

# Events of Vietnam

## **The French War**

While peace came to most of the world in 1945 with the end of World War II, it did not come to Vietnam (Indochina). However the people of Vietnam, a former French colony, wanted to be free of French colonial rule. The French tried to re-establish their control over the area once the war was over, but they were opposed by the communist dominated Viet Minh. Ho Chi Minh was the leader of this communist revolutionary army. The French were able to control the cities (Hanoi and Saigon), but were never able to control the Vietnamese countryside. The French and the Viet Minh struggled to control Vietnam for ten years. The French did not give up until May 7, 1954 when in the remote village of Dien Bien Phu, they suffered a massive defeat after a 55 day siege. After this defeat, the French surrendered. Then, the Americans, fearing the spread of communism across Southeast Asia, decided to become actively involved in Vietnam

## **The Buddhist Uprisings**

U.S. involvement in Vietnam has been called a “slippery slope” of good intentions and false optimism. At the time of the Buddhist uprising South Vietnam was ruled by Ngo Van Diem and his family. The country had many problems, including corruption and poverty. In an attempt to stem the spread of the communist Viet Minh, Diem, a Catholic in a strongly Buddhist country, engaged in repressive actions against the people. He hoped a strong central government would prevent communist subversion from within and from North Vietnam. The Buddhists majority resented Diem’s attempts to impose Catholicism on the population. Buddhist monks began to engage in acts of selfimmolation as protests against Diem. These events gained attention around the world. The United States government, led by President Kennedy, found itself in the position of defending and supporting Diem’s weak and corrupt government. As communist successes mounted, more and more U.S. armed forces were required to defend the South from Ho Chi Minh’s forces.

## **Gulf of Tonkin**

The USS Maddox was in international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin (off the coast of North Vietnam) when it was fired upon by three North Vietnamese torpedo boats on August 2, 1964. The destroyer and a small number of U.S. jets returned fire. The next day, another U.S. ship reported being fired upon. However, the circumstances were unclear. President Johnson professed deep anger over these events and ordered “air action against gunboats and certain support facilities” in North Vietnam. The Gulf of Tonkin incident became a lightning rod for the Johnson administration. Johnson used this event to get Congress to give him wide-ranging powers to deal with the crisis in Vietnam. These wide-ranging powers would later hamper Congress’ ability to influence events in Vietnam.

## **Anti-War Demonstrations**

The horrors of the Vietnam War were presented nightly on American television. Opposition to the war increased dramatically after the Tet offensive in 1968. Opposition was especially strong on college campuses around the country. During the 1968 presidential elections the Vietnam War was the central topic of concern. Nixon was able to win the war in a landslide, in part, because of his promise to the American people. Nixon promised to reduce America’s involvement in the conflict through an official policy of “Vietnamisation” of the ground war and through the use of massive bombardments of North. In addition to bombing North Vietnam “back to the stone age,” Nixon believed that bombing Laos and Cambodia would be successful. Protests of these bombings erupted on college campuses across the United States. At Kent State University (OH) national guardsmen shot and killed four students when the protests got out of hand. The military, made up mostly of draftees was in a state of near chaos. Drug abuse, mutiny, and even massacres resulted. Massacres in the tiny villages of My Lai and Son My shocked the nation.

## **Laos and Cambodia**

Because of their proximity to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia found themselves involved in the war in Vietnam. Vietnamese communist ran supply routes through both countries (the Ho Chi Minh trail passed through parts of both countries) and they used the rural terrain of both countries as safe havens. Consequently, the Americans and the South Vietnamese decided to bomb and conduct raid into both countries. Over time, both sides in the war attempted to influence the internal affairs Laos and Cambodia in order to protect own interests in Southeast Asia. Because of the difficult position each country found itself in, neutrality was impossible. In the countryside and in the capital cities of Vientiane, Laos and Phnom Penh, Cambodia chaos resulted. As bad as it was in Laos, the situation in Cambodia was a disaster. Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge engaged in genocide killing approximately 1/3 of the country's citizens. In 1978 the Vietnam army invasion Cambodia and became, ironically, the target of guerrilla warfare during the occupation.

## **Fall of Saigon**

When American ground forces withdrew from Vietnam, the South Vietnamese army was not able to stand up to the communist insurgency for very long. In 1972, the North Vietnamese army invaded the South and things looked very bad for the South. However, American airpower was still available and this airpower was able to stem the tide of communist aggression in the South. Just has had been done before in World War II, the United States used its airpower against the economy and military capacity of the North. Hanoi and other northern cities were bombed on a regular basis. Many in the United States believed that airpower could relieve communist pressure on the South. But the belief was wrong. Events in the United States, in particular the Watergate scandal which rocked the Nixon administration, shifted the US's focus away from South Vietnam. When the North launched a new offensive in 1975, South Vietnam crumbled. Refugees from villages and the countryside poured into Saigon and other cities in the South. It was a crisis the Republic of South Vietnam could not survive. In April 1975 Saigon fell and the Republic of South Vietnam was no more.

## **Fire Power**

The task of adapting to a small-scale struggle against guerrilla fighters was a task the US found difficult to achieve. With a huge arsenal of tanks, aircraft, conventional, and nuclear weaponry, the US military was designed to deter, or fight, a large-scale conventional (or nuclear war) against the Soviet block in Eastern Europe. The military never completely adapted to the small-scale war in Vietnam. Additionally, General Westmoreland, commander of U.S. troops in Vietnam, found himself fighting a war that was as much about politics as it was military tactics. There were no clear boundaries; no designated battlefields or war zones. The war zone was anywhere the communists wanted to attack. To counter this reality, the Americans engaged in "search and destroy" missions, searching out and destroying the enemy. Helicopters were critical to the success of this military strategy.

**Events of Vietnam**  
**(1945 - 1975)**  
**Worksheet #1**

**Directions:** Work with your partner to read each paragraph in your packet and complete this worksheet, recording the year, what happened in the event, and the people who were involved. Once you have completed each section, write a sentence on worksheet #2 that reflects your understanding of the event's importance.

**The French War (Indochina)**

<b>Years Involved</b>	<b>Events/Ideas</b>	<b>People</b>
1945 - 1954	End of World War II Battle of Dien Bien Phu Domino Theory	Viet Minh Ho Chi Minh Eisenhower

**The Buddhist Uprisings**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Events/Ideas</b>	<b>People Involved</b>

**Gulf of Tonkin**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Events/Ideas</b>	<b>People Involved</b>

**Anti-War Demonstrations**

Year(s)	Events/Ideas	People Involved

**Laos and Cambodia**

Years	Events/Ideas	People Involved

**Fall of Saigon**

Year	Events/Ideas	People Involved

**Fire Power**

Years	Events /Ideas	People Involved

## Events of Vietnam Worksheet #2

Directions: Complete each statement after the corresponding section of worksheet #1. Once all sentences have been completed and checked by the teacher, cut each one out and match it to the correct photo. Once you are sure you have the correct photo, tape your sentence below it.

1. The **French War** was important because the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 made the Americans feel that it was their job to save Vietnam and SE Asia from communism.

2. The **Buddhist Uprisings** were important because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. The **Gulf of Tonkin** incident was important because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. **Anti-War Demonstrations** were important because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. **Firepower** was important in Vietnam because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6. The expansion of the war into **Cambodia and Laos** was important because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

7. The **Fall of Saigon** was important because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_