

# MODERN AMERICAN POE

## The Causes of the Vietnam War

---

Andrew J. Rotter

Most American wars have obvious starting points or precipitating causes: the Battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775, the capture of Fort Sumter in 1861, the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, and the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950, for example. But there was no fixed beginning for the U.S. war in Vietnam. The United States entered that war incrementally, in a series of steps between 1950 and 1965. In May 1950, President Harry S. Truman authorized a modest program of economic and military aid to the French, who were fighting to retain control of their Indochina colony, including Laos and Cambodia as well as Vietnam. When the Vietnamese Nationalist (and Communist-led) Vietminh army defeated French forces at Dienbienphu in 1954, the French were compelled to accede to the creation of a Communist Vietnam north of the 17th parallel while leaving a non-Communist entity south of that line. The United States refused to accept the arrangement. The administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower undertook instead to build a nation from the spurious political entity that was South Vietnam by fabricating a government there, taking over control from the French, dispatching military advisers to train a South Vietnamese army, and unleashing the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to conduct psychological warfare against the North. President John F. Kennedy rounded another turning point in early 1961, when he secretly sent 400 Special Operations Forces-trained (Green Beret) soldiers to teach the South Vietnamese how to fight what was called *counterinsurgency* war against Communist guerrillas in South Vietnam. When Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963, there were more than 16,000 U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam, and more than 100 Americans had been killed. Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, committed the United States most fully to the war. In August 1964, he secured from Congress a functional (not actual) declaration of war: the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Then, in February and March 1965, Johnson authorized the sustained bombing, by U.S. aircraft, of targets north of the 17th parallel, and on 8 March dispatched 3,500 Marines to South Vietnam. Legal declaration or no, the United States was now at war.

The multiple starting dates for the war complicate efforts to describe the causes of U.S. entry. The United States became involved in the war for a number of reasons, and these evolved and shifted over time. Primarily, every American president regarded the enemy in Vietnam--the Vietminh; its 1960s successor, the National Liberation Front (NLF); and the government of North Vietnam, led by \*Ho Chi Minh--as agents of global communism. U.S. policymakers, and most Americans, regarded communism as the antithesis of all they held dear. Communists scorned democracy, violated human rights, pursued military aggression, and created closed state economies that barely traded with capitalist countries. Americans compared communism to a contagious disease. If it took hold in one nation, U.S. policymakers expected contiguous nations to fall to communism, too, as if nations were dominoes lined up on end. In 1949, when the Communist Party came to power in China, Washington feared that Vietnam would become the next Asian domino. That was one reason for Truman's 1950 decision to give aid to the French who were fighting the Vietminh,

Truman also hoped that assisting the French in Vietnam would help to shore up the developed, non-Communist nations, whose fates were in surprising ways tied to the preservation of Vietnam and, given the domino theory, all of Southeast Asia. Free world dominion over the region would provide markets for Japan, rebuilding with American help after the Pacific War. U.S. involvement in Vietnam reassured the British, who linked their postwar recovery to the revival of the rubber and tin industries in their colony of Malaya, one of Vietnam's neighbors. And with U.S. aid, the French could concentrate on economic recovery at home, and could hope ultimately to recall their Indochina officer corps to oversee the rearmament of West Germany, a Cold War measure deemed essential by the Americans. These ambitions formed a second set of reasons why the United States became involved in Vietnam.

As presidents committed the United States to conflict bit by bit, many of these ambitions were forgotten. Instead, inertia developed against withdrawing from Vietnam. Washington believed that U.S. withdrawal would result in a Communist victory--Eisenhower acknowledged that, had elections been held as scheduled in Vietnam in 1956, "Ho Chi Minh would have won 80% of the vote"--and no U.S. president wanted to lose a country to communism. Democrats in particular, like Kennedy and Johnson, feared a right-wing backlash should they give up the fight; they remembered vividly the accusatory tone of the Republicans' 1950 question, "Who lost China?" The commitment to Vietnam itself, passed from administration to administration, took on validity aside from any rational basis it might once have had. Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy all gave their word that the United States would stand by its South Vietnamese allies. If the United States abandoned the South Vietnamese, its word would be regarded as unreliable by other governments, friendly or not. So U.S. credibility seemed at stake.

Along with the larger structural and ideological causes of the war in Vietnam, the experience, personality, and temperament of each president played a role in deepening the U.S.

commitment. Dwight Eisenhower restrained U.S. involvement because, having commanded troops in battle, he doubted the United States could fight a land war in Southeast Asia. The youthful John Kennedy, on the other hand, felt he had to prove his resolve to the American people and his Communist adversaries, especially in the aftermath of several foreign policy blunders early in his administration. Lyndon Johnson saw the Vietnam War as a test of his mettle, as a Southerner and as a man. He exhorted his soldiers to "nail the coonskin to the wall" in Vietnam, likening victory to a successful hunting expedition.

When Johnson began bombing North Vietnam and sent the Marines to South Vietnam in early 1965, he had every intention of fighting a limited war. He and his advisers worried that too lavish a use of U.S. firepower might prompt the Chinese to enter the conflict. It was not expected that the North Vietnamese and the NLF would hold out long against the American military. And yet U.S. policymakers never managed to fit military strategy to U.S. goals in Vietnam. Massive bombing had little effect against a decentralized economy like North Vietnam's. Kennedy had favored counterinsurgency warfare in the South Vietnamese countryside, and Johnson endorsed this strategy, but the political side of counterinsurgency--the effort to win the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese peasantry-- was at best underdeveloped and probably doomed. Presidents proved reluctant to mobilize American society to the extent the generals thought necessary to defeat the enemy.

As the United States went to war in 1965, a few voices were raised in dissent. Within the Johnson administration, Undersecretary of State George Ball warned that the South Vietnamese government was a functional nonentity and simply could not be sustained by the United States, even with a major effort. Antiwar protest groups formed on many of the nation's campuses; in June, the leftist organization Students for a Democratic Society decided to make the war its principal target. But major dissent would not begin until 1966 or later. By and large in 1965, Americans supported the administration's claim that it was fighting to stop communism in Southeast Asia, or people simply shrugged and went about their daily lives, unaware that this gradually escalating war would tear American society apart.

From *The Oxford Companion to American Military History*. Ed. John Whiteclay Chambers II. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. Copyright © 1999 by Oxford UP.