Vietnam Essay, Research Paper

Vietnam is one of the most famous wars that America has taken place in. It is also considered by some to be the most controversial. Many say that America did not belong in the fight and that it was a waste of money, man-power, and time. Others say that it was important to show that the U.S. will not stand by and let a country or territory be taken in the wrong way.

Vietnam lasted from 1959 to 1975. It involved the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front or NLF. It also included the U.S. and the South Vietnamese forces. From about 1946 to 1945 the Vietnamese had struggled for independence from the French during the first Indochina War. When the war ended the country was split into two creating North and South Vietnam. North Vietnam soon came under the control of Vietnamese Communists who really hated France and were looking to unite Vietnam under Communist rule. South Vietnam was controlled by Vietnamese leaders who favored the French.

The reason that the U.S. entered the Vietnam War was fear of the ?Domino Effect?. The Domino Effect is the term used to explain that if one country falls under Communist rule than soon after the countries in that area will soon fall also. If Vietnam became a Communist state than it was likely that more could fall also. This is also why the U.S. supported South Vietnam. The U.S. didn?t send troops in until 1965. They were sent in to keep the South Vietnamese government from collapsing but in the long run they eventually failed.

When Ngo Dinh Diem came into power he used very repressive measures. These measures led to growing organized opposition within South Vietnam. Another problem was that Diem?s government represented a small minority of Vietnamese who were mostly businessmen, Roman Catholics, large landowners, and others who were pro-French. At first the United States helped South Vietnam military advisors and financial assistance. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was what eventually gave President Linden B. Johnson permission to escalate the war in Vietnam.

President Johnson felt that he had to take a forceful stance on Vietnam so that other Communist countries wouldn?t think that the United States ?lacked resolve?. Johnson also believed that the key to success was to frighten North Vietnam?s leaders with the possibility of full-scale United States military intervention. In January of 1964 Johnson approved of top-secret, covert attacks against North Vietnam, including commando raids against bridges, railways, and coastal installations. After reports of North Vietnamese gunboats attacking United States NAVY war ships Johnson went on air to get approval from the public of an attack on Vietnam. Soon after Congress gave Johnson the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which gave him war-making powers until such time as ?peace and security? had returned to Vietnam. On March 8, 1965, 3500 U.S. Marine troops landed in da Nang. Soon after about 74,000 combat troops arrived.

When some of the soldiers of the U.S. 9th Marine Regiment landed in da Nang in March 1965, their orders were to protect the U.S. air base, but the mission was quickly changed to include search-and-destroy patrols of the area around base. This corresponded in miniature to the larger strategy of General William Westmoreland. Westmoreland, who took over the Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (NACV) in 1964, wanted to establish a large American force and then unleash it in big sweeps. This strategy was called attrition- eliminating or wearing down the enemy by inflicting the highest death toll possible. There were 80,000 U.S troops in Vietnam by the end of 1965, by 1969 there would be 534,000.

The North Vietnamese and the NLF had anticipated the U.S. escalation. With full-scale movement of U.S. troops onto South Vietnamese territory, the Communists claimed that the Saigon regime had become a puppet, not unlike the pro-French. Both the North Vietnamese and the NLF appealed to the nationalism of the Vietnamese to rise up and drive the U.S. forced out of Vietnam.

The strategy against the United States was decided after alot of debate. Many argued that South Vietnam had to liberate themselves. Others argued that Vietnam was one nation and therefore dependent on all Vietnamese for it?s dependence and reunification.

After the United States initiated large scale bombings against the DRV in 1964, just after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Hanoi dispatched the first unit of northern-born regular soldiers or ?regulars?. Before this only southern-born Viet Minh, known as regroupees, had returned to their native regions and joined NLF guerilla units. Now regulars, who where led by generals that were born in the south, began to set up bases in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam in order to gain strategic position.

Unable to move across the demilitarized zone, the regulars had moved to South Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos and Cambodia. The Ho Chi Minh trail had been set up in 1957 and was at first a series of footpaths. By the late 1960?s it had become a network of paved highways that enabled the motor transport of people and equipment. The NLF guerillas and the North Vietnamese troops were poorly armed compared to the Americans, so once they were in South Vietnam they tried to avoid open combat. Instead the guerillas developed hit-and-run tactics designed to cause steady casualties among the U.S. troops and to wear down popular support for the war in the United States. In June 1964 retired general Maxwell Taylor replaced Henry Cabot Lodge as ambassador to South Vietnam. Taylor at first opposed the introduction of combat troops, believing that this would make the South quit fighting altogether. By 1965 he agreed to the request of General Westmoreland for combat forces. At first Taylor wanted to use a different strategy where U.S. forces would seek to preserve areas already considered to be under Saigon?s control. This quickly proved impossible, since NLF strength was fairly strong pretty much everywhere in South Vietnam.

In October 1965 the 1st Calvary Division of the United States Army fought one of the largest battles of the war. It occurred in the Ia Dang Valley and was a serious defeat to North Vietnamese forces. After the battle the North Vietnamese and the NLF forces decided to change strategies. They decided that they only way to win was to fight when they wanted to. They began hit rapidly, with surprise if possible, and get out as soon as they had entered to avoid casualties from American forces. The success of the Ia Dang Valley battle convinced General Westmoreland that his strategy of attrition was the key to a United States victory. General Westmoreland then ordered the largest search-and-destroy operations of the war in what was called the ?Iron Triangle?, a Communist stronghold northeast of Saigon. These search-and-destroy missions were intended to find and destroy North Vietnam and NLF military headquarters but in the end failed to rid Communist forces from the area.

By the time 1967 had come around the ground war in Vietnam had become a stale mate. Americans would attack Vietnamese installations, kill some people, and go home. The Vietnamese would then attack American installations, kill people, and go home. This caused President Johnson and McNamara to increase the intensity of the air war being fought in Vietnam. For some time the Joint Chiefs of staff had been trying to get more bombings for quite some time and they thought that this was a good excuse to press for it. But there were already signs showing that intensified bombing would not do what it was intended to. In 1966 the U.S. successfully bombed a North Vietnam oil filed which destroyed 70 percent of their fuel reserves, this, however, did not affect the fight that they put up.

Civilian casualties were also a factor of the air war in Vietnam. People who planned escapes for civilians tried to avoid populated areas, but when you try to people during a time that more than one-hundred and fifty thousand sorties per year were flying and bombing things civilian casualties were really hard to avoid. These casualties caused tensions both in the United States and other places in the world. In 1967 the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle Wheeler, declared that no more ?major military targets? were left. With fear of Chinese and Soviet Union support to North Vietnam, The United States Defense Department had to admit a stale mate in both ground and air. This finally happened after an enormous amount of Vietnamese property had been destroyed.

In 1967 North Vietnam and the NLF decided that it was time to go all out and do as much damages as possible to the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. They planned what was called the Tet Offensive hoping that the casualties and destruction they were planning to inflict would alter the mood of the war in the United States. In December 1967 North Vietnamese forces attacked and surrounded a U.S. Marine base Khe Sahn. General Westmoreland ordered to have the base held at all costs. To make sure that the base wasn?t taken under North Vietnam control Westmoreland dispatched 50,000 U.S. Marines to hold the base. This move weakend the line to the South and was what the NLF strategists had hoped would happen. The main force of the Tet Offensive then began January 31, 1968, at the start of Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. This was unsuspected because the U.S. thought that the fighting would stop for a few days like it normally did for celebration. Most of the South Vietnamese troops had gone home on leave and in many areas U.S. troops were at stand-down. Almost simultaneously nearly 85,000 NLF troops attacked almost every major city and province capital across South Vietnam. Even the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, which had been thought to be invulnerable, had been taken over and held for eight hours before U.S. forces could regain control of it. It took Unites States forces three weeks to get rid of the 1000 NLF soldiers in Saigon.

The bloodiest fighting of the war happened in the Imperial capital of Hue. South Vietnamese officers were assasinated for associating with American forces. After more forces arrived nearly all the NLF sympathizers were murdered. United States Marines and paratroopers were ordered to search for NLF soldiers and sympahtizers. The thing that killed the most people though was the shelling that took place upon the city. All the architecual treasures of Hue were flattened and nearly 100,000 people were left homeless.

The Tet Offensive lasted untill the fall of 1968. When it was over North Vietnamese and NLF forces had suffered a small amount of losses. The U.S. Department of Defense estimated that nearly 45,000 North Vietnamese and NLF soldiers had been killed, most of the casualties were NLF soldiers. Although it was covered up for almost a year, a horrifying event struck the U.S. public. During the Tet Offensive American forces in May had destroyed and entire village called My Lai killing 500 unarmed civilians, mostly women and children.

After the Tet Offensive, General Westmoreland stated that the enemy was almost defeated and requested 206,000 more troops to come in and help finish the job. The success of the NLF in the Tet Offensive affect the public?s mood about the war and showed how deep the roots of Communism were in Norht Vietnam. It also showed how costly it was for America to stay in Vietnam. Many wanted closure and were hoping for withdrawl from the war. President Johnson rejected General Westmoreland?s request for more troops and replaced as the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam with Westmoreland?s deputy, General Creighton Abrams. President Johnson also decided not to run for re-election in 1968. Republican Richard Nixon ran for president and was elected saying that he would bring ?peace and honor?.

After Vietnam many people wondered what the U.S. had accomplished. Most say that if the U.S. hadn?t tried to prevent a Communist Vietnam much worse of things may have occured. Others still believe today that the Vietnam war was not America?s fight and that it was a waste of money, time, and most importantly American soldiers.