Vietnam

PS 142A.10
Why Vietnam?

- Shattered Cold War consensus in U.S. on opposing communism everywhere
  - Critics came to see Third World conflicts as indigenous revolutions/movements
- Undermined confidence of the U.S. in its power and role in world affairs
Why Fight in Southeast Asia?

- Domino theory: if one country falls to communism, other revolutionary movements and the Soviet Union will be emboldened to strike in other countries
- Loss to communism anywhere would damage U.S. reputation and undermine credibility for allies
- Thus, aggression anywhere is a threat
- But, no specific assets and, thus, no “stake” in the conflict
Vietnam’s Troubled History

- Indochina a French colony in 19th century
- Japan seizes region in World War II
- During the war, the U.S., Soviet Union, and China support the Viet Minh insurgency, led by Ho Chi Minh
- Viet Minh resist the reimposition of French rule after the war, starting the first Indochina War (1946)
Post-War Vietnam

- January 1950, Soviet Union and China recognize Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
  - Military assistance from July 1950
- February 1950, U.S. and UK recognized French-based government of State of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
  - U.S. military assistance from September 1950
Elections

- South Vietnam governed under emperor Bao Dai and Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem
  - Diem severely suppresses political opposition
  - Holds referendum on future of State of Vietnam (Oct. 1955); 98.2 percent of the vote for Diem (133% in Saigon)
  - Diem immediately declares Republic of Vietnam, with himself as President
- Rigged elections in North give Ho Chi Ming 99 percent of the vote
Transition

- **Diem suppresses dissent**
  - Reverses land reforms in countryside
  - Interprets all disorder as an organized communist campaign and enacts laws punishing all political violence by death and property confiscation

- **National Liberation Front (NLF), a.k.a. the Viet Cong, created 1960, unifies all anti-government movements**
  - Assumed to be part of a single communist movement at the time; role of North Vietnam in formation of NLF appears limited
Kennedy

- U.S. military served in an “advisory role” in South Vietnam
  - 900 military advisors under Eisenhower
- Kennedy expands advisors to 16,000 by 1963
  - Strategic hamlet program implemented in 1961/62
- After strategic defeat of South Vietnamese army (ARVN) in January 1963, U.S. moves to replace Diem
  - CIA communicates to select generals that it would neither oppose nor punish a coup by withdrawing aid
  - Diem murdered (Nov. 2, 1963)
  - Instability ensues, with rapid turnover in leadership
Kennedy v. Johnson

- Kennedy anticipated a limited war, focused on training and counter-insurgency (winning hearts and minds)
- Johnson bought more thoroughly into the Domino Theory
  - Feared “losing” in Vietnam
  - Focused on maintaining support for his Great Society programs at home
- Cold War conflict; U.S. support to South Vietnam provoked Soviet and Chinese support for North Vietnam
Escalation

- Gulf of Tonkin Incident
  - *USS Maddox* fires upon North Vietnamese torpedo boats (Aug. 2, 1964)
  - Report of attack on *USS Maddox* and *USS Turner Joy* on Aug. 4, prompts Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on Aug. 7, granting president permission to expand war
  - Aug. 4 attack never happened according to documents declassified in 2005
- Bombing campaign escalates rapidly, including supply lines through Laos
- U.S. combat troops deployed March 1965
  - 3/65 = 3,500, 12/65 = 200,000; peak of 1968 = 536,100
- North Vietnam counters by sending combat troops
Tet-Offensive

- Jan. 30, 1968, 85,000 Viet Cong/North Vietnamese troops attack key military installations and urban sites
  - Scale of attack surprises U.S. and ARVN
  - Most cities recaptured within weeks
  - Over 5000 ARVN and 4000 U.S. casualties; more than 45,000 wounded
  - PAVN suffers 45,267 killed and 111,179 wounded
- Ho Chi Minh: “You will kill 10 of our men, and we will kill 1 of yours, and in the end it will be you who tire of it.”
Response to Tet

- U.S. concludes that war is unwinnable
  - Johnson refuses to send more troops
  - Cronkite editorial
- Domestic opposition to the war skyrockets
  - War reconceptualized as national liberation struggle
- Johnson’s approval rating drops from 48 to 36 percent
  - Eugene McCarthy (anti-war candidate) does shockingly well in New Hampshire primary
  - Johnson drops out of the race and suspends bombing campaign to open peace talks
Nixon and the Slow Denouement

- **Nixon Doctrine:**
  - Troop withdrawals and Vietnamization
  - U.S. forces pull back from front lines
  - But, invades Cambodia and bombs Laos

- **U.S. public turns against the war:**
  - My Lai Massacre
  - Pentagon Papers (1971)

- **Paris Peace Accords (Jan. 1973):**
  - U.S. troops withdrawn
Final Phase

- U.S. continues to supply ARNV, but it fails as a fighting force
- North increases forces in South
- Saigon falls April 1975 and country unified
Could the U.S. have won?

- Yes, weak-willed politicians held back the U.S. military and did not support it
- Yes, but military ill-equipped to fight counter-insurgency in SE Asia
- No, cannot win when regime lacks support from the people it governs
  - Indirect rule requires some domestic supporters
- No, U.S. had no real stakes in the country
  - In the end, no specific assets worth protecting