. Johnson may have just presumed that the North

Vietnamese bombed this ship. Thus, Johnson can be blamed for making America go to war.

Another trigger factor was President Johnson's decision to bomb North Vietnam, which was known as Operation Rolling Thunder. Harrison believes that the bombings were necessary for reducing the military supplies to the Vietcong in the South. Indeed, if the American's bombed the Ho Ch Minh trail, supplies would have been reduced. However, this was unsuccessful because many supplies still reached the Vietcong. Another interpretation for this bombing could be that America wished to reveal their military power over a developing country. This imperialist view may be valid because in 1965 over 300, 000 tonnes were dropped in the North to over 1 million tones in 1966. These figures not only reveal American power, but also reveals why America went to war with Vietnam. It was one of the biggest bombing campaigns in the 1960's which lasted three and a half years. This may show that America wished to go to war to reveal their superiority over Vietnam. However, the most likely reason would be to destroy the Ho Chi Minh trail and North Vietnamese air bases. Johnson hoped that this would force the Vietcong to retreat. Thus, Harrison's view is valid. Moreover, Gibbons shows that public opinion to Johnson's attack on North Vietnam was pro-war. For example, 55% of Americans supported the war effort. This is surprising considering that, the world a few years before had been at the brink of nuclear war. This may, falsely, show that Johnson's actions were vindicated due to a lot of public support. However, when American troops were sent to Vietnam the public felt that Johnson's actions were too abrupt. Thus, Johnson's actions started full military warfare with Vietnam.

Overall, Johnson's role led America to war. Johnson was the one who decided to place 180, 000 troops within Vietnam. He was the one who decided on one of the largest bombing campaigns on North Vietnam, twice. Surely, he knew how poorly the condition in South Vietnam was and its consequences of war. The bombings only angered the North Vietnamese and increased the activity of the Vietcong in the South. For example, the Vietcong used Guerilla tactics to confuse American troops. Thus, he can be responsible for war.

America's belief in the domino effect Eisenhower's belief that force was not the way to resolve the affair at Dien Bien Phu, as a war would have definitely started. At Geneva, it is not important whether America signed or not, as North Vietnam would have still turned communist. Eisenhower was better to decide how to ensure the restriction of Communism from the north.

However, Eisenhower and especially Kennedy's role in giving more aid in South Vietnam to control the Vietcong was an error as it did not prevent the Vietcong becoming less influential and Diem became more violent. Lyndon Johnson's decision to go to war was heightened by his bombing campaign due to the damage to the Maddox and his bombings of the Ho Chi Minh trail failed.

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