

## America's Longest War

### Lyndon Johnson and U.S. Involvement in Southeast Asia

(Vietnam War)

#### Background

Doesn't just happen in 1960s when Johnson becomes President, has been slowly building since 1945

Starts under an entirely different set of circumstances

- as a consequence of events during WWII
- as a consequence of what is going to happen regarding prior colonial possessions
- prior to the start of WWII, Vietnam had been a French colonial possession
  - France gets beat pretty early on in the Second World War, becomes a nazi puppet state
  - French colonial possessions are now up for the grabs

based on its location on the map--who's going to do the grabbing? Japan.

After 1945 Vietnam decides it's going to be its own territory--declare their independence w/ a pretty massive celebration that the U.S. military participates in; U.S. air force does a fly-over, etc.

- *There is U.S. support for the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence*
- In this declaration ceremony, Ho Chi Minh (a guy prominent in the movement of vietnamese independence) gives a speech--the need for Vietnamese independence; uses a lot of words from the british colonies' Declaration of Independence/Thomas Jefferson
  - Ho Chi Minh had studied abroad, studied the "great thinkers" like Thomas Jefferson--really liked him, Carl Marx (heavy duty condemnation of capitalism--saying it can never provide equality for working people), etc.

Ho Chi Minh had an interesting mix of ideologies--took ideas from Jefferson, Marx, and others--and applied them to the realities of how life was lived in Indochina.

- Indochina circa 1945--subsistence agrarian; an agrarian economy that is a subsistence economy----->produce enough food so that your family survives that year--not producing for capitalist wealth, just for your family

U.S. at this time is becoming more and more of a consumer economy--invention of credit cards, more travelers, expanding reaches, and completely unable to appreciate the realities of what life in indochina was like.

- pretty much every American policy maker flunks indochina 101

#### • 5 presidents "dealt" vs. "death" with it

Vietnam becomes one of the main factors that helps ruin the mid century liberal synthesis (???) that emerged during Roosevelt's presidency

#### Things learned during WWII:

- **never appease a dictator** (Hitler)
  - by the time Lyndon is in the White House, Ho Chi Minh has gained the reputation as a dictator by the 1960s
- **fear of domino effect** (more of WWII moving into the Cold War)--we are afraid during the Cold War of "dominos falling"; George Keenan and the "containment" idea
  - so don't let another country go communist, in this case--Vietnam

#### • Truman, Kennedy, Eisenhower-->policy of un-involvement/sending aid/advisors...

#### • In the fight for Vietnams independence from France it has turned into a quasi-civil war between Northern and Southern Vietnam-->2 year "cooling off period"--then have free elections

Problems w/ that idea:

- majority of the vietnamese population lived in northern half of the country
- northern half of the country tended to be more rural/subsistence oriented part of the country where Ho Chi Minh had support--a charismatic dude w/ a large following
- 1956: U.S. found "violations in the treaty" and wouldn't allow these free elections because they realized that Ho Chi Minh would win over Diem, and Minh had already been deemed a communist in the American people's minds--so call off the free elections that further ties the US to the fate of Vietnam

#### Buddhist Monk Protests

early 1963

Followers of Ho Chi Minh are very unhappy with the practices of diem (?) gov't and the western interference in Vietnam-->these buddhist monks in their religious faith are well adept at meditation and taking themselves into deep meditative states

- Unhappy that catholicism has been forced on the vietnamese people-->so they start to protest by putting themselves into very deep meditative trances and then allow their bodies to be set on fire-- and remain still and seated as they burn to death-->pretty gruesome statement of protest

Their efforts attract a lot of media attention from U.S as well as from the Kennedy administration

- tremendous amount of reaction to "hey we're giving a bunch of money to diem who is cracking down these things on vietnamese people and we're allied w/ the guy who is making people in his country so mad that they're setting themselves on fire?"
- Conversation: Should we really continue an alliance w/ Diem?
  - happens in a hypothetical fashion
  - should we kill Diem?
  - The U.S., in its series of misguided decisions toward Vietnam that tie it closer to its fate, continues to "break it" but when will we have to "buy it"
  - the tensions in Vietnam deteriorate after Diem is killed
  - Kennedy is killed-->Lyndon becomes President

Issues Lyndon Johnson Faced upon taking Office:

- Domestic situation: failure to act is no longer even possible
- Global situation: same as above
- Very early in his presidency is talking about the assassination of Diem--"cops and robbers"
  - he was saying it was a bad idea for the United States to do this
  - does not sound sympathetic to the U.S. participation in the Vietnam War
  - he is a man trapped.

### In or Out? The Domino Theory

map from Time magazine on powerpoint in class

showing the hypothetical/possible pattern of communism spreading throughout the world

Johnson is continuing to struggle w/ this

"the more we try to do for them the less it seems they're willing to do for themselves" ??

"and that's the only utilization of power, to glorify the individual..." (whitehousetapes.org/ LBJ explains his Fiscal Policy may 27, 1964)

- "if they send troops it's going to get worse, but it's already bad"
- well guess what, they send troops--and it does get worse
  - Feel like they need to take action b/c we've already made such a mess of it--but if we get out of it we're gonna look weak/seem like communist sympathizers, the rest of the world won't trust us... there is a tremendous amount of indecision that runs throughout these conversations.

### • Takeaway point:

this is a war that becomes an Alcatraz (?) around Lyndon Johnson's neck

he wanted to outdo the new deal and build a great society--one w/ equality of experience and opportunity for all americans

Johnson saw himself as a leader who would do civil rights, health care, education, transportation, urban renewal.....clean air/water....arts..... ETC-->but at the end of his presidency he said "that bitch of a war is killing the lady i love---my country" or something like that