

# Essay on the vietnam war

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## **Abstract**

The Vietnam lasted for 30 years and had dire consequences for both, America as well as Vietnam. However, these consequences were not short lived. Some had long lasting effects on the society, economy, politics and foreign policy. The war led thousands of Americans to question their own countries approach towards conflicts on foreign shores as well the level of risk it takes when partaking in such wars. It also raised several questions on how these wars were conducted and the morality of troops sent to fight wars on foreign soil. The war changed the way people thought of their own troops and the effects a war had on the well being of the soldiers and their families. This paper aims to analyze the immediate, short term as well as long term effects of the Vietnam War on America.

## **Events Leading to the Vietnam War**

Vietnam was controlled by the French during the pre-World War II era. After the French were defeated in 1940 by the Germans, they formed a coalition with Japan to rule colonies of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. However, the Viet Minh was formed in 1941 to seek independence from France and later took up the same cause against the Japanese. They were supported in this struggle by America and China who wanted to alleviate the region from the control of the Axis Powers. Japan assumed full control in 1945. This was followed by a period of extreme famine caused by natural conditions as well as gross exploitation at the hands of the Japanese administration. Over 1 million of the 10 million Vietnamese population died of starvation between 1944 – 1945. Urged by the Viet Minh, the public raided between 75 – 100

food grain warehouses. The Viet Minh's popularity and its numbers grew. The Ho Chi Minh led group attained freedom for Vietnam on 2nd September 1945 and this was supported by the Japanese.

The Allied powers, US, UK and the Soviet Union agreed that the region should be under French control and with their support, France eventually assumed power in 1946. The ousted Viet Minh began a guerilla war against the French and this was the first Indochina war. The Viet Minh was strengthened with weapons in 1949 by China whose communist party had just won the Chinese Civil War. By 1950, the US was convinced of that the region was at the center of a communist expansion and so began aiding French Vietnamese soldiers. By 1954, the United States had supplied 300,000 small arms and spent US\$1 billion in support of the French military effort and was shouldering 80 percent of the cost of the war [ CITATION Zin97 p 471 | 1033 ] while the People's Republic of China aided the Viet Minh. The French eventually lost power and Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were granted independence in 1954 during the Geneva Conference. However, Vietnam was temporarily divided as North Vietnam (Communist) and South Vietnam (Anti-communist) with a condition that elections to form a unified government would be held in 1956.

## **The Vietnam War**

As people of varying political alliances moved to the parts of Vietnam where their kind of government was in power, Vietnam grew increasingly divided in principle. Although the North was ruled by Ho Chi Minh's Communist Viet Minh, the South had a more tyrannical leader in Ngo Dinh Diem. Although Diem claimed to be anti-communist, his government reeked of corruption

and exploitation of lower classes of the society such as the peasants, who supported Ho Chi Minh for his consideration towards the poor. Hence, when the time to form a unified government arrived, South Vietnam refused to comply with the Communist North, a purpose in which they were backed by America. The North Vietnamese guerillas, the Viet Cong, began attacks on South Vietnam in 1958. In support of the South, The US sent in 200 troops as ' military advisors', a number which has swollen to 16, 300 by 1963.

Despite the backing of the US, South Vietnam had lost several fertile lands to the Northern Guerillas by 1963. In 1965, in hopes of squashing the revolution, President Johnson took the war to the next level with air strikes on North Vietnam. The presence of troops was also increased to 536, 000 by 1968. In the same year, Tet Offensive by the North Vietnamese drew fire from the American people and protests broke out against the war. The next president, Richard Nixon, advocated Vietnamization, withdrawing American troops and giving South Vietnam greater responsibility for fighting the war. His attempt to slow the flow of North Vietnamese soldiers and supplies into South Vietnam by sending American forces to destroy Communist supply bases in Cambodia in 1970 in violation of Cambodian neutrality provoked antiwar protests on the nation's college campuses [ CITATION Dig11 I 1033 ]. When John F. Kennedy became the president, the US was still split over its support for Diem. As the guerilla warfare continued, American troops kept facing heavy losses in the face of an uncertain cause. There were several efforts to resolve the conflict through diplomacy from 1968 through to 1970. However, all such efforts failed and the National Liberation Front, formed in 1960 by both communists and non-communists against Diem's tyrannical

reign, gained momentum. After North Vietnam attacked an American Navy ship in the Gulf of Tonkin, the congress passed a resolution for a full scale war. America launched limited air strikes, that, never the less, led to many civilian deaths. Military presence in the conflict was also increased as the number of US troops dying in battle increased steadily. Finally, in 1973, America withdrew its troops and North Vietnam released its prisoners of war. The war ended when South Vietnam surrendered to the North and Vietnam was united in April 1975.

## **Consequences of the Vietnam War**

Vietnam was called a “ Fourth Rate Power” by the then Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. However, when American troops, technologies and strategies were defeated by the guerilla warfare by the same nation, it dealt a humiliating blow to American national pride. The American people for long had considered their country to be an invincible force committed to upholding justice and glory. This image was shattered as questions arose about the justification of the Vietnam war and the methods of warfare used against a comparatively backward army. The US also fell into a deeper economic crises as an estimated \$ 167 billion was spent on the war. President Lyndon B. Johnson's decision to finance a major war and the Great Society simultaneously, without a significant increase in taxation, launched a runaway double-digit inflation and mounting federal debt that ravaged the American economy and eroded living standards from the late 1960s into the 1990s [ CITATION Sit99 l 1033 ]. The popularity of the government and its methods of administration fell greatly in the eyes of the people who could not understand how the government allowed 58, 000 US soldiers and

between 1 to 2 million Vietnamese to die when it was not even sure it was supporting a just cause. The American people were also highly upset over the manner in which the war was fought. Domestic protests against America's role in Vietnam was not so much directed at the absence of a just cause, however, as against the unjust means whereby the war was pursued, and the indiscriminate attacks on the noncombatant population [ CITATION Blu85 l 1033 ].

The troops that fought the war and returned home did not receive the hero's welcome that most war veterans get. The shame of having lost a war fought for an unjust cause was passed on to the returning troops. The government too chose to ignore the physical, psychological and financial needs of the troops or their families who were severely impacted by the horrendous war. Many soldiers suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome while several others had contracted cancer due to the use of chemical weapons in Agent Orange. Due to the easy availability of hard drugs in the Vietnam regions, nearly 30% of the troops had developed an addiction to heroine. The Vietnam War opened the eyes of the American government and people alike to the fact that their nation was not invincible. Not only were the American people but there were protests around the world for the end of the war in Vietnam, in particular, the unjustified presence of American troops in the battlefield.

However, the government, it seems, did not learn its lesson well and the people of America too have forgotten the teaching of America's longest and most fruitless wars. The neo-isolationist tendency that former President Richard M. Nixon called " the Vietnam syndrome" would be most manifest in

the public debates over President Ronald Reagan's interventionist policies in Nicaragua and President George Bush's decision to drive Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. Despite the victorious outcome of the Persian Gulf War for the United States and its allies, and President Bush's declaration in March 1991--" By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all!"--the fear of intervention would reappear in the public debate over President Bill Clinton's commitment of U. S. peacekeeping forces in Somalia and Bosnia [ CITATION Sit99 l 1033 ]. It is obvious that over 25 years post the Vietnam War, the American people still remember the losses from that war and the lessons learned in the process. American foreign policy saw a shift whereby it was determined that the US would only use military force as a ' last resort' in order to resolve international disputes. The cause and justification of waging a war also required a very firm and clear national interest. The decision to wage a war for the resolution of an international conflict would also need a majority backing of the people of America and any such war would need to be resolved quickly with minimum spending. While these changes in the outlook of the American people and the overall foreign policy of the US would imply that fewer wars would be waged and lesser money spent on warfare in the years to come, the opposite was actually true.

Although it was expected that the US would exercise more caution when waging wars on foreign soil, the very fact that it has militarily interfered in the conflicts of other nations in almost every decade post the Vietnam War shows that its foreign policy has only changed in the books. Since the Persian Gulf War of 1992, the US has invaded Afghanistan as well as Iraq on the pretext of finding people or weapons. Although the reasons it gave for

the invasions sounded just, no convincing proofs were provided to the international community at large. American involvement in the Middle East crisis has been the subject of debate for over two decades with no end in sight. A large number of soldiers died in Iraq and similarities were drawn with the Vietnam War. America's foreign policy has been under great scrutiny. Being a nuclear power itself, the nation has made it a point to ask several countries to sign nuclear deals that will restrict them from manufacturing weapon grade uranium. It even went to the extent of threatening war against Iran when it failed to comply. This attitude of the US government has given it the reputation of a 'Global Bully', especially in South Asian, Middle Eastern and North African countries.

## **Conclusions & Predictions**

There is a stark contrast between the US foreign policy and its actual implementation. Considering the fact that the death toll of its own troops or the scores of civilian deaths has not prevented the US from intervening in international conflicts, it cannot be expected that this will change in the near future. While on one hand, the government will struggle to balance the economy and appease tax payers, it will also continue to wage wars on foreign shores. As President Bush jr. aptly named the American warfare method of 'Shock and Awe', the US will avoid using ground troops in combats, preferring massive, if inaccurate, air strikes to eliminate. Civilian casualties incurred during such strikes will continue to be called collateral damage. Billions of dollars will continue to be spent on developing weapons and defense technology that could as easily be used in an offensive. In all likelihood, the primary focus will be North Korea, Iran and Pakistan, with an



increasing Neo-Cold-War with China. American involvement in the Middle East crisis will remain at the same level, if not increase, over the next few years.

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