

KEY QUESTION: How successful was US Containment in Vietnam? Part 2, 1963 – 68 ESCALATION

KEY TERMS

Body Count / Combat effectiveness / Hanging off the belt /
Ho Chi Minh Trail / Punji Traps / Search + Destroy

Contextual Background to US escalation

The Gulf of Tonkin

- In November 1963 JFK was assassinated and his VP, Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) replaced him.
- In August 1964, the destroyer *USS Maddox*, an American naval vessel, was attacked in the **Gulf of Tonkin**, just off the coast of North Vietnam, by North Vietnamese torpedo boats.
- This provoked President Johnson into retaliating with military attacks in North Vietnam.
- The **Tonkin Resolution** passed by Congress allowed him to take whatever action was necessary to deal with the crisis.
- He started **Operation Rolling Thunder** which involved air strikes against the North.
- In March 1965, the first ground troops were sent to Vietnam.



Did you know: 'Hey Hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today' became a frequent chant outside the Whitehouse and in anti-war protests

US Tactics: How effective were they?

Bombing: President Johnson ordered the bombing of strategic military targets in North Vietnam, including air raids on the capital city, Hanoi, and bases and supply routes for the Vietcong. This was code-named Operation Rolling Thunder. The USA would ultimately drop three million tonnes of bombs in Vietnam - more than all the bombs dropped in Europe during World War Two. However, bombing was highly inaccurate due to the jungle landscape and the lack of industrial targets in North Vietnam.

Advisers to Ground Troops: President Johnson slowly increased the number of American troops on the ground in Vietnam. In 1965, two battalions of US Marines were deployed to protect military bases at Da Nang. This represented a shift away from 'military advisors' to combat troops. In July 1965, Johnson sent another 100,000 troops and a further 100,000 in 1966.

Search + Destroy: From 1965, the American military began a policy of sending soldiers into the jungle and villages of Vietnam to 'take the war to the enemy'. This often meant soldiers were easy targets for Vietcong guerrilla attacks as the Vietcong were far more adept in the jungle than the American soldiers. This tactic also led to a high number of civilian casualties, destruction of villages and atrocities like the **My Lai Massacre**, all of which damaged the USA's reputation abroad.

Chemical warfare: The US used jets to dump **napalm**, a chemical that burnt skin to the bone, on suspected Vietcong strongholds. They used **Agent Orange**, a powerful defoliant, to destroy jungle cover. Helicopters were used to deploy (search for) and destroy guerrilla combatants. Television propaganda was used in the USA to report the 'body count' of estimated Vietcong casualties.

VC Tactics: How effective were they?

Guerrilla warfare

The Vietcong used the cover of the jungle, which they knew well, to their advantage. They fought a hit-and-run guerrilla war against inexperienced American soldiers, many of whom were young conscripts. The threat of an invisible enemy and hidden traps like punji sticks – sharpened sticks of bamboo which were laid in traps - had a demoralising psychological impact on US troops.

Ho Chi Minh trail

Vietcong guerrillas were kept well supplied by a constant stream of food and arms from the North. These were carried on foot, by bicycle and mule along the Ho Chi Minh Trail - a jungle trail which wound through the neighbouring countries of Laos and Cambodia and which was bombed by the US Army but never fully disrupted.

Tet Offensive: A turning point?

In 1968, the Vietcong used the cover of the Buddhist New Year (Tet) celebrations to change tactics and launch a massive attack on US-held areas across South Vietnam, including the US Embassy in Saigon. The attack was a success for the Vietcong and although ultimately they were driven back by the US Army, it showed the Americans that despite all the soldiers, bombs, and money spent in Vietnam, they were not making progress against the Vietcong or communism.

Discussion Point: Are you surprised that LBJ decided not to stand for re-election in 1968/69?

How many stars would you award the US for containing communism to '68?

