

The USA in Vietnam

America's allies kept out and President Johnson wanted to concentrate on reform at home. So why did America let itself get sucked into an agonising war it could not win?

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The USA was involved in two major wars in Asia during the Cold War. The first, the Korean War, saw America respond to a single blatant act of aggression. The second, the Vietnam War, was different. In 1965, the US decision to try and save South Vietnam from communism was the culmination of 15 years of gradual and deepening involvement in the affairs of that country.

Ironically, it is the US experience of Korea between 1950 and 1953 that helps explain the hesitancy with which America approached the problem of Vietnam. To US policymakers in the early 1950s, the 'lesson' of Korea was that land wars in Asia could soak up money and life almost endlessly. In future, they determined, the local non-communist governments would have to take primary responsibility for the containment of communism in Asia. The USA should offer military advice and support but not troops.

For 12 years after the Korean War ended this lesson was heeded in Washington. In 1965, however, President Lyndon B. Johnson finally jettisoned the Korean precedent in authorising the [dispatch] of hundreds of thousands of US combat troops to South Vietnam to preserve that country from communism.

Unlike President Truman's decision to go to war in Korea in 1950, Johnson's Vietnam decision proved disastrous for America. The war in Vietnam would last longer than Korea (1965–73) and involve even greater loss of life (58,000 American deaths compared to more than 36,000 in Korea). The Vietnam War also proved to be the most politically divisive domestic issue in the United States since the civil war of the nineteenth century. Korea, in contrast, generated no comparable domestic criticism, mainly because the soldiers who fought in that conflict were predominantly professionals for whom war was an occupational hazard, not conscripted civilians as was the case in Vietnam.

There were other important differences between Korea and Vietnam. In Korea, the USA fought as part of a United Nations (UN) coalition, whereas Vietnam was an American rather than a UN undertaking. By 1965, the UN had expanded its membership as a consequence of decolonisation, and many of the new countries were highly critical of what they saw as American interference in the affairs of less economically developed

countries. The UN, in short, could no longer be considered a reliable instrument of US foreign policy.

The USA also had to deal with something in Vietnam that it had avoided in Korea—defeat. Although by the time North Vietnam conquered South Vietnam in 1975 all US troops had been removed, the outcome of the war was still a tremendous humiliation for America. All its earlier sacrifices had been undertaken to preserve an independent South Vietnam. In April 1975, South Vietnam ceased to exist.

Truman and Vietnam

Why, then, did Johnson commit American troops to a 'new' Korea? In seeking an answer to this question it is necessary to look first at Johnson's three immediate predecessors as president. The reason for this is that the choice Johnson faced in 1965 between war or the abandonment of South Vietnam was the inevitable consequence of decisions taken by US governments over the previous 15 years.

The first crucial step on the slippery slope to full US involvement came in 1950, when President Truman authorised a military aid programme for France to help with the war it was fighting in Vietnam, one of its colonies, against a communist-led independence movement, the Vietminh.

In April 1950, Truman had approved a new version of the US Cold War strategy of containment, known simply as NSC-68 (National Security Council document number 68). According to NSC-68, communism had to be strictly contained everywhere. Conversely, any failure of containment threatened to set in motion the domino theory, with incalculable consequences for American national security and for the Western position in the Cold War.

A month later, in May 1950, America began providing military assistance to France. This was a Cold War decision in keeping with the reasoning of NSC-68. Vietnam was now regarded as the trigger domino of southeast Asia, and US policymakers feared that its loss could lead to neighbouring Laos and Cambodia turning communist, followed by Thailand, Burma, Malaya

Indonesia and Japan. Looking further westward, India, the middle east and even Europe could be threatened.

The lasting consequence of Truman's decision was that, from 1950 onwards, victory or defeat in Vietnam was no longer a matter of just French concern but was also a vital American interest. The scale of subsequent US military aid to France serves to illustrate this point: by 1954, America was paying for almost 80% of the financial cost of the French war effort.

Eisenhower and Vietnam

To Washington's consternation, however, it was the Vietminh, itself supported by Chinese military aid, that was winning the war. In the spring of 1954, the Eisenhower administration explored the possibility of military intervention to shore up the crumbling French position. But the memory and lessons of Korea were too recent and too vivid to permit unilateral US action. At the same time, relying upon the UN, as in 1950, was impracticable, given the Soviet Union's power of veto in the Security Council.

As a compromise solution, the USA attempted to create a coalition of like-minded powers to intervene in support of France, but America's principal allies were reluctant to become involved in Vietnam in case communist China entered the war in support of the Vietminh and transformed the conflict into a potential catalyst for a Third World War.

Unable to influence events, the US government could only look on as a war-weary France negotiated a peace settlement with the Vietminh at the Geneva Accords, April–July 1954. Under its terms, Vietnam was temporarily partitioned, with the Vietminh occupying the area north of the 17th parallel and the French regrouping south of that line. Nationwide elections were scheduled for July 1956, after which it was intended that a single indigenous government would rule over a reunified and independent Vietnam.

The elections would never be held. The Eisenhower administration had publicly distanced itself from what it had deemed to be the 'appeasement' of the Geneva agreement, but in private US policymakers were relieved that at least the southern half of the trigger domino of southeast Asia had been preserved. Thereafter, the US set itself the task of 'nation-building' in southern Vietnam—the construction of a separate anti-communist state. But American plans meant ignoring the Geneva agreement on nationwide elections, which most impartial observers believed would be won by the Vietminh. Thus the temporary division of Vietnam took on an air of permanence.

During the rest of the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration provided South Vietnam—or the Republic of Vietnam, as it was officially known—with billions of dollars in economic and military aid. But Eisenhower always drew the line at committing US troops, despite a mounting communist guerrilla threat to the US-backed government in Saigon from 1959 onwards.

Kennedy, Johnson and Vietnam

In January 1961, a new US president, John F. Kennedy, took office, but there was no lessening in the American commitment to South Vietnam. To counter the rising Vietcong danger, the

Kennedy administration sent 16,000 US 'advisers' (MAAG) to South Vietnam, ostensibly to instruct the native army in how to use the sophisticated military equipment that the USA was supplying in ever-increasing quantities. In practice, however, US Special Forces—the Green Berets—became involved in combat, although officially the US government insisted that it was not an active participant in the war.

It was only in 1965, 15 years after President Truman first accorded Vietnam the status of a vital American interest, that the USA became directly and fully committed to the defence of South Vietnam. The man who led America into war, Lyndon Johnson, has often been portrayed as a 'hawk', a gung-ho Texan who was determined from the outset to break with his predecessors' preferences and employ full US military power to destroy both the Vietcong and its North Vietnamese ally.

This crude and simplistic assessment is no longer valid in the light of recent scholarship. Far from being the hawk of legend, historians now tend to see Johnson as a man wracked with uncertainty about which direction to take on Vietnam. Johnson, it is argued, was especially worried that American escalation would produce Chinese counter-intervention on the Korean model and lead to a wider and more dangerous conflict.

It is also evident that the war Johnson really wanted to fight was not in Vietnam at all but in America, a war against poverty and social injustice. Johnson wanted to build a 'great society' in the USA. The 'great society' was a catch-all term for his commitment to civil rights, the eradication of poverty, increased access to education and health care, and a cleaner environment. In consequence, Johnson fretted constantly lest a major war in Vietnam divert public attention and money away from his domestic priorities.

Johnson's War?

For these reasons, as well as because of the lesson of Korea, Johnson hesitated to go to war in Vietnam. Yet, in the end, his Cold War orthodoxy won through. Johnson believed in containment. Johnson also feared the consequences of the domino theory. These two considerations ultimately conditioned his decision on Vietnam. But it is also clear that Johnson had very little room in which to manoeuvre by 1965, thanks to earlier and very public assertions by Eisenhower and Kennedy of how vital South Vietnam was to US national security.

It was Johnson's misfortune that he, rather than either of his predecessors, was in office when the situation in Vietnam reached crisis point and when, thanks to previous presidential decisions, he was confronted by just two choices. One was war. The other, as he put it, was 'bugging out'. Johnson chose war.

Vietnam was not, as critics would later charge, Johnson's war. It was America's war. It was a war in support of an American ally, and an American creation, the state of South Vietnam, and a war to make good a commitment to South Vietnam entered into by earlier American Cold War presidents, both Republican and Democrat.