

**Lesson  
Twenty-  
Five****Vietnam Background  
and The Cold War****Aims**

The aims of this lesson are to enable you to:

- understand Vietnam's long- and short-term history and its position in the lead up to the outbreak of the Vietnam War in 1961
- understand the events which led to the division of Vietnam into North and South, and the reasons why the US became involved in the conflict between the two territories
- understand the significance of the 'Truman Doctrine'
- place the Vietnam War in the context of the 'Cold War', which developed following World War II between the Soviet Union and the USA



*The Vietnam War (Seminar Studies In History)* - Chapter 1  
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## Vietnam: Geographical and Historical Background

Vietnam is a long, narrow country, bordered by Laos to the northwest, Cambodia to the southwest, and the South China Sea to the east. The southern region, around the Mekong River delta, is a damp, fertile, tropical area, where rice-growing is the main occupation and industry. The north, with the city of Hanoi at its centre, is a large fan-shaped area, spreading outwards and upwards to touch the south western borders of China. The main city in this region of Saigon, now referred to as Ho Chi Minh City, and the central part of the country is a narrow plain between the mountains and the sea. Vietnam's main city is Hue, the ancient capital of the Kings of Annam.

### Vietnamese Nationalism

The roots of Vietnamese nationalism go deep. The kingdom was conquered by China in 111BC, and 1000 years of Chinese rule ensued, which ended in 939AD. From that time, until the arrival of the French in the 1860s, the Kingdom of Annam steadfastly resisted all foreign invasion attempts from the north and south, excepting one successful Chinese occupation between 1407 and 1428.

### The French Occupation

The first Christian missionaries arrived in nearby Cambodia in 1553 and by 1630 French missions were well established in Annam (or 'Cochin China' as it was often called). In 1774 the ruling king of Annam was overthrown and he asked France for support in exchange for his protection of Christian converts. The Treaty that emerged from this agreement gave France her first foothold in the country. In March 1862, three provinces passed into French hands, by way of treaty agreements. A decade later, the occupation was complete. From France's point of view, the abundant stores of coal to be found in the area around the Gulf of Tonkin were an important asset for supplying her coal-powered navy. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were times of great European colonial expansion. Britain stretched her Empire into India and its near neighbour, Burma. The occupation of Indochina gave France a colonial empire of her own. For nearly 100 years, Indochina was occupied by France. In January 1944, US President Franklin Roosevelt wrote to his Secretary of State Cordell Hull, saying "France has milked it for one hundred years. The people of Indochina are entitled to something better than that".

## The 'Wilsonian moment'



Paris in 1919 was the setting for what has come to be referred to as the 'Wilsonian moment'. The First World War had just ended and US President Woodrow Wilson was in France's capital city with the aim to 'make the world safe for democracy'. An unknown young Vietnamese man, named Nguyen Tat Thanh, working as a waiter in Paris, sent a petition to the visiting US President, expressing his admiration for Wilson's often-expressed belief in national self-determination; that is, independence for subject peoples. In his petition, the young waiter even quoted from the US Declaration of Independence.

### Activity 1

1) Study the map in Source A below. Write a short speech from the point of view of a Vietnamese nationalist in 1920, praising the long traditions of an independent Vietnam and mentioning the hopes raised by President Wilson's state belief in national self-determination.

2) Given US President Wilson's oft-stated dislike of European colonial control, why do you think he continued to back the French from 1919 in Vietnam?

### Source A



The young Vietnamese man's petition was ignored. In the months which followed, he became involved in radical politics and was a founding member of the French Communist Party. In the early 1920s, he was summoned to Moscow for training as a revolutionary and in 1924 was sent to Canton, China, with orders to organise Vietnamese exiles living there. Nguyen was to go by the name of Ho Chi Minh ('Ho the Enlightener'). 1941 saw his most notable political achievement to date. He helped to found the communist-dominated independence movement of Vietnam, the Vietminh.

## The Japanese Invasion and Dien Bien Phu

The Imperial Japanese army invaded and occupied Vietnam in 1941. France signed an agreement with the Japanese promising 'military co-operation for joint defence of French Indochina' in exchange for Japanese assurances on the 'rights and interests of France in East Asia'. The collaboration of France and Japan was not forgotten by the Vietminh.

### Activity 2

Study Source B overleaf, which gives the text of the 1941 Franco-Japanese Agreement. The French decision to sign it was not an easy one. Imagine you are the French government faced with this decision. Draw up two lists; one with the possible advantages such an agreement would bring, and one considering the disadvantages.

**Source B**

Peace Agreement between France and Japan, 1941

**AGREEMENT BETWEEN JAPAN AND FRANCE PLEDGING MILITARY CO-OPERATION IN DEFENSE OF INDO-CHINA**

*Tokyo, July 29, 1941*

(Unofficial translation, *Contemporary Japan*, October, 1941.)

Imperial Japanese Government and the Government of France,

Taking into consideration the present international situation, And recognizing as the result, that there exist reasons for Japan to consider that, in case the security of French Indo-China should be threatened, general tranquillity in East Asia and her own security would be exposed to danger,

And renewing at this opportunity the promise made by Japan, on the one hand, to respect the rights and interests of France in East Asia, especially the territorial integrity of French Indo-China and the French sovereignty over the whole of the Union of French Indo-China; and the promise made by France, on the other hand, not to conclude with any third Power or Powers any agreement or understanding regarding Indo-China envisaging political, economic or military co-operation which is directly or indirectly aimed against Japan.

Have agreed upon the following provisions:

(1) The two Governments mutually promise military co-operation for joint defence of French Indo-China.

(2) Measures to be taken for such co-operation shall be the object of special arrangements.

(3) The above stipulations shall be valid only so long as the situation which has motivated their adoption exists.

**Activity 3**

Looking at Source B, what do you think were the consequences for France of signing the agreement with Japan in 1941?

As the Imperial Japanese army swept through East Asia, checked only in northern Burma and on the borders of India, European control over the people who had been subject to colonial rule for many years was significantly loosened. In Vietnam, the Vietminh seized power in August 1945 when the Japanese surrendered and proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in Hanoi. Ho Chi Minh was appointed as its President. The DRV Declaration of Independence, issued on September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1945, began with the statement that “All men are created equal” and went on to quote Thomas Jefferson and the US Declaration of Independence from 1776.

#### Activity 4

What factors explain the victory of Vietminh forces at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954?

### The Division of Vietnam

The French however, were unwilling to accept the independence of their colonial subjects, and for the next eight years, there was fierce irregular fighting between French troops and Vietminh guerrillas. US policy on the situation at this time was uncertain. There is some evidence to suggest that the US supported the Vietminh, but their attitudes were not clear. The fighting finally came to an end with a humiliating defeat for the French at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. During the negotiations which followed in Geneva, the country was divided and the Vietminh were awarded the north of the country only.

The novelist Graham Greene spent the winters between 1950 and 1954 in Saigon reporting on the fighting for *The Sunday Times* and *Le Figaro*. In 1955 he published his novel *The Quiet American*. It offers a vivid picture of Saigon during this period.

The US refused to accept the Geneva Agreements which had brought an end to the fighting in Vietnam in 1954. Instead, they offered their support to the Ngo Dinh Diem's regime in South Vietnam.

#### Activity 5

Why did the continued occupation of Indochina seem so important to France after 1945?

## Ngo Dinh Diem and the Republic of Vietnam

Diem was President of South Vietnam from 1955 until his death during a military coup in 1963. He was a devout Roman Catholic, nationalistic, but passionately anti-Communist. His first and very powerful backer in the US Cardinal Francis Spellman, referred to by many as 'The American Pope'. Spellman was not only the Roman Catholic Archbishop of New York, but also Vicar to the US Armed Forces. He was deeply conservative in both his politics and his theology. He believed that the defeat of the French in Vietnam would bring the world one step closer to the day when communism would dominate the United States, writing that "We shall risk bartering our liberties for lunacies, betraying the sacred trust of our forefathers, becoming serfs and slaves to the Red's godless goons".

Spellman met with Diem in New York in 1950. He was impressed by Diem's ardent anti-communism and used his considerable influence in Washington to promote Diem's cause. US support for Diem was to continue almost until the end of his life. In early 1955, Diem was appointed as interim leader in South Vietnam. In his new position, he had to deal with huge numbers of refugees from the North, many of whom were Roman Catholics. In October that year he won a rigged election, marked by impossible numbers of votes and widespread intimidation of the opposition, led by Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. Diem won a massive 98.2% of the vote. Three days later, he proclaimed the formation of the Republic of Vietnam, appointing himself as President.

### Activity 6

Study Source C overleaf. Why do you think the US continued to support the Diem regime in Vietnam, despite the allegations of widespread corruption which surrounded it?

**Source C**

President Diem is greeted by US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles at Washington Airport, 1956.

**Diem's Regime**

President Diem's rule was authoritarian and his family became very influential. He installed his family members in some of the key government positions across the country. His most trusted official was his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, leader of the family Can Lao party, and his other younger brother Ngo Dinh Can was placed in charge of Hué, the former Imperial City. Both were in command of private armies and secret police. Another brother, Ngo Dinh Luyen, was appointed Ambassador to the UK. The older brother Thuc became Archbishop of Hué. This family rule was widely believed to be deeply corrupt. Can was thought to be involved in opium-smuggling throughout Asia, and Archbishop Thuc, resident in the Presidential Palace, solicited 'voluntary contributions to the church' from Saigon businessmen. All of the brothers used their influence and position to amass fortunes, salted away in foreign banks. At the same time, Madame Nhu led programmes of social reform in Saigon, closing brothels and opium dens. Divorce and abortion were made illegal and adultery laws became stronger.

During his presidency, Diem won a street war with organised crime syndicates in Saigon and dismantled the private armies of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects. His anti-communist drive resulted in torture and killings on a massive scale. Opponents of the regime, even if they were anti-communist, also became victims.



As resistance to Diem's harsh rule in the South grew, Hanoi's Central Committee in the North saw its chance. In January 1959 it authorised an armed struggle in the South and in December 1960, southern communists established the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (the NLF).

Recognising the need to deprive the insurgents of access to the resources of the general population, Diem tried to create allegiance through building 'agrovilles'. These villages, fortified against infiltration, moved hundreds of families from their ancestral homes to rural areas more isolated from communist influence. Peasants generally disliked the programme and Diem suspended it in late 1960. Policies like this, combined with Diem's tight family-controlled government, increasingly alienated much of the population.

Mitchell K. Hall, 2007

If even a tenth of what the Communists said about the close and intimate relationship between themselves and the South Vietnamese peasants had been true, that would have been enough to have an important effect on the military situation, and in fact much more than a tenth of it was true. In most of South Vietnam the NLF had genuine roots in the villages; it had a much closer relationship with the people than the Saigon Government did. One of the main reasons that the guerrillas were so much more effective than the ARVN soldiers, man for man, was that during military operations the guerrillas could generally count on more cooperation from local civilians than the ARVN could.

Edwin E. Moise, 1998

## US Military Assistance

In October 1954, US President Eisenhower advised Diem that he would provide his regime with direct assistance. In offering this, he bypassed the French. The first direct shipment of military aid arrived early in 1955 and US advisors began training the South Vietnam army. An American Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) took over the training of South Vietnamese forces in April 1956. Major Dale Buid and Sergeant Chester Ovnand were killed by Viet Minh guerrillas at Bien Hoa, twenty miles north-east of Saigon. They were the first American deaths in the Second Indochina War. They were not to be the last. By May 1960, the numbers of the MAAG had increased from 327 in 1956 to 6850.

I saw everywhere that there were people who were frightened and worried at the evidence, either within their own country or in very close proximity to it, of aggressive Chinese Communist intentions. It would seem as though it was quite possible that the Chinese Communists are not content to stop until it is apparent that they are stopped by superior resistance.

US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, March 14, 1955

Anybody who gets himself involved in a ground war in Indochina needs his head examined.

US General Douglas MacArthur, 1954

### Activity 7

Imagine that you are one of the following, writing a letter home in 1961;

- a Vietminh guerrilla fighter
- A US soldier in Vietnam, there to advise the Vietnamese army

In both cases, you should say why you think what you are doing is important.

Diem survived an attempted coup in 1960, but by the time the new US President John F. Kennedy took office in Washington in January 1961, the situation in Vietnam was increasingly turbulent and threatened to spin out of control.

## US attitudes towards the Vietminh

It is against this background that US attitudes towards the Vietminh in Vietnam by 1954 must be placed. North Vietnam (DRV), with its capital, Hanoi, was a Communist state and as such, was supported by both China and the USSR. As the Cold War intensified, the US became more convinced than ever that an international communist conspiracy was growing and becoming a real threat to American interests. According to this line of thinking, communism therefore needed to be opposed wherever it appeared in the world.

## Communism in Cuba

Political developments in nearby Cuba were also to affect the international situation. Early in 1959, the communist guerrilla forces of Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba, toppling the Batista regime and sweeping away all US influence. For many Americans, the fact that Cuba, a state just 100 miles from the US mainland, had become communist, was evidence that the communist threat was real and urgent. In January 1961, just as John F. Kennedy was taking over as the new US President in Washington, Cuban exiles based in Florida made an attempt to invade the island and topple Castro and his communist regime. The expedition was backed by the US through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs, but were quickly rounded up by resident Cuban forces and executed. The communist regime of Fidel Castro continues to this day, although Fidel has recently just handed over power to his brother, Raul.

### Activity 8

Find out more about the Bay of Pigs landing. Write a news story about the events, from an American point of view.

The Bay of Pigs fiasco, as it came to be known, was a deep humiliation for the US and an unfortunate opening event in Kennedy's presidency. On the other hand, it did make Kennedy even more determined to hold the line against communism. Vietnam, unlike Cuba, is not in America's back yard. But given the events which had taken place in Cuba, Kennedy was keen to support the anti-communist regime of President Diem in South Vietnam.

**Source D**

Given his belief in the global struggle between east and west, his acceptance of the domino theory, his conviction that Vietnam was the testing ground for combating 'wars of national liberation,' his often zealous commitment to counterinsurgency, and his determination to never appear soft on communism, Jack might well have been compelled, as conditions worsened, to commit more American troops to Vietnam. It is clear that his harsh public rhetoric made disengagement more difficult. And his clumsy and unprincipled acquiescence in the coup tied the United States closely to the eight military governments that briefly succeeded Diem.

Thomas Reeves (Biographer of John F. Kennedy) *A Question of Character* 1991

**Activity 9**

What does Source D suggest about President Kennedy's attitude towards continued US involvement in Vietnam in 1961?

**The Space Race**

The successful launch of an unmanned rocket with a satellite called 'Sputnik' by the Soviet Union in 1957 was followed in 1961 by Yuri Gagarin's orbit of the earth. That the Russians had been the first to put a man in space came as a great shock to the US. They were working frantically at space travel themselves, and at this time, appeared to be losing the 'space race' which had developed as an integral part of the Cold War. The race itself heralded huge technological advances in aeronautics throughout the 1960s on both sides. As an offshoot of this, the superpowers developed the ability to deliver nuclear warheads using very long-range (intercontinental) missiles. This meant that the urban populations of the USA and the Soviet Union were now both vulnerable to annihilation.

## Self-Assessment Test

The following questions are based on the information and activities in this lesson. You should answer each of the questions as fully as you can, supplementing your answers with further information from your reading and research if needed. Suggested answers to Self-Assessment Tests are given at the end of this module.

1. Why were the USA and the Soviet Union referred to as the 'superpowers' after 1945?  
**(4 marks)**
  
2. What developments in weapons technology made the Cold War so potentially lethal?  
**(4 marks)**
  
3. What was the 'Truman Doctrine' and how does it relate to US involvement in Vietnam?  
**(10 marks)**
  
4. Why do you think the US was so worried by the communist revolution in Cuba in 1959?  
**(6 marks)**
  
5. What lessons did the US learn from the Bay of Pigs fiasco?  
**(6 marks)**
  
6. What was the 'Space Race'? Why did the US feel it was losing it?  
**(4 marks)**
  
7. What do you think was the main reason behind US President Kennedy's commitment to continuing involvement in Vietnam at the start of his presidency in 1961? Give evidence to support your answer.  
**(16 marks)**

50 total marks

## Suggested Answers to Activities

**These answers should give you an idea of how to tackle activities throughout the module. From lesson 26, it will be up to you to check you're answers are correct.**

### Activity 1

2) The fear of the spread of communism in South-East Asia following the Russian Revolution of 1917 overcame any instinctive dislike that President Wilson and subsequent US Presidents had of European colonial rule.

### Activity 3

After the defeat of the Japanese in 1945 and their withdrawal from Vietnam, it was easy for Ho Chi Minh and the communist Vietminh to portray the French as prepared to do anything to remain in power in Indochina and confirmed them as the enemies of national self-determination for the Vietnamese people.

It was always going to be difficult for France, which was bankrupt following WW2, but this Agreement with the Japanese certainly made their task even harder.

### Activity 4

This was a set-piece battle. The evolution of the Vietminh from irregular guerrilla fighting to the ability to fight a successful conventional battle was unexpected by the French. Leadership was a factor. The Vietminh were well led by General Giap while confusion and uncertainty characterised French military leadership. Motivation was a second major factor. The determination of the Vietminh based on the doctrine of nationalist struggle against colonial rule saw them triumph even though they sustained heavy casualties, over 20,000. The French, by contrast, were uncertain. More than 10,000 eventually surrendered.

Tactics were another factor. The Vietminh possessed heavy artillery as well as the ability to move them onto the mountains overlooking the French base. This was unexpected. The French had decided to establish their base on low ground to be supplied by air, a decision based on poor intelligence and ignorance of Vietminh ability to disrupt air supply with anti-aircraft weapons.

Another factor was numerical. As the battle developed, it was clear that the Vietminh heavily outnumbered the French. The Vietminh deployed some 48,000 combat troops with a further 15,000 in logistical support. By contrast, the French had around 11,000 combat troops. Even though

Vietminh casualties were around ten times higher, it was the French who were surrounded and forced to surrender.

### Activity 5

In terms of national prestige, the retention of a substantial colonial possession in Indochina was felt by the French to be important. Britain had after all retained power in India, at least until 1947, in the face of growing nationalist opposition. Indonesia gained independence from the Dutch in 1949 but the British were to hang on in Malaya until 1957 and Kenya until 1963. The Portuguese were not driven from Angola and Mozambique until 1975. Any abandonment of Indochina would have alienated powerful commercial and political elements in France including the military establishment. Many of the Generals who attempted military takeovers in France in 1958 and 1961 were veterans of the Indochina Wars. In economic terms, Indochina was a valuable source of raw materials for France and a useful market for French exports. Morocco became independent from the French in 1953 but Algeria only in 1962.

### Activity 6

The definition of 'corruption' is not always an easy matter. Sometimes behaviour that is acceptable and normal in one culture is called 'corrupt' by another. However, by most standards, the Diem regime was clearly corrupt, with family members gaining positions of influence and wealth, bribery rampant and elections rigged. The US was only prepared to overlook all of this and to continue support for the Diem regime because it was the only available defence against a communist victory in the whole of Vietnam, which was, it believed, a far more important matter.