

A Vietnam War Timeline

[Note: This timeline is an abbreviated version of the more detailed timeline posted on the Public Broadcasting System's "Vietnam Online" section of [The American Experience](#).]

1945

Ho Chi Minh Creates Provisional Government: Following the surrender of Japan to Allied forces, Ho Chi Minh and his People's Congress create the National Liberation Committee of Vietnam to form a provisional government. Japan transfers all power to Ho's Vietminh.

Ho Declares Independence of Vietnam

British Forces Land in Saigon, Return Authority to French

First American Dies in Vietnam: Lt. Col. A. Peter Dewey, head of American OSS mission, was killed by Vietminh troops while driving a jeep to the airport. Reports later indicated that his death was due to a case of mistaken identity -- he had been mistaken for a Frenchman.

1946

French and Vietminh Reach Accord: France recognizes Vietnam as a "free state" within the French Union. French troops replace Chinese in the North.

Negotiations Between French and Vietminh Breakdown

Indochina War Begins: Following months of steadily deteriorating relations, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam launches its first concerted attack against the French.

1947

Vietminh Move North of Hanoi

Valluy Fails to Defeat Vietminh: French General Etienne Valluy attempts, and fails, to wipe out the Vietminh in one stroke.

1949

Elysee Agreement Signed: Bao Dai and President Vincent Auriol of France sign the Elysee Agreement. As part of the agreement the French pledge to assist in the building of a national anti-Communist army.

1950

Chinese, Soviets Offer Weapons to Vietminh

US Pledges \$15M to Aid French: The United States sends \$15 million dollars in military aid to the French for the war in Indochina. Included in the aid package is a military mission and military advisors.

1953

France Grants Laos Full Independence

Vietminh Forces Push into Laos

1954

Battle of Dienbienphu Begins: A force of 40,000 heavily armed Vietminh lay siege to the French garrison at Dienbienphu. Using Chinese artillery to shell the airstrip, the Vietminh make it impossible for French supplies to arrive by air. It soon becomes clear that the French have met their match.

Eisenhower Cites "Domino Theory" Regarding Southeast Asia: Responding to the defeat of the French by the Vietminh at Dienbienphu, President Eisenhower outlines the Domino Theory: "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."

French Defeated at Dien Bien Phu

Geneva Convention Begins: Delegates from nine nations convene in Geneva to start negotiations that will lead to the end of hostilities in Indochina. The idea of partitioning Vietnam is first explored at this forum.

Geneva Convention Agreements Announced: Vietminh General Ta Quang Buu and French General Henri Delteil sign the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam. As part of the agreement, a provisional demarcation line is drawn at the 17th parallel which will divide Vietnam until nationwide elections are held in 1956. The United States does not accept the agreement, neither does the government of Bao Dai.

1955

Diem Rejects Conditions of Geneva Accords, Refuses to Participate in Nationwide Elections

China and Soviet Union Pledge Additional Financial Support to Hanoi

Diem Urged to Negotiate with North: Britain, France, and United States covertly urge Diem to respect Geneva accords and conduct discussions with the North.

Diem Becomes President of Republic of Vietnam: Diem defeats Bao Dai in rigged election and proclaims himself President of Republic of Vietnam.

1956

French Leave Vietnam

US Training South Vietnamese: The US Military Assistance Advisor Group (MAAG) assumes responsibility, from French, for training South Vietnamese forces.

1957

Communist Insurgency into South Vietnam: Communist insurgent activity in South Vietnam begins. Guerrillas assassinate more than 400 South Vietnamese officials. Thirty-seven armed companies are organized along the Mekong Delta.

Terrorist Bombings Rock Saigon: Thirteen Americans working for MAAG and US Information Service are wounded in terrorist bombings in Saigon.

1959

Weapons Moving Along Ho Chi Minh Trail: North Vietnam forms Group 559 to begin infiltrating cadres and weapons into South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Trail will become a strategic target for future military attacks.

US Servicemen Killed in Guerilla Attack: Major Dale R. Buis and Master Sargeant Chester M. Ovnand become the first Americans to die in the Vietnam War when guerillas strike at Bienhoa

Diem Orders Crackdown on Communists, Dissidents

1960

North Vietnam Imposes Universal Military Conscription

Kennedy Elected President: John F. Kennedy narrowly defeats Richard Nixon for the presidency.

Diem Survives Coup Attempt

Vietcong Formed: Hanoi forms National Liberation Front for South Vietnam. Diem government dubs them "Vietcong."

1961

Battle of Kienhoa Province: 400 guerillas attack village in Kienhoa Province, and are defeated by South Vietnamese troops.

Vice President Johnson Tours Saigon: During a tour of Asian countries, Vice President Lyndon Johnson visits Diem in Saigon. Johnson assures Diem that he is crucial to US objectives in Vietnam and calls him "the Churchill of Asia."

1962

US Military Employs Agent Orange: US Air Force begins using Agent Orange -- a defoliant that came in metal orange containers-to expose roads and trails used by Vietcong forces.

Diem Palace Bombed in Coup Attempt

Mansfield Voices Doubt on Vietnam Policy: Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield reports back to JFK from Saigon his opinion that Diem had wasted the two billion dollars America had spent there.

1963

Battle of Ap Bac: Vietcong units defeat South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) in Battle of Ap Bac

President Kennedy Assassinated in Dallas: Kennedy's death meant that the problem of how to proceed in Vietnam fell squarely into the lap of his vice president, Lyndon Johnson.

Buddhists Protest Against Diem: Tensions between Buddhists and the Diem government are further strained as Diem, a Catholic, removes Buddhists from several key government positions and replaces them with Catholics.

Buddhist monks protest Diem's intolerance for other religions and the measures he takes to silence them. In a show of protest, Buddhist monks start setting themselves on fire in public places.

Diem Overthrown, Murdered: With tacit approval of the United States, operatives within the South Vietnamese military overthrow Diem. He and his brother Nhu are shot and killed in the aftermath.

1964

General Nguyen Khanh Seizes Power in Saigon: In a bloodless coup, General Nguyen Khanh seizes power in Saigon. South Vietnam junta leader, Major General Duong Van Minh, is placed under house arrest, but is allowed to remain as a figurehead chief-of-state.

Gulf of Tonkin Incident: On August 2, three North Vietnamese PT boats allegedly fire torpedoes at the USS Maddox, a destroyer located in the international waters of the Tonkin Gulf, some thirty miles off the coast of North Vietnam. The attack comes after six months of covert US and South Vietnamese naval operations. A second, even more highly disputed attack, is alleged to have taken place on August 4.

Debate on Gulf of Tonkin Resolution: The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution is approved by Congress on August 7 and authorizes President Lyndon Johnson to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." The resolution passes unanimously in the House, and by a margin of 82-2 in the Senate. The Resolution allows Johnson to wage all out war against North Vietnam without ever securing a formal Declaration of War from Congress.

Vietcong Attack Bienhoa Air Base

LBJ Defeats Goldwater: Lyndon Johnson is elected in a landslide over Republican Barry Goldwater of Arizona. During the campaign, Johnson's position on Vietnam appeared to lean toward de-escalation of US involvement, and sharply contrasted the more militant views held by Goldwater.

1965

Operation "Rolling Thunder" Deployed: Sustained American bombing raids of North Vietnam, dubbed Operation Rolling Thunder, begin in February. The nearly continuous air raids would go on for three years.

Marines Arrive at Danang: The first American combat troops, the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, arrive in Vietnam to defend the US airfield at Danang. Scattered Vietcong gunfire is reported, but no Marines are injured.

Heavy Fighting at Ia Drang Valley: The first conventional battle of the Vietnam war takes place as American forces clash with North Vietnamese units in the Ia Drang Valley. The US 1st Air Cavalry Division employs its newly enhanced technique of aerial reconnaissance to finally defeat the NVA, although heavy casualties are reported on both sides.

US Troop Levels Top 200,000

Vietnam "Teach-In" Broadcast to Nation's Universities: The practice of protesting US policy in Vietnam by holding "teach-ins" at colleges and universities becomes widespread. The first "teach-in" -- featuring seminars, rallies, and speeches -- takes place at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in March. In May, a nationally broadcast "teach-in" reaches students and faculty at over 100 campuses.

1966

B-52s Bomb North Vietnam: In an effort to disrupt movement along the Mugia Pass -- the main route used by the NVA to send personnel and supplies through Laos and into South Vietnam -- American B-52s bomb North Vietnam for the first time.

South Vietnam Government Troops Take Hue and Danang

LBJ Meets With South Vietnamese Leaders: US President Lyndon Johnson meets with South Vietnamese Premier Nguyen Cao Ky and his military advisors in Honolulu. Johnson promises to continue to help South Vietnam fend off aggression from the North, but adds that the US will be monitoring South Vietnam's efforts to expand democracy and improve economic conditions for its citizens.

Veterans Stage Anti-War Rally: Veterans from World Wars I and II, along with veterans from the Korean war stage a protest rally in New York City. Discharge and separation papers are burned in protest of US involvement in Vietnam.

CORE Cites "Burden On Minorities and Poor" in Vietnam: The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) issues a report claiming that the US military draft places "a heavy discriminatory burden on minority groups and the poor." The group also calls for a withdrawal of all US troops from Vietnam.

1967

Operation Cedar Falls Begins: In a major ground war effort dubbed Operation Cedar Falls, about 16,000 US and 14,000 South Vietnamese troops set out to destroy Vietcong operations and supply sites near Saigon. A massive system of tunnels is discovered in an area called the Iron Triangle, an apparent headquarters for Vietcong personnel.

Bunker Replaces Cabot Lodge as South Vietnam Ambassador

Martin Luther King Speaks Out Against War: Calling the US "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world," Martin Luther King publicly speaks out against US policy in Vietnam. King later encourages draft evasion and suggests a merger between antiwar and civil rights groups.

Dow Recruiters Driven From Wisconsin Campus: University of Wisconsin students demand that corporate recruiters for Dow Chemical -- producers of napalm -- not be allowed on campus.

McNamara Calls Bombing Ineffective: Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, appearing before a Senate subcommittee, testifies that US bombing raids against North Vietnam have not achieved their objectives. McNamara maintains that movement of supplies to South Vietnam has not been reduced, and neither the economy nor the morale of the North Vietnamese has been broken.

1968

January

Sihanouk Allows Pursuit of Vietcong into Cambodia

North Vietnamese Launch Tet Offensive: In a show of military might that catches the US military off guard, North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces sweep down upon several key cities and provinces in South Vietnam, including its capital, Saigon. Within days, American forces turn back the onslaught and recapture most areas. From a military point of view, Tet is a huge defeat for the Communists, but turns out to be a political and psychological victory. The US military's assessment of the war is questioned and the "end of tunnel" seems very far off.

February

Battle for Hue: The Battle for Hue wages for 26 days as US and South Vietnamese forces try to recapture the site seized by the Communists during the Tet Offensive. Previously, a religious retreat in the middle of a war zone, Hue was nearly leveled in a battle that left nearly all of its population homeless. Following the US and ARVN victory, mass graves containing the bodies of thousands of people who had been executed during the Communist occupation are discovered.

Westmoreland Requests 206,000 More Troops

My Lai Massacre: On March 16, the angry and frustrated men of Charlie Company, 11th Brigade, Americal Division entered the village of My Lai. "This is what you've been waiting for -- search and destroy -- and you've got it," said their superior officers. A short time later the killing began. When news of the atrocities surfaced, it sent shockwaves through the US political establishment, the military's chain of command, and an already divided American public.

March

LBJ Announces He Won't Run: With his popularity plummeting and dismayed by Senator Eugene McCarthy's strong showing in the New Hampshire primary, President Lyndon Johnson stuns the nation and announces that he will not be a candidate for re-election.

April

MLK Slain in Memphis:

May

Paris Peace Talks Begin: Following a lengthy period of debate and discussion, North Vietnamese and American negotiators agree on a location and start date of peace talks. Talks are slated to begin in Paris on May 10 with W. Averell Harriman representing the United States, and former Foreign Minister Xuan Thuy heading the North Vietnamese delegation.

June

Robert Kennedy Assassinated

August

Upheaval at Democratic Convention in Chicago: As the frazzled Democratic party prepares to hold its nominating convention in Chicago, city officials gear up for a deluge of demonstrations. Mayor Richard Daley orders police to crackdown on antiwar protests. As the nation watched on television, the area around the convention erupts in violence.

November

Richard Nixon Elected President: Running on a platform of "law and order," Richard Nixon barely beats out Hubert Humphrey for the presidency. Nixon takes just 43.4 percent of the popular vote, compared to 42.7 percent for Humphrey. Third-party candidate George Wallace takes the remaining percentage of votes.

1969

Nixon Begins Secret Bombing of Cambodia: In an effort to destroy Communist supply routes and base camps in Cambodia, President Nixon gives the go-ahead to "Operation Breakfast." The covert bombing of Cambodia, conducted without the knowledge of Congress or the American public, will continue for fourteen months.

Policy of "Vietnamization" Announced: Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird describes a policy of "Vietnamization" when discussing a diminishing role for the US military in Vietnam. The objective of the policy is to shift the burden of defeating the Communists onto the South Vietnamese Army and away from the United States.

Ho Chi Minh Dies at Age 79

News of My Lai Massacre Reaches US: Through the reporting of journalist Seymour Hersh, Americans read for

the first time of the atrocities committed by Lt. William Calley and his troops in the village of My Lai. At the time the reports were made public, the Army had already charged Calley with the crime of murder.

Massive Antiwar Demonstration in DC

1970

Sihanouk Ousted in Cambodia: Prince Sihanouk's attempt to maintain Cambodia's neutrality while war waged in neighboring Vietnam forced him to strike opportunistic alliances with China, and then the United States. Such vacillating weakened his government, leading to a coup orchestrated by his defense minister, Lon Nol.

Kent State Incident: National Guardsmen open fire on a crowd of student antiwar protesters at Ohio's Kent State University, resulting in the death of four students and the wounding of eight others. President Nixon publicly deplors the actions of the Guardsmen, but cautions: "...when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy." Several of the protesters had been hurling rocks and empty tear gas canisters at the Guardsmen.

Kissinger and Le Duc Begin Secret Talks

Number of US Troops Falls to 280K

1971

Lt. Calley Convicted of Murder

Pentagon Papers Published: A legacy of deception, concerning US policy in Vietnam, on the part of the military and the executive branch is revealed as the New York Times publishes the Pentagon Papers. The Nixon administration, eager to stop leaks of what they consider sensitive information, appeals to the Supreme Court to halt the publication. The Court decides in favor the Times and allows continued publication.

Nixon Announces Plans to Visit China: In a move that troubles the North Vietnamese, President Nixon announces his intention to visit The People's Republic of China. Nixon's gesture toward China is seen by the North Vietnamese as an effort to create discord between themselves and their Chinese allies.

Thieu Re-elected in South Vietnam

1972

Nixon Cuts Troop Levels by 70K: Responding to charges by Democratic presidential candidates that he is not moving fast enough to end US involvement in Vietnam, President Nixon orders troop strength reduced by seventy thousand.

Secret Peace Talks Revealed

B-52s Bomb Hanoi and Haiphong: In an attempt to force North Vietnam to make concessions in the ongoing peace talks, the Nixon administration orders heavy bombing of supply dumps and petroleum storage sites in and around Hanoi and Haiphong. The administration makes it clear to the North Vietnamese that no section of Vietnam is off-limits to bombing raids.

Break-In at Watergate Hotel

Kissinger Says "Peace Is At Hand": Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho reach agreement in principle on several key measures leading to a cease-fire in Vietnam. Kissinger's view that "peace is at hand," is dimmed somewhat by South Vietnamese President Thieu's opposition to the agreement.

Nixon Wins Reelection

1973

Cease-fire Signed in Paris: A cease-fire agreement that, in the words of Richard Nixon, "brings peace with honor in Vietnam and Southeast Asia," is signed in Paris by Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. The agreement is to go into effect on January 28.

End of Draft Announced

Last American Troops Leave Vietnam

Hearings on Secret Bombings Begin: The Senate Armed Services Committee opens hearing on the US bombing of Cambodia. Allegations are made that the Nixon administration allowed bombing raids to be carried out during what was supposed to be a time when Cambodia's neutrality was officially recognized. As a result of the hearings, Congress orders that all bombing in Cambodia cease effective at midnight, August 14.

Kissinger and Le Duc Tho Win Peace Prize: The Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to Henry Kissinger of the United States and Le Duc Tho of North Vietnam. Kissinger accepts the award, while Tho declines, saying that a true peace does not yet exist in Vietnam.

1974

Thieu Announces Renewal of War

Report Cites Damage to Vietnam Ecology: According to a report issued by The National Academy of Science, use of chemical herbicides during the war caused long-term damage to the ecology of Vietnam. Subsequent inquiries will focus on the connection between certain herbicides, particularly Agent Orange, and widespread reports of cancer, skin disease, and other disorders on the part of individuals exposed to them.

Communists Take Mekong Delta Territory

Nixon Resigns

Communists Plan Major Offensive: With North Vietnamese forces in the South believed to be at their highest levels ever, South Vietnamese leaders gird themselves for an expected Communist offensive of significant proportions.

1975

Communist Forces Capture Phuoc Long Province: The South Vietnamese Army loses twenty planes in a failed effort to defend Phuoc Long, a key province just north of Saigon. North Vietnamese leaders interpret the US's complete lack of response to the siege as an indication that they could move more aggressively in the South.

Hue Falls to Communists

Communists Take Aim at Saigon: The North Vietnamese initiate the Ho Chi Minh Campaign -- a concerted effort to "liberate" Saigon. Under the command of General Dung, the NVA sets out to capture Saigon by late April, in advance of the rainy season.

Ford Calls Vietnam War "Finished": Anticipating the fall of Saigon to Communist forces, US President Gerald Ford, speaking in New Orleans, announces that as far as the US is concerned, the Vietnam War is "finished."

Last Americans Evacuate as Saigon Falls to Communists: South Vietnamese President Duong Van Minh delivers an unconditional surrender to the Communists in the early hours of April 30. North Vietnamese Colonel Bui Tin

accepts the surrender and assures Minh that, "...Only the Americans have been beaten. If you are patriots, consider this a moment of joy." As the few remaining Americans evacuate Saigon, the last two US servicemen to die in Vietnam are killed when their helicopter crashes.

1976-80

Pham Van Dong Heads Socialist Republic of Vietnam: As the National Assembly meets in July of 1976, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam names Pham Van Dong its prime minister. Van Dong and his fellow government leaders, all but one of whom are former North Vietnamese officials, take up residence in the nation's new capital--Hanoi.

Jimmy Carter Elected US President

Carter Issues Pardon to Draft Evaders: In a bold and controversial move, newly inaugurated President Jimmy Carter extends a full and unconditional pardon to nearly 10,000 men who evaded the Vietnam War draft.

Vietnam Granted Admission to United Nations

Relations Between Vietnam and China Deteriorate

Vietnam Invades Cambodia: Determined to overthrow the government of Pol Pot, Vietnam invades Cambodia. Phnompenh, Cambodia's capital, falls quickly as Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge followers flee into the jungles.

"Boat People" Flee Vietnam: Swarms of Vietnamese refugees take to the sea in overcrowded and unsafe boats in search of a better life. The ranks of the "boat people" include individuals deemed enemies of the state who've been expelled from their homeland.

China Invades, Withdraws from, Vietnam

US GAO Issues Report on Agent Orange: After years of Defense Department denials, the US General Accounting Office releases a report indicating that thousands of US troops were exposed to the herbicide Agent Orange. Thousands of veterans had demanded a government investigation into the effect that dioxin, a chemical found in Agent Orange, had on the human immune system.

Ronald Reagan Elected US President

1981-85

Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC Dedicated: Designed by Maya Ying Lin, a 22 year-old Yale architectural student, the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial opens in Washington, DC. The quiet, contemplative structure consisting of two black granite walls forming a "V", lists the names of the 58,183 Americans killed in the Vietnam War. The memorial itself stirred debate as some thought its presentation was too muted and somber, lacking the familiar elements of war-time heroics found in most war memorials.

Reagan Promises to Make MIAs "Highest National Priority": For the family members of those still listed as Missing-In-Action, the war is not over. In an address to the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, President Ronald Reagan pledges to make the finding of these individuals one of the "highest national priority."

Dow Chemical Knowledge of Dioxin Revealed: Documents used as part of a lawsuit brought by 20,000 Vietnam veterans against several chemical companies reveal that Dow Chemical had full knowledge of the serious health risks posed by human exposure to dioxin, a chemical found in the herbicide Agent Orange. Evidence indicated that despite this information, Dow continued to sell herbicides to the US military for use in Vietnam.

"Unknown Soldier" of Vietnam War Laid to Rest

US Offers Asylum to Vietnamese Political Prisoners

Vietnamese Forces Defeat Khmer Rouge Rebels: An offensive launched against refugee Khmer Rouge rebels spills over the Thai border and eventually comes to involve Thai troops. The Vietnamese are successful in suppressing the rebels and solidify their hold on Cambodia despite criticism from neighboring countries and the United Nations.

1986-90

George Bush Elected US President

Vietnamese Troops Leave Cambodia: All Vietnamese troops exit Cambodia by September of 1989, paving the way for UN-sponsored elections in 1993. As a result of the elections, a coalition government is formed and work on a new constitution begins.

1991-97

Bill Clinton Elected US President

Washington Restores Diplomatic Ties with Hanoi: As Communist Vietnam inched toward market reforms and pledged full cooperation in finding all Americans listed as still missing-in-action, the United States restores diplomatic ties with its former enemy in 1995.

McNamara Calls Vietnam Policy "Wrong, Terribly Wrong": Former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, one of the key architects of the US's war policy in Vietnam, admits grave mistakes in that policy in his 1995 memoir, *In Retrospect*. McNamara, in his book, says that "...We were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future generations to explain why."

US and Vietnam Exchange Ambassadors: Ushering in a new era of cooperation between the two former enemies, the United States and Vietnam exchange ambassadors. Douglas "Pete" Peterson, a prisoner of war for 6 years during the Vietnam War, is named US envoy to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, while H.E. Le Van Bang assumes the position of Vietnamese ambassador to the United States.

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