

Vietnam: The Indochina War



The Indochina War

- Early Stalemate
 - From 1946-1949, neither side was able to gain a meaningful advantage
- France
 - Entered the war willingly, believing that controlling Vietnam was crucial to post-WWII recovery
 - Had confidence that their superior weaponry and resources would win the war
- Viet Minh
 - Proved to be a dedicated and skilled enemy
 - Operated in small units that specialized in guerilla warfare
 - Assumed control of significant portions of the countryside in northern and central Vietnam



The Indochina War

• Early Stalemate

- French also underestimated Ho Chi Minh's popularity in Vietnamese communities
 - Attempted to reduce support by introducing a new government led by Bao Dai (former emperor of Vietnam)
 - Most recognized that he was just a puppet for the French government and the strategy failed
- French eventually became divided over whether to continue its efforts in Vietnam
 - Viet Minh controlled most of northern and central Vietnam, while growing in popularity in the south
 - French troops found it difficult to distinguish between peaceful Vietnamese and Viet Minh soldiers



The Indochina War

• Cold War

- The Indochina War eventually became part of the Cold War
 - Truman's "Containment Doctrine" was applied to the Indochina situation
 - "Domino Theory" also applied to the Indochina conflict
 - The loss of one country to communism usually triggered similar collapses in neighboring countries
 - After China and the Soviets recognized Ho Chi Minh as the rightful rulers of Vietnam, this fear became a reality
 - The Korean War also convinced the U.S. that they needed to focus greater attention on Southeast Asia
- The U.S. condemns Ho Chi Minh and offers support to the French



The Indochina War

• Cold War

- February 7, 1950
 - The U.S. formally recognizes the French-controlled government of Bao Dai as the legitimate government of Vietnam
- By the spring of 1950, the U.S. is providing direct political, economic, and military support to French forces in Vietnam
 - Despite this, many American officials expressed doubt about getting involved
 - Many believed that the U.S. would not be able to help change Vietnam into a peaceful, anticommunist nation



The Indochina War

• French Support Fades

- U.S. support provided a much-needed boost for the French
- Aided by the Chinese, the Viet Minh managed to strengthen their hold over northern provinces
- Chinese weapons and other equipment helped the Viet Minh expand into a significant military force
 - Showed a greater willingness to confront French forces in larger battles



The Indochina War

• French Support Fades

- Fall of 1950
 - Viet Minh launch several successful strikes against the French in the north
 - Eventually kill or capture over 6,000 French troops in October alone
- Following these defeats, the war begin to become less and less popular amongst the French
- By the end of 1950, Viet Minh forces seemed to be on their way to victory



The Indochina War

• American Aid Fails

- From 1950-1954, the U.S. steadily increased its aid to France in Vietnam
 - By 1954, approximately \$3 billion in aid went to France
- Despite all American aid, the war seemed to be turning in the Viet Minh's favor
 - By the end of 1952, French casualties had reached 80,000-90,000
 - Ho Chi Minh's message continued to appeal to young Vietnamese, making it difficult for the French to gain any advantage with the population



The Indochina War

- Dien Bien Phu

- Late 1953
 - Large French military force was assigned to Dien Bien Phu
 - Sent in order to prevent the Viet Minh from taking the Mekong River Valley
- Also, the French hoped to be able to negotiate a more favorable treaty if it held strong military positions
- The French underestimated the size and strength of the Viet Minh forces surrounding Dien Bien Phu



The Indochina War

- Dien Bien Phu

- Early 1954
 - Viet Minh successfully isolated Dien Bien Phu from the rest of French forces
- March 1954
 - The Viet Minh launch a fierce siege on the stronghold
 - For two months, Viet Minh units attacked the trapped French soldiers with artillery, anti-aircraft guns, and automatic weapons
 - France tried to airdrop supplies, but many missed their mark or were shot down



The Indochina War

• Dien Bien Phu

- Conditions worsened as the battle dragged on
 - Food, medicine, and ammunition depleted rapidly without reinforcements
- President Eisenhower considered conducting airstrikes on Communist positions surrounding Dien Bien Phu
 - Eventually decided it was too risky, which angered the French
- May 7, 1954
 - Dien Bien Phu is overrun by Viet Minh forces
 - Although Viet Minh lost more lives, it was considered a major victory
 - France was humiliated at the defeat



The Indochina War

• Dien Bien Phu

- The defeat created disarray amongst the French government
- July 20, 1954
 - France agrees to permanently withdraw from Vietnam under the Geneva Accords
- This inadvertently cleared the way for the U.S. to commit time and resources to Vietnam

