Vietnam Essay, Research Paper

Believing that communist aggression in South Vietnam could lead to takeover of South East Asia, the United States slowly became more involved in the conflict there during the years of 1954 through 1975.

Prior to the War

Following World War II, there was a bloody 7 ? year struggle between Communist Vietnamese and the French for control of the land. A peace conference was finally held in Geneva, Switzerland on July 1954 which determined that French rule would be ended in Vietnam and that the country would be split at the 17th parallel of latitude into North Vietnam, with a Communist government, and South Vietnam, with a republican government.

Not long after, the United States military advisers took the job of training the South Vietnamese army. At the same time, Ho Chi Minh, president of North Vietnam, pledged to “liberate” South Vietnam.

Elections were planned to be held during 1956 to resolve the division of Vietnam, but the U.S. supported Ngo Dihn Diem’s refusal to hold the elections, believing that Ho Chi Minh would win.

South Vietnam

South Vietnamese Government Loses Support

Ngo Dinh Dem was elected in 1955, and was very popular at first, but public support, as well as that of military officers and cabinet ministers, gradually disappeared. This was mainly because Diem’s brother and adviser, Ngo Dinh Nhu, was able to give orders to officers and military units. Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem’s sister-in-law, also promoted a lot of dislike from Vietnamese.

South Vietnamese Rebellion

On May 1963, President Diem, a Roman Catholic, prohibited the flying of the Buddhist flag. Thousands of Buddhists were arrested, and some were tortured or killed. Some Buddhists publicly burned themselves to death in protest. On November 1, three weeks before President Kennedy was killed in Dallas (on November 22), Diem and Nhu were assassinated. A government was hastily put together, and remained unstable.

Vietcong

Communist guerrillas, known as the Vietcong, came across the border through Laos in large numbers, helping native Communist terrorists in the south. One main objective of these rebels who were directly controlled by the Vietminh, North Vietnam’s government, was to disrupt all types of South Vietnamese order. Many local administrators were also assassinated accomplishing this goal. Guerrilla bands also raided industries, farms, military installations, and villages. Frequently they attacked at night, withdrawing afterward in the thick forest. Seldom were the South Vietnamese forces able to fight them in the open. Because of this battles were rarely fought along a single front..

U.S. Involvement

Beginning U.S. Involvement and Escalation

In October 1961, President John F. Kennedy sent Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor to South Vietnam, to evaluate the country’s economic and military condition. General Taylor said that “infiltration of the Vietcong from the north was increasing,” that “South Vietnam’s economy had suffered drastically,” and that “better and more equipment was needed.” Believing that there would be a domino effect President Kennedy expanded economic and military aid. American aid increased from 1961 to 1963, and over 16,000 military advisers were sent to South Vietnam, and 400 million dollars provided for military purposes. The Vietcong was temporary halted. About this time Robert Macnamarah was escalating the involvement of the U.S. in Vietnam and later the war will begin to be called Macnamarah’s War. William Wessmoreland a commander of MAC V (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) was assuring political figures that in order to win he needed more troops.

United States Warships Attacked

On Aug. 2, 1964, North Vietnamese patrol boats off the coast of North Vietnam attacked the USS Maddox, a destroyer cruising in the Gulf of Tonkin. Two days later the Maddox and another destroyer were attacked. The United States was drawn further into the conflict when President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered retaliatory air attacks and the congress authorized U.S. military operations with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

Reaction to Terrorist Activities

Terrorist attacks upon American bases in South Vietnam became frequent. These were made to discourage the United States into complete withdrawal from Vietnam. However, the number of air raids by American aircraft against North Vietnam increased. The attacks on Pleiku triggered the massive bombing campaign on North Vietnam called “Operation Rolling Thunder”. Bombings were aimed mainly at highways and bridges. In Laos, bombers also struck the Ho Chi Minh Trail, an important Vietcong supply line. United States warships attacked the North Vietnamese coastal supply depots. On March 8, 1965 the first U.S. combat troops landed at Da Nang.

First Attempts for Peace

In April 1965 President Johnson proposed that “unconditional discussions” be held for a settlement of the conflict. His peace move was ignored by North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese insisted that United States forces first be withdrawn from South Vietnam. They also argued that the United Nations must not intervene and that the internal affairs of South Vietnam would have to be settled by the National Liberation Front. Johnson maintained that these matters could not be discussed prior to a peace conference. In June he urged the United Nations to seek a solution.

War

During 1965 the United States became even more committed to help South Vietnam. That year it was official known that the U.S. was at war with the North Vietnam and the Vietcong. The size of the United States force in South Vietnam exceeded 50,000 troops, doubling in about six months. Between July and November a fighting force of an additional 100,000 men was transferred from military bases in the United States to Vietnam.

Battles and Offensives

Rather than a classic military strategy of gaining territory, the army tried to clear areas with search and destroy missions. The U.S. hoped to make the communists want to give up by causing creating heavy casualties and lack of supplies. This strategy did not take into the account that Hanoi was prepared to suffer enormous losses.

The first major American victory took place in August at Chu Lai, where more than 5,000 United States troops defeated an estimated 2,000 Viet Cong. In November American forces won a decisive victory over a large North Vietnamese force in the Ia Drang Valley. It was the first time that a major Vietcong or North Vietnamese force had abandoned hit-and-run guerrilla tactics for open combat. Ia Drang was the bloodiest battle of the war to that date.

In January 1966 about 20,000 American, South Vietnamese, and South Korean troops encircled North Vietnamese south of Da Nang. A successful sweep through the Binh Dinh took place in the spring.

In May the air strikes against the North were stopped for five days, following President Johnson’s invitation in April to “unconditional discussions” of peace. The raids were again suspended in late December 1965 and throughout January 1966 for a “peace offensive” formed by President Johnson and other world leaders. The North Vietnamese failed to respond to these discussions.

In June 1966 United States bombers made their first attack on North Vietnam’s two largest cities Hanoi, the capital, and Haiphong, the chief port. Subsequent American bombing raids were made on these as well as other industrial centers air bases in North Vietnam.

United States forces increased from 190,000 in January 1966 to more than 500,000 by early 1968 used “search-and-destroy” tactics to keep National Liberation Front (NLF) forces from the South. In 1967 and 1968, American troops raided NLF troop concentrations in the DMZ (demilitarized zone).

In January 1968 the NLF launched a large-scale offensive throughout the South during Tet, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year holiday. The targets included about 30 major cities.

American troop withdrawals, which had begun in the summer of 1969, left about 200,000 Americans in South Vietnam at the end of 1971.

In April 1972 the United States bombed targets in the cities of Hanoi and Haiphong. In May, in response to a drive by the North Vietnamese forces into the South, President Richard M. Nixon ordered the mining of harbors off North Vietnam. Both the bombing and the mining provoked long antiwar protests within the United States.

The End of the Conflict

On Jan. 31, 1973, a cease-fire was signed in Paris by the United States, South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and the NLF (called the Paris Accords). Negotiations were made regarding the withdrawal of foreign troops and the release of prisoners.

United States ground troops left Vietnam by the end of March 1973. Fighting continued, however, as the North and the South accused each other of truce violations. A second cease-fire was signed in June, but the battles continued through 1974.

South Vietnam fell to communist rule on April 30, 1975 when the South surrendered and enemy troops entered Saigon. President Ford formally ended the war on January 1975.

There were over 58,000 Americans killed in Vietnam and 3 times the amount of bombs dropped in World War II.

The United States During the War

Anti-War Protests in the U.S

During the many years that the U.S. was at war with North Vietnam, there were many people that didn’t agree with the directions the country took. Some people disagreed with the whole Vietnam war and wanted the U.S. involvement to end. Others complained about social prejudices.

Drafts and Draft Resistance Movements

At the time of escalation, the normal size of the army was insufficient to meet the demands of certain generals, presidents, and politicians. Therefore a draft was established to find eligible men to participate in the fighting.

Much draft resistance was given by a group of people known as hippies. These people burned their draft cards, and participated in non-violent protests which often involved police. Police sometimes resorted to extreme use of force and in its worst cases the national guard was called in for backup. Kent State University had its shares of riots where the ultimate result was the killing of a few students (1969).

1968 was the turning point year for much of American opinion of Vietnam. The American people caught a small glimpse of the real war in Vietnam and decided they didn’t want to be involved.

Assassinations

Malcolm X, a pioneer of black rights and equality, was shot and killed on February 21, 1965, while speaking at an OAAU rally in Harlem.

Martin Luther King combined his civil-rights campaigns with a strong stand against the Vietnam War. He believed that the money and effort spent on war could be used to combat poverty and discrimination. On April 4, he was assassinated by a sniper, James Earl Ray.

As President John F. Kennedy took office, cold-war tensions between Communist and Western nations increased. Communist forces pushed into Laos and threatened South Vietnam. The new president pledged strong efforts to halt the spread of Communism. Kennedy was assassinated arriving from the Dallas airport on the morning of November 22, 1963 formally by Lee Harvey Oswald (although there are many conspiracy theories).

In 1968 Robert F. Kennedy campaigned for the presidency in opposition to the Vietnam War. On June 5, during a victory celebration following the California primary, he was assassinated by Sirhan Sirhan, an Arab immigrant.

Ngo Dinh Diem was also assassinated 3 weeks prior to John F. Kennedy’s death on November 1, 1963.