

Name _____ Date _____

The Vietnam War

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. Vietnam has a long history of colonization. In the 1800s, France took over Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos and created one colony known as French Indochina. The French wanted to control Indochina to take advantage of its natural resources and biggest industries, including rubber, rice, tin, pepper and cotton. Many Vietnamese lost their land and were forced into labor, while the French colonizers became rich.

Notes

During World War II, Japanese forces took control of Indochina from the French. In this time of instability, a man named Ho Chi Minh formed a communist political party called the Viet Minh to fight off both the Japanese and the French. After the Japanese lost the war in 1945, they withdrew from Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh swiftly seized power and established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

2. Soon after Ho Chi Minh established Vietnam as an independent country, the French came back to recolonize it. Ho asked the United States for support against France. However, the US was allied with the French and supported them instead. Cold War politics also played a part. US politicians feared a domino effect. The domino theory suggests that if Vietnam became communist like China and the Soviet Union, the rest of Southeast Asia would fall to communism as well. The US wanted to support western countries with democratic values.

Notes

The Viet Minh and France, with the backing of the US, fought the First Indochina War. In 1954, Ho's forces defeated the French. As part of the treaty that ended the war, Vietnam was divided at the 17th parallel into two countries. North Vietnam was communist and led by Ho. In South Vietnam, the US installed pro-western president Ngo Dinh Diem in 1955. The two countries were to be reunified after a presidential election in 1956. However, that election never took place because the two sides could not decide on terms. This is how the Second Indochina War, known to Americans as the Vietnam War, began.

3. Although not officially involved in the war from the start, the US kept a military presence in Vietnam. Then, in August 1964, two American ships reported that they were ambushed by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, a body of water off the coasts of North Vietnam and China. Following this attack, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to allow the US to officially use military force against North Vietnam. Johnson installed General William Westmoreland as the commander of US forces. By 1965, the US had launched massive bombing operations in Vietnam.

Notes

4. Most people in the US expected an easy fight against North Vietnam, since the US had a more advanced military. However, American troops were unprepared for the Vietnamese climate, terrain and guerrilla war strategy of small surprise attacks instead of large battles. The North Vietnamese soldiers wore dull-colored uniforms that camouflaged them in the jungles and forests so they could sneak up on unsuspecting US troops and quickly retreat afterward.

Notes

The war ultimately became one of attrition, a series of relatively small battles designed to slowly wear down the enemy's resources and morale. US troops focused on increasing the North Vietnamese body count. They did this by conducting "search and destroy" missions, bombing and burning down villages where suspected communist sympathizers lived. This left many civilians without food or shelter. Frustrated by the jungles that hid their enemies, the US also extensively used defoliants and herbicides like Agent Orange on the Vietnamese countryside. As a result, many miles of forests and farmland were destroyed. Millions of Vietnamese and Americans were exposed to toxic chemicals.

5. Protests against the war in Vietnam began almost as soon as the US entered the conflict. Many American protestors didn't understand why the US was getting involved in another country's war, especially one halfway around the world. They were horrified by reports of US troops attacking Vietnamese civilians. One example of this was the massacre in the village of My Lai in 1968, in which more than 500 Vietnamese were killed. Young people were the most vocal protestors, in part because young men were the ones in immediate danger of the draft to fight in Vietnam. Protests happened on college campuses, in cities and in front of the Pentagon. On November 15, 1969, about 500,000 Americans gathered peacefully in Washington, DC, to protest the war. It was one of the largest anti-war demonstrations in American history.

Notes

6. When Richard Nixon became president of the US in 1969, he pledged to end the war with honor. Many people urged him to immediately remove all troops from Vietnam, but he believed that would create even more chaos in the area. Instead, he announced a program called “Vietnamization,” in which he would work toward slowly withdrawing US troops and giving the South Vietnamese the training and weapons they needed to defend themselves. It wasn’t until January 1973 that the US and North Vietnam agreed to a final peace agreement. The fighting between North and South Vietnam continued for two more years. North Vietnamese forces eventually defeated South Vietnam, and the two countries were reunified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976.

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