

MODERN HISTORY: *CONFLICT IN INDOCHINA*

Assess the importance of the containment of communism in determining United States policy towards Vietnam in the period to 1965.

United States policy towards Vietnam up to 1965 was strongly influenced by long term US policy that had begun with the containment of communism. However US determination to hold onto South Vietnam was as much affected by internal political concerns as it was by cold war issues.

US policy towards Vietnam was largely dominated by the idea of the containment of communism, an idea that escalated from a fear of communist rule that grew during the Cold War period. This policy had first been introduced in the Truman Doctrine of 1947 that pledged to help any country that was threatened by communism in order to keep it from spreading. This was due to the threat of communism from the Soviet Union but Truman did not succeed and China fell to the Communists in 1949, developing Cold War tensions that were surrounded by fear, suspicion and paranoia. When communism infiltrated North Vietnam the US feared a further expansion and 'in American eyes, Ho was a mere communist puppet directed by his Soviet and Chinese masters.' (K.Webb) This idea was strengthened by Eisenhower's Domino Theory that he expressed in April 1954 as, 'You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly.' Thus the issues in Indochina were largely being looked at through the Cold war fear of communism and this policy of confinement that influenced US policy towards Vietnam.

US determination to continue with the confinement of communism policy led to an unquestioning support of South Vietnam. During French occupation in Vietnam, the US provided substantial aid and by the end of the First Indochinese war the US was paying up to 80% of French war expenses in order to prevent further spread of communism. As French involvement declined, US involvement increased and at the Geneva Conference of 1954, the US refused to compromise with Vietminh or Chinese delegates. By the end of 1954 there were 600 US delegates in South Vietnam whose aim was to train the new Southern Vietnamese army to fight the Northern Communist. In 1955 the US granted an aid package of \$322 million and by early 1960s the South Vietnamese economy was completely reliant on the US. With Kennedy pledging to 'pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend... to assure the survival and success of liberty', the United States provided full support to Diem, unquestioning of his aims due to the fact that he was against communism and wished to fight against the north. By 1963 there was 16 700 US personnel in Vietnam in this fight against communism and involvement was only due to escalate as the issue of Vietnam began to effect internal American affairs.

While the confinement of communism led to major decisions in US policy, the American idealism, self interest and prestige were also fundamental reasons why they continued support for the South. Having resolved conflicts in both world wars, America's self image was high and believed that Vietnam would be a quick victory for their country and for democracy, a great misconception. This is demonstrated through Walt Rostow, key advisor to Kennedy and Johnson, comment that, 'We are the greatest power in the world.' Self interest added to this motivation as a loss of Vietnam meant a loss of a great investment as the US had provided vast amounts of economic and military aid to South Vietnam over the years. In Kennedy's 1956 speech he assessed Vietnam's issue 'in terms of American lives and American dollars', demonstrating American interests with their own loss. Finally, American prestige. They had such high ideals of their strength that to lose the South would surely damage their worldwide image. Assistant Secretary of Defence, John McNaughton wrote that US motivation for war in Vietnam was '70%- to avoid a humiliating US defeat!'. The Pentagon papers that outlined plans to escalate military involvement in Vietnam in order to withhold their country's image were a great indicator that US prestige was a major contributor to these policies. Thus American idealism, self interest and prestige were also main contributors to US policy towards Vietnam.

Johnson's own prestige and electoral concerns also played a major role in US policy. Coming into office after Kennedy's assassination in 1963, Johnson was automatically faced with the issue of Vietnam. With re-elections in November 1964, Johnson knew that he could not be seen as another democrat president lose a country to communism, just as Truman lost China, that he must appear to be strong in regards to Vietnamese policy, however he could not go into the elections known as a 'war president'. Historian Maclear supports this idea of Johnson's prestige in his comment, 'Johnson's immediate motivation in Vietnam was political self-defence'. With the aim to refrain from Vietnamese escalation until after the elections, Johnson knew that escalation was needed, believing that the issue could be dealt with quickly. With the Pentagon Papers drawn up, Johnson was just waiting for an event that would allow him to increase military action, the Gulf of Tonkin incident provided this. While historians are still unsure about the truth of the matter, it was the Tonkin Resolution that put into place the Pentagon Papers that gave Johnson the power to control US escalation and was seen by historian S.W. Morse as 'A resolution that gives the President the power to make war without a declaration of war'. Once the elections had been won Johnson implemented much change to US policy with 'Operation Rolling Thunder' in 1965 that issued sustained bombing in North Vietnam. Thus it is known that Johnson's own prestige and electoral interests played a major part in US policy towards Vietnam.

The containment of communism was a key contributor in directing US policy towards Vietnam up until 1965. However, American idealism, self interest and prestige, along with Johnson's self image and electoral interests, all played contributing roles.