

Why it started? The Vietnam Conflict

Evaluate which President is at fault for the Vietnam
War

History

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Introduction:

To understand this topic and its importance fully one must understand the global context at the time. One major event at the time was the end of WW2. The world had just fought the largest and most lethal war ever to date and was still recovering. There was tension between the Allies and the Axis powers and the threat of war loomed. Along with this, the Cold War between two of the world's largest powers had also just begun. The US saw that the communist soviet union was very dangerous to the rest of the world. The US viewed communism as a bad thing which led to them hating any communist leaders. These factors caused many countries along with the US to be aggressive because they were scared of what was going on. The idea of colonial independence had also risen in popularity and Vietnam caught wind of this. With countries like the United States and India declaring independence from Britain, Vietnam craved to be independent of France. This led to the start of a colonial revolution, led by communist leader Ho Chi Minh. He was seen as the hero of the country and became the temporary leader of this new independent country. The different parts of the country had different opinions on how to govern the new nation. This difference in opinions caused the split into north and south Vietnam. North Vietnam was communist. with the Soviet Union becoming a massive power Northern Vietnam saw that as the right way to govern this new country. Southern Vietnam wanted to create a capitalist republic and have a country governed similarly to countries in the west. This caused the world to come together and create the Geneva accords. These were written up in 1954 to split the country at the 17th parallel until elections could be held in 1956 to discuss what should be done with the area of Vietnam. (Cuddy) These accords stated that the election was unfair and should be supervised by a committee that was impartial to communist and non-communists. The country was never

supposed to be split indefinitely, it was just supposed to be one split into two zones. The Vietnam war started as an internal conflict between the two nation-states of North and South Vietnam. North Vietnam was a communist nation-state while contrastingly South Vietnam was a Capitalist republic. The US decided to intervene and gave aid and military support to South Vietnam. The war started around 1955 and lasted until about 1975. Studying this topic is important because the Vietnam War is a major part of American and World history. It affected American culture through the 60s and affected how America was viewed on the world stage. The research question this investigation will focus on which President is most at fault for engaging in the conflict, and specifically it will focus on Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson.

Eisenhower:

When understanding military motives and decisions it is important to understand the biography of the person in question. Dwight Eisenhower served in WW2 and then went on to become the 34th president of the United States. He was a part of the republican party. His policies were pro-foreign engagement as shown in multiple military efforts in countries like Iran. This also occurred in Vietnam. When Historians discuss the Vietnam war many characterize the involvement as a gradual intervention of multiple presidents and the president who's most at fault is up for debate. When Eisenhower came into office Vietnam had just declared independence from French forces along with the help of Truman. Truman gave money and resources to Saigon because he did not recognize Ho Chi Minh as a genuine leader. This aid was given to anti-communists in the south. His aid was modest compared to the later presidents, but this meant that there were no lasting ties with Vietnam (Herring 1991) .I feel that Eisenhower is partly to blame for the Vietnam War because he had the luxury of a clean slate. The aid and support Truman gave was not lasting nor binding, and this allowed Eisenhower to turn

American policy completely around. One way he did not stop US involvement is his decision around the Geneva accords. The Geneva accords were drawn up to help quell Northern and Southern tensions on how to govern the new country. Eisenhower came out and stated that the US supported the accords. He convinced Vietnam and the rest of the world he was going to support a fair democratic election by agreeing in them. In reality, he planned to sabotage them behind the world's back (Cuddy 2003). He wanted to do this because he was scared of a sweeping communist victory that would cause Vietnam to become communist. The American foreign policy condemned communism and he was following his policy. This shows that Eisenhower wanted the US to meddle around in Vietnamese affairs where there was really no need to. He said he wanted southern Vietnam to win and uphold the nationalist ideas of its people, when in reality he wanted the south to fight the American's fight, which was against communism. He was also scared to back out. During his time in office Eisenhower authorized the US military to overthrow temporary governments in Guatemala and Iran (Cuddy). This proves that he previously acted with the idea that if he could get the US military to take footholds in underdeveloped countries he could establish them as allies and benefits to the US. This also proves that Eisenhower was the US and its military superior. If he were to back out of Vietnam his American pride as a whole would be severely damaged and his goal of commandeering Vietnam would fail. Along with his intervention in Vietnamese politics Eisenhower was the first to send physical personnel along with aid to Southern Vietnam to help the anti-communists in the south. This proves that even with the fighting happening across an ocean, Eisenhower sought to pour more into the conflict. In 1954 Eisenhower along with countries like France and the UK established (SEATO) Southeast Asia Treaty organization in light of the threat of communism (Herrin 1991). This was a result of Domino theory. He was immensely afraid that communism

would spill into other countries in Indochina and these countries would fall like a sequence of dominoes, hence domino theory. This organization allowed Eisenhower to send 700 military personnel including generals and soldiers. Under SEATO Eisenhower also sent economic aid to the government in Southern Vietnam. He spent billions of dollars to try and establish an outpost of America in Southeast Asia (Stur 2017). He decided to pour more into their military efforts instead of backing out. Although Eisenhower sent economic aid and military aid to Southern Vietnam, ultimately progressing the war, he is not to blame for the majority of the conflict. Compared to the amount of military presidents like Johnson and Kennedy sent, his involvement is tiny. Eisenhower's war also wasn't with North Vietnam at the time, his war was more on communism. Eisenhower saw the driving factor of the civil war was against communism and not Vietnamese nationalism. (Herring). He had not established a big enough foothold in which the US was stuck in. Eisenhower entered into something he didn't really understand the history behind. These actions put into motion by Eisenhower left his successors in a terrible situation. They fell right into the hole he created and left them in the midst of his issues. His actions started American intrusion in a Vietnamese domestic war and basically. He set up the stage for his successors but he was not the true catalyst. One will see that Kennedy and Johnson both had clear paths to stop US involvement but neither of them got the chance to do so.

Kennedy:

After Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy (JFK) came into the presidency. John F. Kennedy was a full-blown politician having been part of the House of Congress before he became president. He also was a part of the US military. His administration was very against communism as shown by the Vietnam war, and his actions relating to communist Cuba and the Bay of Pigs invasion. He served as the 35th president of the United States as a Democrat. When he was elected he immediately

thrown into the midst of the Vietnam conflict. Prior to him Eisenhower had already established US involvement across the Pacific and JFK was faced with difficult decisions. He could either continue following Eisenhower's laid out plan or do something completely different. To understand the situation one needs to understand the status of the communists in Vietnam. In 1962 the communists sought out assistance from China and Cambodia on the understanding that the war would develop into a full out brawl with the US (Guan). Obviously this was smart as the war would develop in future years. The Vietnamese also received military advice from both the Soviets and China, who suggested forcing the US to accept negotiations. This led China, and communist Vietnam to establish an intercountry congress which decided that their main objective was to stop American Imperialism and the South Vietnamese regime (Guan 2000). This fact shows us that the war wasn't just against communist Vietnam, they had powerful allies backing them. The first way that Kennedy escalated the war was the establishment of (MACV) or the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. This organization allowed Kennedy and his military advisors to send military aid in the form of planes and infantry. This organization sent thousands of advisors to assist and train South Vietnamese soldiers (Herring 1991) This organization also sent updates about Vietnam back to the US. These transmissions contained information that the North guerrilla military was gaining traction and were becoming more dangerous. Eisenhower had previously sent aid and advisers to the anti-communists in the south. JFK followed his lead and decided to also increase US presence in Vietnam. His decisions showed that he wanted to continue facilitating the war. Kennedy also showed his escalation in his beliefs. As the US were getting worried, so were the Vietnamese and they took the necessary steps to prepare for US escalation. America saw this and whether it was an attack on their pride or a need to fulfill their goals, they kept escalating the situation. JFK wrote a letter to a woman named Bobbie Lou

Pendergrass. This woman was the sister of an American soldier that was sent to Vietnam.

Kennedy addressed the fact that he feared the problem in Vietnam was expanding. He felt the need to personally address a mother, and tell her that the US needed to be across the ocean. This shows that he personally agreed with his predecessor in the fact that the conflict was important and required US intervention. Information from MACV began to come up in American media which scared and worried the American public. This put heavy pressure on Kennedy to get to the bottom of what was going on in Vietnam. Kennedy was in a bad position which forced him to take difficult action. We're not killing them off as fast as they're breeding them up there (General Curtis Lemay). This was said in a meeting between high ranking military advisers and Kennedy before they left for Vietnam. This shows that the military saw the North as a large threat that had almost unlimited resources. The Americans saw that they had to put extensive military and aid to win their overseas war. The war seemed endless to these presidents. After hearing this, Kennedy started to develop a plan to get American soldiers and advisors to come home safely, as he feared the war would get continuously dangerous. These plans were supposed to start in July 1962 and were to continue in the next year. After conversing with Robert McNamara the secretary of defense, they decided to only start withdrawing soldiers in the event of military success (Herring 1991), which was unlikely at the time since the Northern forces were gaining strength and traction. In 1995 McNamara later recalled Kennedy's exact plans. He stated that Kennedy wanted to have all American personnel out by 1965. He wanted to also have the first 1000 soldiers out by the end of 1963. (Logevall) This shows that Kennedy was really the first President that took extra steps because he wanted to lessen US involvement. Even though Kennedy increased the military presence in Vietnam, his attempt to remove soldiers proves that he did not want to continue this war. Unfortunately President Kennedy was assassinated and

Johnson had other plans which show that Johnson could have been partly the reason Vietnam was so brutal. Kennedy never really got the chance to execute his plans, because he cannot be blamed for the entire war. . LBJ was thrown into the crossfire and handled the situation differently than Kennedy had outlined, completely shifting the course of the war.

Johnson:

Lyndon B Johnson of LBJ was the 36th president of the United States and he was the vice president to JFK. After JFK was assassinated he took office immediately. He had previously worked as a school teacher, and was also a part of congress. Johnson had very big plans domestically but most of his foreign policy was focused on Vietnam and the halting of spreading communism. Johnson was thrown into office after the assassination of Kennedy. Along with being thrown into office he was also thrown into Vietnam. Eisenhower and Kennedy had already set the US up and the plan of action was basically already laid out. He could have worked to lessen American involvement but he implemented a plan to further American involvement in Vietnam. He wanted the US to stay involved at the cost of American lives and resources. The first reason why Johnson is most at fault is his military plan. His plan contained two phases. The first phase would include armed reconnaissance strikes in both Laos and Vietnam. The second would contain an escalation of ground and air strikes against the north Vietnamese.(Logevall 2004). In 1964 Johnson approved NSAM 288 which was the order that called for more US planes and bomber jets to commence air strikes against north Vietnam. This shows that Johnson wanted to keep troops and increase the attacks in Vietnam. This could have been due to external pressures,

like him not wanting to be the president that let communism spread, but nonetheless it was his decision making. In his plan he also took steps to damage both Lao and Cambodian territory. While he was in office his actions involved other countries turning the war into much more than a civil war. This shows that his actions directly escalated the civil war into an international conflict. In August of the same year the infamous Gulf of Tonkin Incident occurred, where US naval ships were attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin in the south china sea. This gave Johnson a reason to even further resources being sent into Vietnam. This caused the Gulf of Tonkin resolution to be passed by congress which allowed Johnson to use whatever means necessary to protect the US military (Logevall 2004). This incident was also later discovered to be staged or misread. Johnson decided to basically lie to the US congress to increase military presence in Vietnam. The incident also caused the Soviets to switch their attitude and they started to give support to the Vietnamese communists (Guan), which shows that yet another country decided to get involved. Along with the fact that Johnson involved multiple other countries he also involved all branches of the US military. Johnson executed operation rolling thunder. This authorized to bombing of North Vietnam nad the surrounding countries like Cambodia and Laos. He involved the air force, and authorized the using of bomber planes. Along with this he also sent the first American battalions to Vietnam. Although Johnson's circumstances were not ideal, his actions show that he kept putting resources and effort into the conflict. By 1966 there were over 200,000 American troops in Vietnam (Cuddy 2003). Johnson also authorized a search and destroy method, for soldiers to find and destroy anything they saw as north vietnamese or communist. His actions are seen as passing the final threshold into full out war, and he should be credited with facilitating it. Since his military policy was continuing to grow, Johnson had to establish the draft. He was the first president out of the three to need to create a draft and the fact proves he

was the one who pushed America through the threshold of no return.

Johnson faced pressure from two parties back home. His two suggestions were to either keep bombing cities and threaten to use nuclear weapons, or to try and draft a treaty to negotiate a reunification with the north. He decided to create a middle ground of the two where the ground forces were to continue while Washington tried to convince Hanoi that they had no chance. Johnson was in a very difficult position because he was almost forced to keep facilitating the war. The CIA told LBJ that he would have to keep supporting the troops already there because if he didn't the threat of communism would grow to be too much. Him backing out would also damage American credibility throughout the world.

Throughout Johnson's work and writing about the war common themes were that he felt trapped in the war, and he feared that if he backed out he would cause the US to seem weak and fight against their own values. This also caused him to fear what the American people would think of him. Americans saw communism as a threat and if he were to back out it would make Americans feel unsafe and threatened. Even if he felt trapped, his actions caused the US to get involved in an overseas war, and cost us many American lives.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Kennedy had shifted the American plan of action in Vietnam, but ultimately was not the president for long enough to have that much of an effect. He should not be blamed for the situation and the blame lies more with LBJ. Eisenhower's actions were not nearly as drastic as Johnson's and he should be blamed. Johnson facilitated the war for so long and had the most aggressive policies, and he should be at fault for most of the conflict. He affected the war much more than Kennedy and Eisenhower ever did.

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