

Vietnam and America

To pour money, material, and men into the jungles of Indochina would be dangerously futile and self-destructive. I am frankly of the belief that no amount of American military assistance can conquer an enemy which is everywhere, and which is nowhere.”

-John F. Kennedy, 1954

Do the actions of Kennedy in the early 1960s support this statement?

The Geneva Accords (1954)

- provided for a military cease fire between French and Vietnamese forces
- divided Vietnam along the 17th parallel
- mandated free elections to be held in 1956
- Ho Chi Minh used this opportunity to solidify power in the Northern division (communism)

South Vietnam and America - 1956 to 1961

- Ngo Dinh Diem, supported by America, refused to hold elections in 1956 -- why?
- with U.S. support Diem created an absolute dictatorship in South Vietnam
- Vietcong (South Vietnamese communists) began encouraging opposition to the Diem regime
- in response to “communist aggression” U.S. sent military advisors to train Diem’s armed forces

Role of Truman Doctrine? Domino Theory? Fulbright’s *Arrogance of Power* (IX, doc. 7)?

Rumblings of War and Dishonor (1961 to 1964)

- 1961 - Vietcong assassinate 4,000 government officials and overrun S. Vietnamese countryside
- Kennedy authorizes 1,500 advisors (CIA) to enter the country, by 1963 =17,000
- South Vietnamese generals advocate overthrow of Diem -- Kennedy, under the advice of military advisors supports the generals = Diem is murdered along with his wife in September of 1963 -- **consistent with the Peace Corps? Fear of Cuban Missile Crisis? Berlin?**
- 1963 to 1964 a series of unstable military governments is established
- assassination of Kennedy puts the problem into Lyndon Johnson’s hands

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

- U.S. warships patrolling Gulf of Tonkin report being fired upon by North Vietnamese PT boats -- U.S.S. Maddox reportedly hit by heavy gunfire
- Johnson delivers message to Congress reporting “this aggressive attack on American sovereignty” -- **parallels to recent Iraq controversy?**
- Congress authorizes Johnson to “take all necessary measures to prevent further aggression”

Why give the president nearly unlimited warmaking powers? Consequences? Impact on American attitudes toward foreign relations? Very visible announcement -- nationwide TV (see Part IX, doc. 6)

- Vietcong attack two American military bases in Feb. 1965 (Pleiku and Qui Nhon)

“They want a war, well I’ll give them a damned war!”

-LBJ, allegedly to NSA advisor

- Johnson escalates direct military involvement by ordering the bombing of North Vietnam
- by the end of 1965 180,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam, 1966 = 300,000 1968 = 450,000

Johnson at Home

- war effort complicated implementation of Johnson’s Great Society programs
- Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 creates V.I.S.T.A. -- complicated by military draft
- War on Poverty coupled with the war effort in Vietnam -- parallels to “Double V” campaign of WW2? A. Philip Randolph? Recognition of MLK, Jr.? Malcolm X?
- mistrust of government hindered Johnson’s effectiveness in pursuing Civil Rights programs
- **major successes** include the Civil Rights Act of 1964 -- *Gideon v Wainwright* (right to privacy) -- Medicare Program
- **major failures:** resolution to Vietnam crisis, Apollo 1 fire and loss of 3 astronauts (1967), credibility gap grew as government statements began to be contradicted by TV news reports on the war effort -- Tet Offensive, decline of Civil Rights = Kerner Commission findings

Tet: The Beginning of the End

- Vietminh and Vietcong mounted a military offensive coinciding with Tet, the Vietnamese New Year
- since 1965, Johnson had been promising a quick and positive end to the Vietnam conflict
- told Americans that the Vietnamese ability to make war was ending, if not ended
- Americans had to reconcile this with the growing number of military body bags coming home
- although Tet ended in a U.S. military victory, the psychological victory went to the communist forces of North Vietnam -- **What role did the psychology of the average American play in America’s defeat in the Vietnam War? Dual War? Where was the war in Vietnam won -- in the rice paddies and jungles of SE Asia, or on Mainstreet, USA?**
- by March of 1968 many American’s opinion had turned against the war effort -- My Lai massacre polarized anti-military feelings of counterculture
- students mounted protests on many campuses nationwide, “hippies” began open rebellions against governmental norms -- films, Easy Rider, The Graduate, Dr. Strangelove all questioned the values of the 1960s “Silent Generation” -- Teach-ins, Summer of Love, Woodstock, etc. -- protest music, sexual revolution, drug culture all acted as escape mechanisms toward aversion of war and feeling of injustice of American military actions
- Johnson suffered heavily from changing American mood -- Great Society died, Civil Rights movement turned violent with the assassinations of MLK, Jr. and Malcolm X, Black Panthers, Detroit Riots, Watts Riots, Chicago Riots.
- political protest = *“Hey, hey, LBJ, How many babies have you killed today?”*