Colonial Vietnam

The Southeast Asian nation of Vietnam is bordered by China to the north and by Laos and Cambodia to the west. Rich agricultural resources have long made the country ripe for foreign invasion. China invaded northern Vietnam's Red River Delta around 200 BC. The Vietnamese people struggled for independence for centuries, finally driving out Chinese rulers in the early 1400s.

Vietnam’s independence again was threatened in the mid-1800s, as European powers competed to build colonial empires. Despite fierce resistance from the Vietnamese, France gained control of Vietnam by 1883. The French later combined Vietnam with Laos and Cambodia to form French Indochina.

A nationalist leader Many Vietnamese were driven into poverty under French rule. The French raised taxes and gave the Vietnamese no civil rights under French authority.

These conditions helped to fuel a growing nationalist movement in Vietnam. Nguyen That Thanh emerged as one of its leaders. He came to be known by a new name, Ho Chi Minh, meaning “He Who Enlightens.”

Ho Chi Minh was born in a village in central Vietnam in 1890. He participated in several tax revolts against the French before leaving home and traveling around the world in the early 1900s. After President Wilson declined to meet him at the Paris Peace Conference, Ho Chi Minh joined the French Communist Party. “It was patriotism, not communism, that inspired me,” he claimed.

While living in China and the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s, Ho Chi Minh continued to work for Vietnam’s independence and to study communism. He came to believe that a Communist revolution was a way Vietnam could gain freedom from foreign rulers.

Changing rulers Control of Vietnam again changed hands during World War II, when the Japanese army occupied Indochina. Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam in 1941 and organized a group to resist the Japanese occupation. The group was called the League for the Independence of Vietnam, or the Vietminh (vee-eht-MIN). The Vietminh was led by Communists, but the group was open to non-Communists who were committed to independence. During World War II, the Vietminh attacked Japanese forces and were able to liberate parts of northern Vietnam.

In 1945 Japan surrendered to the Allies and withdrew from Indochina. The Vietminh took the opportunity to declare Vietnam an independent country. Thousands of people gathered in Hanoi, Vietnam’s capital, to hear Ho Chi Minh speak on September 2. Hoping to gain American support for Vietnam’s independence, he quoted from the Declaration of Independence.

The French Presidential Palace, located in the city of Hanoi, remains a powerful reminder of French colonial influence.
Ho Chi Minh was a rebel from a young age. The school he attended taught that France was trying to improve Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh told other students that France was actually an invader, a view he formed by reading banned books. He was soon kicked out of school.

When he was 21 he went to London, where he met Asian workers who he believed were overworked and underpaid. In France he became a Communist, but he criticized the French Communist Party for not opposing colonialism more strongly. He called for revolution in Southeast Asia and moved to south China to train Vietnamese exiles. He amassed an army of supporters who would eventually wage the twentieth century's longest and costliest battle against colonialism.

**Draw Conclusions** Why did Ho adopt Communist beliefs?

**HISTORY’S VOICES**

"All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness . . . The whole Vietnamese people, animated by a common purpose, are determined to fight to the bitter end against any attempt by the French colonialists to reconquer their country. We are convinced that the Allied nations, which . . . have acknowledged the principles of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam."

—Ho Chi Minh, September 2, 1945

Ho Chi Minh believed that Vietnam’s fight for independence from France was similar to the American colonies’ struggle for independence from Great Britain. He expected that the United States would support the Vietnamese nationalist movement.

**REPRESENTATION CHECK**

**Drawing Conclusions** Why did Ho Chi Minh work for Vietnam’s independence from France?

**Vietnam after World War II**

As Ho Chi Minh feared, the French reclaimed Vietnam as a colony after World War II. In December 1946 the Vietnamese people again began battling French rule.

**The first Indochina war** President Harry Truman disappointed Ho Chi Minh after World War II, as Wilson had after World War I. Truman saw the situation in Indochina in terms of the struggle against communism. He decided to support France, a key ally in the effort to block Communist expansion in Europe. He was also unwilling to back the Vietminh because many of its members were Communists.

Events in Asia soon revealed the extent of Communist expansion. The Communist army of Mao Zedong seized China in 1949. The next year, Communist North Korea invaded South Korea. At the same time, several Communist-led nationalist revolts were raging in Indonesia, Malaya, and the Philippines. These events strengthened the U.S. commitment to contain communism in Southeast Asia.

**The domino theory** After Dwight D. Eisenhower became president of the United States in 1953, he warned that if Vietnam fell to communism, other Southeast Asian countries would quickly follow. The belief that communism would spread to neighboring countries was called the domino theory. “You have a row of dominoes set up,” Eisenhower explained. “You knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is a certainty that it will go over very quickly.”

The United States sent arms, ammunition, supplies, and money to the French forces in Vietnam. By 1954 the United States was paying more than 75 percent of the cost of France’s war. Despite the massive U.S. aid, the French were losing, suffering defeat after defeat.

The Vietminh used guerrilla tactics effectively. They attacked French forces without warning and then disappeared into the jungle. Ho Chi Minh compared this type of warfare to a fight between a tiger and an elephant.

**HISTORY’S VOICES**

“If the tiger ever stands still, the elephant will crush him with his mighty tusks. But the tiger does not stand still . . . He will leap upon the back of the elephant, tearing huge chunks from his hide, and then the tiger will leap back into the dark jungle. And slowly the elephant will bleed to death. That will be the war of Indochina.”

—Ho Chi Minh, quoted in America Inside Out by David Schoenbrun. Copyright © 1994 by McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.
France is defeated  The French soldiers made a last stand in a valley in northwestern Vietnam called Dien Bien Phu (DYEHN BYEHN FOO). About 40,000 Vietminh troops surrounded 15,000 French troops. The French commander clung to the hope of a U.S. rescue, telling his soldiers, “The ‘free world’ will not let us down.” Eisenhower, however, had no intention of sending U.S. soldiers into another war in Asia so soon after the Korean War. The French forces at Dien Bien Phu surrendered to the Vietminh on May 7, 1954.

In eight years of fighting, the two sides had lost nearly 300,000 soldiers. Surviving Vietnamese forces had gained valuable experience fighting a guerrilla war against an enemy with superior weapons and technology. This would prove to be an important factor in the years ahead.

The Geneva Conference  After the French surrender, representatives from France, Vietnam, Cambodia, Great Britain, Laos, China, the Soviet Union, and the United States gathered in Geneva, Switzerland. The goal of the Geneva Conference was to work out a peace agreement and arrange for Indochina’s future.

The Geneva Accords were signed in July 1954. A cease-fire was worked out, and Vietnam was temporarily divided at the 17th parallel. Vietminh forces would control the northern part of Vietnam, and the French would withdraw from the country. A demilitarized zone (DMZ) along the 17th parallel would act as a buffer zone to prevent fighting between the north and south.

According to the Geneva Accords, general elections were to be held in July 1956. These elections would reunify the country under one government. The United States, however, believed that Ho Chi Minh and the Communists would win a nationwide election. The United States therefore never fully supported the peace agreements.

China’s Communist government had been aiding the Vietminh in the war and hoped to limit U.S. influence in the region. The United States, meanwhile, did not want to see all of Vietnam fall under Communist control.

Growing Conflict in Vietnam  With North Vietnam in the control of Ho Chi Minh and his Communist forces, President Eisenhower hoped to at least prevent communism from spreading to South Vietnam. He pinned his hopes on the South Vietnamese leader, Ngo Dinh Diem (NGOH DINN dee-em).

Vietnam’s leaders  Diem, a Roman Catholic, had served as a high-ranking official in the colonial government under French rule. He was taken hostage by the Vietminh in 1945 and brought to see Ho Chi Minh. Ho asked
Diem to become part of his Communist government, believing Diem would bring support from Catholics. Diem, whose brother had been murdered by the Vietminh, refused the offer. Despite Diem’s refusal to cooperate, he was released.

Vietminh forces later tried unsuccessfully to assassinate Diem. He then fled Vietnam and traveled for several years. He spent two years in the United States, where he met American leaders. Diem impressed them with his strong anti-Communist views. He returned to Vietnam after France’s defeat in 1954 and became the president of South Vietnam.

Very soon, however, U.S. officials became disappointed with Diem’s corrupt and brutal leadership. In a presidential election in 1955, Diem claimed to have won more than 98 percent of the vote. In Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, election results showed he received 200,000 more votes than there were registered voters in the city.

Diem’s government was unpopular from the start. He showed favoritism toward Catholics, which upset South Vietnam’s large Buddhist majority. He handed out top government jobs to members of his family. In addition, Diem’s land policies favored wealthy landowners at the expense of the peasants. His security forces tortured and imprisoned his political opponents. American leaders were disturbed by these and other actions by Diem. Nevertheless, they preferred Diem’s government to a Communist takeover.

In North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh’s leadership became increasingly totalitarian and repressive. Forsaking his earlier commitment to human rights, he struck with brutal force, breaking up the estates of large colonial landowners. He gave the land to the peasants, which made him immensely popular.

Fearing that Ho Chi Minh would win the 1956 election set by the Geneva Accords, Diem barred the election in South Vietnam. Like Germany and Korea, Vietnam continued to be divided into separate Communist and non-Communist countries. This was unacceptable to Ho Chi Minh, who wanted to unite Vietnam as a nation under one Communist government.

A civil war By the late 1950s, Diem’s opponents in South Vietnam were in open revolt. In 1959 Communist leaders in North Vietnam began supplying weapons to Vietminh rebels
who had remained in the south after the defeat of the French.

The following year, the Vietminh in South Vietnam formed the National Liberation Front (NLF). The NLF’s military forces were called Vietcong, meaning Vietnamese Communists. Not all members of the NLF were Communists, but they were united in the goal of overthrowing Diem’s regime.

Some peasants joined the Vietcong because they opposed Diem’s government, but others did so because they feared retaliation from the Vietcong if they did not. The Vietcong assassinated thousands of South Vietnamese government officials. Soon, much of the countryside was under Vietcong control.

In 1960 Ho Chi Minh expanded the effort to reunify North and South Vietnam. More supply routes leading to South Vietnam were established. North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces also began coming into the country to fight alongside the Vietcong.

President Eisenhower decided to intervene in the conflict in 1955. The United States began supplying South Vietnam with money and weapons. Eisenhower began sending military advisers to train South Vietnam’s army—the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)—to use American weaponry.

By the end of Eisenhower’s presidency, there were about 900 U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam. Many of these advisers had become frustrated with the corruption and inefficiency present in the ARVN.

**READING CHECK**

**Summarizing** Why was Ngo Dinh Diem’s government unpopular?

### Increasing U.S. Involvement

Elected in 1960, President John F. Kennedy was a firm believer in the domino theory. Kennedy was eager to display U.S. strength in Vietnam.

You read in an earlier chapter about the two Cold War disasters that began Kennedy’s presidency, the Bay of Pigs invasion and the building of the Berlin Wall. In the aftermath of these incidents, Kennedy hoped that aiding South Vietnam would be a sign of continued U.S. resolve and strength. “Now we have a problem in making our power credible,” he warned, “and Vietnam is the place [to do so].”

President Kennedy hesitated to send official combat forces into South Vietnam, however. Instead, he decided to increase the number of military advisers and army special forces, or Green Berets, in that country. In December 1961 there were about 3,000 U.S. advisers in South Vietnam. By 1963 that number had increased to about 16,000.

The advisers were not supposed to take part in combat, but many did. For example, helicopter pilots fired rockets and machine guns at Vietcong targets. Green Berets often accompanied the ARVN on dangerous ambush operations. As Vietcong attacks mounted, Kennedy authorized U.S. personnel to engage in direct combat. The number of Americans killed or wounded climbed steadily. In 1961 some 14 Americans were killed. In 1963 the number rose to nearly 500.

**Diem’s overthrow** Meanwhile, Diem’s government grew more and more unpopular. When Buddhist leaders opposed his rule, Diem struck back by arresting and killing Buddhist protesters. To bring attention to the situation, several Buddhist monks killed themselves by publicly setting themselves on fire. Gruesome photographs were printed in newspapers around
American officials threatened to withdraw support unless Diem changed his policies. Yet he refused to alter his stand against Buddhists. In response, U.S. leaders secretly began to support a plot within the South Vietnamese army to overthrow Diem. Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., the ambassador to South Vietnam, sent a cable to Washington describing the situation.

**HISTORY’S VOICES**

“We are launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back: the overthrow of the Diem government. There is no turning back because there is no possibility, in my view, that the war can be won under a Diem administration.”

—Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., August 29, 1963

In November 1963 the South Vietnamese plotters murdered Diem. Although Kennedy and his top advisers supported Diem’s overthrow, they did not seek his assassination. The removal of Diem from power, however, did nothing to ease President Kennedy’s growing concern over U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Shortly before Diem’s murder, Kennedy had said of the South Vietnamese: “In the final analysis it is their war. They are the ones who have to win or lose it.”

It cannot be known for sure whether Kennedy would have changed U.S. policy toward Vietnam. Just three weeks after Diem’s death, President Kennedy himself was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

**The Tonkin Gulf Resolution** When Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson took over as president, he inherited a rapidly deteriorating situation in South Vietnam. Although the ARVN had about 300,000 soldiers, the South Vietnamese government was on the brink of collapse. North Vietnamese forces were slipping into South Vietnam at an ever-increasing rate. By March 1964 the Vietcong controlled about 40 percent of South Vietnam.

President Johnson became convinced that only an expanded U.S. military involvement in South Vietnam could prevent a Communist victory. To increase the American military effort there, however, Johnson needed to obtain authority from the U.S. Congress. In 1964 an incident off the coast of North Vietnam gave him the opportunity to ask for this authority.
Near midnight on August 4, 1964, President Johnson appeared on national television. He made the dramatic announcement that on August 2 the USS Maddox, a navy destroyer, had been attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the North Vietnamese coast.

Johnson said that the attack on the Maddox “was repeated today by a number of hostile vessels attacking two U.S. destroyers [the Maddox and the C. Turner Joy] with torpedoes.” He called for a swift military response.

**HISTORY’S VOICES**

“Repeated acts of violence against the Armed Forces of the United States must be met not only with alert defense, but with positive reply. That reply is now in execution against gunboats and certain supporting facilities in North Vietnam which have been used in these hostile operations.”

—Lyndon B. Johnson, speech on August 4, 1964

Later it was learned that President Johnson did not present a completely accurate picture of the incident in the Gulf of Tonkin. Johnson was in the middle of his 1964 presidential election campaign against Senator Barry Goldwater, a strong anti-Communist. Johnson wanted to avoid charges from Senator Goldwater and the Republicans that he was soft on communism.

The president claimed that the attack on the USS Maddox was unprovoked. In fact, the Maddox had been on a spying mission and had fired first.

As for the second attack, U.S. sailors may have mistaken interference on their radar and sonar for enemy boats and torpedoes. At the time, however, most members of Congress did not know the factual details surrounding the two incidents.

The Tonkin Gulf Resolution was approved by Congress on August 7. The resolution enabled the president to take “all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against forces of the United States.” Johnson and his advisers now had authority to expand the war.

Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon was one of only two senators to oppose the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. “I believe that history will record we have made a great mistake,” he predicted. “We are in effect giving the President war-making powers in the absence of a declaration of war.”

**READING CHECK**

**Identifying Cause and Effect**

What circumstances led Congress to pass the Tonkin Gulf Resolution?

**Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People**

1. **a. Define** What was French Indochina?
   **b. Analyze** How did French rule influence Ho Chi Minh’s decision to embrace communism?
   **c. Elaborate** Do you think Ho Chi Minh’s comparison of Vietnam after World War II and colonial America was valid? Explain.

2. **a. Describe** According to the domino theory, what did American leaders think might happen if Vietnam became a Communist country?
   **b. Make Inferences** Do you think the Geneva Accords eased American concerns about a domino effect in Southeast Asia? Why or why not?

3. **a. Identify** Who were the Vietcong?
   **b. Analyze Cause and Effect** What was Eisenhower’s response to the growing strength of the Vietcong?
   **c. Evaluate** Do you think the United States was justified in supporting Ngo Dinh Diem? Why or why not?

4. **a. Describe** What happened to the USS Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin?

5. **b. Predict** How might the Tonkin Gulf Resolution affect the power of the presidency?

**Critical Thinking**

5. **Draw Conclusions** Review your notes on the leaders of North Vietnam and South Vietnam. Then copy the graphic organizer below and use it to list the causes for the decline in popularity of Ngo Dinh Diem’s government.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Effect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The popularity of Ngo Dinh Diem’s government declined.</td>
<td></td>
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**FOCUS ON WRITING**

6. **Expository** Suppose that you are the communications director in the Kennedy or Johnson White House. Write a press release that explains the president’s decision to increase U.S. military involvement in Vietnam.
The Vietcong could not compete in firepower, but they used tunnels and other types of guerrilla warfare.  

**Drawing Conclusions**  
How did the tunnel structure meet the military and personal needs of the Vietcong?  

See *Skills Handbook*, p. 18