

CHAPTER
20

THE UNITED STATES FIGHTS A WAR IN VIETNAM. (1960–1975)

Why did the United States go to war in Vietnam and what was the result?



Gunfire all around, U.S. soldiers rush a wounded friend through a swamp in 1969. Thousands fought and died in the Vietnam War.

STUDY

On a separate sheet of paper, make a list of the presidents from Eisenhower through Nixon. Write down how each president dealt with the issue of Vietnam.

HINT

Looking at Key Terms

- domino theory
- Viet Cong
- Vietnamization

Looking at Key Words

- **escalation:** a slow but steady increase in the level of warfare
- **hawk:** a war supporter
- **dove:** an opponent of war
- **amnesty:** a pardon for political offenses

Smoke and fire came out of a U.S. Navy plane over the Gulf of Tonkin. Enemy fire had scored a hit. U.S. Navy Captain Everett Alvarez, Jr. bailed out. He splashed into the water below. There, a Vietnamese fishing boat was waiting. Men pointed rifles at Alvarez and took him prisoner.

It was August 5, 1964. U.S. planes were making their first attack on North Vietnam. Alvarez, a Mexican American from California, was the first American taken prisoner in the Vietnam War.

Eight and a half years later, Alvarez came home. He was one of 591 U.S. prisoners to be released from enemy prisons. Fifty-eight thousand Americans did not come home at all. They were killed in the war.

1 The Cold War Leads the United States into War in Vietnam.

Why did a war break out in Vietnam?

Until the 1960s, few Americans had thought much about Vietnam. It was far away in Southeast Asia. But Vietnam lies just south of China. When Communists took control of China in 1949, the Cold War was at its height. U.S. leaders feared that communism would spread. They saw Southeast Asia like a string of dominoes. When one domino falls, it knocks down its neighbors. If Vietnam “fell,” its neighbors would topple too. For years this **domino theory** shaped the policy of the United States. U.S. leaders tried to keep the first domino, Vietnam, from falling.

Two Vietnams Vietnam had been a colony of France. After World War II, the Vietnamese fought for independence. However, Vietnam became independent as two nations. North Vietnam

had a Communist government. Its ruler was Ho Chi Minh. South Vietnam remained under French influence. It promised to hold free elections, but then refused to do so.

Opponents of the South Vietnamese government then launched a civil war. They formed groups of guerrillas. The guerrillas were led by the **Viet Cong**, who were Communists.

South Vietnam asked the United States for help. President Dwight Eisenhower believed in the domino theory. He sent 1,000 military advisers to train South Vietnam’s army. But South Vietnam still could not defeat the guerrillas. The fighting spread.

North Vietnam sent help to the guerrillas. The United States sent more help to South Vietnam. By 1963, President John Kennedy had increased the number of U.S. advisers to 16,700.

President Lyndon Johnson tried to force North Vietnam to stop helping the guerrillas. Undercover agents began blowing up bridges and doing other damage to North Vietnam. The American people did not know about this secret war in Southeast Asia.

A wider war Then, in August 1964, events plunged the United States into a wider war. Off the coast of North Vietnam, in the Gulf of Tonkin, the U.S. warship *Maddox* was attacked by North Vietnamese boats.

Johnson sent U.S. planes to bomb bases and oil tanks in North Vietnam. He said the United States was responding to attacks by North Vietnam. Congress quickly backed the President.

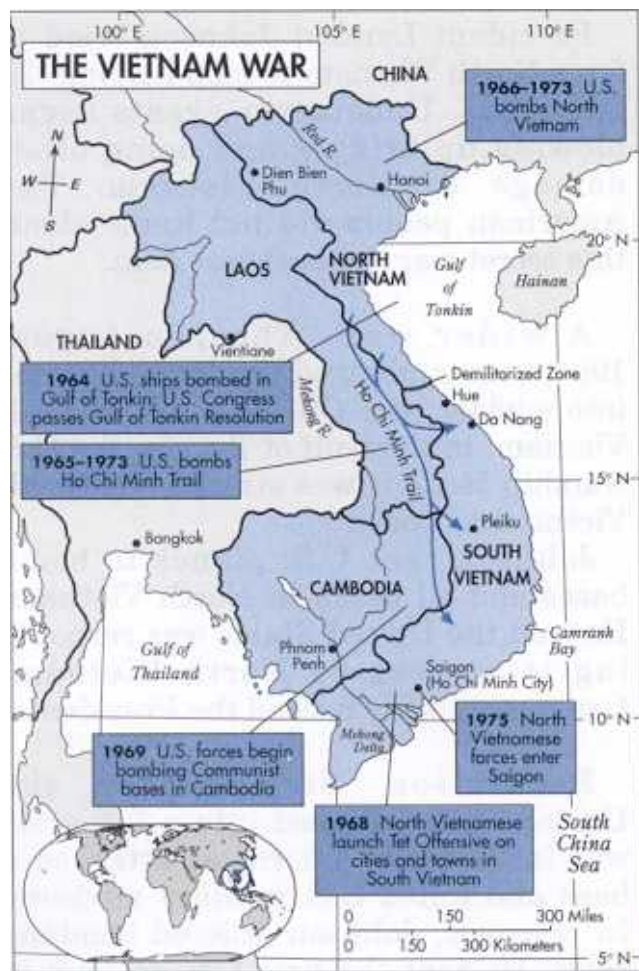
Escalation Step by step, the United States slipped into a full-scale war in Vietnam. Guerrillas attacked a base and killed U.S. military advisers. In response, Johnson ordered bombing raids. He sent the first U.S. soldiers to

fight on the ground. Then the guerrillas launched new attacks. So Johnson sent more soldiers. This slow but steady rise in the level of warfare was called **escalation**.

By the end of 1965, 181,000 U.S. soldiers were in Vietnam. Three years later the figure had reached 536,000. Each week, U.S. planes brought dead soldiers home in “body bags.” As the death toll rose, opposition to the Vietnam War increased.

Johnson decided in 1968 that he might not win re-election. He chose not to run at all. Richard Nixon accused the Democrats of bungling the war. He won election as president in 1968.

Reading a Map. Where is the Gulf of Tonkin located? Through which countries does the Ho Chi Minh Trail pass?



Vietnamization Nixon too believed in the domino theory. He said the United States had to “stand up to the Communists.” At the same time, he wanted to end the war.

Nixon’s solution was to turn the fighting over to South Vietnam’s army. This policy was called **Vietnamization**. It meant that Nixon could begin bringing U.S. soldiers home. By late 1972, only 50,000 U.S. soldiers remained in Vietnam.

At the same time, Nixon stepped up air attacks. U.S. planes bombed supply routes that linked North Vietnam and South Vietnam.

Peace settlement Peace talks that began in the 1960s finally succeeded in January 1973. The United States signed agreements with North Vietnam and the guerrillas. The last U.S. ground troops came home.

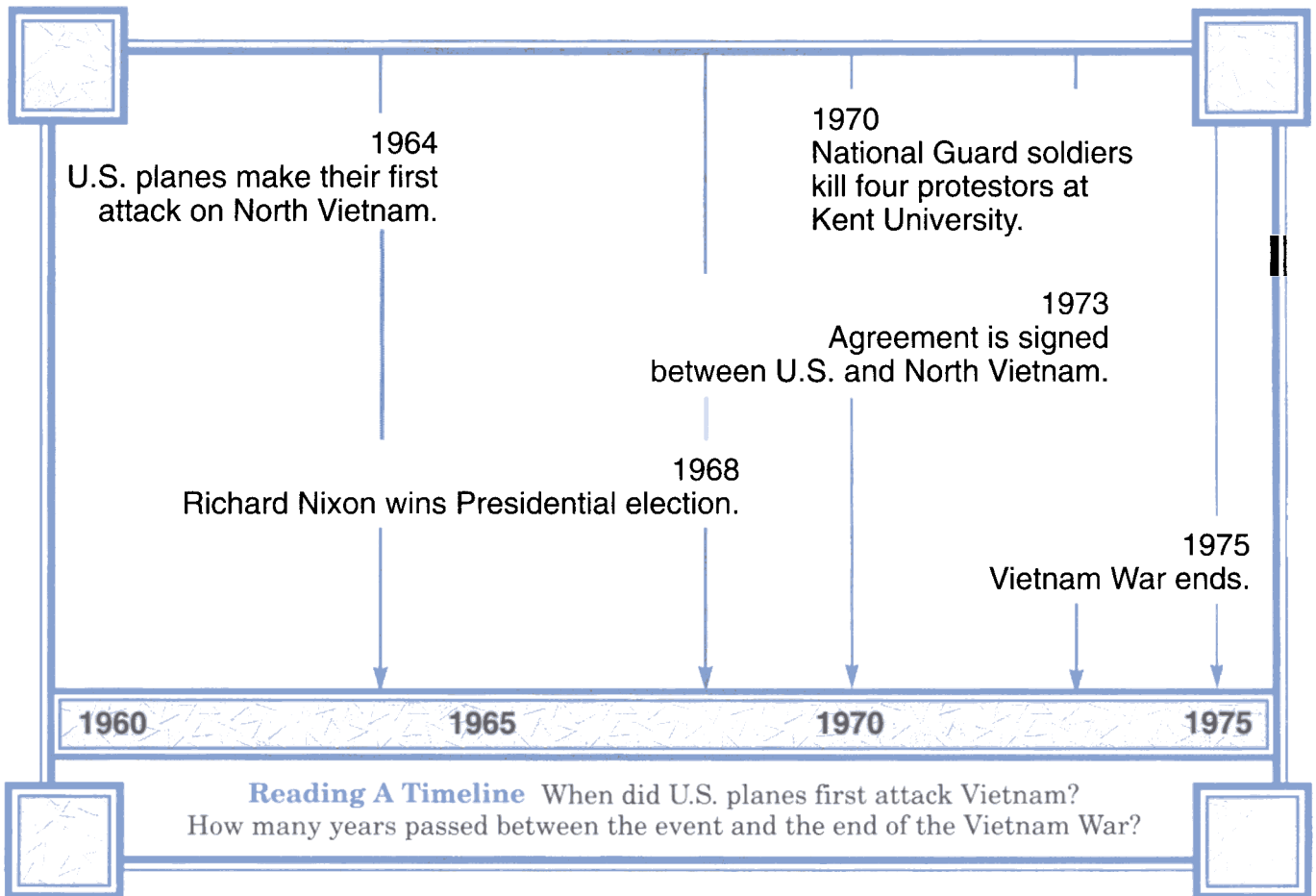
However, the war continued without the United States. It finally ended in 1975. North Vietnam and the guerrillas were the winners. South and North became one nation, Vietnam. Vietnam had a Communist government.

1. What was the domino theory?
2. How did the Vietnam War end?

2 Americans Are Divided on the War.

What form did opposition to the war take in the United States?

The Vietnam War sharply divided the U.S. public. Some Americans supported the war. Others criticized it. The war became the subject of bitter debate.



Doves and hawks Critics and supporters of the war were given labels. **Doves** were against the war. **Hawks** were for it.

Doves argued that the war in Vietnam was a civil war. U.S. troops should not interfere. They also said that the war was hurting the United States. It was killing thousands of young Americans. And the war was a waste of money.

Hawks said that the Communist government of North Vietnam had started the war. The United States must halt the spread of communism. Hawks also said that U.S. presidents had promised to defend South Vietnam. Americans had to honor that promise. Otherwise, no one would ever trust the United States again.

Rising opposition Most Americans backed the war at first. Here and

there, a few people spoke out against the war. Some college students marched in protest.

President Johnson tried not to alarm the public. He avoided asking for new taxes to pay for the rising costs of the war. U.S. planners said that the war would soon be over.

But news reports told a different story. The reports said that many South Vietnamese hated the government that the United States was backing. Despite the huge U.S. effort, victory was nowhere in sight. Many Americans began to think the U.S. government was lying about the war.

The Tet offensive Enemy attacks at the start of 1968 increased this doubt. Tet is the Vietnamese new-year holiday. On Tet, the Viet Cong attacked many cities at once. They even struck



Protests against the Vietnam War spread as the war dragged on. Thousands of demonstrators surrounded the U.S. Defense Department at the Pentagon. They were held back by armed military police.

South Vietnam's capital, Saigon. For a short time, guerrillas occupied the U.S. embassy there. U.S. and allied forces finally put down the **Tet offensive**. But it was now clear that the Viet Cong could strike anywhere. The U.S. commander asked for more soldiers.

More protests Now many more Americans protested against the war. Thousands marched in peaceful protests. Other protests turned violent. Angry students trashed college buildings. Young men burned their draft cards. Hundreds moved to Canada to avoid serving in the army.

Protests ended in bloodshed in May 1970. President Nixon had just sent ground troops into Cambodia to attack

enemy supply bases. At Kent State University in Ohio, National Guard soldiers shot and killed four student protesters. Two more students died in Mississippi. There, state police fired on demonstrators at Jackson State College.

These tragedies shocked the nation. Hawks blamed the protesters. Doves blamed the war. American society was split in two.

1. Who were hawks and doves?
2. What events increased opposition to the Vietnam War?

3 Americans Look Back on the Vietnam War.

What were the long-term effects of the war?

The Vietnam War left a bad taste in everyone's mouths. But people disagreed about what had gone wrong. They drew different lessons for the future.

Drawing lessons The Vietnam War raised questions about the uses of power. Doves said that the war showed the limits of U.S. power. Despite all its firepower, the United States had not been able to win in Vietnam.

Hawks drew a different lesson. They said that the United States could have won if it had only tried harder. They accused U.S. leaders of making U.S. sol-

diers fight "with their hands tied behind their backs."

War's toll The war took a terrible toll. Some 11,500 women and 8,700,000 men served with U.S. forces in the war zone. More than 58,000 Americans died in the fighting.

For every American killed in the war, 3 South Vietnamese soldiers and 16 enemy soldiers died. Some 415,000 civilians were among the 1.5 million Vietnamese who died.

After the war, many Vietnamese fled their country to escape harsh conditions. Thousands came to the United States. (See Chapter 33.)

Greater involvement for people of color The Vietnam War was the first

The Women's Vietnam Veterans Memorial was unveiled in 1993. Diane Carlson, the founder of the memorial, hugged other women veterans at its dedication. It is located near the "Wall" in Washington, D.C.



U.S. war in which people of color served in large numbers in all ranks. Some of the top officers were African Americans and Latinos.

African Americans made up 10 percent of the U.S. population. Yet 20 percent of the draftees who served in Vietnam were African Americans. A larger portion of Latinos served, too. This was because most draftees were poor or working-class Americans. Middle-class youths could postpone being drafted by going to college. Often, they escaped the draft altogether. In addition, a high percentage of Americans killed in battle were African Americans and Latinos.

Healing the wounds The Vietnam War left deep wounds on the American soul. Anger about the war died slowly. Few celebrations greeted returning Vietnam veterans. Some Americans treated them as war criminals, not war heroes.

Gradually, those who had left the country to escape the draft came home. In

1974, President Ford granted a limited **amnesty** to draft evaders. An amnesty is a pardon for political offenses.

Further healing came in 1982. On Veterans Day, November 11, the government unveiled the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. It is a long, dark granite wall. Engraved in stone are the names of all 58,000 Americans killed in the war.

In 1993, a separate memorial was put up nearby. It honored women who served in the war. One veteran who attended the dedication wiped tears from her eyes. “We were supposed to be the brave ones,” she said, “and not have emotions.” Now, two decades later, she could cry.

1. Which groups had a high percentage of soldiers killed in battle?
2. Name one way in which the wounds of Vietnam were healed.

CHAPTER 20 KEY IDEAS

- Cold War policies led the United States into a war in Vietnam. But the war failed to prevent Vietnam from becoming Communist.
- The Vietnam War sharply divided Americans into supporters and critics of the war. Massive protests broke out.
- The war was the first in which the U.S. military was truly integrated. It also left Americans with conflicting lessons for the future.