

The Vietnam War: A timeline

BY DAVID WALBERT



Figure 3. Indochina in 1886.
Vietnam was then called



Figure 4. Ho Chi Minh.

1858–1884

Vietnam becomes a French colony, called Indochina.

1930

The Indochinese Communist Party is formed. Ho Chi Minh is a founder.

September 1940

Japan invades Vietnam.

May 1941

Ho Chi Minh establishes the Viet Minh (the League for the Independence of Vietnam).

September 2, 1945

Japan surrenders to Allied forces. Ho Chi Minh declares Vietnam an independent nation, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. But victorious France reassumes colonial authority.

1946

The First Indochina War begins, as the Viet Minh begin fighting against French colonial rule. Over the course of the war, they grow from small guerilla bands into a well-organized and equipped army.

1950

China begins providing the Viet Minh with military advisors and weapons. In response, the United States pledges \$15 million in military aid to France.



Figure 5. Anticommunist refugees flee Vietnam after the Geneva Accord.

1954

The Viet Minh defeat the French army in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, forcing the surrender of most of the occupying troops. On July 21, France signs the Geneva Accord, a cease-fire that leads to the peaceful withdrawal of French troops from Southeast Asia. Vietnam is temporarily divided between North and South at the 17th parallel (17 degrees north latitude). The Viet Minh are to withdraw north of the line, while troops supporting France are to withdraw to the south. Elections are to be held in 1956 to reunify the country.

1955

On October 26, South Vietnam declares itself the Republic of Vietnam, with its capital at Saigon and Ngo Dinh Diem elected president in rigged elections. Diem argues that South Vietnam was not a party to the Geneva Accords, and cancels the 1956 elections. The North remains under the control of Ho's Communists, with its government at Hanoi.

1956

The U.S. military begins training South Vietnamese forces.

1957

Communist guerillas begin an insurgency in South Vietnam, assassinating more than 400 South Vietnamese officials. Within a year, Communist forces have settled along the Mekong Delta.

1960

The Hanoi government forms the National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnam. Diem calls the group the Vietcong.



Figure 6. In this photograph by journalist Malcolm Browne, Buddhist monk Thích Qu?ng ??c remains perfectly still as he is consumed by flame.

1963

Diem, a Catholic, has been intolerant of other religions and has tried to silence protests by Buddhist monks. In response, monks protest by setting themselves on fire in public places.

In November, with the tacit approval of the U.S., members of the South Vietnamese military overthrow Diem and execute him.

1964

General Nguyen Khanh takes power in South Vietnam in another coup.

On August 2 three North Vietnamese boats allegedly fire torpedoes at the U.S.S. Maddox, a destroyer located in the international waters of the Tonkin Gulf. A second attack was alleged to have taken place on August 4, but government documents later showed that no second incident took place. On August 7, Congress passes the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing President Lyndon Johnson to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression."

1965

The U.S. begins sustained bombing of North Vietnam, called Operation Rolling Thunder. The bombing will continue for three years.

In March, the first U.S. combat troops arrive in Vietnam. By year's end, more than 200,000 U.S. troops are stationed there.

1966

The first protests against the war are held, including a protest by veterans of World Wars I and II in New York City.



Figure 7. A soldier is lowered into an underground tunnel during a search-and-destroy mission.

1967

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara calls the bombing campaign ineffective. The U.S. launches Operation Cedar Falls, a ground war effort involving 30,000 U.S. and South Vietnamese troops to destroy Vietcong operations and supply sites near Saigon. They discover a massive system of underground tunnels that had served as headquarters for the Vietcong.

1968

In January, on the Vietnamese lunar new year (Tet), the North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces launch an attack on one hundred South Vietnamese cities and towns. Within days, U.S. forces recapture most areas. The “Tet Offensive” is a military defeat for Communists, but is a political victory, as Americans begin questioning the U.S. military’s conduct of the war.

On March 16, U.S. soldiers kill hundreds of Vietnamese civilians in the town of Mai Lai.

His popularity plummeting, President Johnson announces that he will not seek re-election.

In July, General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, is replaced by General Creighton Abrams.

Richard Nixon is elected President in November.

By December, U.S. troop levels in Vietnam reach 540,000.

1969

President Nixon approves “Operation Breakfast,” covert bombing of Communist supply routes and base camps in Cambodia. The bombing continues for 14 months without knowledge of Congress or the American public.



Figure 8. Bodies of civilians killed in the Mai Lai massacre.



Figure 9. Fighting bunker with a handwritten sign, “Home is where you dig it.”



Figure 10. A girl screams over the body of a slain student at Kent State, 1970.



Figure 11. A statue of Ho Chi Minh in Saigon.

Nixon’s Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, announces a policy of “Vietnamization” in which the U.S. will gradually shift the burden of the war to the South Vietnamese army.

Ho Chi Minh dies on November 3.

On November 13, the American public learns of the Mai Lai massacre. The news further turns opinion against the war. The Army has already charged Lieutenant William Calley, who led the attack, with murder. Calley will be convicted a year later.

1970

On April 30, Nixon announces that U.S. troops will attack enemy locations in Cambodia. The news sparks protests nationwide, especially on college campuses.

In May, Ohio National Guardsmen open fire on a crowd of student protesters at Kent State University, killing four students and wounding eight others. Several of the protesters had been hurling rocks and empty tear gas canisters at the Guardsmen.

1972

The North Vietnamese cross the demilitarized zone (DMZ) at the 17th parallel to attack South Vietnam in what will be known as the Easter Offensive.

Nixon announces further troop reductions.

1973

On January 27, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Vietcong leader Le Duc Tho sign the Paris Peace Accords, an immediate cease-fire that will allow for U.S. withdrawal. Kissinger and Le are awarded the Nobel Peace Prize later in the year.

On March 29, the last U.S. troops leave Vietnam.

1974

North Vietnam announces a renewal of the war.

1975

North Vietnam launches a massive assault on South Vietnam. President Gerald Ford announces that for the U.S., the Vietnam War is “finished.” On April 30, South Vietnam surrenders to Communist forces, and the last Americans evacuate Saigon.

1976–1980

Vietnam is unified under Communist rule as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The new government imprisons as many as a million people without trial for supporting the previous regime. Thousands of Vietnamese refugees, dubbed “boat people,” flee in crowded and rickety boats, hoping to be permitted to reach other countries.

1982

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is dedicated in Washington, D.C.

1997

The United States and Vietnam exchange ambassadors for the first time since the war, beginning a new era of cooperation between the two nations.



Figure 2. Vietnam today.

On the web

The American Experience: Vietnam

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/>

Companion website to the PBS series, including historical background, timeline, photographs, and personal stories.

Teaching With Documents: The War in Vietnam - A Story in Photographs

<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/vietnam-photos/>

From the National Archives and Records Administration.

French colonization and Vietnam wars

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/vietnam-wars/>

Photographs and text tell the story of Vietnam under French colonial rule, its experience during twentieth-century wars with France and the United States, and its recent liberalization.

An overview of the Vietnam War

<http://www.sog.unc.edu/programs/civiced/resources/docs/VietnamWar8.pdf>

In this lesson from the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, students will be introduced to the Vietnam War through a simulation regarding the anxiety of combat and will then receive an overview of the war via a teacher Power Point presentation or lecture (provided), or a text book reading followed by class discussion. Students will then create an illustrated timeline picturing the prominent events from the years of conflict.

Readings on the Vietnam war

<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/subtitles.cfm?titleID=71>

From the University of Houston's Digital History project.

Battlefield: Vietnam

<http://www.pbs.org/battlefieldvietnam/>

Companion website to the PBS television series, including a brief historical overview (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.pbs.org/battlefieldvietnam/history/index.html>).

Contemporary life in Vietnam

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/vietnam-reform/>

Photographs and text describe contemporary life in Vietnam and the impact of economic and social reforms since the 1980s.

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David Walbert is Editorial and Web Director for LEARN NC in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education. He is responsible for all of LEARN NC's educational publications, oversees development of various web applications including LEARN NC's website and content management systems, and is the organization's primary web, information, and visual designer. He has worked with LEARN NC since August 1997.

David holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America*, published in 2002 by Oxford University Press. With LEARN NC, he has written numerous articles for K–12 teachers on topics such as historical education, visual literacy, writing instruction, and technology integration.

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