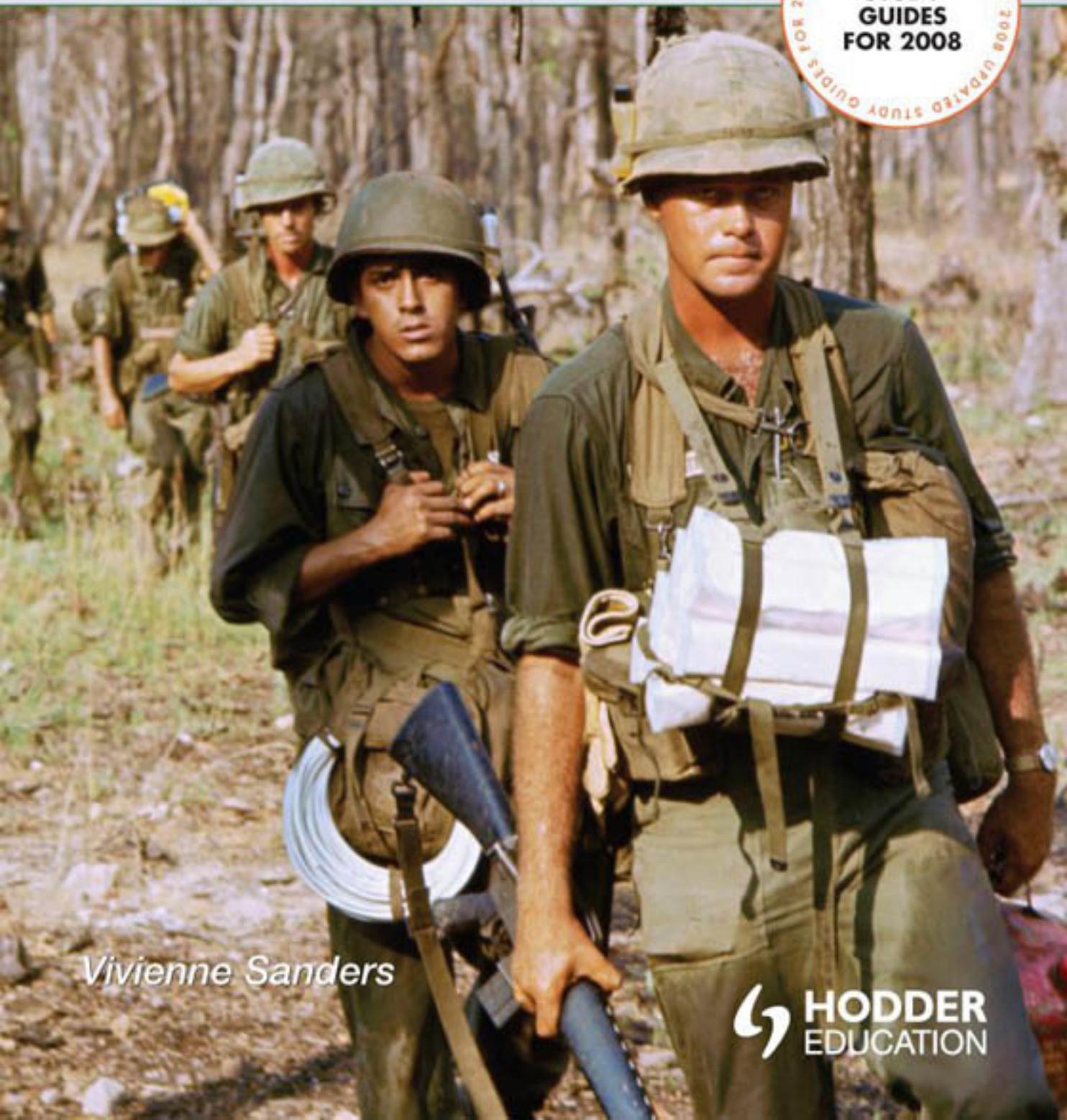
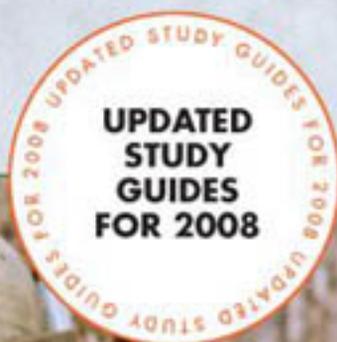


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The USA and Vietnam

1945–75 THIRD EDITION



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1945–75 THIRD EDITION

Vivienne Sanders

**Study guides revised and updated, 2008, by Sally Waller (AQA),
Angela Leonard (Edexcel) and Martin Jones (OCR).**

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Contents

Dedication	vii
Chapter 1 Introduction: The United States and Vietnam	1
1 Introduction	1
2 Overview of the War	2
3 Overview of the Debates on the Vietnam War	3
Chapter 2 Vietnam and Foreigners Before 1953	7
1 Ho Chi Minh and Vietnamese Nationalism	8
2 The United States and Vietnam, 1941–5	14
3 The Reasons for the Early American Involvement in Vietnam	17
4 ‘These Situations ... Have a Way of Snowballing’	20
5 Key Debates on the Truman Years	21
Chapter 3 Eisenhower and Two Vietnams	24
1 Ho, Giap and the French Failure in Indochina	25
2 Dienbienphu – The Debate over American Intervention	29
3 The Geneva Conference on Indochina, 1954	34
4 Two Vietnams and Two Leaders	39
5 Assessment of Eisenhower’s Policy	46
6 Key Debates	48
Chapter 4 ‘Vietnam is the Place’ – The Kennedy Crusade (1961–3)	51
1 Introduction: Kennedy’s War?	52
2 Kennedy’s Early Ideas about Vietnam	52
3 The President and his Advisers	54
4 Kennedy’s Actions in the Third World	61
5 Kennedy and Diem	63
6 Conclusions	75
7 Key Debates	76
Study Guide	79
Chapter 5 ‘Johnson’s War’?	80
1 Why Johnson Continued US Involvement in the War	81
2 How Johnson was Able to Escalate the War	87
3 Why Did Johnson Escalate the American Involvement in Vietnam?	90
4 ‘Where Are We Going?’	95
5 Historians and ‘Johnson’s War’?	100
Study Guide	102

Chapter 6 Why the USA Failed: I – The People in Vietnam	109
1 The Vietnamese	109
2 The Americans	122
3 Key Debates	130
Chapter 7 Why the USA Failed: II – US Politicians and People	132
1 Problems with Johnson’s Aims and Methods	133
2 Why and How Johnson was Forced to Retreat	135
3 Johnson’s Last Months	150
4 Conclusions about Johnson and the War	152
Study Guide	154
Chapter 8 1969–73: Nixon – Diplomatic Genius or Mad Bomber?	162
1 The Transformation of a Cold Warrior?	163
2 President Nixon	167
3 1969–71	171
4 1972 – Getting Re-elected	179
5 Assessment of Nixon’s Vietnam Policy	185
6 Key Debate	188
Study Guide	190
Chapter 9 Conclusions	192
1 Summarising the Debates	192
2 The Effects of the War	194
3 The Lessons of the Vietnam War	200
Glossary	201
Index	206

Dedication

Keith Randell (1943–2002)

The *Access to History* series was conceived and developed by Keith, who created a series to ‘cater for students as they are, not as we might wish them to be’. He leaves a living legacy of a series that for over 20 years has provided a trusted, stimulating and well-loved accompaniment to post-16 study. Our aim with these new editions is to continue to offer students the best possible support for their studies.

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1

Introduction: The United States and Vietnam

POINTS TO CONSIDER

From 1954 to 1973, the United States of America was deeply involved in a war in Vietnam. This chapter gives an overview of the debates on:

- Why the United States got involved and remained in Vietnam
- Why the United States failed to defeat Communism in Vietnam
- The results of the Vietnam War

Key dates

Late 1800s	French conquered Vietnam
1946–54	Vietnamese Communists led struggle for independence from France
1954	Era of French domination ended. Two Vietnamese governments: North Vietnam (Communist) and South Vietnam
1954–68	United States gave ever-increasing aid to unpopular anti-Communist South Vietnamese regimes
1968–73	United States gradually withdrew from Vietnam
1975	Vietnamese Communists took over the whole of Vietnam

1 | Introduction

Many who were born after the American involvement in the Vietnam War ended (1973) have vivid mental images of Americans in Vietnam, thanks to memorable scenes in Hollywood movies: Robin Williams as a DJ trying to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people in *Good Morning Vietnam*; Robert de Niro trying to stop his Vietnam veteran buddy playing Russian roulette with a gun against his head in *The Deer Hunter*; Charlie Sheen prowling through the jungle with a war-crazed sergeant in *Platoon*; Sylvester Stallone going back to Indochina to defeat the Communists single handedly in a *Rambo* film; Tom Cruise barely recognisable as a crippled veteran in *Born on the Fourth of July*.

The Vietnam War is still very much alive in the memories and actions of Americans today. I spent Christmas 1995 with my uncle

2 | The USA and Vietnam 1945–75

and aunt in California. A career soldier in his younger days, my uncle was a helicopter pilot in the American army in Vietnam in 1966–8. I wanted to hear his recollections of Vietnam. ‘When Bob [his son] comes’, my uncle said, ‘don’t mention the war. It is not the sort of thing I want to talk about in front of my kids.’ I knew the great issues that historians debate about America and Vietnam, but many were painfully immediate that Christmas. My uncle was a professional soldier in the army of the richest and most powerful nation in the world in 1966. Why did he have to fight in a small, poor country in Southeast Asia? Why did he think his children were embarrassed about his participation in the war? What impact did the war have on him and his family? Answers to the first two questions are given in this book. The answer to the third question is that it greatly damaged his family life and that he now has the kind of terminal cancer that is exceptionally common amongst Vietnam veterans exposed to **Agent Orange**.

2 | Overview of the War

From 1946 to 1954 the Vietnamese people struggled for independence against their French colonial masters. When the French left Vietnam in 1954 the country was temporarily divided into two. Almost immediately the Americans moved in, helping to create and support an anti-**Communist** Vietnamese regime in the south against the **Communist** Vietnamese regime in the north. Although Vietnamese struggles against foreigners before 1954 are briefly discussed, this book concentrates on the years of American involvement in Vietnam (1954–73). From 1954, the United States made increasingly strenuous efforts to support the government of South Vietnam in its struggle against Communist **guerrillas** who were supported by North Vietnam, China and the USSR. However, by 1973 the United States had given up the struggle against the Vietnamese Communists. The latter proceeded to take over the whole of Vietnam in 1975. The causes, course and consequences of American involvement are much debated by historians.

Agent Orange

A herbicide used by the US in Vietnam, in order to defoliate the trees to destroy enemy cover.

Communist

One whose ideology (set of beliefs) is anti-imperialist (against countries that try to conquer or dominate others) and pro-equal distribution of wealth.

Guerrilla

A soldier who tries to avoid conventional warfare (that is, one army directly confronting another), preferring methods such as sabotage to counter the enemy’s superior conventional forces.

The Vietnamese war of independence against France: 1946–54

USA deeply involved in Vietnam: 1954–73

Vietnam became fully Communist: 1975

Key terms

Key dates

Summary diagram: Overview of the Vietnam War

1946–54	Vietnamese v French
1954	French out USA and two Vietnams in
1954–73	USA and South Vietnam v (Communist) North Vietnam
1973	USA out
1975	Vietnam united and Communist

Key question →
When was the United States at war?

3 | Overview of the Debates on the Vietnam War

Historians disagree about almost every aspect of US involvement in Vietnam. There is not even agreement about the dates between which the US was at war. This is because American diplomatic and military intervention was gradual. It escalated slowly, over a long period of time from 1945 onwards. Furthermore, the US never actually declared war on anyone. There was little direct involvement between 1945 and 1954 when France was attempting to re-establish colonial rule over the country following the Second World War (see Chapters 2 and 3). However, from 1954 onwards, the US became more and more embroiled in the region (Chapters 4–8).

a) A key debate: why did the US get involved and remain in Vietnam?

This is one of the most hotly debated issues.

i) The official explanation

The official American government position was that the US was fighting against an aggressive and evil Communist movement, and that the Vietnamese Communists were the puppets of the USSR and China. Washington said that if Vietnam fell to Communism, other Southeast Asian countries would probably follow (for this ‘domino theory’ see page 31). Unless the US stopped Communism, American national security and liberty and free enterprise throughout the world would be threatened. There were different emphases as circumstances changed. In the 1950s it was stressed that America’s ally France needed help (Chapters 2 and 3). In the 1960s South Vietnam’s need for freedom and democracy was emphasised (Chapters 4–8). It was said that the US had an obligation to continue its commitment in Vietnam and that American international credibility would be damaged if the US withdrew (see, in particular, Chapters 5, 7 and 8).

ii) Idealism, economic self-interest or militarism?

While some historians (for example, G. Lewy) see idealism behind American anti-Communist crusading, others (for example, Gabriel Kolko) think that American economic self-interest was the most important motivating force. Many companies did well out of war, and many Americans thought it vital that America should continue to have access to the raw materials and markets of Southeast Asia – something they thought would cease if Southeast Asia became Communist (see page 17). Many Vietnamese today attribute US involvement in Vietnam to American economic greed and militarism.

iii) The role of presidents

Historians argue over how the blame for the involvement and its continuation should be apportioned between the various

presidents who held office during this period. Truman was the first to get involved but is rarely blamed. Some historians blame Eisenhower, more blame Kennedy but most blame Johnson. Many revile Nixon for not getting the US out quickly enough.

US presidents in the era of American involvement in Vietnam

President	Dates	Chapters
Harry Truman	1945–53	2
Dwight Eisenhower	1953–61	3
John Kennedy	1961–3	4
Lyndon Johnson	1963–9	5–7
Richard Nixon	1969–73	8

iv) The ‘quagmire theory’

Some historians (for example, Arthur Schlesinger Jr) favour the ‘quagmire’ interpretation of American involvement. According to the **quagmire theory**, successive presidents took one step after another, thinking each step would be the one to solve the Vietnam problem. The US then got deeper and deeper into the quagmire (literally, a muddy marsh).

v) The stalemate theory

Some historians (for example, L. Gelb and R. Betts) bitterly accuse American presidents of knowing that they could not win yet continuing the war so that they would not be ‘the first president to lose a war’. That is known as the **stalemate theory**.

vi) The commitment trap

Many historians, whether implicitly or explicitly, argue that the commitment made to Vietnam by the previous president(s) made it harder for each president’s successor(s) to exit without the US and the president(s) losing face.

vii) Shared responsibility

Other historians (for example, Vaughn Davis Bornet) feel that it is unfair to blame the presidents alone. They argue that the responsibility is shared by the presidents’ advisers, the **State Department**, the **Defence Department**, the **Joint Chiefs of Staff** (JCS), the **Central Intelligence Agency** (CIA), and ambassadors to Vietnam. Presidents normally make decisions after hearing the advice of all the above. Furthermore, in order to finance any fighting, the president needed to get money from **Congress**. The president and Congress were elected by the people. Some historians claim that Congress, the public, and the press who kept them informed bear some responsibility for American involvement because it is clear that presidents responded to what they thought the electorate did or did not want.

Quagmire theory

Belief that the US got slowly and increasingly stuck in Vietnam.

Stalemate theory

Belief that the US continued to fight an unwinnable war in Vietnam, simply to avoid being seen to be defeated.

State Department

The US equivalent of Britain’s Foreign Office – the section of the federal bureaucracy with responsibility for US relations with foreign powers.

Defence Department

The section of the federal bureaucracy with responsibility for US defence.

Joint Chiefs of Staff

Established during the Second World War – US army, navy and air force chiefs.

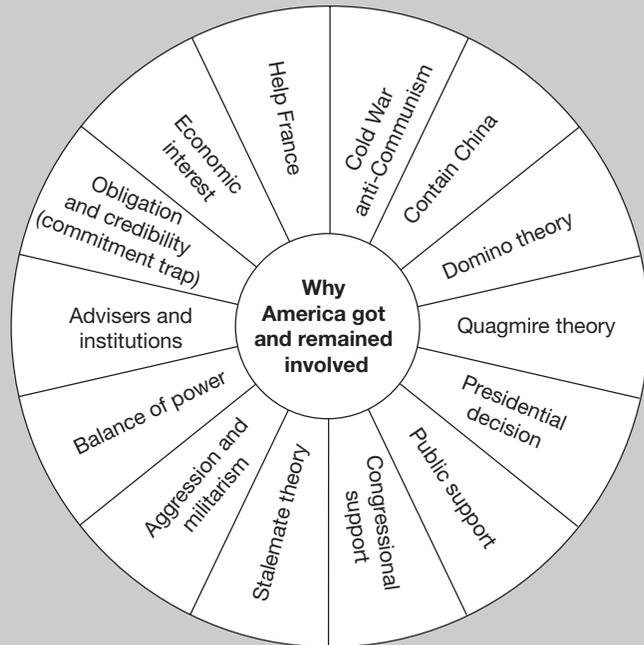
Central Intelligence Agency

Established in 1947 – responsible for collecting and evaluating intelligence data for the federal government.

Congress

The US equivalent of Britain’s parliament – passes laws and votes money for the president to spend.

Summary diagram: Why did the US get involved and remain in Vietnam?



b) A key debate: why did the US fail in Vietnam?

The other central debate concerns why America failed in the war (Chapters 6 and 7). Despite tremendous American efforts, the state of South Vietnam collapsed in 1975 after an invasion by the North. The American military (for example, William Westmoreland) tend to blame the civilians for the loss of the war. Had the US immediately employed all its military power, they argue, it would have won. They are bitter about the politicians who 'lost their nerve' in the face of mounting protests from the American public.

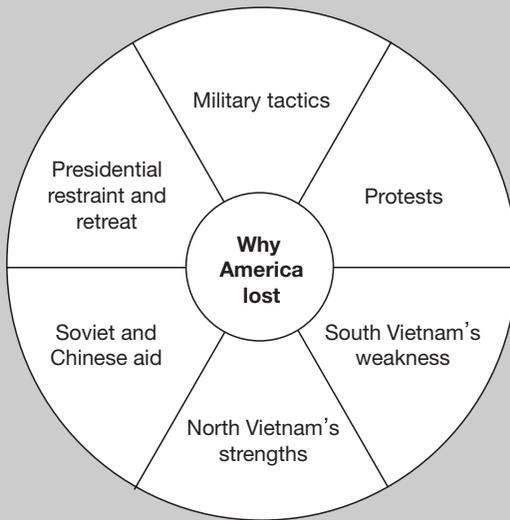
However, some historians (for example, S. Stanton) blame the military as much as the civilians, saying they failed to adopt the appropriate **counter-insurgency** tactics. Instead of 'search and destroy' operations against the Communist guerrillas, the US should have concentrated forces on the 17th parallel to divide the North and South (see the map on page 37), and worked harder to win the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese people. Some (such as Eric Bergerud) believe the war was unwinnable because of the strength and stubborn conviction of the North Vietnamese (helped by the USSR and China) and the hopelessness of America's South Vietnamese allies.

Key term

Counter-insurgency

When faced with irregular (guerrilla) warfare conducted against the South Vietnamese government by discontented South Vietnamese rebels (insurgents), some Americans urged special tactics (for example, propaganda) to counter those insurgents.

Summary diagram: Why did the US fail in Vietnam?



c) The results of the Vietnam War

The results of the war are less debated. It is unanimously agreed that Americans and Vietnamese suffered physically, emotionally and economically (Chapters 6–8). There are still visible reminders of the war. Limbless veterans and war memorials can be seen in both countries. The physical landscape in Vietnam has not yet recovered. Lush tropical forests have not yet grown back. So many Vietnamese emigrated to America that one area of Los Angeles is known as ‘Little Saigon’. In both countries, some remain embittered, although more are keen to forget the war and get on with their lives. Perhaps the final great debate about ‘Vietnam’ is what, if any, lessons the US (and others) can learn from it (Chapter 8).

Some key books in the debates

- E. Bergerud, *Dynamics of Defeat* (Boulder, 1991).
 V. Davis Bornet, *The Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson* (Kansas, 1983).
 L. Gelb and R. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam* (Washington, 1979).
 H. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, 1979).
 G. Kolko, *Anatomy of a War* (Pantheon, 1985).
 G. Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Oxford University Press, 1978).
 A. Schlesinger Jr, *The Bitter Heritage* (Boston, 1966).
 S. Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army* (Dell, 1985).
 W. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Dell, 1976).

2

Vietnam and Foreigners Before 1953

POINTS TO CONSIDER

There are three particularly controversial questions regarding American involvement in Vietnam: 1) Why did the United States get involved? 2) Which presidents were responsible for that involvement? 3) Why did the United States fail there?

This chapter helps to answer those three questions, through the following sections:

- Ho Chi Minh and Vietnamese nationalism
- The United States and Vietnam, 1941–5
- The reasons for early American involvement in Vietnam
- ‘These situations ... have a way of snowballing’
- Key debates on the Truman years

Key dates

1887	Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) under French domination
1911	Ho Chi Minh left Vietnam
1919	Paris Peace Settlement at end of First World War President Wilson ignored Ho Chi Minh’s pleas for greater Vietnamese freedom
1924	Ho Chi Minh visited USSR
1929	Ho Chi Minh established Indochinese Communist Party
1939–45	Second World War
1941	Japanese completed conquest of French Indochina Ho returned to Vietnam Vietnam Independence League (Vietminh) established
1941–5	USA at war with Japan
1945 April	President Roosevelt died; Truman became president
September	Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence, but US and Britain allowed French to return to Vietnam
1945–9	Start of Cold War between USA and USSR

1946	November	Outbreak of Franco-Vietminh War
1949		France established 'independent' Associated State of Vietnam under Bao Dai
	October	China became Communist
1950	January	USSR and China recognised Ho's Democratic Republic of Vietnam
	February	Start of 'McCarthyism' USA recognised Associated State of Vietnam and promised aid
	September	Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) established
1954		United States paid 80 per cent of French costs in Indochina

1 | Ho Chi Minh and Vietnamese Nationalism

Two of the most important reasons why the Americans were to fail in Vietnam were (a) Vietnamese **nationalism** and (b) the leadership of Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969).

a) Vietnamese nationalism before 1900

Captain John White was the first American to set foot on Vietnamese soil. Seeking trade, he arrived in the port of Saigon in 1820. He found a small country very different from the United States of America. The vast majority of Vietnamese were peasant farmers producing rice on the fertile deltas of the Red River in the north and the Mekong in the south. The growing of rice was a communal activity carried out by the people of each village. Their community spirit and nationalism had been vital in fending off frequent Chinese attempts to conquer Vietnam. China was at least a hundred times larger in both area and population, but during their centuries of struggle against the Chinese the Vietnamese had generally been successful because they had perfected guerrilla warfare techniques (see page 2). Vietnamese guerrillas abandoned the towns, avoided frontal attacks, and harassed the Chinese into confusion and exhaustion.

During the nineteenth century the French replaced the Chinese as the greatest threat to Vietnamese independence. In their search for souls, trade, empire and glory, the French began attacking Vietnam in the mid-nineteenth century. By 1887 the countries subsequently known as Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were under the control of the French, who referred to them collectively as **Indochina**. Vietnamese internal squabbles had facilitated the French triumph.

However, the economic and political humiliations of French colonial rule soon caused articulate Vietnamese nationalists to unite to consider how to turn national resentment into rebellion. One nationalist who changed his name many times (partly to avoid detection) eventually became known throughout the world as Ho Chi Minh.

Key question
Who and what had inspired Vietnamese nationalism?

Nationalism
In the case of Vietnam, patriotic enthusiasm for an independent Vietnam.

Indochina
The countries now known as Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

Indochina under French domination: 1887

Key terms

Key date

Key question

Who and what shaped and inspired Ho Chi Minh's nationalism and Communism?

Key terms**Russian Revolution**

Began in 1917. It made Russia into the world's first Communist country, called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

Mandarin

A high-ranking civil servant.

Self-determination

When a people has the right to decide how they will be governed.

Key dates

Ho Chi Minh out of Vietnam: 1911–41

Paris Peace Settlement at end of the First World War: 1919

President Wilson ignored Ho Chi Minh's pleas for greater Vietnamese freedom: 1919

b) The shaping of a Vietnamese leader

Ho Chi Minh's patriotism was shaped and inspired by Vietnamese history and by his father. His Communism was initially inspired by the **Russian Revolution** and then by the Chinese Communist Party.

i) Family background

Ho Chi Minh's father worked his way up to the rank of **mandarin**, then abandoned his family and became a travelling teacher and doctor. Ho inherited that service ethos and the urge to wander, free of family commitments.

ii) Years abroad

In 1911 Ho sailed away from Vietnam on a French merchant ship and it was 30 years before he returned. A major aim of these travels was to help to prepare himself for the eventual struggle for Vietnamese independence. On his travels he studied Westerners with interest and admiration. He was particularly impressed by the wealth and dynamism of New York City. He took any job, whether assistant pastry cook in London's five-star Carlton Hotel or painter of 'genuine' Chinese antiquities in France!

Intoxicated by French culture during a six-year stay in Paris, he denounced the corruption of the French language by English words such as '*le manager*'. He mixed with political radicals who discussed the Communist revolution currently convulsing Russia. Ho discovered that he shared many Communist beliefs, especially opposition to the colonialism whereby white nations dominated Asians and Africans.

iii) At the Paris Peace Conference (1919)

In 1919 US President Woodrow Wilson was in France masterminding the peace settlement at the end of the First World War. Wilson emphasised that all people had the right to **self-determination**. Ho was impressed by Wilson's ideas and the words of the American Declaration of Independence (1776), which said that all men were created equal and entitled to a say in who governed them. Although Ho was aware that these fine words could not always be taken literally and that Americans did not always apply them to non-European peoples, he nevertheless petitioned Wilson for democratic reforms in Vietnam. Although Wilson ignored him, Ho never ceased to call upon the Western democracies to live up to their declared principles. Meanwhile, he was optimistic that his fellow Vietnamese would soon revolt against their French oppressors just as ordinary Russians seemed to have rejected their upper-class government. 'It was patriotism and not Communism that originally inspired me', Ho said later.

iv) 'A professional revolutionary'

In 1924 Ho went to Moscow, where he met Soviet leaders such as Stalin, but he found that they were disappointingly uninterested in little Vietnam.

Profile: Ho Chi Minh 1890–1969

- 1890 – Born to a Vietnamese nationalist of the mandarin class in central Vietnam
- 1911–41 – In exile from Vietnam
- 1941 – Returned to Vietnam and established League for the Independence of Vietnam (Vietminh) to combat Japanese occupation of Vietnam
- 1943 – Contacted United States units in southern China, suggested co-operation against Japan. US officers helped to train Vietminh
- 1945 – Declared newly independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)
- 1945–6 – Unsuccessful negotiations with the French. Increased Franco-Vietminh military clashes (the First Indochina War or the Franco-Vietminh War)
- 1950 – DRV recognised by USSR and People’s Republic of China
- 1950–3 – Most of Vietnamese countryside under Vietminh control
- 1954 – French decisively defeated at Dienbienphu. Geneva Accords ‘temporarily’ divided Vietnam (with Ho’s Vietminh dominant in the North, and Bao Dai in the South), and promised elections in a reunified Vietnam in 1956
- 1959 – Communist guerrillas (Vietcong) caused increased problems for Ngo Dinh Diem, ruler of South Vietnam. Ho increasingly in the background, but his followers dominated the North Vietnamese government in Hanoi. As ‘Uncle Ho’, he was increasingly the symbol of nationalism and national unity
- 1969 – Died



Ho Chi Minh was one of the most influential Communist leaders of the twentieth century. He was the prime mover in the establishment of the unusually nationalistic Communist Party of Vietnam, which he led for three decades. He led the Vietnamese people to victory over the Japanese and the French, and then towards victory over the United States.

In an age when alternative Vietnamese leaders ruined their nationalist credentials by association with foreign powers, Ho Chi Minh’s main appeal lay in his patriotism. Significantly, in the 1920s and 1930s, other Communists criticised him as too nationalistic.

He was willing to dilute or even ignore Communist ideology in order to maximise support. He successfully cultivated the ‘common touch’. In the 1950s, American observers reported that the bulk of the population supported ‘Uncle Ho’, as he called himself. He was to be seen everywhere – villages, rice fields, meetings and the battlefield. As he never married and paid little attention to his blood relations, he really seemed like ‘uncle’ Ho to many of his fellow countrymen.



A Vietnamese nationalist cartoon from the early 1930s showed peasants driving out French colonial troops. The peasants shout 'Wipe out the gang of imperialists, mandarins, capitalists and big landlords!'

Key dates

Ho Chi Minh visited USSR: 1924

Ho Chi Minh established Indochinese Communist Party: 1929

Later in the year he visited China. By now he was fluent in Russian, Chinese, French and English, as well as Vietnamese. Ho began to organise Vietnamese students in China into a revolutionary league. 'I have become a professional revolutionary', he told a French friend in 1927.

Meanwhile back home, Vietnamese nationalists clashed with their French colonialist oppressors. Believing that the time would soon be ripe for revolution, Ho established the Indochinese Communist Party in Hong Kong in 1929.

Throughout the 1930s, Ho's writings were smuggled into Vietnam while he continued travelling carefully observing Communism in China and the Soviet Union, mentally preparing himself for the struggle for Vietnamese independence. That struggle was brought to a head by the actions of the Emperor Bao Dai, the French and the Japanese, all of whom gave Ho Chi Minh revolutionary opportunities.

Key question

How did Bao Dai increase Ho Chi Minh's popularity?

c) Bao Dai – the French puppet

One of the main reasons why Ho Chi Minh was a popular leader was because of the dearth of appealing alternatives. One such unappealing alternative was the Emperor Bao Dai, whose association with the French compared unfavourably with Ho's patriotism.