

**1955**  
Diem becomes president of South Vietnam

**1961**  
Kennedy takes office

**1963**  
Military coup overthrows Diem

**1964**  
Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

**1965**  
War in Vietnam escalates

**1968**  
Tet Offensive

**1955**

**1960**

**1965**

**1970**

# 1 Deepening American Involvement

## SECTION PREVIEW

### Objectives

- 1 Describe the background events leading up to war between North and South Vietnam.
- 2 Describe the Vietnam policies of President Kennedy and Robert McNamara.
- 3 Explain how President Johnson changed the course of the war.
- 4 **Key Terms** Define: Geneva Conference; Viet Cong; Gulf of Tonkin Resolution; escalation; Ho Chi Minh Trail; Tet Offensive.

### Main Idea

The United States entered the Vietnam War to defeat Communist forces threatening South Vietnam.

### Reading Strategy

**Structured Overview** Write the following column headings on a sheet of paper: *Background of the War, Kennedy's Vietnam Policy, Johnson's War*. As you read the section, take notes in the appropriate column.

American involvement in Vietnam began during the early years of the cold war. It ended in defeat and disappointment more than twenty years later.

## Background of the War

Vietnam had a history of nationalism that extended back nearly 2,000 years. The Vietnamese spent much of that time resisting attempts by neighboring China to swallow their small country. In the 1800s France established itself as a new colonial power in Vietnam, and it met similar resistance.

After World War II Ho Chi Minh, a nationalist who sympathized with Communist ideas, led the Vietnamese independence movement. He aroused his people's nationalism in order to repel the French. Policymakers in the United States, however, saw Ho merely as a Communist, and therefore an enemy.

While France and Vietnam fought, an international conference met in Geneva, Switzerland. Representatives of Ho Chi Minh, Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai, Cambodia, Laos, France, the United States, the Soviet Union,

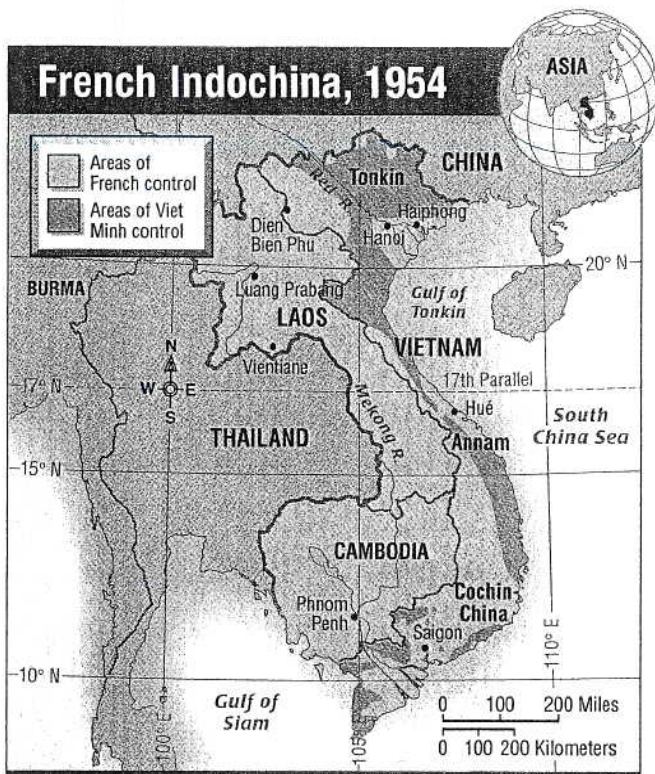
China, and Britain discussed the situation in Indochina. After the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, the conference tried to settle the conflict.

As a result of the **Geneva Conference**, Vietnam was divided into two separate nations in July 1954. Ho Chi Minh controlled northern Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Diem, a former official in Bao Dai's government, became the premier of southern Vietnam. Diem, who had lived in exile in the United States, gained the backing of the United States. In 1955, Diem became the president and declared South Vietnam a republic. Thus began United States involvement in the Vietnam War. The war lasted from 1955 to 1975 and was fought to protect South Vietnam from being taken over by Communists.

The Geneva agreements provided for elections to be held in 1956 to unify the country. South Vietnam and the United States refused to support this part of the agreement because they feared that elections would remove Diem from power. The elections never took place.



*The fates of three nations—Vietnam, the United States, and France—became interwoven in the struggle for control over Vietnam.*



Events in Southeast Asia caught the attention of the United States in 1954, as France struggled to maintain control in this region. **Regions** Where was the largest region of Viet Minh (Ho Chi Minh's) control?

## Kennedy's Vietnam Policy

President Eisenhower pledged his support to Diem's South Vietnamese government. In 1960 he provided some 675 United States military advisers to assist in the struggle against the North. When President Kennedy took office in 1961, he did even more. Kennedy was determined to prevent the spread of communism at all costs. This meant strengthening and protecting the government that the United States had helped create in South Vietnam.

Kennedy sent Vice President Lyndon Johnson to Vietnam to assess the situation there. Diem told him that if South Vietnam was to survive, it would need even more aid. In response, Kennedy increased the number of American military advisers to Vietnam. By the end of 1963, that number had grown to more than 16,000.

Military aid by itself could not ensure success. Diem lacked support in his own country. He imprisoned people who criticized his government and filled many government positions

with members of his own family. United States aid earmarked for economic reforms went instead to the military and into the pockets of corrupt officials.

In addition, Diem launched an unpopular program to move peasants from their ancestral lands to "strategic hamlets." These government-run farming communities were intended to isolate the peasants from Communist influences seeping into South Vietnam.

In addition, Diem was a Catholic in a largely Buddhist country. When Diem insisted that Buddhists obey Catholic religious laws, serious opposition developed. In June 1963 a Buddhist monk burned himself to death. Photographs showing his silent, grisly protest appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the world. Other monks followed the example, but their martyrdom did not budge Diem.

Kennedy finally realized that Diem would never reform and acknowledged that the struggle against communism in Vietnam could not be won under Diem's rule. United States officials told South Vietnamese military leaders that the United States would not object to Diem's overthrow. With that encouragement, military leaders staged a coup in November 1963. They seized control of the government and, to Kennedy's dismay, assassinated Diem on November 2 as he tried to flee.

## Robert McNamara

### AMERICAN BIOGRAPHY

One of the American officials who gave up on Diem was Robert McNamara, Kennedy's Secretary of Defense. A Republican with a strong business background, McNamara became one of Kennedy's closest advisers on Vietnam. Later he would help shape the policies that drew the United States deeper into the war.

Robert McNamara was born June 9, 1916, in San Francisco, California. He grew up across the bay in Oakland. McNamara attended the University of California at Berkeley and went on to earn a graduate degree at Harvard Business School in 1939. He used his degree to land a job at the Ford Motor Company. Through hard work and solid business decisions, McNamara moved quickly up the corporate ladder. He took over the



Robert McNamara  
(b. 1916)

presidency of Ford Motors in November 1960. This rising star caught the eye of President Kennedy, who offered him a position in his Cabinet just one month later.

As Secretary of Defense, McNamara applied his business knowledge, managing to cut costs while modernizing the armed forces. He turned the Pentagon's thinking away from reliance on the threat of nuclear bombs toward the development of a "flexible response" to military crises. He also began to focus his attention on how to handle the conflict in Vietnam.

Later, under Lyndon Johnson, McNamara would push for direct American involvement in the war. But in 1963 he still questioned whether a complete withdrawal was not the better alternative. Looking back on that period later, McNamara revealed his and Kennedy's feelings:

#### AMERICAN VOICES

"I believed that we had done all the training we could. Whether the South Vietnamese were qualified or not to turn back the North Vietnamese, I was certain that if they weren't, it wasn't for lack of our training. More training wouldn't strengthen them; therefore we should get out. The President agreed."

—Robert McNamara

As you will read, the United States did not withdraw. It continued to back South Vietnam and the coup leaders who took over the government.

## Johnson's War

Three weeks after Diem's assassination, Kennedy himself fell to an assassin's bullet in Dallas, Texas. By then the new military government in South Vietnam was already in trouble. The ruling generals bickered among themselves and failed to direct the South Vietnamese army effectively.

**The Viet Cong** Meanwhile Communist guerrillas in the south, known as **Viet Cong**, gained control of more territory and earned the loyalty of an increasing number of South Vietnamese. Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese aided the Viet Cong throughout the struggle.

Lyndon Johnson, the new United States President, was suspicious of Ho's Communist sympathies, as Kennedy had been. He believed strongly in the need for containment:

#### AMERICAN VOICES

"The Communists' desire to dominate the world is just like the lawyer's desire to be the ultimate judge on the Supreme Court. . . . You see, the Communists want to rule the world, and if we don't stand up to them, they will do it. And we'll be slaves. Now I'm not one of those folks seeing Communists under every bed. But I do know about the principles of power, and when one side is weak, the other steps in."

—Lyndon Johnson

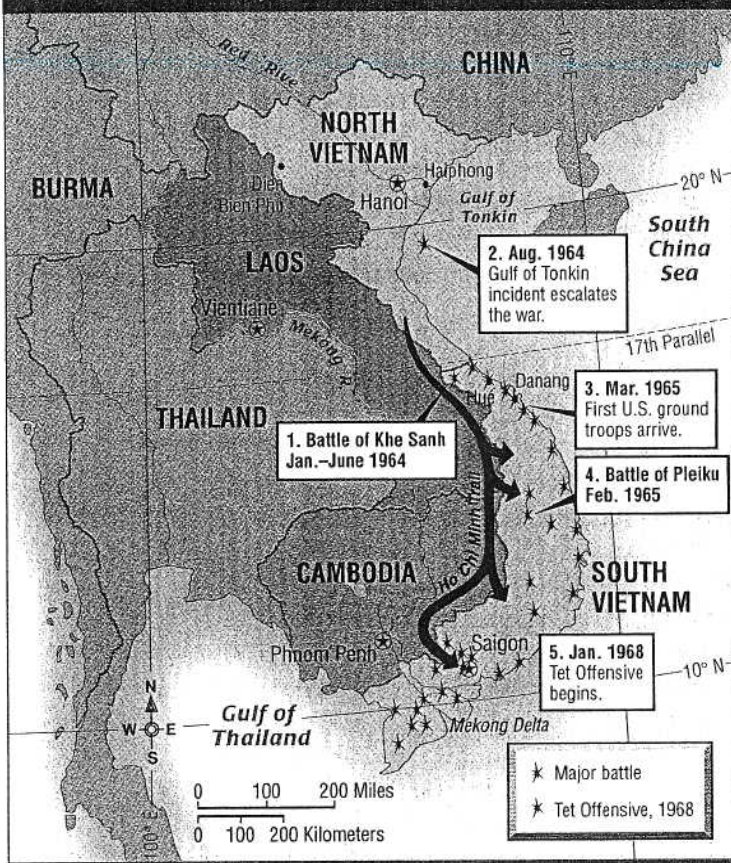
Just after he assumed office, Johnson met with Henry Cabot Lodge, United States ambassador to South Vietnam. Lodge told the new President that if he wanted to save Vietnam, he faced some tough choices. Johnson was determined to do whatever was necessary to win the war. "I am not going to lose Vietnam," he said. Referring to the Communist takeover of China in 1949, he went on: "I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went."

In his campaign for President in 1964, Johnson tried to keep the war from becoming an issue. "We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves," he declared. He called Barry Goldwater,



Buddhist monks protested Ngo Dinh Diem's government by burning themselves to death on the streets of Saigon. **Government** How does this picture symbolize the difficult problems Johnson inherited in Vietnam?

## Vietnam War, 1964–1968



The Ho Chi Minh Trail, shown in the map above, was a supply route from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam.

**Movement** How might the Ho Chi Minh Trail have contributed to the execution of the Tet Offensive?

his Republican opponent in the election, an extremist who would lead the nation into nuclear war. Even when the Viet Cong attacked an airfield outside of Saigon, killing four Americans, Johnson declined to retaliate.

**Intensifying the War** In August 1964, during the presidential campaign, Johnson made a dramatic announcement. North Vietnamese torpedo boats, he said, had attacked United States destroyers in the international waters of the Gulf of Tonkin, 30 miles from North Vietnam. Those attacks would change the course of the war.

Details about the attacks were sketchy, and some people doubted that they had even taken place. In any case, Johnson used the Tonkin Gulf incident to deepen American involvement in Vietnam. Johnson asked Congress for and obtained a resolution giving him authority to “take all neces-

sary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”

Congress passed this **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution** on August 7 by a vote of 414 to 0 in the House of Representatives and 88 to 2 in the Senate. Johnson had been waiting for some time for an opportunity to propose the resolution, which, he noted, “covered everything.” The President now had nearly complete control over what the United States did in Vietnam, even without an official declaration of war from Congress.

After winning the election in 1964, Johnson started a gradual military **escalation**, or expansion, of the war, devoting ever more American money and personnel to the conflict. Enemy gains in South Vietnam led to this course of action.

Initially, United States soldiers had gone to Vietnam to advise the South Vietnamese. Now they took on the task of propping up the South Vietnamese government. The leader of that government in 1965 was military officer Nguyen Cao Ky. In 1967 Nguyen Van Thieu succeeded him as president. Ky and Thieu were more effective leaders than Diem had been, but they remained authoritarian. More important, they were unable to put together an army that could successfully defend the country.

By 1965 the Viet Cong were steadily expanding within South Vietnam. North Vietnamese troops and supplies poured into the south via the **Ho Chi Minh Trail**, a supply route that passed through Laos and Cambodia. The Communists appeared close to victory.

In February 1965 a Viet Cong attack at Pleiku in South Vietnam killed 8 Americans and wounded 126. President Johnson responded by authorizing the bombing of North Vietnam. Two weeks after the Pleiku attack, General William Westmoreland, the commander of United States forces in Vietnam, requested more soldiers. He asked Johnson for two battalions of marines to protect the American airfield at Da Nang.

Johnson heeded the request, beginning a rapid buildup of American combat troops. At the start of 1965 some 25,000 American soldiers were stationed in Vietnam. By the end of the year the number had risen to 184,000. The Americans brought with them advanced weaponry and new tactics and did achieve some successes. But they still failed to drive out the Viet Cong, who were masters at jungle warfare.

### Main Idea CONNECTIONS

What events led to an increase in American involvement in Vietnam in 1964?

Month after month the fighting continued. United States planes bombed North Vietnam, and the flow of American soldiers into the south increased. Their number climbed to 385,000 by the end of 1966, to 485,000 by the end of 1967, and to 536,000 by the end of 1968. Despite the large United States presence in South Vietnam, the Communist forces only intensified their efforts.

**The Tet Offensive** Those efforts reached a climax in 1968, during Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. On January 30 the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese launched a major offensive. The **Tet Offensive**, shown in the map on the previous page, included surprise attacks on major cities and towns and American military bases throughout South Vietnam. In Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital, the Viet Cong boldly attacked the American embassy and the presidential palace. Fierce fighting continued in Saigon for several weeks. The siege of Khe Sanh, an American base near the border with North Vietnam, lasted until April.

Even though they were turned back with heavy losses, the Viet Cong had won a psychological victory. The Tet Offensive demonstrated that the Viet Cong could launch a massive attack on targets throughout South Vietnam. Furthermore, as images of the fighting flooded American television, many people at home began to express reservations about United States involvement in Vietnam. Many were discouraged, believing that once

## FACT FINDER The War in Vietnam Escalates

Year	Event
1964	Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passes. Gradual military escalation begins.
1965	President Johnson responds to attacks against American troops by authorizing the bombing of North Vietnam and by rapidly increasing the number of American combat troops in South Vietnam.
1966–1967	The number of American soldiers in South Vietnam continues to increase.
1968	The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese launch the Tet Offensive.

**Interpreting Tables** The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution gave President Johnson increased authority over troops in Vietnam. **Government**  
*What was the Tet Offensive?*

there the troops had not been allowed to win the war. In spite of the vocal “pro-peace” protesters, a majority of Americans supported a policy tougher than the one pursued by the administration. President Johnson, caught in the middle, saw his popularity plunge.

### SECTION 1 REVIEW

#### Comprehension

- Key Terms** Define: (a) Geneva Conference; (b) Viet Cong; (c) Gulf of Tonkin Resolution; (d) escalation; (e) Ho Chi Minh Trail; (f) Tet Offensive.
- Summarizing the Main Idea** Why did the United States get more and more involved in the conflict in Vietnam?
- Organizing Information** Draw a line graph to show the changes in the number of American soldiers in Vietnam between 1960 and 1968. Write notes to describe events that influenced United States policy toward Vietnam, and connect them to points on the graph.

#### Critical Thinking

- Analyzing Time Lines** Review the time line at the start of the section. Which event do you think affected Kennedy’s viewpoint on Vietnam the most? Explain.
- Identifying Assumptions** What do you think Johnson hoped to gain by authorizing the bombing of targets in North Vietnam in 1965?

#### Writing Activity

- Writing a Persuasive Essay** Imagine that you are Robert McNamara in 1963. Write an essay presenting President Kennedy with two options—withdraw from Vietnam or fully support Diem.

