THE VIETNAM WAR (1945–1975)

Overview

The Vietnam War is likely the most problematic of all the wars in American history. It was a morally ambiguous conflict from the start, ostensibly a war against Communism yet also a war to suppress nationalist self-determination. The war was rife with paradoxes: in the name of protecting democracy, the United States propped up a dictatorial regime in South Vietnam; later in the war, the U.S. military was destroying villages in order to “save” them. Because U.S. objectives were often poorly defined during the course of the war, U.S. policy often meandered: indeed, the United States would “Americanize” the war only to “Vietnamize” it five years later. Not surprisingly, a profound sense of confusion pervaded the entire conflict: the American media sometimes represented tactical victories as terrible defeats, while the U.S. military kept meticulous enemy body counts without any clear method of distinguishing the bodies of the hostile Viet Cong from those of the friendly South Vietnamese.

The U.S. involvement in Vietnam is inseparable from the larger context of the Cold War. Ever since the end of World War II, the United States and Soviet Union had been in the midst of a worldwide struggle for spheres of influence, each superpower wanting to exert cultural, political, and ideological control over various regions of the globe. At the same time, the United States and the USSR each wanted to stop the other country from gaining any such spheres. Southeast Asia in general, and Vietnam in particular, were important spheres of influence in the minds of both U.S. and Soviet leaders. With the “fall” of North Vietnam to Communism in 1954, the United States was then committed to stopping the further spread of Communism in the region.

The escalation period of the Vietnam War, from 1955 to 1965, mirrored the Cold War in that the United States and USSR avoided direct conflict—and thereby the possibility of nuclear war—by operating through proxy governments and forces. Unfortunately for the United States, the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government was weak and corrupt, while the Soviet-backed North Vietnamese government was a fiercely proud and independent group of nationalists willing to fight endlessly against foreign dominance and for Vietnamese unification.

The United States further antagonized the North Vietnamese by stepping into the power void that France, the former colonial power in Vietnam, had left behind. In its zeal to battle Communism, the United States essentially ended up assuming the hated role of imperial master in Vietnam. As a result, when the United States sent troops into the territory in the mid-1960s, they found a far different situation than any other they had faced up to that point in the Cold War. Instead of its usual tentative dance of brinksmanship with the USSR, the United States suddenly faced an