

What motivated US Presidents to increase involvement in Vietnam 1945-65?

Every president from 1945 to 1965 increased America's involvement in Vietnam - it started with help to French forces and culminated in all-out war. There were several factors which applied across the period and influenced the actions of all the presidents:

- Concern about the spread of Communism to Southeast Asian countries ('domino theory').
- The economic importance of Southeast Asia. There were a lot of vital raw materials (including rubber and petroleum) and markets which would be threatened if Communism spread.
- The desire of each president to be the one to solve the problem.
- The reluctance of each president to be the one to admit failure.

Each individual president also had his own reasons for increasing America's involvement.



Task

1. Read through the following statements for each president. Use highlighters/coloured pencils to identify parts of the statement which show:
 - a. fear of communism
 - b. the feelings of the president
 - c. pressure from others
 - d. poor knowledge or advice
 - e. other motivating factors.
2. Write a conclusion for each president, explaining the main reason why you think they became increasingly involved in Vietnam.
3. Write an overall conclusion explaining why America became increasingly involved in Vietnam 1945-1965.

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Truman 1945-1952: *the USA started to support the French financially in Vietnam.*

- As a new president, Truman wanted to appear tough and show that he had the ability to make difficult decisions.
- Truman did not know much about the rest of the world. He listened to his Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, who believed in standing up to Communism.
- Truman and Acheson supported the French because they were important allies against Communism in Indochina, Europe and NATO.
- In 1949 China became Communist. There was a fear that Communism would spread to the rest of Asia.
- When Chinese troops went into Korea during the Korean War, the Americans believed that the Chinese wanted to spread Communism to the rest of Asia.



Eisenhower 1952-1960: *supported Ngo Dinh Diem in setting up the Republic of South Vietnam.*

- Eisenhower also wanted France to be a strong NATO member to defend Western Europe against the perceived Communist threat.
- France threatened to be unhelpful in the fight against Communism in the West and to pull out of Indochina unless America gave them aid.
- Eisenhower knew Truman had become less popular when China became Communist.
- Eisenhower felt Ho Chi Minh had won at the Geneva conference and wanted to restore America's prestige in the Far East.
- Diem decided to rely on America, even though France was supposed to stay in Vietnam until July 1956. The Americans pledged their support within weeks of the Geneva agreement.
- The Americans committed themselves to guaranteeing an independent South Vietnam and said they would help Diem. Once the commitment was made America had to see it through.
- The Americans thought that Diem's battles were against unpopular Communists and that he could win with more military force and money. Seven billion dollars was sent between 1955 and 1961.
- 1,500 American advisers were sent. Half of them were 'military advisers'. This was a short step to putting American soldiers in Vietnam.



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Kennedy 1960-1963: *increased America's commitment and military involvement. Military advisers rose from 800 to 17,000.*

- Kennedy came from a family which was very anti-Communist.
- In order to try and win votes Kennedy had emphasised that he was firmly anti-Communist and that there was a need for a more dynamic foreign policy. He therefore had to stick to this when he came to power and this limited his foreign policy.
- Kennedy was very sensitive about people saying he was too young and inexperienced to be President. He therefore wanted to show he was being assertive in foreign affairs.
- Just before he came to power, Khrushchev (the leader of the USSR) had promised foreign aid to developing countries.
- Robert McNamara, the Secretary of State, was left to deal with Vietnam. His solutions to problems usually involved using the military and this led to America's increased military involvement in Vietnam.
- Kennedy had failed in Cuba with the Bay of Pigs and had also failed to neutralise Laos in 1961. He therefore needed to find victory somewhere else. In the *New York Times* after the Bay of Pigs incident Kennedy said 'Now we have a problem in making our power credible and Vietnam is the place.'
- By encouraging a change in government in South Vietnam, America was then obliged to help other governments.



Johnson 1963-1968: *prepared to commit the USA to a full scale conflict with Vietnam.*

- Johnson was very patriotic and was committed to South Vietnam for national honour. He said that defeat by 'that damn little country' 'that raggedy-ass little fourth rate Vietnam was inconceivable'.
- After the assassination of President Kennedy, Johnson felt that he had to stand by what Kennedy had done.
- Johnson found it difficult to understand foreign affairs and thought that Ho Chi Minh was another Hitler.
- Johnson kept the same advisers as Kennedy so there were no fresh ideas. Most of them wanted the USA to be even more involved in Vietnam.
- McNamara criticised himself, Johnson and Kennedy for not questioning every stage of US involvement in Vietnam.
- In the summer of 1964 Johnson was accused by the opposition of being soft on Communism.
- The Tonkin Gulf resolution gave Johnson the power to take the USA into a full scale war if he felt necessary.
- In 1965 polls showed that 70% of the nation was behind Johnson. 80% believed in the 'domino theory' and in sending troops to Vietnam.

