

## The War Unfolds

## READING FOCUS

- What events led to the war between North Vietnam and South Vietnam?
- What were the Vietnam policies of President Kennedy and Robert McNamara?
- How did President Johnson change the course of the war?

## MAIN IDEA

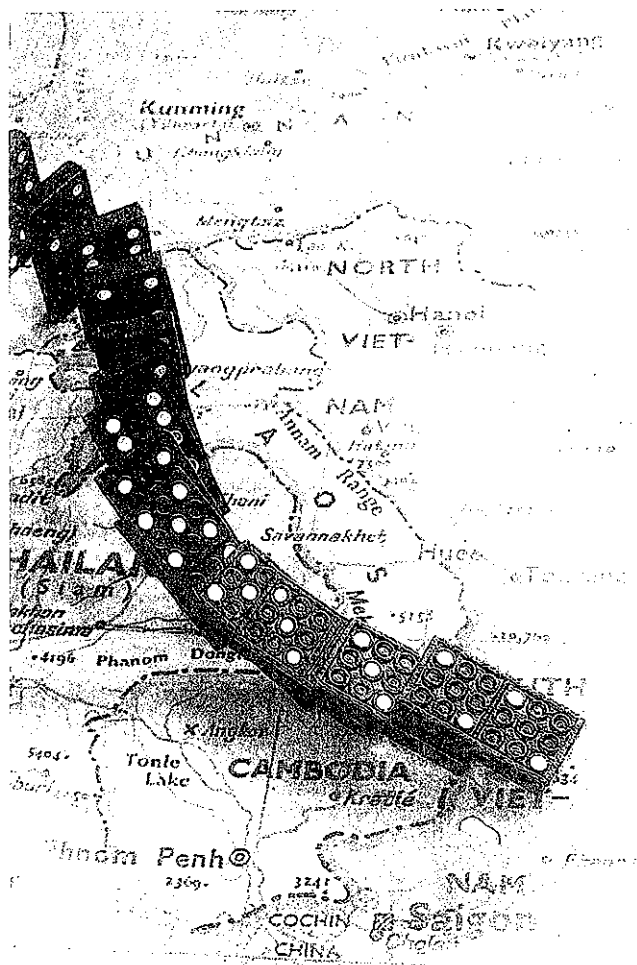
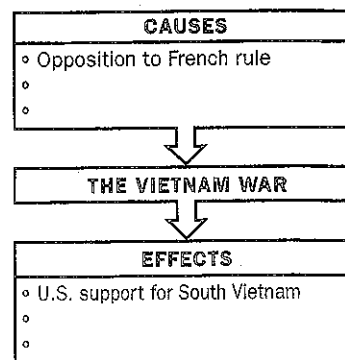
The United States entered the Vietnam War to defeat Communist forces threatening South Vietnam.

## KEY TERMS

domino theory  
 Vietminh  
 Geneva Accords  
 Viet Cong  
 National Liberation Front  
 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

## TAKING NOTES

Copy the chart below. As you read, fill in some of the causes of the Vietnam War and its early effects on the United States.



**Setting the Scene** American involvement in Vietnam began during the early years of the Cold War. It was based on President Harry S. Truman's policy of containment, which called for the United States to resist Soviet attempts to spread communism around the world. At a news conference in 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower described the principle that became associated with American involvement in Southeast Asia:

*“You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly.”*

—Dwight D. Eisenhower

The **domino theory**, described above, refers to the fear that if one Southeast Asian nation fell to the Communists, the others would also fall. A Communist takeover of Vietnam, because of its geographic location, posed a threat to Cambodia, Laos, Burma, and Thailand.

## 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 the French met similar resistance from the Vietnamese.

Ho Chi Minh, who sympathized with Communist ideas, fought for independence before, during, and after World War II. He was head of the League for the Independence of Vietnam, commonly called the Vietminh.

Ho Chi Minh aroused his people's feelings of nationalism against French control. The French opposed the Vietminh by forming the Republic of Vietnam, headed by the emperor Bao Dai. War between these opposing forces continued until May 1954, when the Vietminh defeated the French after a long siege at a fortress in Dien Bien Phu.

**A Divided Vietnam** In April 1954, an international conference met in Geneva, Switzerland. After the French defeat in Vietnam, representatives of Ho Chi Minh, Bao Dai, Cambodia, Laos, France, the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Britain arranged a peace settlement. As a result of the **Geneva Accords**, Vietnam was divided into two separate nations in July 1954. Although the border between the two nations was often referred to as the 17th parallel, the demarcation line set in Geneva was actually a few miles south of the parallel.

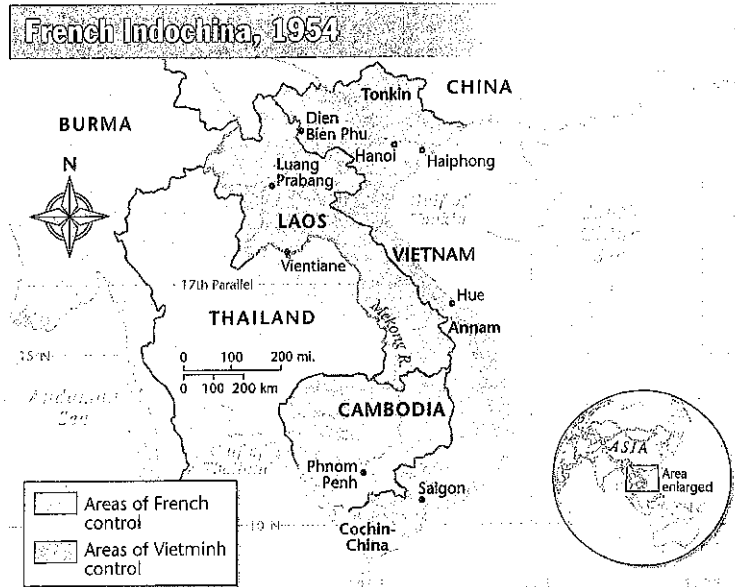
Ho Chi Minh became president of the new Communist-dominated North Vietnam, with its capital in Hanoi. Ngo Dinh Diem, a former Vietnamese official who had been living in exile in the United States, became president of anti-Communist South Vietnam, with its capital in Saigon. The Geneva agreements called for elections to be held in 1956 to unify the country. South Vietnam refused to support this part of the agreement, claiming that the Communists would not hold fair elections. As a result, Vietnam remained divided.

**United States Involvement** After World War II, President Truman had pledged American aid to any nation threatened by Communists. Beginning in 1950, the United States provided economic aid to the French effort in Vietnam as a way of gaining French support for the policy of containment in Europe. After the French defeat, the United States began to support anti-Communist South Vietnam.

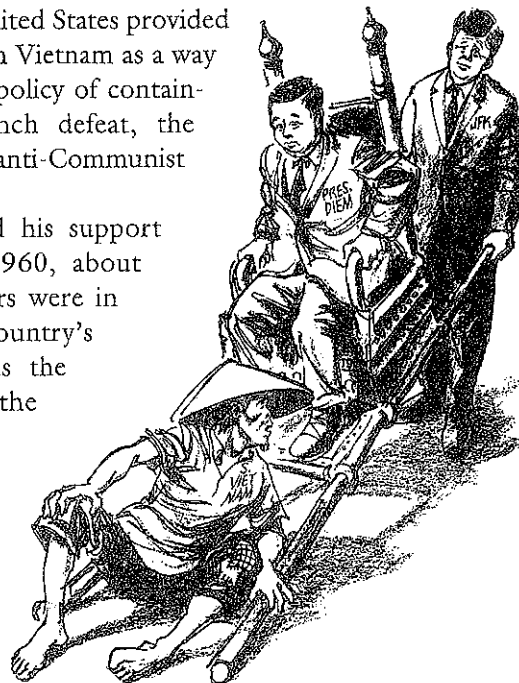
President Eisenhower pledged his support to South Vietnam's Diem. By 1960, about 675 United States military advisors were in South Vietnam to assist in that country's struggle against the North. Thus the United States became involved in the Vietnam War.

### Kennedy's Vietnam Policy

When President John F. Kennedy took office in 1961, he was determined to prevent the spread of communism at all costs. This meant strengthening



**MAP SKILLS** After World War II, France struggled to keep control of its colonies in Southeast Asia. The Vietminh was fighting for Vietnamese independence. *Regions In early 1954, where was the largest region of Vietminh (Ho Chi Minh's) control?*



**INTERPRETING POLITICAL CARTOONS** This cartoon uses an open sedan chair, similar to a kind of personal transportation popular in Southeast Asia, to make a political point. **Drawing Inferences** (a) Who are the two men "carrying" President Diem of South Vietnam? (b) What has brought Diem's progress to a halt? (c) Why is the man in front complaining? (d) Explain the point the cartoonist is making.

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



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 Johnson that South Vietnam would need even more aid if it was to survive. In response, Kennedy increased the number of American military advisors 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.

**Diem's Downfall** Diem launched an unpopular program which relocated 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 on the streets of Saigon. 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 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 assassinated Diem as he tried to flee.

**McNamara's Role** One of the American officials who helped create the Kennedy administration's Vietnam policy was Robert McNamara, President Kennedy's Secretary of Defense. A Republican with a strong business background, McNamara became one of Kennedy's closest

## American BIOGRAPHY

Robert McNamara was born in San Francisco, California, and grew up across the bay in Oakland. He attended the University of California at Berkeley and went on to earn a graduate degree at Harvard Business School in 1939.



McNamara served in the air force during World War II. After the war, he took 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 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.

advisors on Vietnam. Later he helped shape the policies that drew the United States deeper into the war.

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 pushed for direct American involvement in the war. In 1963, however, he still questioned whether a complete withdrawal was not the better alternative. Looking back on that period later, McNamara revealed his feelings:

*“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 (Kennedy) agreed.”*

—Robert McNamara

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

### Johnson Commits to Containment

Three weeks after Diem's assassination, President Kennedy himself fell to an assassin's bullet in Dallas, Texas. Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency and faced an escalating crisis in Vietnam. Johnson believed strongly in the need for containment:

*“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

**Communist Advances** Diem's successors established a new military government in South Vietnam that proved to be both unsuccessful and unpopular. The ruling generals bickered among themselves and failed to direct the South Vietnamese army effectively. Communist guerrillas in the south, known as Viet Cong, and their political arm, called the **National Liberation Front**, gained control of more territory and earned the loyalty of an increasing number of the South Vietnamese people. Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese aided the Viet Cong throughout the struggle.

Just after Johnson assumed office, he met with Henry Cabot Lodge, who was the United States ambassador to South Vietnam. Lodge told the new President that he faced some tough choices if he wanted to save Vietnam.

## FOCUS ON GOVERNMENT

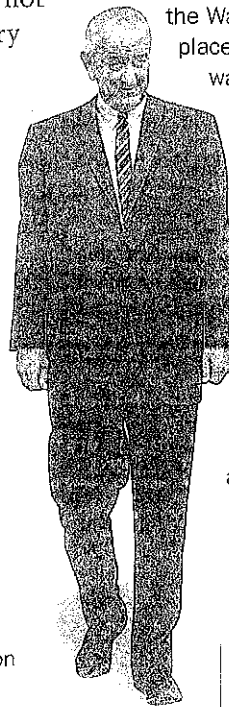
**The Powers of the President** The United States Constitution divides military power between the executive and legislative branches. It makes the President commander in chief of the army and navy, but gives Congress the power to declare war and the power to raise an army and navy.

Throughout American history, Presidents have used their extensive authority as commander in chief to order military operations without a formal declaration of war. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed by Congress in 1964, was not a declaration of war, but it gave the President expanded powers to conduct the war in Vietnam.

The nation's anguish over the Vietnam War led Congress to pass the War Powers Act in 1973. The act places close limits on the President's war-making powers: If there is no declaration of war by Congress, it requires the President to

1. notify Congress within 48 hours of committing American troops to combat, and
2. end the combat within 60 days unless Congress authorizes a longer period.

In addition, the act gives Congress the power to end the combat at any time by passing a resolution to that effect.



### CRITICAL CHECK

Describe the new military government in South Vietnam.

## GULF OF TONKIN RESOLUTION

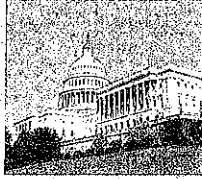
Joint Resolution of Congress

H.J. RES 1145 • August 7, 1964

Public Law 88-408; 78 Stat. 384 • August 10, 1964

*Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

That the Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.



**Section 2.** The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia. Consonant with the Constitution of the United States and the Charter of the United Nations and in accordance with its obligations under the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, the United States is, therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.

**Section 3.** This resolution shall expire when the President shall determine that the peace and security of the area is reasonably assured by international conditions created by action of the United Nations or otherwise, except that it may be terminated earlier by concurrent resolution of the Congress.

Johnson was determined to do whatever was needed to win the war. “I am not going to lose Vietnam,” he said. Johnson recalled the Communist takeover of China in 1949. Referring to the fact that many Americans had blamed the “loss of China” on the Truman administration, Johnson went on: “I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went.” Johnson did not want the Southeast Asian “dominoes” to be set in motion by the fall of Vietnam.

**Expanding Presidential Power** In August 1964, Johnson made a dramatic announcement: North Vietnamese torpedo boats 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 Gulf of Tonkin incident to deepen American involvement in Vietnam. The President asked Congress for and obtained a resolution giving him authority to “take all necessary 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 416 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.

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution tipped the balance of power between Congress (upper photo) and the White House (lower photo).

### Section

### Assessment

#### READING COMPREHENSION

1. How did the **domino theory** explain American involvement in Southeast Asia?
2. What were (a) the **Vietminh**, (b) the **Viet Cong**, and (c) the **National Liberation Front**?
3. What were the results of the **Geneva Accords**?
4. Why did American officials support the overthrow of Diem’s government?

#### CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

5. **Drawing Conclusions** Write a paragraph explaining how the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution affected the balance of power between the President and Congress.
6. **Writing an Outline** Write an outline for an essay from the perspective of Robert McNamara in 1963 in which you present President Kennedy with two options—withdraw from Vietnam or fully support Diem.



#### Take It to the NET

##### Activity: Writing an Editorial

Research events and media coverage from the early years of the Vietnam conflict. Then write an editorial as if it were 1965, and you do not know the eventual outcome of the war. Use the links provided in the *America: Pathways to the Present* area of the following Web site for help in completing this activity.

[www.phschool.com](http://www.phschool.com)