

A Primer on the Vietnam War before America's large-scale military involvement (1964-1973)

What is now the communist nation of Vietnam had been, until World War II, part of the French colonial empire in Indochina. At the start of World War II, Japan invaded Indochina (including what is now Vietnam) and booted the French out. During the war, a Vietnamese resistance movement formed against the Japanese, supported through the OSS (now the CIA) with American money and weapons. When World War II ended, the French returned, much to the anger of the Vietnamese. Their leader, a man named Ho Chi Minh, appealed to the United States to stop the French return. The U.S., worried about communist expansion in Asia by this time, did not intervene.

From 1946-1954, Vietnamese rebels (called “Viet Minh”) waged war against France, seeking independence. After a major military defeat in 1954, the French withdrew, leaving Vietnam temporarily divided into two areas, a communist North Vietnam, under the control of the Viet Minh and their leader, Ho Chi Minh, and a non-communist South Vietnam, with no clear leader. Elections were to take place by 1956 to re-unify the country, but they never took place.

By the early 1960s, a rebel group calling themselves the “Viet Cong” had emerged in South Vietnam, fighting a guerrilla war against the government of South Vietnam. The United States provided military and economic aid to the South Vietnamese government, along with about 15,000 military advisors.

When “Letters Home from Vietnam” begins, the United States has initiated a large scale military commitment to the war, leading to nearly 600,000 American troops fighting in the war. Initially, all but two members of Congress and most Americans supported President Lyndon Johnson's decision to commit American forces to the war. There was opposition in the American public, however, and by 1968 the country was faced with increasingly large numbers of Americans opposed to continuing a war that, by its end, would cost 58,000 Americans their lives.