

## The Vietnam War

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The period of détente was not without localised conflicts, but these did not directly jeopardise relations between the United States and the USSR. The most notable of these was the Vietnam War, which hung heavily over the 1960s and early 1970s. It was part of the overall Cold War confrontation and the American struggle against the spread of Communism in the world, but did not involve a direct confrontation between the two superpowers. The US justified its military intervention in Vietnam by the domino theory, which stated that if one country fell under the influence of Communism, the surrounding countries would inevitably follow. The aim was to prevent Communist domination of South-East Asia.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy, convinced that Communist China was actively supporting North Vietnam, approved a US military campaign in Vietnam to help the nationalist government stave off the Communist rebellion. His successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, who was keen to see peace in South-East Asia and to maintain America's economic and political interests in the region, stepped up his country's involvement, massively expanding the American presence from 23 000 troops in 1965 to over 540 000 in 1969. The Viet Cong Communist rebels, supported by the North Vietnamese Army, were supplied along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which consisted of a network of paths, tunnels and bunkers that the Americans tried in vain to destroy. This only led the USSR and China to intensify their assistance to the Communist National Liberation Front (NLF), which they supplied with arms and food; however, they did not intervene directly. In February 1965, the United States began bombing military and industrial targets in North Vietnam. This was followed by a protracted guerrilla war, despite some fruitless attempts at international mediation.

In January 1968, the Communist *Têt* (New Year) offensive caused the conflict to escalate, plunging into doubt the Americans who had long been confident of ultimate victory. The American public, shocked by the daily television coverage and the heavy loss of life, became increasingly hostile to the war, forcing the country to withdraw and cut its military expenditure.

Following new carpet bombing raids carried out by the US Air Force on the orders of President Nixon, peace negotiations began in Paris in May 1968. The Paris Agreements of 27 January 1973 finally provided the United States with an opportunity to pull out from the conflict. Their South Vietnamese ally would stand alone for only two years before falling to the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. The fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975 marked the true end of the Vietnam War. The American military intervention in the Vietnamese quagmire weighed heavily on US policy and caused serious damage to the country's international standing, especially in Western Europe.