

The Vietnam War

Background:

President Kennedy was against getting heavily involved in Vietnam, but he was assassinated in 1963. Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy's successor, decided that the USA must either become deeply involved in Vietnam or pull out completely. The first option was chosen after North Vietnamese gunboats attacked American warships in 1964.

Early in the war

From 1964 onwards, Johnson sent hundreds of thousands of young American soldiers, warships and aircraft into Vietnam. In 1963 before Kennedy's assassination, there were less than 100 000 American advisors and troops in Vietnam – from 1964-68 this figure had risen to over 500 000.

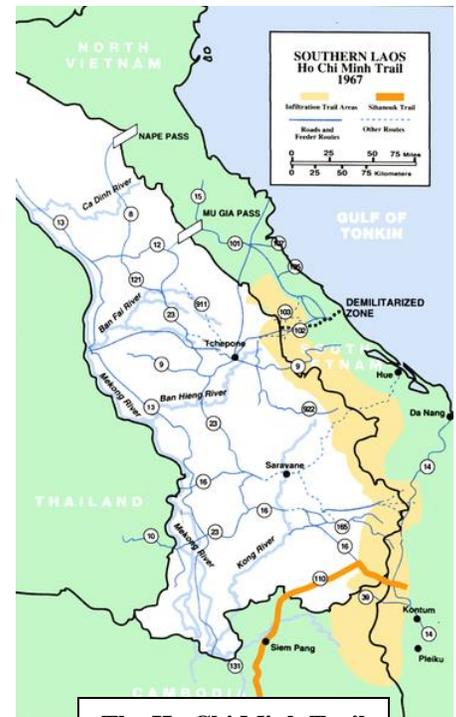
In early 1965 the USA launched Operation Rolling Thunder, a massive bombing campaign against North Vietnam. They bombed factories and the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was essential for getting supplies to the Viet Cong in South Vietnam.

In 1967 the Americans started search and destroy missions. They would fly into an area and search out and kill the Viet Cong.

Why was there a stalemate in 1968?



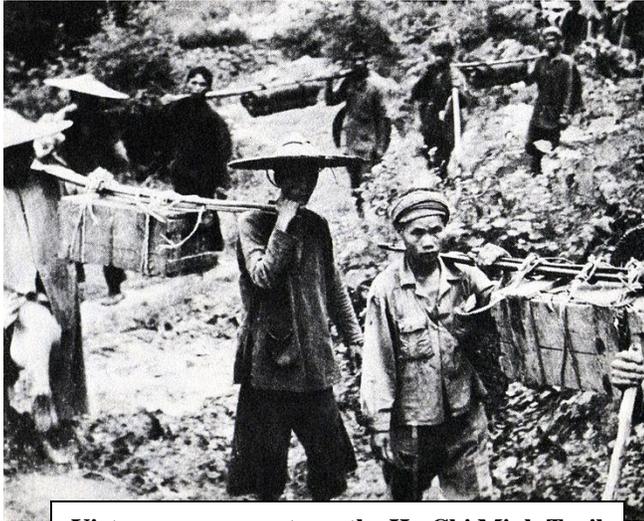
village. The Americans could not fight an enemy that they could not see.



The Ho Chi Minh Trail

The bombing campaign did not work very well against the Viet Cong. They hid themselves and their equipment in highly protected tunnels in the jungle. The CIA estimated that there was 240 kilometres of this tunnel network that kept the Viet Cong safe.

The Viet Cong used elusive guerrilla techniques of fighting. They avoided open combat at all costs. They would attack American patrols, then disappear off into the jungle or



Vietnamese peasants on the Ho Chi Minh Trail

The Viet Cong controlled the rural areas. Anyone who cooperated with the South Vietnamese was executed, but anyone who supported the Viet Cong was helped and protected. Therefore, very few were willing to help the Americans.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was the transport route for equipment supplied by the USSR and China who supported the Communists in North Vietnam. US aircraft would bomb the Trail with bombs and chemical weapons, but as soon as the bombing stopped, around 40 000

Vietnamese peasants would work to get the road operational again and keep the supplies moving.

The guerrilla and jungle warfare drained the morale and energy of the US troops. About 40% of the US soldiers were conscripted so they did not want to be in Vietnam in the first place and they were highly inexperienced. It was the opposite with the Viet Cong fighters who knew their way around the jungle, were completely dedicated to the cause and experienced in jungle warfare.

The search and destroy missions ended up killing more innocent Vietnamese civilians than Viet Cong fighters because it was impossible to tell the difference between them. The American public were horrified by this massacre of harmless people and their support of the war weakened.

The American public and the Vietnam War

The media brought the horror of the Vietnam War right into the sitting rooms of the American people. They reported all the happenings in Vietnam; they interviewed prisoners of war and filmed executions; they showed the effects that the US's chemical weapons had on the Vietnamese.

By the end of the war, the USA had 200 000 dead or wounded soldiers and the war cost the Americans \$20 billion dollars per year. The Viet Cong were prepared to accept the heavy losses that they received, but the US public were not prepared to watch their men die for a war they did not support.

Students in American universities protested all over the country. Many of these protesters became "draft dodgers" – in other words, they refused to serve in Vietnam. In 1970 four protesting students were shot dead by the National Guard troopers and this caused a public uproar.

In October 1969 one million Americans united in an anti-war protest, with fifty members of Congress joining in. The following month about 700 000 protesters marched to Washington D.C. This was the largest ever protest in USA's history. In 1971 around 2300 Vietnam War veterans held another anti-war protest in Washington.

Questions:

1. Why did Lyndon B. Johnson decide to become heavily involved in Vietnam?
2. What was Operation Rolling Thunder?
3. Why did the bombing campaign not work on the Viet Cong or the Ho Chi Minh Trail?
4. Why were the Vietnamese peasants unwilling to help the US soldiers?
5. Give two reasons why the US soldiers hated fighting in Vietnam.
6. The American public were horrified by the results of the search and destroy missions. Why?
7. Make a table displaying the differences between the Viet Cong fighters and the US soldiers. You should get at least very least four differences.
8. What did the media do to bring coverage of the Vietnam War to the American public?
9. Who were the "draft dodgers"?
10. 'The American public supported the war in Vietnam.' Do you agree with this statement?