

# Vietnam War Glossary

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## COLD WAR TERMS:

- **Communism:** a political and economic ideology under which the government owns all means of production. Supported by the Soviet, Chinese, and North Vietnamese governments (among others).
- **Containment:** a strategy to stop the expansion of an enemy; in the Cold War, used to describe stopping the expansion of communism.
- **Domino Theory:** states that if one country in a region came under the influence of communism, the surrounding countries would follow; used by the United States to justify involvement in several conflicts during the Cold War.

## GENERAL TERMS:

- **Agent Orange:** an herbicide used widely by the United States in Vietnam; has lasting health effects on those exposed.
- **Conscientious Objector:** an individual who claims the right to refuse to perform military service.
- **Conscription:** AKA “the draft,” the compulsory enlistment of a nation’s people in the military.
- **Deferment:** official postponement of military service.
- **Guerrilla warfare:** a form of irregular warfare defined by use of small groups and flexible tactics to wear down an enemy, including ambushes, hit-and-run attacks, raids, etc.
- **Napalm:** a flammable liquid used as an incendiary device against buildings and humans.
- **Prisoner of War (POW):** a person who has been captured and imprisoned by the enemy while at war.

## LEGISLATION AND POLICIES:

- **Geneva Accords (1954):** ended the First Indochina War and separated Vietnam along the 17th parallel, with North Vietnam under communist rule.
- **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (1964):** gave broad congressional approval for the expansion of the Vietnam War and increased the war powers of the president under LBJ.
- **Vietnamization:** a Nixon-era policy intended to end US involvement in Vietnam by transferring all military responsibilities to the South Vietnamese.
- **War Powers Act (1973):** a law intended to restrict the President's power to commit the United States to war without congressional consent.
- **Paris Peace Accords (1973):** peace treaty signed to end the Vietnam War; effectively ended all direct intervention by the United States and withdrawal of US troops and advisors, and the return of all POWs held by the North Vietnamese.



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## AMERICAN FIGURES:

- **American Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG):** a group of American military advisors sent to other countries to provide training assistance, best known for involvement in South Vietnam before and during the Vietnam War.
- **Lyndon B. Johnson:** the 36th president of the United States, from 1963-1969.
- **Richard M. Nixon:** the 37th president of the United States, from 1969-1974.
- **General William Westmoreland:** Commander of the United States forces in Vietnam from 1964-1968.

## IMPORTANT PLACES:

- 17th Parallel
- Cambodia
- Hanoi
- Ia Drang Valley
- Khe Sanh
- Laos
- Mekong Delta
- North Vietnam
- Saigon
- South Vietnam

## VIETNAMESE TERMS AND FIGURES:

- **17th Parallel:** the demarcation between North and South Vietnam established by the 1954 Geneva Accords.
- **Hanoi:** the capital of North Vietnam during the First Indochina War (1946-1954) and the Vietnam War (1955-1975), now the capital of unified Vietnam (1976-present).
- **Ho Chi Minh:** the leader of the Viet Minh and first president of North Vietnam, determined to reunite North and South Vietnam under communist rule.
- **Ngo Dinh Diem:** anti-communist leader of South Vietnam from 1955 until his assassination in 1963.
- **North Vietnamese Army:** aka People's Army of Vietnam, the regular army of North Vietnam.
- **People's Liberation Armed Forces of South Vietnam (PLAF):** the army of the National Liberation Front/Viet Cong.
- **Saigon:** the capital of South Vietnam, now Ho Chi Minh City.
- **Viet Minh:** organization that led the struggle for Vietnamese independence from the French during and following World War II. Led by Ho Chi Minh.
- **Viet Cong:** aka National Liberation Front, a political organization in South Vietnam that supported the efforts of North Vietnam against the United States and the South Vietnamese government. Referred to as VC or Charlie by American servicemembers.



# Major Vietnam War Combatants

1955-1975

## Pro-Communist (supported by China, USSR)

### NORTH VIETNAM

*Aka Democratic Republic of Vietnam*

**Founded:** 1954

**Leaders:** Ho Chi Minh (1955-1969),  
Ton Duc Thang (1969-1976)

**Army:** Vietnam People's Army (VPA),  
Northern Vietnamese Army (NVA)

**General:** Vo Nguyen Giap

**Headquarters:** Hanoi

Sought reunification of Vietnam under communist rule; used more traditional (non-guerrilla) military strategies



### VIET CONG

*Aka National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF)*

**Founded:** 1960

**Leader:** Nguyen Huu Tho (1969-1976)

**Army:** People's Liberation Armed Forces of South Vietnam (PLAF)

**General:** Tran Van Tra

**Headquarters:** Loc Ninh

Communists based in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos; fought against the South Vietnamese Army and the United States; known for usage of guerrilla warfare.



## Anti-Communist (supported by United States)

### SOUTH VIETNAM

*Aka Republic of Vietnam*

**Founded:** 1954

**Leaders:** Ngo Dinh Diem (1955-1963), Nguyen Van Thieu (1967-1975)

**Army:** Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)

**General:** Hoang Xuan Lam

**Headquarters:** Saigon

Participated in many operations with American troops; found more support in urban areas, struggled with popularity with rural peasantry.



# Vietnam War Timeline

- **May 7, 1954:** Ho Chi Minh's communist Viet Minh forces defeat the French to end the First Indochina War
- **July 1954:** countries come to an agreement at the Geneva Conference to divide Vietnam into two zones - North Vietnam to be governed by the Viet Minh, and South Vietnam to be governed by the State of Vietnam. Cambodia and Laos created as separate states.
- **November 1, 1955:** the first American advisors are sent to South Vietnam as the American Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was created.
- **December 20, 1960:** National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) established in South Vietnam.
- **August 2-4, 1964:** Gulf of Tonkin incident, Johnson seeks congressional approval for United States involvement
- **March 8, 1965:** First United States Marines land in Vietnam (Danang)
- **November 14-18, 1965:** the Battle of Ia Drang - the first large scale battle between the United States and the North Vietnamese Army. Both sides claim victory.
- **January 21-July 9, 1968:** Battle of Khe Sanh
- **January 31, 1968:** the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong launch the surprise Tet Offensive, attacking provincial capitals and other urban centers throughout South Vietnam.
- **January 27, 1973:** Cease-fire reached between North Vietnam and the United States. POWs begin to return home.
- **March 29, 1973:** last US combat troops leave South Vietnam.
- **April 30, 1975:** Fall of Saigon.



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. During the Vietnam War, Americans had more immediate access to the fighting than ever before through television news. Reporters and camera operators were stationed with troops. How do you think all this access affected the American public's opinion of the war?
2. How do we determine and evaluate success in war? Do you think the United States won or lost the Vietnam War? Explain your answer.
3. What was the impact of technology on the style of war in Vietnam? How was Vietnam distinct from other wars in America's history? How was it similar?
4. What is the role of organizations like the Virginia War Memorial in sharing the stories of conflicts like the Vietnam War? What are some ways you can keep the stories of Vietnam veterans and veterans of other wars alive in your community?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Research the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. What were the required criteria for the design? How was it chosen? Who designed the Wall and what was the concept of the Memorial? When was it dedicated? What is it made of?
  - a. Compare and contrast the Vietnam Veterans Memorial with the Shrine of Memory at the Virginia War Memorial.
  - b. How would you design a memorial to the American servicemen and women killed in Vietnam? Why?
2. Watch two or more films about the Vietnam War (list on Resources page). Compare and contrast the movies while thinking about the following questions: what do you think the point of view of the movie maker was regarding the war? Was there any obvious misinformation about the Vietnam War? What did the movie get right? What was public reception to this movie, and why? Do you think a veteran would feel the same way watching this as someone who hasn't served?
3. Interview a veteran. Reach out to a veteran you know (maybe a relative, or someone in your community), and ask if you can ask them about their experiences. See [vawarmemorial.org](http://vawarmemorial.org) for suggestions on how to do an interview, and make sure you have permission from your parents (if applicable)!



# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

To learn more about the experiences of Virginians in the Vietnam War, view our Virginians at War films:

- **Virginians at War: Vietnam War - Air Operations** - <https://vimeo.com/367042606>
- **Virginians at War: Vietnam War - Tet Offensive** - <https://vimeo.com/367038067>

Interested in doing more research? Visit the links below to learn more about the Vietnam War!

- National Archives: <https://www.archives.gov/research/vietnam-war>
- Encyclopedia Britannica (for Middle School):  
<https://kids.britannica.com/students/article/Vietnam-War/277599>
- Khan Academy:  
<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/postwarera/1960s-america/a/the-vietnam-war>
- Ken Burns/PBS: <https://vpm.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/ken-burns-the-vietnam-war/>
  - Music from Ken Burns' Vietnam War (Spotify):  
<https://open.spotify.com/album/11jfbjzLcCXOv1R70CosnO>

## **Vietnam War Films:**

- The Green Berets (1968, G)
- Forrest Gump (1994, PG-13)
- Deer Hunter (1978, R)
- Platoon (1986, R)
- Apocalypse Now (1979, R)
- Born on the 4th of July (1989, R)
- Full Metal Jacket (1987, R)
- We Were Soldiers (2002, R)
- Good Morning Vietnam (1987, R)
- First Blood (1982, R)
- Tropic Thunder (2008, R)

