Introduction: Vietnam and the American Experience

The Vietnam War is different things to different people. For some Americans it conjures images of anti-war protests, draft dodgers, and M.I.A.s. Others speak about the "lessons" of Vietnam. For others it is a distant war in the distant past.

Whatever it may represent to Americans today, the Vietnam War is an important part of U.S. history. The Vietnam War changed politics, culture, and the United States itself. Hollywood has made movies about it. Musicians, poets, and scholars have all tried to understand and describe what happened.

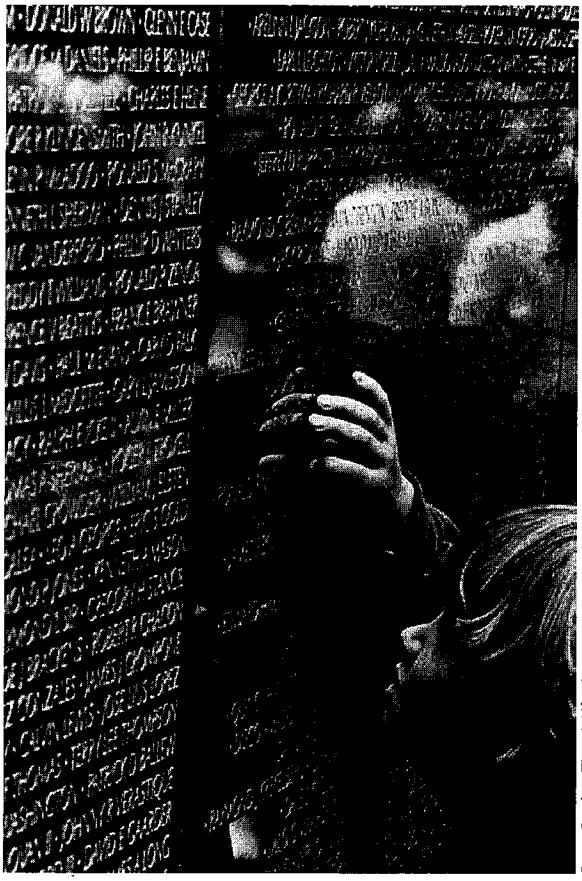
The effects of the war have been far-reaching. The Vietnam War was even an issue during the 2004 campaign for the U.S. presidency. The United States is what it is today in part because of the American experience of the Vietnam War. But Americans understand and remember the American experience in Vietnam in different ways.

> ***"No event in American history is more misunderstood than the Vietnam War."***
>
> —former President Richard M. Nixon

The first step to understanding the Vietnam War is to examine how and why the U.S. government became deeply involved in a complex and costly war halfway across the globe.

This reading uses selections from speeches, articles, political cartoons, songs, and memoranda to trace events from before Americans became involved in Southeast Asia until the last military personnel left Vietnam. The documents were written by the major participants in the decision-making process. These primary sources are the raw material that historians work with when they write history. As you read, focus not only on the ideas expressed, but also on the words and phrases chosen to express them. As you study these documents, ask yourself what are the values and perceptions behind these opinions and what are the implications of the recommendations.

In the next pages, you will follow the path of U.S. decision-makers as the drama of the Vietnam War unfolded. You will be given the information that they had at the time and you will be asked to view the world from the perspective of their values and objectives. With your classmates, you will analyze the situation in Vietnam at several key junctures and will explore the policy choices decision-makers considered. Like an earlier generation of U.S. decision-makers, you, too, will be asked to recommend what role the United States should play in Southeast Asia during the 1960s. You will have an opportunity to reenact debates and to consider questions and lessons from the period that still influence policy-makers today.



Owen Franken/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images. Used with permission.

A young person traces a name etched into the Vietnam War Veterans Memorial in Washington.

Part I: The Cold War in Southeast Asia—1946-54

The American road to Vietnam began in early 1947 in the villages of Greece and in the mountains of Turkey. Shortly after the surrender of the Axis powers in 1945, the unity of World War II's victorious allies—the United States, Britain, France and the Soviet Union—unraveled. A conflict gradually began, pitting the Soviet Union against the United States and Britain (soon to be joined by France), over the shape of the postwar world. During the second half of 1946, U.S. decision-makers engaged in a spirited debate concerning the nature of Soviet intentions and what policies the United States should adopt toward the Soviet Union.

By early 1947, the U.S. government had reached a consensus. At the heart of the new U.S. strategy were the ideas of George Kennan, the State Department's principal expert on the Soviet Union. Kennan proposed that the United States "contain" overt Soviet military expansion and the covert Soviet use of rebellion and armed uprising to spread communist influence around the world.

The United States applied its new policy of "containment" to defeat Soviet-supported rebels in Greece and to counter Soviet political pressure against Turkey. In a speech before Congress on March 12, 1947, President Harry S Truman outlined what would become known as the "Truman Doctrine."

> ***"At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. The choice is too often not a free one. One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression. The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms. I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."***
>
> —President Harry S Truman

While his speech did not refer to either the Soviet Union or communism, Truman left no doubt as to the target of his challenge. In the following years, he laid the foundations for U.S. policies during what became known as the Cold War. The Marshall Plan of 1948-1952 provided $12.5 billion in U.S. aid to help the countries of Western Europe recover from the war. In 1948, the United States organized a massive airlift to supply West Berlin after the Soviets cut off access to the city. After the end of the Soviet blockade, the United States, Canada, and Western Europe formed in a military alliance called the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949.

By the late 1940s, U.S. decision-makers hailed the policy of containment in Europe as a success. America's leadership of the "free world" had stopped aggression in Europe. In Asia, however, the situation was very different. The defeat of the Japanese in 1945 and the weakness of the British, French, and Dutch colonial powers in Asia sparked the rise of anti-colonial and nationalist movements. At the same time, the Chinese civil war between the communists led by Mao Ze-dong and the nationalists of Chiang Kai-shek resumed with full fury. After erupting originally in the late 1920s, the conflict had smoldered during the years of Japanese aggression.

Why was the United States careful of becoming involved in China?

In contrast to its active, interventionist role in Europe, the United States was very cautious of becoming involved in China. The

United States gave economic aid and military equipment to the nationalists, but avoided deeper commitment. U.S. leaders recognized that few Americans would support a land war on the Asian mainland.

U.S. policy changed dramatically after the communists drove the nationalist forces from mainland China in September 1949 and proclaimed the People's Republic of China. The U.S. government believed the new communist leaders were puppets of the Soviet Union. In response, the United States denied the communist government's legitimacy, refused to have any dealings with it, and blocked its takeover of the seat reserved for China in the United Nations.

Why did France become involved militarily in Indochina?

After World War II, France attempted to reassert its control over French colonial possessions in Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia). During the Japanese occupation, a Vietnamese anti-colonial movement led by Ho Chi Minh had grown in strength. In September 1945, less than a month after the Japanese surrender, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam's independence from France in a speech patterned after the American Declaration of Independence. Temporary agreements struck after the war between the French and Ho Chi Minh's forces soon broke down, with each side blaming the other. By December 1946, a full-blown insurgency campaign by Ho's forces, the Vietminh, was underway. The French attempt to set up a competing Vietnamese government under French protection and headed by the emperor Bao Dai did little to stop the growth of the insurgency. In January 1950, the Vietminh officially proclaimed the "Democratic Republic of Vietnam." Only communist China, the Soviet Union, and the communist countries of Eastern Europe extended diplomatic recognition to the Vietminh government. The United States ignored the new republic.

French armed forces in Southeast Asia soon numbered more than 150,000, while French casualties and financial costs steadily mounted.

By the spring of 1954, more than 92,000 troops had died fighting for the French Union Forces. While most of these casualties were Africans from French colonial possessions, Indochinese, and Foreign Legionnaires, nearly 21,000 Frenchmen had died. The loss of 8,200 French officers and noncommissioned officers exceeded the rate at which officers were graduating from French military colleges. French efforts to transfer the burden of the fighting to the Vietnamese army under Bao Dai (a policy that the French called "yellowing") proved unsuccessful. Many of the Vietnamese troops either deserted to the Vietminh or showed little enthusiasm for carrying on the fight to preserve French colonial rule. As France's counter-insurgency plans sputtered, much of the Vietnamese countryside, both in the north and in the south, came under Vietminh control.

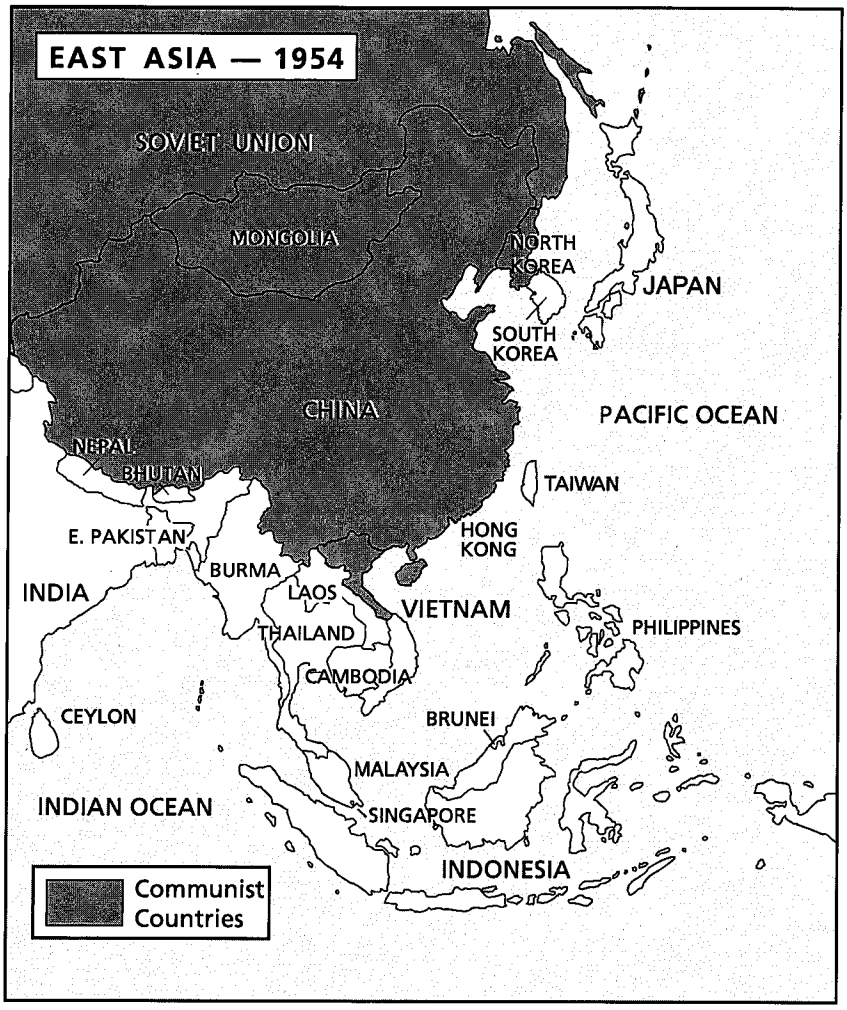
What attitude did the United States have toward France's involvement in Indochina?

In the United States, there was little interest at first in the French colonial war in Indochina. Even before the defeat of the Japanese in World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945) and other U.S. leaders criticized French colonial practices.

> ***"I [have] for over a year expressed the opinion that Indochina should not go back to France but that it should be administered by an international trusteeship. France has had the country—thirty million inhabitants—for nearly one hundred years, and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning."***
>
> —President Franklin D. Roosevelt

Since their own history was rooted in a long struggle against colonial rule during the eighteenth century, many Americans were sympathetic to the aspirations of the Vietnamese, even though they had little knowledge of Ho Chi Minh, the Vietminh, and what they stood for. Typical were the remarks of a young congressman and future president from Mas-

sachusetts, John F. Kennedy, who declared shortly after the war in Indochina had begun: "The United States must not ally itself with a colonial regime that [has] no real support from the people. The single most powerful force in the world is man's desire to be free."



What events led the United States to change its perspective on Southeast Asia?

The Chinese communist conquest of the Chinese mainland in October 1949 and the communist North Korean invasion of South Korea on June 25, 1950 changed the U.S. perspective on the war in Indochina and led to the first of many U.S. commitments in the area. The decision to send U.S. forces to the Korean peninsula was a particularly decisive turning point. Previously, U.S. defense strategists had defined a "strategic island defense perimeter" stretching from the Aleutian Islands down through Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines to Australia and New Zealand. Although South Korea fell outside the perimeter, President Truman reacted to the North Korean invasion by asserting that "they [the communists] won't get away with it! Period!" Similarly, Truman announced two days later that U.S. military aid would be provided to the French government and that a U.S. military mission would be sent to Indochina to advise the French forces.

In December 1950, the U.S. government signed the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with France and the governments under French control in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The United States no longer saw the war in Indochina as a colonial war having little impact on American strategic interests. Instead, the government viewed it as part of the U.S. effort to contain the influence of communism in Asia. U.S. economic and military aid to France soon paid for nearly 80 percent of France's cost of the war. Uncomfortable with the apparent role of supporting a colonial power, U.S. leaders continually prodded the French to grant real independence to the Vietnamese. The French, who were fighting to preserve their colonial empire, refused to accept the American advice.

The United States and its allies in the United Nations (UN) fought in Korea from June 1950 until they reached an armistice in July 1953. American and UN casualties rose sharply when regular units of the Chinese People's Army intervened in the conflict. As Chinese leaders had threatened, China acted

after UN forces crossed the 38th parallel and entered North Korea. Initially, the United States had sought to unite North and South Korea, thereby punishing the aggressors in North Korea.

China's entry into the war forced a stalemate. U.S. leaders backed away from their original goal, fearing that the war might escalate further. Meanwhile, the American people became disillusioned, and public support for U.S. involvement dropped from a clear majority to about 30 percent of the American people. Although neither President Truman nor President Dwight D. Eisenhower had requested a declaration of war from Congress for U.S. action in Korea, the U.S. "police effort" involved nearly 5.8 million American troops. The loss of nearly thirty-four thousand American lives in combat and an additional twenty thousand lives due to accidents and disease suggested to many that the United States should not fight a land war for limited objectives on the Asian mainland.

How did the end of the Korean War put pressure on France?

The armistice that ended the Korean War left the borders on the peninsula unchanged. For the French government, the war's conclusion brought increasing pressure at home to end the conflict in Indochina.

A letter from Ho Chi Minh in November 1953 seemed to offer the possibility of a negotiated settlement. While Ho reaffirmed the intention of the Vietminh to fight to victory, he also suggested that if the French government wished "to bring about an armistice and solve the Vietnam problem through negotiations, the people and government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam will be prepared to discuss the French proposal." Ho's letter fanned political controversy by referring to the widespread resentment within France of U.S. policies and to the possibility of a rearmed and powerful Germany.

> ***"Today it is not only the independence of Vietnam that is exposed to serious attacks. Even the independence of France is being seriously threatened. On the one hand, American Imperialism is making French Colonialists carry on and extend the war of conquest in Vietnam for the purpose of rendering France weaker and weaker and taking over her position in Vietnam. On the other hand, the American Imperialists are forcing France to sign the EDC* pact which implies that German militarism will be reborn."***
>
> —Ho Chi Minh

What was the "Navarre Plan"?

While tempted by the promise of a negotiated settlement to the war, the French continued to pursue the "Navarre Plan"—a strategy designed by the French commander in Indochina to crush the insurgency. General Henri Navarre's plan called for a dramatic buildup in the French Union forces, primarily by increasing the Vietnamese forces fighting for the French, and for the construction of strong strategic positions from which the French could block the movement of Vietminh forces and strike at their rear supply bases. With his declaration that, "now we can see it [victory] clearly—like light at the end of the tunnel," the general boosted the spirits of French people who refused to accept the loss of any part of their empire.

In November 1953, General Navarre daringly ordered six battalions of the French Union forces to be dropped into the valley at Dienbienphu, a mountainous region near the Laotian border in northwest Vietnam. Navarre hoped that his forces would block the Vietminh army from entering Laos and capturing positions on the upper Mekong River. Although the French position could be reinforced only by air, Navarre aimed to lure the Vietminh into a conventional battle in

*The EDC, or European Defense Community, was a U.S.-supported security pact directed against the Soviets that would have brought a rebuilt, powerful German army into Western defense plans.

which superior French air power and artillery would overwhelm its army. For seven years, the Vietminh had worn down the French with hit-and-run attacks. Navarre's goal was to force the Vietminh to fight on French terms—engaging in a contest of firepower and entrenched positions.

Why did France lose at Dienbienphu?

Unfortunately for the French, the Vietminh leader, General Vo Nguyen Giap, brilliantly countered their carefully laid plans. Strengthened by fresh supplies and artillery brought from China, Giap quickly deployed his forces—thirty-three infantry battalions and six regiments of artillery—in the hills surrounding the French position. The French high command had not believed it possible that the Vietminh could bring artillery to the tops of these hills. When the first salvos fell on the airplane landing strips that were the French forces' only link to the outside world, it was clear that the French battalions were trapped. Moreover, anti-aircraft guns the Vietminh obtained from the Chinese neutralized France's air power. The plight of the doomed French army at Dienbienphu would occupy the attention of much of the world for the next four months, as daily press reports and diagrams of the battlefield traced the dwindling perimeter of the French position.

Meanwhile, the British and Soviets, who shared a strong interest in ending the war in Southeast Asia, organized an international peace conference in Geneva during the spring of 1954. Britain, the Soviet Union, France, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam representing the Vietminh, the United States, delegations representing the royal governments of Laos and Cambodia (which were supported by the French), a delegation from the French-supported Republic of Vietnam, and the Chinese People's Republic participated. For China, attendance at this conference boosted its international image, which had suffered because of China's intervention in the Korean War.

Reprinted from *Viet-Nam Witness.*

Indochina at the time of the 1954 Geneva Conference.

Why was the United States reluctant to participate in the peace conference?

The United States was very reluctant to participate in this conference for two reasons. First, the United States had consistently denounced the Chinese communists as puppets of Moscow and as international bandits whom they would neither recognize diplomatically nor deal with in any manner. Second, unlike the British and the French, who were reconciled to at least a partial communist victory in Indochina, U.S. leaders refused to consider the loss of any additional land to communist control.

In fact, as the siege at Dienbienphu tightened during the months leading up to the conference, U.S.-French discussions touched on the possibility of employing American forces to reverse the communist tide in Indochina. Plans the U.S. military suggested included the use of American air power, including nuclear weapons, to relieve the garrison at Dienbienphu, followed by the introduction

of U.S. warships and ground troops to bolster the French effort in Indochina. This plan was ultimately rejected, primarily because of strong British opposition to any joint intervention. There were other reasons leaders rejected the plan. The U.S. Army chief of staff, General Matthew Ridgway, had reservations about fighting a ground war in Asia. President Eisenhower refused to act without congressional approval; congressional approval was unlikely after congressional leaders discovered that the British would not join the plan. Finally, France was cool to the proposal when it realized that the United States expected it to grant the nations of Indochina full independence.

The last French position at Dienbienphu surrendered on May 7, 1954 to the Vietminh. The following day, the Geneva Conference formally opened. While the French government still had several hundred thousand troops in Indochina, the French will to continue the struggle had been lost at Dienbienphu.