

BBC Bitesize GCSE History – Cold War and Vietnam

Episode 6 – The Vietnam War

Announcer: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

Datshiane: I'm Datshiane Navanayagam.

Katie: And I'm history podcaster Katie Charlwood. And this is Bitesize GCSE History.

Datshiane: This is the sixth episode in a seven-part series on the Cold War and Vietnam War. In this episode we'll be examining a second proxy war, the Vietnam War. We'll look at the causes, key events, and consequences of how it profoundly changed America.

Katie: And remember that it might help you if you have something to make notes on, and do feel free to press, stop and rewind whenever you need to.

Datshiane: Let's get started: the Vietnam War. Katie, give us some historical context, the key whos, whats, whens and whys.

Katie: Okay, Vietnam had been a French colony, an organisation called the Viet Minh had fought for its independence after World War Two. This loss led to the Geneva Accords: agreements which temporarily divided Vietnam at the Seventeenth Parallel, with the communist North led by Ho Chi Minh and the anti-communist South supported by the West and led by Ngo Dinh Diem.

Datshiane: Have a look at the Bitesize website to see a map of Vietnam's location and how the country had been divided along the Seventeenth Parallel.

Katie: Ho Chi Minh looked for support from the USSR and China in his fight for an independent Vietnam, which led the USA to be concerned at the spread of communism in Asia.

Datshiane: The USA policy for Asia was called Containment. China had become a communist nation in 1948, and America did not want to see a domino effect of surrounding countries falling into communism, an effect which my dear co-presenter Katie will now demonstrate with domino bricks.

Katie: Indeed! I've carefully stacked a row of dominoes on their end close to each other, and if I give this one just a tiny little push-

Datshiane: If the first domino or country falls to communism, then the neighbouring ones quickly follow. You might need to pick those up later, by the way.

Katie: Okay... So, Containment was the American effort to support the anti-communist government in South Vietnam, and was a strategic move to counter Soviet and Chinese influence.

Datshiane: In the late 1950s, communist guerilla fighters known as the Viet Cong and supported by North Vietnam began attacking South Vietnamese government forces. The USA feared a communist takeover, and they increased their financial support and military advisers to the South Vietnamese Government.

Katie: Unfortunately for the USA, the leader in South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, was himself a dictator, and somewhat unpopular. He refused to hold elections to reunify Vietnam, which many Vietnamese people wanted. Instead, many supported the communist-led North Vietnam Government under Ho Chi Minh. Financial aid and military advice from the USA wasn't working, and in 1963 Diem was assassinated; it seemed like direct military intervention from the USA was on the horizon.

Datshiane: On the second and fourth of August that year, American navy ships in the Gulf of Tonkin were allegedly attacked by North Vietnamese forces.

Katie: Why allegedly?

Datshiane: Well, there have been different interpretations depending on which source or historian you read, and when these accounts were written. For example, the American government at the time claimed that North Vietnamese torpedo boats launched unprovoked attacks on the USS Maddox. On the night of the attack, President Johnson said, "Repeated acts of violence against the armed forces of the United States must be met, not only with alert defence but with a positive reply. That reply is being given as I speak tonight."

Katie: However, critics later questioned whether the second attack on the fourth of August actually occurred, and that the American administration had used the incident to gain support for escalating the war. Historian Robert Hanyok concluded that: no convincing evidence supported the second attack, and, that intelligence was manipulated to justify US escalation.

Datshiane: And not surprisingly, North Vietnam viewed the American naval operations in that area as provocations, and argued that any confrontations were defensive.

Katie: These differing interpretations of history are typical, and might be the basis of an exam question depending on which GCSE syllabus you are taking. Have a listen back to the Exam Skill series where we talk about how to tackle these.

Datshiane: That incident led to escalation from the USA, and by 1965 American ground troops were deployed and heavy bombing campaigns like Operation Rolling Thunder began.

Katie: Lots of info in that last section, perhaps press pause here and reflect on the causes for American intervention in Vietnam, thinking about those which were short term and those long term.

Datshiane: The Vietnam War is often used as an example of guerilla warfare. That's because although the USA had huge military power the Viet Cong used guerilla tactics: things like ambushes, booby traps and tunnel systems; and the dense jungle terrain and their familiarity with the environment gave them an advantage against the USA.

Katie: As American casualties mounted and media coverage showed the brutal tactics used by American soldiers against the Vietnamese people, public opinion turned against it. Massive protests erupted across the United States, and calls for withdrawal grew stronger.

Datshiane: In America it led to growing anti-war sentiment and protests, particularly after events like the My Lai massacre when American soldiers killed hundreds of unarmed women, children and elderly Vietnamese people. Both this and other events pressured American politicians to find a resolution and end the war. You might have studied these events in your history lessons, but if you need a refresh, go back to the Bitesize website. Okay, so by the late 1960s the American president, who is now Richard Nixon, introduced the policy of Vietnamisation, a long and difficult process, to gradually withdraw American troops whilst transferring combat responsibilities to South Vietnamese forces. In 1973, the Paris Peace Accords were signed and these agreed a ceasefire, but American combat troops didn't leave South Vietnam until April 1975; and Katie, when they left it was in quite a dramatic fashion.

Katie: You are absolutely right. So, let's hear from Kitty our time-travelling reporter who is in Vietnam for more on this.

Kitty: You can hear the roar of helicopters overhead. American troops are finally packing up, preparing to leave this war-torn country after a decade of conflict. As I watch the last soldiers board the helicopters and planes I can't help but think about the cost to all concerned. Vietnamese women

have played pivotal roles in this conflict not just as supporters but as fighters and leaders in their own right. Nguyen Thi Binh is a prominent South Vietnamese communist leader and chief negotiator at the Paris Peace Accords; she told me that, "the struggle for our country is not just a political issue, it's a matter of life and death for our people, especially our women and children. I was extremely angry at the enemy, and I love my country so much. This was because, every day, bombs and shells were falling, and the blood and bones of my people appeared before my eyes." The war tore at the fabric of American society with protests erupting across the country as citizens questioned the purpose and morality of the conflict. Many wonder why the United States with all its might was unable to secure victory here. The answer lies in the determination of the Vietnamese people, their guerilla tactics, and the support they receive from allies. This was more than a battle for land, it was a fight for identity and self-determination. As I stand here, it's clear that the war has left deep scars on both nations. This is Kitty reporting from Vietnam, back to the studio.

Datshiane: Thanks Kitty. After American forces withdrew, North Vietnamese forces launched a final offensive. In April 1975, they captured Saigon the capital of South Vietnam, leading to the unification of Vietnam under communist rule.

Katie: The human cost of the war was huge, resulting in the deaths of an estimated two to three million Vietnamese people, and over 58,000 American soldiers. Many more were wounded and the conflict left lasting trauma and destruction across Vietnam.

Datshiane: So, the war deeply divided American society, and it also eroded trust in the government. The antiwar movement, draft protest, and media coverage changed American perceptions of it, and it led to a more cautious approach in future conflicts. This experience influenced future American interventions, making leaders more hesitant to become entangled in foreign conflicts.

Katie: And despite fears of the domino effect, the spread of communism in Southeast Asia was limited. The war did not significantly alter the global balance of power, but highlighted the limits of American influence in the Cold War.

Katie: So why did the USA lose the Vietnam War? This, or something like it, might be the basis of an essay question.

Datshiane: As with all questions like this, there are usually many reasons or causes, remember to make your point about each based on your knowledge. Use evidence to explain each reason, this could be something like a source quote, and link it back to the question. Point, evidence, explain, link. Remember PEEL, our friendly banana from our Exam Skill series; or have a listen back if you don't.

Katie: In this case the reasons will include the guerilla tactics of the Viet Cong which made it difficult for the American forces to engage with them, as well as the difficulties associated with fighting in the jungle terrain.

Datshiane: Also, that the American military underestimated the determination of the Vietnamese people, and the significant impact of anti-war public opinion and TV news in America.

Katie: So, write one PEEL paragraph on each of those, and your answer might conclude along these lines: The USA lost the Vietnam War due to effectiveness of guerilla tactics, the challenges posed by the geography, the impact of anti-war sentiment at home, and the support received by North Vietnam from other communist nations. The combination of these factors made it impossible for the United States to win the war, despite its military strength.

Datshiane: And if the question asks you to judge which reason was the most important and why, then you can also have a go at that question yourself after this podcast. Again, these judgement questions are ones that two very nice presenters talked about in the Exam Skill series.

Datshiane: Quick test of your knowledge: three questions, five seconds, here it goes. Who was the communist leader of North Vietnam and the leader of the Viet Cong?

Katie: That would be Ho Chi Minh.

[correct bell sounds]

Datshiane: What was the American policy aimed at preventing the spread of communism in Asia?

Katie: Containment.

[correct bell sounds]

Datshiane: What event led to America getting involved directly in the war against North Vietnam?

Katie: The Gulf of Tonkin incident.

[correct bell sounds]

Datshiane: Well done all of you who got those right.

Katie: In the final episode we look at the events that led to the end of the Cold War. Don't miss that!
Thanks for listening.