Why did America go to War in Vietnam?

8th March 1965. 3,500 US Marines landed at Da Nang and the US invasion of Vietnam officially began. But why did America go to war in the first place?

From 1946 the communist Viet Minh fought against France in North Vietnam… finally defeating them at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

The French withdrew and, as part of the Geneva agreements, Vietnam was divided between communist North and capitalist South.

The US feared South Vietnam could be next, as its government was under attack from an opposition movement called the Viet Cong.

The Americans believed that if South Vietnam fell, surrounding countries might turn communist as well - the so-called 'domino theory.'

So the US enacted the policy of 'containment', using alliances and aid to stop communism spreading.

America supported President Ngo Dinh Diem's government in South Vietnam with military equipment and money.

But the Viet Cong were becoming more popular in rural areas of the South.

With US backing, the South Vietnamese army assassinated Diem. But his fall only made things worse — and pulled the US in deeper.

Then, in August 1964, just off the coast of Vietnam, North Vietnamese patrol boats attacked the USS Maddox. This became known as The Gulf of Tonkin incident.

US Congress authorised President Johnson to take "all necessary measures to repel armed attack … and to prevent further aggression."

Johnson was worried about being seen as 'soft' on communism. And in March 1965 he sent US marines into Vietnam.

Between 1954 and 1964 the US was slowly dragged into a war in Vietnam.