

A BRIEF HISTORY OF A LONG WAR

DOMESTIC STRIFE MARKED THE VIETNAM ERA

Involvement of the United States in Vietnam began as early as 1950, when President Truman sent advisors to assist the French government. At that time, France was seeking to re-establish its colonial power in Vietnam following World War II.

After Communist and nationalist forces in the north under Ho Chi Minh defeated the French at Dienbienphu in 1954, the U.S. sent advisors to train the South Vietnamese military. The goal was to block the spread of communism by supporting the non-Communist south. By 1963, the U.S. had 15,000 advisors in South Vietnam.

Following a clash between North Vietnamese torpedo boats and U.S. destroyers in 1964 – the “Gulf of Tonkin incident” – Congress gave President Lyndon Johnson authority to take necessary steps to “maintain peace.” A rapid buildup of U.S. forces followed.

The Communists’ 1968 Tet offensive marked the fiercest fighting of the war. By early 1969, U.S. troop strength stood at 542,000. Meanwhile at home, opposition to the war escalated, leading to increasing protests and, in 1970, the shooting of four students at Kent State University in Ohio by National Guardsmen. In the face of growing opposition to the war, President Nixon began a gradual withdrawal of troops, leaving more of the fighting to the South Vietnamese.

In 1973, the U.S., South Vietnam, North Vietnam and the Viet Cong (pro-Communist guerrilla fighters living in South Vietnam) signed a ceasefire, which allowed the U.S. to withdraw the last of its troops. However, full-scale warfare among Vietnamese forces resumed in 1975. On April 30, the Communists captured Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, ending the war.



Mortar platoon firing at Lai Khe, late 1965-early 1966.

Casualties of the Vietnam War

Sources: Encyclopedia Britannica (1990), World Almanac (2000)

UNITED STATES
58,000 Deaths, 153,000 Wounded

SOUTH VIETNAM
250,000 Soldiers Killed, 600,000 Wounded

U.S. and SOUTH VIETNAM ALLIES
5,000 Soldiers Killed

NORTH VIETNAM and VIET CONG
900,000 Deaths, 2 Million Wounded

CIVILIAN DEATHS
Hundreds of Thousands