

Vietnam War chronology

Vietnamese subjugation and resistance

1867-85 France takes control of Cochinchina (southern Vietnam), Tonkin (northern Vietnam), and Annam (central Vietnam); resistance movement in defense of monarchy begins and then subsides.

1900s-1910s Vietnamese nationalism takes form.

1919 Ho Chi Minh (Nguyen Ai Quoc) appeals to World War I victors for independence.

1925 Ho, by now a communist, forms Revolutionary Youth League as Vietnamese politics turn radical.

1930 Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) formally established in Hong Kong; peasant rebellion in Nghe-Tinh province backed by ICP but repressed by French.

1941 Japanese occupation of Indochina prompts founding of Viet Minh (headed by Ho) as vehicle for united-front resistance (May).

Origins of a conflict

1945 Japanese depose French administration (Mar.) before surrendering to Allies (Aug.); Viet Minh seizes Hanoi and declares independence ("August revolution").

1946 Viet Minh begins armed struggle to end French control after failure of negotiations in Paris.

1950 Mao's China begins military support to Viet Minh; Truman administration formally makes French struggle part of global containment and financially underwrites the French.

1954 Viet Minh defeat the French at Dienbienphu; Eisenhower rejects U.S. military intervention. Geneva Conference ends French control, temporarily partitions Vietnam pending elections. Ho's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in control north of the 17th parallel; U.S.-backed Ngo Dinh Diem sets up the new state of South Vietnam. Nearly 1 million, mostly Catholic, refugees move south. Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP, new name for the ICP) opts for political struggle in South while concentrating on socialist construction in North.

1955 With U.S. approval Diem consolidates control in South and rejects nation-wide elections stipulated by Geneva agreement.

1959 Diem's repressive policy leads VWP to endorse military as well as political struggle in the south (Jan.); decision to create supply line (Ho Chi Minh trail) to the South (May).

1960 North Vietnam creates National Liberation Front (NLF) as anti-Diem united front in South Vietnam (Dec.); U.S. advisers increase to 900.

1961 NLF success in the countryside induces Kennedy to increase military support while also pressing Diem for reforms. Kennedy and Khrushchev agree to neutralization of Laos (formalized July 1962).

1963 Buddhist-led protest movement culminates in Diem's overthrow with tacit U.S. support (Nov.). Military government beset by infighting. Kennedy assassinated. (Nov.) Lyndon Johnson becomes president.

1964 China pledges support to DRV in looming contest with U.S. U.S. destroyers are reportedly attacked twice by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in Gulf of Tonkin; Congress passes Gulf of Tonkin resolution authorizing Johnson to retaliate against aggression in Southeast Asia (Aug.). VWP Politburo decides to seek decisive victory in the South (Sept.); first DRV combat units move down Ho Chi Minh trail late in the fall; U.S. military advisers number slightly over 23,000.

Escalation

1965 Soviets pledge support to DRV. Johnson begins sustained bombing (“Rolling Thunder”) against DRV (Feb.) and sends the first U.S. combat units to fight in the South (Mar.). First major antiwar protest in Washington (Apr.). Johnson announces major increase in U.S. ground forces (July). U.S. and DRV units clash for the first time in the Ia Drang valley (Nov.). General Nguyen Van Thieu and Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky stabilize the Saigon military government.

1966-67 U.S. forces (approaching half million mark) follow strategy of attrition, but DRV and NLF forces remain strong. Anti-war march on Pentagon (Oct. 1967) with public now divided evenly on the war.

1968 In Tet Offensive (Jan.-Feb.) NLF forces attack cities all over South, including Saigon, score initial successes, but beaten back with heavy losses; American media and public opinion register shock; Johnson calls for peace talks and renounces another term in the White House (Mar.). My Lai massacre (Mar.). Anti-war protesters and police clash in Chicago during Democratic Convention (Aug.). Richard Nixon elected president (Nov.).

War’s End

1969 Pres. Nixon promises to end the war, presses Vietnamization (including U.S. troop withdrawal), negotiates with DRV in Paris, and secretly bombs Cambodia. Major demonstrations against Nixon’s go-slow policy (Oct.-Nov.).

1970 Kissinger and Le Duc Tho begin secret talks in Paris (Jan.). Cambodian neutralist Prince Norodom Sihanouk overthrown by Gen. Lon Nol (Mar.). U.S. forces invade Cambodia (Apr.-June), setting off nationwide campus protests. Senate repeals Gulf of Tonkin resolution and bars U.S. military presence in Cambodia (June).

1971 Saigon forces defeated in campaign into Laos (Feb.-Mar.). “Winter Soldier Investigation” (Feb.) and Dewey Canyon III protest in Washington (Apr.) highlight veteran discontent.

1972 DRV launches major offensive (Mar.) and hurt by heavy U.S. bombing (Linebacker I); dispute over peace terms leads to Christmas bombings of the DRV (Linebacker II).

1973 Paris Peace accords (Jan.): U.S. to withdraw all troops from South Vietnam; DRV to return American prisoners of war and not to use force in South Vietnam. Nixon assures Thieu of continued U.S. support. Congress cuts off bombing of Cambodia (June).

1974 Fighting between DRV and Saigon forces intensifies. Nixon resigns presidency. His successor, Gerald Ford, renews U.S. commitment to South Vietnam (Aug.).

1975 DRV forces begin major offensive (Mar.); Congress rejects emergency military aid (Apr.); fall of Saigon (Apr.) ends war. Flight of “boat people” (to number over a million over fifteen years). Pol Pot’s radical Communist party (Khmer Rouge) takes power from Lon Nol regime in Phnom Penh (Apr.).

Aftermath

1976 Vietnam politically reunified and renamed Socialist Democratic Rep. of Vietnam.

1979 Vietnam overthrows Khmer Rouge and occupies Cambodia; China retaliates with invasion of Vietnam.

1980s Hanoi’s struggle to impose socialism on the South ends with Nguyen Van Linh market-oriented reform program (1986).

1989 Vietnamese troops leave Cambodia.

1995 U.S.-Vietnamese relations normalized.