

Cambridge  
IGCSE®

# Modern World History

Option B: The 20th century

## Case study 3: The Vietnam War

### SOURCE 25

*A poor feudal nation had beaten a great colonial power ... It meant a lot; not just to us but to people all over the world.*

Viet Minh commander Vo Nguyen Giap commenting on the victory over France in 1954.

### SOURCE 26

*It was generally agreed that had an election been held, Ho Chi Minh would have been elected Premier ... at the time of the fighting, possibly 80 per cent of the population would have voted for the communist Ho Chi Minh as their leader.*

President Eisenhower writing after the Vietnam War.

### SOURCE 27



Quang Duc, a 73-year-old Buddhist priest, burns himself to death in protest against the attacks on Buddhist shrines by the government of South Vietnam in 1963

Although Americans were relieved at the outcome of the Cuban Crisis it did not reduce their fear of Communism. Very soon they found themselves locked in a costly war in Vietnam, which put a massive question mark over the very policy of containment.

## Origins of the Vietnam War

Vietnam had a long history of fighting outsiders.

### Fighting the Japanese

Before the Second World War, Vietnam (or Indochina as it was called then) had been ruled by France. During the war the region was conquered by the Japanese. They treated the Vietnamese people savagely. As a result, a strong anti-Japanese resistance movement (the Viet Minh) emerged under the leadership of Communist Ho Chi Minh.

Ho was a remarkable individual. He had lived in the USA, Britain and France. In the 1920s he had studied Communism in the USSR. In 1930 he had founded the Indochinese Communist Party. He inspired the Vietnamese people to fight the Japanese.

When the Second World War ended, the Viet Minh entered the northern city of Hanoi in 1945 and declared Vietnam independent.

### Fighting the French

The French had other ideas. In 1945 they came back wanting to rule Vietnam again, but Ho was not prepared to let this happen. Another nine years of war followed between the Viet Minh who controlled the north of the country and the French who controlled much of the south.

From 1949 Ho was supported by China, which had become a Communist state in 1949. You have already studied how the USA dealt with a similar situation in Korea (pages 96–99) so how would you expect the USA to react to this development? In this case rather than sending troops or getting a UN resolution the USA poured \$500 million a year into the French war effort. Despite this the French were unable to hold on to the country and pulled out of Vietnam in 1954.

A peace conference was held in Geneva and the country was divided into North and South Vietnam until elections could be held to decide its future (see Source 25).

## Why did US involvement escalate?

Under the terms of the ceasefire, elections were to be held within two years to reunite the country. You will remember how the USA criticised Stalin for not holding free elections in Soviet-controlled eastern Europe after the war (see pages 82–85). In Vietnam in 1954 the USA applied a different rule. It prevented the elections from taking place because it feared that the Communists would win (see Source 26).

Why did the Americans do this? Their policy was a strange combination of determination and ignorance. President Eisenhower and his Secretary of State JF Dulles were convinced that China and the USSR were planning to spread Communism throughout Asia. The idea was often referred to as the domino theory: If Vietnam fell to Communism, then Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma and possibly even India might also fall – just like a row of dominoes. The Americans were determined to resist the spread of Communism in Vietnam, which they saw as the first domino in the row. However, their methods and policies showed their ignorance of the Vietnamese people and the region.

## Think!

- Many neutral observers in Vietnam were critical of US policy towards Diem's regime. Explain why.
- Explain how US politicians would have defended their policies.

## Financial support for Diem's regime

In 1955 the Americans helped Ngo Dinh Diem to set up the Republic of South Vietnam. They supported him because he was bitterly anti-Communist and was prepared to imprison or exile Communists. However, Diem's regime was very unpopular with the Vietnamese people.

- He belonged to the landlord class, which treated the Vietnamese peasants with contempt.
- He was a Christian and showed little respect for the Buddhist religion of most Vietnamese peasants (see Source 27).
- Diem's regime was also extremely corrupt. He appointed members of his family or other supporters to positions of power and refused to hold elections, even for local councils.

The Americans were concerned and frustrated by his actions, but as Dulles said, 'We knew of no one better.' The USA supported Diem's regime with around \$1.6 billion in the 1950s. Diem was overthrown by his own army leaders in November 1963, but the governments that followed were equally corrupt. Even so, they also received massive US support.

## The emergence of the Viet Cong

The actions of these anti-Communist governments increased support among the ordinary peasants for the Communist-led National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, which was set up in December 1960. This movement was usually called the Viet Cong. It included South Vietnamese opponents of the government, but also large numbers of Communist North Vietnamese taking their orders from Ho Chi Minh. Peasants who did not support the Viet Cong faced intimidation and violence from them.

The Viet Cong also started a guerrilla war against the South Vietnamese government. Using the Ho Chi Minh trail (see Source 28), the Viet Cong sent reinforcements and ferried supplies to guerrilla fighters. These fighters attacked South Vietnamese government forces, officials and buildings. They gradually made the countryside unsafe for government forces. They also attacked American air force and supply bases.

In response the South Vietnamese government launched their 'strategic hamlet' programme, which involved moving peasant villages from Viet Cong-controlled areas to areas controlled by the South Vietnamese government. The Americans helped by supplying building materials, money, food and equipment for the villagers to build improved farms and houses. In practice this policy backfired as the peasants resented it – and corrupt officials pocketed money meant to buy supplies for the villagers.

## From 'advisers' to combat troops

By 1962 President Kennedy was sending military personnel (he always called them 'advisers') to help the South Vietnamese army fight the Viet Cong (see Source 29). However, Kennedy said he was determined that the USA would not 'blunder into war, unclear about aims or how to get out again'. He was a keen historian himself and had studied the USA's past successes and failures. He was well aware from the Korean war ten years earlier what could and could not be achieved by military intervention.

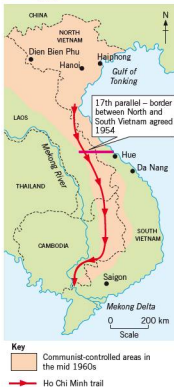
However President Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. His successor, Lyndon Johnson, was more prepared than Kennedy to commit the USA to a full-scale conflict in Vietnam to prevent the spread of Communism.

In August 1964, North Vietnamese patrol boats opened fire on US ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. In a furious reaction, the US Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which gave the President power to 'take all necessary measures to prevent further aggression and achieve peace and security'. It effectively meant that Johnson could take the USA into a full-scale war if he felt it was necessary, and very soon he did.

- **In February 1965 the US started Operation Rolling Thunder** – a gigantic bombing campaign against North Vietnamese cities, factories, army bases and the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which continued for three years.
- **On 8 March 1965**, 3,500 US marines, combat troops rather than advisers, came ashore at Da Nang.

The USA was now officially at war in Vietnam.

SOURCE 28



Vietnam in the mid 1960s

## SOURCE 29

First is the simple fact that South Vietnam, a member of the free world family, is striving to preserve its independence from Communist attack. Second, South East Asia has great significance in the forward defence of the USA. For Hanoi, the immediate object is limited: conquest of the south and national unification. For Peking, however, Hanoi's victory would only be a first step towards eventual Chinese dominance of the two Vietnams and South East Asia and towards exploitation of the new strategy in other parts of the world.

Robert McNamara, US Defence Secretary, explaining in 1964 why he supported the policy of sending US troops to Vietnam.

## Source Analysis ▲

Compare Source 29 with Source 2 on page 96. How similar are the arguments used in 1964 about Vietnam to those used in 1950 about Korea?

## Revision Tip

Make sure you can recall:

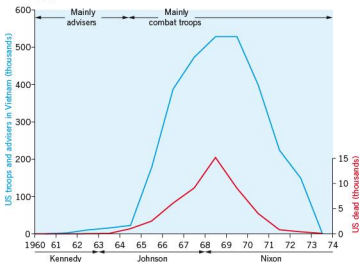
- ◆ two reasons why Communism was becoming stronger in Vietnam
- ◆ two measures taken by the USA to resist the spread of Communism.

## Why did US send troops to Vietnam?

The answer to this question may seem obvious! It was because of the policy of containment and the 'domino theory'. That is certainly how the President and his advisers explained it (see Source 29 for example). However there is a more controversial view held by some historians that powerful groups within the USA wanted a war.

In 1961 President Eisenhower himself warned that America had developed a powerful 'military-industrial complex'. The government gave huge budgets to the military commanders. These budgets were spent on weapons made by some of America's biggest companies. Thus, both the armed forces and business actually gained from conflict. Eisenhower did not accuse business and military leaders of anything, but in his last speech as President he warned the American people not to let these groups become too influential. Some historians believe that this was a factor in American involvement in Vietnam, but it is hotly disputed by others.

## SOURCE 30



US troops and deaths in Vietnam, 1960–74. US troops were not the only foreign soldiers in the war. About 46,000 Australian and New Zealand troops fought too.

## Focus Task A

Why did the USA get increasingly involved in Vietnam?

- 1 Draw a timeline of the period 1945–65.
- 2 Mark on it increasing American involvement using the following headings:
  - ◆ No direct American involvement
  - ◆ Financial support
  - ◆ Political involvement
  - ◆ Military involvement
- 3 Write annotations to show the date on which each of these phases started and what events triggered the increasing involvement.
- 4 Choose two events that you think were critical in increasing the USA's involvement in the war in Vietnam. Explain your choice.

# Tactics and technology in the Vietnam War

With hindsight it is easy to see that the American decision to get fully involved in the war was a huge gamble. But political leaders did not have the benefit of hindsight. They made their decision on the basis of what they knew and believed at the time. They knew their technology and firepower was superior to the Viet Cong and they believed that would allow them to win the war.

However they were soon proved wrong. As time wore on it became clear that the USA needed more than money and technology to win this kind of war. On the next four pages you will find out why by comparing Viet Cong and US tactics. Focus Task B will direct your reading.

## Focus Task B

### Why couldn't the Americans win?

#### Stage 1 – Understand the tactics


1 Work in pairs. Take either the Viet Cong or the Americans. Use page 114 or 115 to find out about the your side's tactics. Create a diagram by following these steps:

- ◆ In the inner circle record the tactics.
- ◆ In the outer circle the reason for using those tactics.
- ◆ Draw lines to show how the tactics and reasons are connected.

Compare your diagram with your partner's.

#### Stage 2 – Thinking it through

2 Make your own table like this, then using your research from stage 1 record in columns 2 and 4 how far each side had these qualities. You can add further rows if you think of other important qualities.

Qualities	The US army		Viet Cong
Well-trained soldiers			
The right technology			
Reliable supplies and equipment			
Effective tactics			
Support from the Vietnamese population			
Motivated and committed soldiers			
Other			

3 Next, in each row of column 3, draw some scales to show which way the balance falls for this quality. Did the USA or the Viet Cong have the advantage?

4 Now think about the overall picture – how the strengths and weaknesses work together.

- a) Were the armies finely balanced? Or was the balance strongly weighted to one side or the other?
- b) Which quality was most important in determining who won the war? Was one so important that being ahead in that area meant that other advantages or disadvantages did not matter?

#### Stage 3 – Explaining your conclusions

5 Now write up your answer. You could use this structure:

- a) Describe how the failure of the US army was a combination of its own weaknesses and Viet Cong strengths.
- b) Give balanced examples of US successes and failures.
- c) Give balanced examples of Viet Cong successes and failures.
- d) Choose one American weakness and one Viet Cong strength that you think were absolutely vital in preventing the USA from beating the Viet Cong and explain the significance of the points you have chosen.

## Revision Tip

Find five reasons why the USA could not defeat the Viet Cong. Make sure you can recall:

- ◆ two or three strengths of the Viet Cong (with examples)
- ◆ two or three weaknesses of the USA (with examples).

## Viet Cong tactics

In early 1965 the Viet Cong had about 170,000 soldiers. They were heavily outnumbered and outgunned. They were no match for the US and South Vietnamese forces in open warfare. In November 1965 in the La Dreng Valley, US forces killed 2,000 Viet Cong for the loss of 300 troops. However, this did not daunt Ho Chi Minh.

## Guerrilla warfare

Ho had been in China and seen Mao Tse-tung use guerrilla warfare to achieve a Communist victory. The principles of guerrilla warfare were simple: retreat when the enemy attacks; raid when the enemy camps; attack when the enemy tires; pursue when the enemy retreats. Ho had successfully used these guerrilla tactics himself to drive out the French.

Guerrilla warfare was a nightmare for the US army. Guerrillas did not wear uniform. They were hard to tell apart from the peasants in the villages. They had no known base camp or headquarters. They worked in small groups with limited weapons. They attacked then disappeared into the jungle, into the villages or into tunnels (see Source 32).

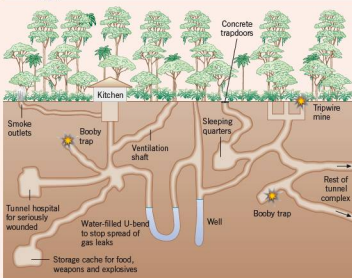
Guerrilla attacks aimed to wear down enemy soldiers and wreck their morale. US soldiers lived in constant fear of ambushes or booby traps such as pits filled with sharpened bamboo stakes. One of the least popular duties for US soldiers was going 'on point', which meant leading the patrol checking for booby traps – 11 per cent of US casualties were caused by booby traps. Another 51 per cent were from ambushes or hand-to-hand combat. The Viet Cong favoured close-quarter fighting because it knew that the Americans would not use their superior guns for fear of hitting their own troops. This was known as 'hanging on to the American belts'.

### SOURCE 31

*I remember sitting at this wretched little outpost one day with a couple of my sergeants. We'd been manning this thing for three weeks and running patrols off it. We were grungy and sore with jungle rot and we'd suffered about nine or ten casualties on a recent patrol. This one sergeant of mine said, 'You know, Lieutenant, I don't see how we're ever going to win this.' And I said, 'Well, Sarge, I'm not supposed to say this to you as your officer – but I don't either.' So there was this sense that we just couldn't see what could be done to defeat these people.*

Philip Caputo, a lieutenant in the Marine Corps in Vietnam in 1965–66, speaking in 1997.

### SOURCE 32



A Viet Cong tunnel complex. To avoid the worst effects of American air power, the Viet Cong built a vast network of underground tunnels, probably around 240 km of them.

## Civilians

Ho knew how important it was to keep the population on his side. The Viet Cong fighters were expected to be courteous and respectful to the Vietnamese peasants. They helped the peasants in the fields during busy periods. However, the Viet Cong could be ruthless – they were quite prepared to kill peasants who opposed them or who co-operated with their enemies. They also conducted a campaign of terror against the police, tax collectors, teachers and any other employees of the South Vietnamese government. Between 1966 and 1971 the Viet Cong killed an estimated 27,000 civilians.

## Supplies

The Viet Cong depended on supplies from North Vietnam that came along the Ho Chi Minh trail. US and South Vietnamese planes bombed this constantly, but 40,000 Vietnamese worked to keep it open whatever the cost.

## Commitment

The total of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese dead in the war has been estimated at 1 million – far higher than US losses. However, this was a price that Ho Chi Minh was prepared to pay. Whatever the casualties, there were replacement troops available. The greatest strength of the Viet Cong fighters was that they simply refused to give in.

### Think!

- 1 One Viet Cong leader said: 'The people are the water. Our armies are the fish.' What do you think he meant?
- 2 Find evidence on pages 114–115 to support the view that:
  - ◆ the Viet Cong had the support of the people
  - ◆ they did not.

## US tactics

### Bombing

The main US tactic was bombing. For seven years from 1965–72 the USA bombed military and industrial targets in North Vietnam; they bombed towns and cities in North and South Vietnam; they bombed the Ho Chi Minh trail; they bombed Vietnam's neighbours Laos and Cambodia (who were sympathetic to the Viet Cong).

To some extent bombing worked.

- It damaged North Vietnam's war effort and it disrupted supply routes.
- From 1970 to 1972, intense bombing of North Vietnam forced them to negotiate for peace.

However, air power could not defeat the Communists. It could only slow them down. Even after major air raids on North Vietnam in 1972, the Communists were still able to launch a major assault on the South. Even more important, civilian casualties helped turn the Vietnamese people against the Americans.

### Search and destroy

To combat guerrilla warfare the US commander General Westmoreland developed a policy of search and destroy. He set up heavily defended US bases in South Vietnam near to the coasts. From here helicopters full of troops would descend on a village and search out and destroy any Viet Cong forces they found. Soldiers had to send back reports of body counts.

Search-and-destroy missions did kill Viet Cong soldiers, but there were problems.

- The raids were often based on inadequate information.
- Inexperienced US troops often walked into traps.
- Innocent villages were mistaken for Viet Cong strongholds. For every Viet Cong weapon captured by search and destroy, there was a body count of six. Many of these were innocent civilians.
- Search-and-destroy tactics made the US and South Vietnamese forces very unpopular with the peasants. It pushed them towards supporting the Viet Cong.

#### SOURCE 33

*You would go out, you would secure a piece of terrain during the daylight hours, [but at night] you'd surrender that – and I mean literally surrender ... you'd give it up, because ... the helicopters would come in and pick you up at night and fly you back to the security of your base camp.*

Lieutenant Colonel George Forrest, US Army.

### Chemical weapons

The US also used chemical weapons to combat the Viet Cong.

- **Agent Orange** was a highly toxic 'weedkiller' sprayed from planes to destroy the jungle where the Viet Cong hid. The Americans used 82 million litres of Agent Orange to spray thousands of square kilometres of jungle.
- **Napalm** was another widely used chemical weapon. It destroyed jungles where guerrillas might hide. It also burned through skin to the bone.
- Many civilians and soldiers were also killed or harmed by these chemical weapons.

## US troops

In the early stages of the war most US troops were professional soldiers. Morale was good and they performed well. However, as the war intensified the US needed more soldiers so they introduced the draft (conscription). As soon as young men left school or college they could be called up into the US army. So from 1967:

- Many soldiers were young men who had never been in the military before. The average age of US troops was only 19.
- In theory American troops came from all walks of life. In reality the majority of combat troops were from poor and immigrant backgrounds.
- The conscripts knew little about Vietnam – and some cared little about democracy or communism. They just wanted to get home alive. In contrast the Viet Cong were fighting for their own country, and a cause many of them believed in.
- Morale among the US conscripts was often very low. To tackle this problem the generals introduced a policy of giving troops just a one-year term of service. This backfired because as soon as the soldiers gained experience they were sent home.

#### SOURCE 34



A ten-year-old Vietnamese girl, Phan Thi Kim, runs naked after tearing her burning clothes from her body following a napalm attack in 1972. This photograph became one of the most enduring images of the war.

#### SOURCE 35

*In the end anybody who was still in that country was the enemy. The same village you'd gone in to give them medical treatment ... you could go through that village later and get shot at by a sniper. Go back in and you would not find anybody. Nobody knew anything. We were trying to work with these people, they were basically doing a number on us. You didn't trust them anymore. You didn't trust anybody.*

Fred Widmer, an American soldier, speaking in 1969.

## The Tet Offensive

Despite these problems the official American view of the war from 1965 to 1967 was that it was going reasonably well. The US and South Vietnamese forces were killing large numbers of Viet Cong. Although they were struggling against guerrilla tactics they were confident that the enemy was being worn down. The press reports reflected this positive view.

This confidence was shattered early in 1968. During the New Year holiday Viet Cong fighters attacked over 100 cities and other military targets. One Viet Cong commando unit tried to capture the US embassy in Saigon. US forces had to fight to regain control room by room. Around 4,500 Viet Cong fighters tied down a much larger US and South Vietnamese force in Saigon for two days.

In many ways the Tet Offensive was a disaster for the Communists. They had hoped that the people of South Vietnam would rise up and join them. They didn't. The Viet Cong lost around 10,000 experienced fighters and were badly weakened by it.

However, the Tet Offensive proved to be a turning point in the war because it raised hard questions in the USA about the war.

- There were nearly 500,000 troops in Vietnam and the USA was spending \$20 billion a year on the war. So why had the Communists been able to launch a major offensive that took US forces completely by surprise?
- US and South Vietnamese forces quickly retook the towns captured in the offensive, but in the process they used enormous amounts of artillery and air power. Many civilians were killed. The ancient city of Hue was destroyed. Was this right?

### SOURCE 36



CBS News journalist Walter Cronkite reporting in Vietnam in February 1968. He was regarded as the most trusted man in America.

### The media

Until this point media coverage of the war was generally positive, although some journalists were beginning to ask difficult questions in 1967. During the Tet Offensive the gloves came off. CBS journalist Walter Cronkite (see Source 36) asked 'What the hell is going on? I thought we were winning this war'. Don Oberdorfer of *The Washington Post* later wrote (in 1971) that as a result of the Tet Offensive 'the American people and most of their leaders reached the conclusion that the Vietnam War would require greater effort over a far longer period of time than it was worth'.

### SOURCE 37

*The Tet Offensive was the decisive battle of the Vietnam War because of its profound impact on American attitudes about involvement in Southeast Asia. In the aftermath of Tet, many Americans became disillusioned ... To the American public and even to members of the administration, the offensive demonstrated that US intervention ... had produced a negligible effect on the will and capability of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese.*

*Extract from The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War by James Wirtz.*



## SOURCE 38

*One does not use napalm on villages and hamlets sheltering civilians if one is attempting to persuade these people of the rightness of one's cause. One does not defoliate [destroy the vegetation of] the country and deform its people with chemicals if one is attempting to persuade them of the foe's evil nature.*

An American comments on US policy failure in Vietnam.

## Source Analysis

- 1 Who or what is the cartoonist criticising in Source 39?
- 2 Which do you think is more effective as a criticism of the Vietnam War – Source 38, 39 or 40? Give reasons based on the source and your knowledge of the USA at this time.

## SOURCE 39

*"There's Money Enough To Support Both Of You — Now, Doesn't That Make You Feel Better?"*



—from *The Hornet* Gallery (Kilmer & Schaefer, 1968)

An American cartoon from 1967.

## The peace movement in the USA

For a war on such a scale the government had to have the support of the American people. With deaths and injuries to so many young Americans, public opinion had been turning against the war even before the Tet Offensive. After it the trickle of anti-war feeling became a flood.

- The war was draining money that could be used to better purposes at home (see Sources 39 and 40). Yet despite all that spending the USA did not seem to be any closer to winning the war.
- The draft exposed racial inequality in the USA: 30 per cent of African Americans were drafted compared to only 19 per cent of white Americans; 22 per cent of US casualties were black Americans, even though this group made up only 11 per cent of the total US force. World champion boxer Muhammad Ali refused to join the army on the grounds of his Muslim faith. He was stripped of his world title and his passport was removed. Ali was a follower of the radical Black Power group called Nation of Islam. They argued: How could they fight for a country which discriminated against them at home? As some of them pointed out, 'the Viet Cong never called us nigger'.
- Most damaging of all, an increasing number of Americans felt deeply uncomfortable about what was going on in Vietnam.

The Vietnam War was a media war. Thousands of television, radio and newspaper reporters, and a vast army of photographers sent back to the USA and Europe reports and pictures of the fighting. The newspapers showed crying children burned by American napalm bombs (see Source 34). Television showed prisoners being tortured or executed, or women and children watching with horror as their house was set on fire. To see such casual violence beamed into the living rooms of the USA was deeply shocking to the average American. Was this why 900,000 young Americans had been drafted? Instead of Vietnam being a symbol of a US crusade against Communism, Vietnam had become a symbol of defeat, confusion and moral corruption. The most powerful illustration of this was the My Lai massacre (see page 118).

The anti-war protests reached their height during 1968–70 led by students and civil rights campaigners.

- In the first half of 1968, there were over 100 demonstrations against the Vietnam War involving 40,000 students. Frequently the protest would involve burning the American flag – a criminal offence in the USA and a powerful symbol of the students' rejection of American values. Students taunted the American President Lyndon B Johnson with the chant 'Hey, Hey LBJ; how many kids did you kill today?'
- In November 1969, almost 700,000 anti-war protesters demonstrated in Washington DC. It was the largest political protest in American history.

## SOURCE 40

*This confused war has played havoc with our domestic destinies. The promises of the great society have been shot down on the battlefields of Vietnam. The pursuit of this wickeded war has narrowed the promised dimensions of the domestic welfare programs, making the poor – white and Negro – bear the heaviest burdens both at the front and at home.*

*The war has put us in the position of protecting a corrupt government that is stacked against the poor. We are spending \$500,000 to kill every Viet Cong soldier while we spend only \$53 for every person considered to be in poverty in the USA. It has put us in a position of appearing to the world as an arrogant nation. Here we are 10,000 miles away from home fighting for the so-called freedom of the Vietnamese people when we have so much to do in our own country.*

Civil rights leader Martin Luther King speaking in the USA in April 1968.

## SOURCE 41

*Most of the soldiers had never been away from home before they went into service. And they end up in Vietnam going there many of them because they thought they were going to do something courageous on behalf of their country, something which they thought was in the American ideal.*

*But it didn't mean slaughtering whole villages of women and children. One of my friends, when he told me about it, said: 'You know it was a Nazi kind of thing.' We didn't go there to be Nazis. At least none of the people I knew went there to be Nazis.*

Written by Ronald Ridenhour, a US soldier in Vietnam. He was not at My Lai, but interviewed many witnesses and started a campaign to pressure the US authorities to investigate properly.

## SOURCE 42



A photograph taken at My Lai on 16 March 1968 by Ron Haeblerle (see Source 43).

## Think!

- 1 Why do you think it took twelve months for anyone to do anything about the massacre?
- 2 Why was the massacre so shocking to the American public?

## Source Analysis ►

- 1 Source 43 was written by someone who worked for the US Army. Does that make it a trustworthy source?

## The My Lai massacre

In March 1968, a unit of young American soldiers called Charlie Company started a search-and-destroy mission. They had been told that in the My Lai area there was a Viet Cong headquarters, and 200 Viet Cong guerrillas. They had been ordered to destroy all houses, dwellings and livestock. They had been told that all the villagers would have left for market because it was a Saturday. Most of them were under the impression that they had been ordered to kill everyone they found in the village.

Early in the morning of 16 March, Charlie Company arrived in My Lai. In the next four hours, between 300 and 400 civilians were killed. They were mostly women, children and old men. Some were killed while they worked in their fields. Many of them were mown down by machine-gun fire as they were herded into an irrigation ditch. Others were shot in their homes. No Viet Cong were found in the village. Only three weapons were recovered.

## 'Something dark and bloody'

At the time, the army treated the operation as a success. The commanding officer's report said that 20 non-combatants had been killed by accident in the attack, but the rest of the dead were recorded as being Viet Cong. The officers and men involved were praised.

However, twelve months later, a letter arrived in the offices of 30 leading politicians and government officials in Washington. It was written by Ronald Ridenhour, an American soldier who had served in Vietnam and who personally knew many of the soldiers who took part in the massacre. He had evidence, he said, of 'something rather dark and bloody' that had occurred in My Lai – or Pinkville as the American soldiers called it. He recounted in detail the stories he had been told about what had taken place and asked Congress to investigate.

## Investigation

Soon after, *Life* magazine, one of the most influential magazines in the USA, published photographs of the massacre at My Lai (see Source 42) that had been taken by an official army photographer. This triggered an investigation that ended in the trial for mass murder of Lieutenant William Calley. He was an officer in Charlie Company. He had personally shot many of the people in the irrigation ditch at My Lai. In September 1969 he was formally charged with murdering 109 people. Ten other members of the company and the commanding officers were also charged.

## Aftermath

The revelations were deeply shocking to the American people. The charges were also too much for the army. They placed responsibility on Calley. They denied that Calley was acting under orders. His senior officers were acquitted. After a long court case surrounded by massive media attention and publicity, Calley was found guilty of the murder of 22 civilians. In August 1971 he was sentenced to 20 years' hard labour. In November 1974 he was released.

## SOURCE 43

*I think I was in a kind of daze from seeing all these shootings and not seeing any returning fire. Yet the killing kept going on. The Americans were rounding up the people and shooting them, not taking any prisoners ... I was part of it, everyone who was there was part of it and that includes the General and the Colonel flying above in their helicopters ... Just as soon as I turned away I heard firing. I saw people drop. They started falling on top of each other, one on top of the other. I just kept on walking. I did not pay any attention to who did it. By that time I knew what the score was. It was an atrocity ... I notice this one small boy had been shot in the foot ... he was walking toward the group of bodies looking for his mother ... then suddenly I heard a crack and ... I saw this child flip on top of the pile of bodies. The GI just stood and walked away. No remorse. Nothing.*

Ron Haeblerle, the US Army official photographer. His black and white pictures for the Army and his colour photographs taken with his own private camera had a dramatic public impact.

## Ending the war in Vietnam

After the Tet Offensive President Johnson concluded that the war could not be won militarily. He reduced the bombing campaign against North Vietnam and instructed his officials to begin negotiating for peace with the Communists.

Johnson also announced that he would not be seeking re-election as President. It was an admission of failure. In the election campaign both candidates campaigned to end US involvement in Vietnam. The anti-war feeling was so strong that if they had supported continuing the war they would have had no chance of being elected anyway. It was no longer a question of 'could the USA win the war?' but 'how can the USA get out of Vietnam without it looking like a defeat?'

### A new President

In November 1968 Richard Nixon was elected President. From 1969 to 1973 he and his National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger worked to end US involvement in Vietnam. This was not easy because the bigger question of how to contain world Communism – the one that had got the USA into Vietnam in the first place – had not gone away. They did not want to appear simply to hand Vietnam to the Communists. They used a range of strategies.

<b>Improved relations with USSR and China</b> In 1969 the USSR and China fell out. It seemed possible that there would even be a war between these two powerful Communist countries. As a result, both the USSR and China tried to improve relations with the USA.	<b>Peace negotiations with North Vietnam</b> From early 1969, Kissinger had regular meetings with the chief Vietnamese peace negotiator, Le Duc Tho.
<b>'Vietnamisation' of the war effort</b> In Vietnam Nixon began handing responsibility for the war to South Vietnamese forces and withdrawing US troops. Between April 1969 and the end of 1971 almost 400,000 US troops left Vietnam.	<b>Increased bombing</b> At the same time Nixon increased bombing campaigns against North Vietnam to show he was not weak. US and South Vietnamese troops also invaded Viet Cong bases in Cambodia, causing outrage across the world, and even in the USA.

### 'Peace with honour'

In Paris in January 1973 all parties signed a peace agreement. Nixon described it as 'peace with honour'. Others disagreed (see Source 44), but the door was now open for Nixon to pull out all US troops. By 29 March 1973, the last American forces had left Vietnam.

It is not clear whether Nixon really believed he had secured a lasting peace settlement. But within two years, without the support of the USA, South Vietnam had fallen to the Communists. One of the bleakest symbols of American failure in Vietnam was the televised news images of desperate Vietnamese men, women and children trying to clamber aboard American helicopters taking off from the US embassy. All around them Communist forces swarmed through Saigon. After 30 years of constant conflict, the struggle for control of Vietnam had finally been settled and the Communists had won.

#### Source Analysis ▶

- 1 Describe the attitude of Source 44 to the agreement of January 1973.
- 2 Are you surprised by this source?

#### SOURCE 44

##### FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

... the nation began at last to extricate itself from a quacksandy war that had plagued four Presidents and driven one from office, that had sundered the country more deeply than any event since the Civil War, that in the end came to be seen by a great majority of Americans as having been a tragic mistake.

... but its more grievous toll was paid at home – a wound to the spirit so sore that news of peace stirred only the relief that comes with an end to pain. A war that produced no famous victories, no national heroes and no strong patriotic songs, produced no memorable armistice day celebrations either. America was too exhausted by the war and too chary of peace to celebrate.

Reaction to the agreement of January 1973 in the influential American news magazine *Newsweek*, 5 February 1973.

## Focus Task A

### Why did US policy fail in Vietnam?

Despite all the money they spent and the effort they put in, the US failed to contain the spread of Communism to South Vietnam. You are now going to consider the reasons for this.

- 1 Make cards like these. On each card write an explanation or paste a source which shows the importance of the reason, i.e. how it damaged the policy of containment. Add other cards if you think there are reasons you should consider.
- 2 Lay your cards out on a large sheet of paper and add lines to show connections between the reasons. Write an explanation of the connection.

US military tactics in Vietnam

The unpopularity of the South Vietnamese regime

The experience of the Viet Cong and the inexperience of the American soldiers

Opposition in the USA

Other countries' support for the Viet Cong

## Revision Tip

Use these cards for your revision. Take a photo of your completed layout showing and annotating the connections. This will be a good essay plan if you have to write on this topic for an assignment. Make sure you can remember one piece of evidence to go with each point.

## How did the Vietnam War affect the policy of containment?

The American policy of containment was in tatters.

- It had failed **militarily**. The war had shown that even the USA's vast military strength could not stem the spread of Communism.
- It had also failed **strategically**. Not only did the USA fail to stop South Vietnam going Communist, but the heavy bombing of Vietnam's neighbours, Laos and Cambodia, actually helped the Communist forces in those countries to win support. By 1975 both Laos and Cambodia had Communist governments. Instead of slowing down the domino effect in the region, American policies actually speeded it up.
- It was also a **propaganda disaster**. The Americans had always presented their campaign against Communism as a moral crusade. But atrocities committed by American soldiers and the use of chemical weapons damaged the USA's reputation. In terms of a crusade for 'democracy' the Americans were seen to be propping up a government that did not have the support of its own people.

These failures greatly affected the USA's future policies towards Communist states. After the war, the Americans tried to improve their relations with China. They ended their block on China's membership of the UN. The President made visits to China. The USA also entered into a period of greater understanding with the Soviet Union. In fact, during the 1970s both the Soviet Union and China got on better with the USA than they did with each other.

The Americans also became very suspicious of involving their troops in any other conflict that they could not easily and overwhelmingly win. This was an attitude that continued to affect American foreign policy into the twenty-first century.

## Focus Task B

### How successful was the USA's policy of containment in Vietnam?

- 1 Look back at your chart from page 109. Complete it for the Vietnam War.
- 2 You have now looked at three very different case studies of the USA's attempts to contain Communism. Using the work you have done for the Focus Tasks on pages 99, 109 and this page, explain:
  - ◆ how far did the policy of containment succeed
  - ◆ what the main reasons for its success or failure were.

## Revision Tip

All these case studies are important because they each show different aspects of containment in action. Make sure you are equally confident about each one and can explain in your own words whether it was a success or failure for containment.

## Keywords

Make sure you know what these terms mean and be able to define them confidently.

- ◆ Agent Orange
- ◆ Armistice
- ◆ Arms race
- ◆ Atomic bomb/H bomb
- ◆ Bay of Pigs
- ◆ Blockade
- ◆ Capitalism
- ◆ CENTO
- ◆ Cold War
- ◆ Cominform
- ◆ Communism
- ◆ Containment
- ◆ Conventional weapons
- ◆ Democracy
- ◆ Dictator
- ◆ Diplomatic relations
- ◆ Domino theory
- ◆ Draft
- ◆ Guerrilla warfare
- ◆ Ho Chi Minh Trail
- ◆ ICBM
- ◆ Indochina
- ◆ Intelligence (as in CIA)
- ◆ Landlord/peasant
- ◆ MAD
- ◆ Missile gap
- ◆ Napalm
- ◆ Nuclear deterrent
- ◆ Operation Rolling Thunder
- ◆ Satellite state
- ◆ Search and destroy
- ◆ SEATO
- ◆ Surveillance
- ◆ Tet Offensive
- ◆ United Nations
- ◆ US sphere of influence
- ◆ Viet Cong
- ◆ Viet Minh
- ◆ Vietnamisation
- ◆ Warsaw Pact

## Chapter Summary

### Containment

- 1 The USA was anti-Communist and wanted to limit the spread of Communism around the world – this policy was called containment.

### Korea

- 2 When a Communist government tried to take over in Korea in 1950 the USA sent troops to help prevent Korea falling to the Communists.
- 3 The result was a stalemate and in 1953 Korea was divided into a Communist north (friendly towards China) and a capitalist south (friendly towards the USA).

### Cuba

- 4 Cuba turned Communist in 1959. Cuba is a large island very close to the USA.
- 5 In the 1960s there was a nuclear arms race between the USA and USSR with ever more dangerous nuclear weapons being developed and tested by both sides.
- 6 The Soviet leader Khrushchev sent nuclear weapons to Cuba. The USA and much of the world were worried that this might lead to the first nuclear war with dreadful consequences.
- 7 The US President Kennedy ordered a blockade of Cuba to prevent the weapons arriving and the crisis was averted. Better relations between the two leaders followed.

### Vietnam

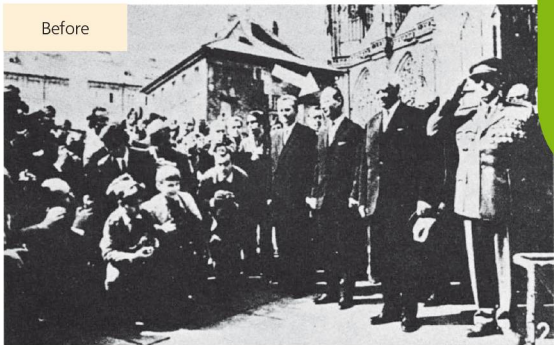
- 8 The next area of worry was South-east Asia where Communism was very strong. The USA believed in the domino theory – if one country turned Communist then the neighbouring countries would follow so they wanted to stop any country turning Communist.
- 9 In 1954 following a civil war Vietnam was divided into a Communist north and a capitalist south but the north, with the help of Communist China, tried to take over the south too.
- 10 The USA decided to help the south to resist the threat of the Communist north by first sending money and advisers then combat troops.
- 11 They got more and more involved, to the point where hundreds of thousands of US troops were fighting in Vietnam (the US introduced conscription to provide enough soldiers), and thousands were being killed each year.
- 12 Despite all this investment the US was not winning this war. The war lost support at home and the USA decided to withdraw from Vietnam and leave South Vietnam to its fate. It finally fell to the Communists in 1975.

## Exam Practice

See pages 168–175 and pages 316–319 for advice on the different types of questions you might face.

- 1 (a) Describe the Domino Theory. [4]  
(b) Explain why the USA sent troops to Vietnam in the mid 1960s. [6]  
(c) 'The Americans failed in Vietnam because they used the wrong tactics.' How far do you agree with this statement? Explain your answer. [10]
- 2 Study Source 15 on page 103. How reliable is this source? Use the source and your knowledge to explain your answer. [7]
- 3 Study Sources 19 and 20 on page 106. How similar are these two sources? Use the source and your knowledge to explain your answer. [8]

Before



After

