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Vietnam

By Jane Runyon

If you were to ask anyone over fifty years of age what they remember most about the 1960s, you would probably hear "Vietnam" more than once. The Vietnam War interested a great many American people during that time. Young American men were drafted to serve their country in Vietnam.

Thousands of those young men didn't live to return home. Many Americans took sides as to whether our troops should even be in this southeast Asian country. Protests and riots in the States brought death to young people on home soil.



America's problems in Vietnam really started in 1954. It was at this time that France gave up its claim to rule countries in Indochina. Communist forces laid claim to the country of Vietnam. In a peace agreement signed by France, Vietnam was divided at the seventeenth parallel into two separate countries, North Vietnam and South Vietnam. The country was to be reunified in 1956 after a national election. The Communists felt that they would be able to take full control of the country after the election. President Eisenhower did not want to see that happen. He convinced the United States Congress to support an agreement that created the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).

In the 1956 election, South Vietnam elected Ngo Dinh Diem, a strong anti-Communist, as its leader. He asked the United States to support him against attack by the North Vietnamese. Diem arrested and imprisoned thousands of people he suspected of having Communist ties.

When John Kennedy became President of the United States in 1960, he had to decide whether Diem was seeking peace or being as ruthless as he accused the Communists of being. Some of his

advisors wanted Kennedy to send as much help as possible to the South Vietnamese leader. Other advisors warned that the United States should leave well enough alone.

From 1956 to 1960, the North Vietnamese tried to reunify their country by political means. In the fall of 1960, they resorted to more violent tactics to reach their goal. They planned a revolution to overthrow Diem. They called on all South Vietnamese citizens who did not like the police state tactics of Diem to rise up against him. They said they would welcome non-Communists as well as Communists in this revolution. In December of 1960, North Vietnam created the National Liberation Front. Its goal was to reunify the country of Vietnam at any cost. Later, American soldiers would call members of this front the "Viet Cong." It was a slang term meant to represent any Vietnamese Communist.

By 1963, President Kennedy realized that the Diem government was in real trouble. Diem and his brother had angered religious groups, such as the Buddhists, and citizens alike with his raids and secret police. Kennedy quietly backed a **coup** against Diem. In this coup, military officers took control of the government and had Diem and his brother arrested. They were mysteriously assassinated. Just three weeks later, President Kennedy was assassinated.

Lyndon Johnson became the new President of the United States. After much debate, Johnson decided to step up the American military presence in Vietnam. The Communists found that a takeover of their southern neighbor would not be so easy after all. By 1965, both sides were beginning to wonder if this type of war could ever be won.

President Johnson was beginning to feel the heat of protest in his own country. Protests, flag burnings, draft card burnings, and riots demanding a cease to the war were becoming more frequent. Perhaps the ultimate peace demonstration occurred at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. Johnson had decided not to run for another term. He felt he could do more to bring peace in Vietnam if he were no longer president. Hundreds of thousands of people descended on the streets of Chicago. They demanded that the leaders of the Democratic Party change the politics in America.

President Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968 by promising that he had a plan to end the war quickly. His secret plan was called "Vietnamization." Basically, his plan was to turn the fighting over to the Vietnamese people. He would then pull American troops out. Instead of helping the cause, the war spread



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into the neighboring countries of Cambodia and Laos. The cry for "peace" grew louder in America. Four students were shot and killed by National Guardsmen during protests at Kent State University in Ohio. Student deaths also occurred at Jackson State in Mississippi during a peace rally.

Bombing and fighting raged in Vietnam through 1972. By 1973, Communists, non-Communists, and Americans could see that there was going to be no true winner in this war. A treaty was signed in January of 1973 to cease hostilities. Unfortunately, the fighting did not stop. In April of 1975, the government of South Vietnam fell, and the capital city of Saigon was taken over by Communist troops. The war was finally over.

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Questions

- _____ 1. What type of government was in power in North Vietnam?
- A. Communist
 - B. Democratic
 - C. Liberal
 - D. Republican
- _____ 2. Who controlled Vietnam in the 1950s?
- A. France
 - B. Indochina
 - C. Germany
 - D. Russia
- _____ 3. SEATO was formed to keep South Vietnam independent.
- A. true
 - B. false

4. From reading the passage above, what kind of leader do you think Diem was?

- _____ 5. How many United States presidents had to deal with the Vietnam War?
- A. five
 - B. three
 - C. four
 - D. two
- _____ 6. What happened at the 1968 Democratic Convention?
- A. Lyndon Johnson won the nomination for president.
 - B. The convention was moved to San Francisco.
 - C. Hundreds of thousands of people protested against the war.
 - D. The Democrats came up with a plan to win the war.
- _____ 7. What did Richard Nixon call his plan to win the war?
- A. Vietnamization
 - B. The Paris Treaty
 - C. Nixon Rules
 - D. The Kent State Resolve