

# The Vietnam War

*Postwar United States  
(1945–1975)*



**Containment**

Escalation

Withdrawal

## Thematic Icons



Economics and business



Geography and environment



Historical concepts and questions



Politics, government and citizenship



Society and culture



War, diplomacy and foreign policy

**Icons:** For more detailed instructions, see the *User Guide*



Flash activity (these activities are not editable)



Teacher notes included in the Notes page



By the end of this section, you will learn about the start of the Vietnam War and be able to answer these key questions:

- What were the Vietnamese fighting for?
- Why did the U.S. become involved in the Vietnam conflict?
- How did the U.S. go from merely supporting the war to becoming a key player?



In order to contextualize the events of the Vietnam War, use this timeline to recap previous key historical events. Either press on a date or drag the pointer along the timeline to find out information about what happened in each year.

Press **start** to begin.

**start**





The term **Vietnam War** has come to describe the military conflict in Southeast Asia that resulted in the death of over a million Vietnamese civilians and over 58,000 Americans. It tore American society apart in the 1960s and 1970s.



The war had two distinct phases, the **First Indochina War**, fought from 1946 to 1954, and the **Second Indochina War**, 1955 to 1975. Usually when people refer to the Vietnam War, they mean only the second phase.

What do you know about the Vietnam War?



Vietnam has a long history of fighting for independence from colonial powers. Understanding the country's history will help you to understand the context of the Vietnam War. Watch this animation to find out more. Press **start** to begin.

start



How did Vietnam's history affect the Vietnam War?



Ho Chi Minh is Vietnam's greatest national hero. Born in 1890, he was, above all else, a fierce Vietnamese **nationalist**. He also turned to **communism**, as he felt that it offered the best route to Vietnamese independence since the U.S. failed to support self-determination after World War II.

He fought against the occupation of Vietnam in World War II and was president of North Vietnam from 1945 until his death in 1969.

The city of Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City in his honor at the end of the Vietnam War.





# The First Indochina War



The First Indochina War started in 1946 as the Vietnamese fought for independence from French colonial control. At the end of the Chinese Civil War, **Mao Zedong** formally recognized Minh's Vietminh as the legitimate government.

France responded by reinstalling Bao Dai as ruler, but with brilliant leadership and Chinese arms, the Vietminh scored increasing success, culminating in the devastating siege and battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954.

The French appealed to the U.S. for military aid but Eisenhower was wary and refused to get involved. The French surrender in 1954 signaled the end of war.



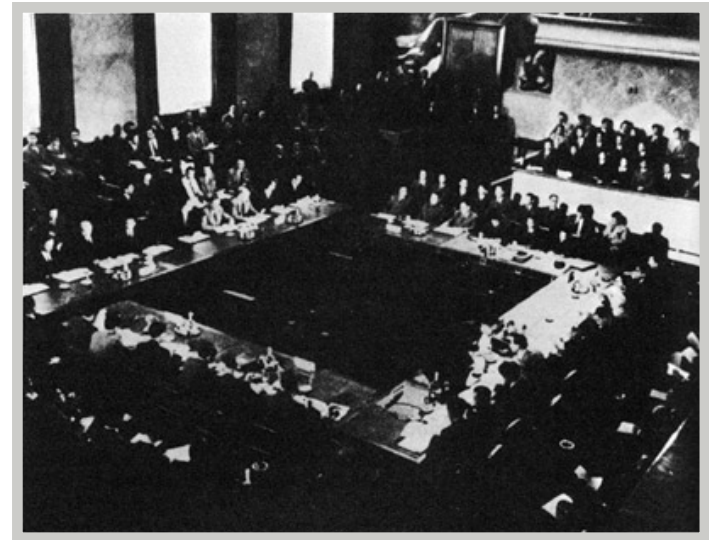
Why was Eisenhower wary of providing military aid?





After their defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the French negotiated an agreement in Geneva, 1954. The **Geneva Accords** did the following things:

- all of Indochina was granted independence
- Vietnam was temporarily partitioned into two states at the **17<sup>th</sup> parallel**
- elections to unify the country would be held in 1956.



The Accords were signed by the newly independent Indochinese countries, the Soviet Union, China, Britain and France but not the U.S.





The perspectives of the U.S., France and Vietnam on the First Indochina War and Ho Chi Minh varied greatly. Can you match each country to their perspective of the conflict?

Press **start** to begin.

**start**





Vietnam was partitioned into two states by the Geneva Accords, the **Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)** and the **Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)**.

Drag each statement to the correct place, depending on whether it was a feature of North Vietnam or South Vietnam.

Press **start** to begin.

**start**





**Ngo Dinh Diem** became President of South Vietnam in 1955 after **deposing** Bao Dai by rigging local elections and crushing all political opposition. He headed a corrupt regime.



Strongly Catholic, Diem was viewed as part of the old French colonial order by the mostly Buddhist population. He was also a staunch anti-communist, which made him attractive to the U.S.

He canceled the reunification elections. The U.S. supported this, fearing Ho Chi Minh might win. This is considered to be the beginning of the Second Indochina War.





# The Second Indochina War



Initially the North was only committed to a political campaign in the South as a way to achieve the goal of unification. However, faced with Diem's brutal anti-communist policies the North authorized a more aggressive insurgency.

They started by targeting government officials and village chiefs for assassination. The North was supported by the **Vietcong**, a communist opposition group in the South.

The North escalated the conflict by authorizing large scale military operations in the South and began sending both men and materials southward via the **Ho Chi Minh Trail**.



Do you know what the Ho Chi Minh Trail was?



The Vietnam War ultimately became America's war as much as that of Vietnam. However, initially the U.S. was wary about getting too involved. Press the buttons to find out about the Vietnam policies of Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy.

Press **start** to begin.

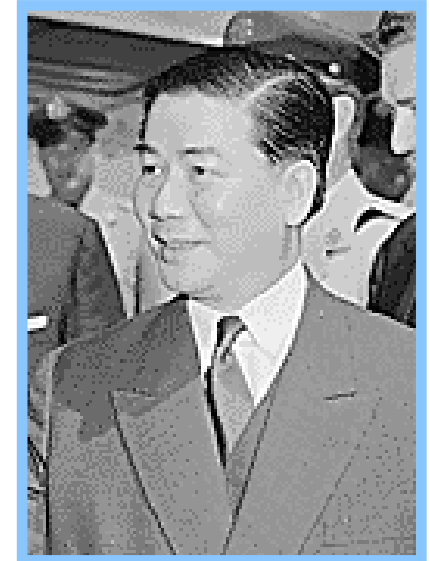
**start**





Kennedy's policy was dependent on Diem's success, but the Diem regime was hopelessly corrupt and incompetent. Diem was more worried about maintaining his power than fighting the Vietcong. He also implemented ineffective policies that alienated the population, e.g. the **Strategic Hamlet Program**.

By 1963, Kennedy had concluded that Diem had to be removed. The **CIA** made it clear to South Vietnamese Army Generals that the U.S. would not oppose a coup by the military.



In November 1963, Diem was removed from office and executed in a military coup.

Was Diem a good choice by the U.S. as leader of South Vietnam?



The Vietnam War featured a lot of key people and important terms that you need to know. Can you match each term to the correct definition?  
Press **start** to begin.

**start**

