**Learning Objective:**

Explain the causes and effects of the Vietnam War.

**Thematic Focus:**

*Diplomatic, economic, cultural, and military interactions between empires, nations, and peoples shape the development of America and America’s increasingly important role in the world.*

1. United States policymakers engaged in a cold war with the authoritarian Soviet Union, seeking to limit the growth of Communist military power and ideological influence, create a free-market global economy, and build an international security system.
2. Postwar decolonization and the emergence of powerful nationalist movements in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East led both sides in the Cold War to seek allies among new nations, many of which remained nonaligned.
   1. Division of Vietnam
      1. Following World War II, the U.S. adopted a policy of containment to halt the expansion of Communist influence. France continued to exercise influence and control over Indochina.
      2. Led by Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Minh defeated the French at the Battle of Dienbienphu. Following their defeat, the French withdrew from Vietnam in 1954.
      3. American involvement in Vietnam grew out of the policy commitments and assumptions of containment.
      4. The United States refused to sign the Geneva Accords which divided North and South Vietnam and soon replaced France as the dominant Western power in Indochina.
   2. Domino Effect
      1. The U.S. believed that if one nation fell under communist control, nearby nations would inevitably also fall under communist influence.
      2. The U.S. feared that it might eventually be forced back to Hawaii, as it was before WWII.
   3. SEATO
      1. To prevent South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from “falling” to communism, Secretary of State Dulles put together a regional defense pact called the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, agreeing to defend one another in case of an attack within the region.
      2. The U.S., Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, and Pakistan also signed.
      3. The CIA organized commando raids across the border into North Vietnam, hoping to provoke a response which could be blamed on the communists.
3. Concerned by expansionist Communist ideology and Soviet repression, the United States sought to contain communism through a variety of measures, including major military engagements in Vietnam.
   1. Escalation
      1. In 1964, the U.S. alleged that North Vietnamese torpedo boats launched an unprovoked attack against U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. The facts of what actually happened have never been fully explained.
      2. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorized President Lyndon Johnson to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” Congress responded to the unsubstantiated report of North Vietnamese aggression by passing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution overwhelmingly.
      3. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution gave President Johnson a “blank check” to escalate the war in Vietnam. Within a short time, President Johnson began to dramatically escalate the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam.
   2. Tet Offensive
      1. In late 1968, the Viet Cong suddenly launched a series of attacks on 27 key South Vietnamese cities, including the capital, Saigon.
      2. The Viet Cong were eventually forced to retreat after suffering heavy losses.
      3. The Tet Offensive undermined President Johnson’s credibility, as it showed the War in Vietnam was far from over. As a result of the Tet Offensive, public support for the war decreased and anti-war sentiment increased.
   3. Vietnamization
      1. Nixon began to slowly withdraw American troops from Vietnam and replaced them with newly trained South Vietnamese troops. This process was known as Vietnamization.
      2. The policy of Vietnamization promised to preserve U.S. goals and bring “peace with honor.”
      3. In April 1970, Nixon announced that Vietnamization was succeeding and that another 150,000 American troops would be out of Vietnam by the end of the year.
      4. The U.S. invaded Cambodia on April 29, 1970. Nixon, suddenly and without consulting Congress, ordered American forces to join with the South Vietnamese army and clean out the Viet Cong sanctuaries in officially neutral Cambodia.
      5. Nixon defended the action, saying it was necessary to protect American forces and support Vietnamization.
   4. Troop Withdrawal
      1. Henry Kissinger, President Nixon’s national security advisor and top negotiator in Vietnam, engaged in a series of secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese, aimed at reaching a negotiated settlement.
      2. The U.S. and the North Vietnamese finally reached an armistice known as the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973. The U.S. agreed to withdraw the last of its troops in exchange for the release of over 500 prisoners of war.
4. Americans debated the appropriate power of the executive branch in conducting foreign and military policy.
   1. The U.S. could not afford both President Johnson’s Great Society programs and the Vietnam War. The combination of spending on the war and expensive social programs produced the high inflation rates of the late 1960s and 1970s.
   2. The Vietnam War increased public skepticism toward international involvements. The publication of the 1971 “Pentagon Papers,” classified Defense Department documents that were leaked to the press, revealed that the government had misled Congress and the American people about its intentions in Vietnam during the mid-1960s.
   3. In 1973, Congress passed the War Powers Resolution, which stipulated that the president must inform Congress within 48 hours if U.S. forces are sent into a hostile area without a declaration of war. It also permits Congress to bring home American troops within 60-90 days of their deployment.