

my **revision** notes

AQA AS/A-level History

THE COLD WAR

c.1945–1991



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4 Confrontation and co-operation, c1963–72

Confrontation in the Vietnam War: Johnson's war

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Why did Johnson continue US involvement in Vietnam?

After the assassination of John F. Kennedy on 22 November 1963, **Lyndon B. Johnson** became President of the USA. To some people's surprise, he continued the US war in Vietnam. Here we examine why.

Johnson's beliefs

- Johnson was extremely patriotic and had a firm belief in the superiority of the US military, particularly against a 'raggedy-ass little fourth-rate' country like Vietnam.
- He believed that the USA should fight communist aggressors and was opposed to appeasement in any form.
- He believed in the domino theory.
- It is said that he misunderstood foreigners despite having travelled extensively. He believed Ho Chi Minh was another Hitler.
- He believed his country had fought to defend freedom and democracy in Korea and the two World Wars.
- He felt that the continuation of the US involvement in Vietnam was a question of national honour.

The assassination of Kennedy

- As Vice President, Johnson opposed greater US involvement in Vietnam; for instance, he was against the assassination of Diem as he knew it would draw the Americans further in.
- However, when Kennedy was assassinated and Johnson assumed office, it is said that Johnson was motivated by the guilt of his loss to continue with Kennedy's policies. He once said that 'I would continue for my partner who had gone down ahead of me.'

Johnson's advisers

- Johnson continued with many of Kennedy's advisers such as Robert McNamara and Dean Rusk (see also page 48). McNamara was an outspoken supporter of US involvement in Vietnam and his solutions were invariably military ones. Rusk believed that it was the fault of appeasement that led to the outbreak of war in the Pacific in 1941. He was a very influential adviser and known to take a hard line against communist aggression.
- The retention of Kennedy's key advisers meant that there was a lack of fresh thinking on the problems in Vietnam.
- Members of the military were said to have pressured Johnson for the continuation of the war. It is said that Johnson was even fearful of some of them. One example was Curtis LeMay; as Chief of the air force, he frequently advocated the bombing of Vietnam.
- It is also said, however, that Johnson surrounded himself by advisers that simply agreed with him. He had a very bullish personality, expecting nothing short of obedience from his men. He once exclaimed that he wanted all assistants' 'pecker in my pocket'. There is a debate about whether he had a closed mind to alternative suggestions or whether he was just poorly advised. An episode whereby Johnson rejected the suggestion by the Democratic Senator Mike Mansfield to pursue policies leading to a neutral and united Vietnam is further evidence of his single-mindedness.

Honour

Johnson did not want to be the first president to lose a war. He perhaps created his own public pressure, despite his private misgivings, by announcing on 20 April 1964 that the USA was 'in this battle as long as South Vietnam wants our support'.



Identify the tone and emphasis of a source

Study the source below. Don't focus on the content as such; focus on:

- the language
- the sentence structure
- the emphasis of the source
- the overall tone.

What does the tone and emphasis of the source suggest about its value in terms of:

- the reliability of the evidence?
- the utility of the evidence for studying why President Johnson continued US involvement in Vietnam?

SOURCE

Extract from a speech by Lyndon Johnson in 1965 in which he explains why the USA continues to be involved in Vietnam.

We have a promise to keep. Since 1954 every American president has offered support to the people of South Vietnam. We have helped build and defend its independence. To dishonour that promise and abandon this small, brave nation to its enemies, and the terror that must follow, would be an unforgivable wrong. We are also there to strengthen world order. Around the globe are people whose well-being rests partly on believing they can count on us if attacked. To leave Vietnam to its fate would shake these people's confidence in the value of the American word. Let no one think for a moment that retreat from Vietnam would bring an end to conflict. The battle would be renewed in one country and then another. The appetite of aggression is never satisfied. In Southeast Asia, as we did in Europe, we must follow the words of the Bible: 'Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further'.



Introducing and concluding an argument

Look at the question and the key points of the answer. How good is the proposed introduction? How effective is the proposed conclusion? Could either be improved – especially in relation to Level 5 answers?

'The main reason why President Johnson continued the American involvement in Vietnam was due to the guilt he felt over Kennedy's assassination.' Assess the validity of this view.

Key points

- The impact of Kennedy's death and the pressure this put upon Johnson.
- The role of Johnson's advisers, many of whom worked for Kennedy (link available to the above point).
- Johnson's bullish personality and beliefs about communism.
- Johnson's need to maintain US honour after the loss of China, stalemate in Korea, etc.

Introduction

There is some evidence that Kennedy's death played a role in why President Johnson continued the US involvement in Vietnam. There was an outpouring of public grief over Kennedy's assassination and this made Johnson, his Vice President, feel guilty about assuming the presidency. Johnson spoke about his desire to continue Kennedy's work including his Civil Rights Bill which became an Act in 1964 and this was also true about his involvement in Vietnam. However, other factors like his advisers, his personality and his need to maintain US dignity played a role.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Kennedy's assassination played a role in why Johnson continued US involvement in Vietnam because he felt guilty at his premature death and he was determined to see what Kennedy wanted through to its conclusion.

How and why was Johnson able to escalate the Vietnam War?

By mid-1964, the war was going badly. McNamara and Rusk pushed for escalation and 200 US soldiers had been killed. Johnson knew that in order to escalate he needed Congressional and public support.

Response to communist aggression: Gulf of Tonkin

The North Vietnamese attacked two American ships, *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*, off the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964. Historians question if both incidents took place and whether the presence of *Maddox*, collecting intelligence, was deliberately provocative. Consequently, there is a suggestion of a pre-existing plan to escalate.

In response, Johnson persuaded Congress to pass a resolution allowing him to 'take any necessary steps', including military force, to assist South Vietnam. Congress passed the resolution with 88 in favour to 2 against.

Response to communist aggression towards US personnel

Johnson was increasingly concerned about the threat to American lives and was pressured to retaliate.

- On Christmas Eve in 1964, a bomb was planted by communists at a Vietnamese bar used by US officers.
- An American camp near Pleiku was attacked in February 1965, killing eight US soldiers. Johnson increased bombing raids over North Vietnam which became known as **Operation Rolling Thunder** to stop supply routes to the South.
- Johnson despatched ground troops from early 1965 in response to General Westmoreland's request and to protect the US airbase at Danang. Westmoreland was convinced the war could be won in six months. The number increased thereafter; by the end of 1968, there were 535,000 US troops.

Working Group recommendations

Johnson assembled a **Working Group** from the US Defense Department, the State Department, the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to suggest options concerning Vietnam. The Working Group stated that:

- an anti-communist, independent South Vietnam was crucial to the USA.
- the domino theory still applied.
- American 'national prestige, credibility, and honor' were at stake.
- escalation was necessitated by the weak Saigon Government.

The weakness of the South Vietnamese Government

- After the assassination of Diem, the South Vietnamese Government was very unstable, and had to deal with several coup attempts from 1963 from different personalities:
 - General Minh, November 1963–January 1964
 - General Khanh, January 1964–February 1965
 - Dr Quat, February 1965–June 1965
 - Air Vice-Marshal Ky, June 1965–September 1967
 - Thieu, September 1967–April 1975
- The Government failed to stop the attacks from the Viet Cong (VC). In 1965, for example, Thieu suggested that the VC controlled 75 per cent of the countryside. It was also suggested that with more US troops arriving, the ARVN became less willing to fight.
- Ky and Thieu were considered to be corrupt and incompetent.

Public support

Each time Johnson bombed and sent troops, his popularity increased and the media supported him. In one poll in 1965, for example, 80 per cent of Americans supported sending US troops to support South Vietnam.

**Support or challenge? ('How far do you agree?')****a**

Below is a sample exam question which asks how far you agree with a specific statement. Below this are a series of general statements which are relevant to the question. Using your own knowledge and the information on the previous pages decide whether these statements support or challenge the statement in the question.

'The main reason Johnson escalated the war in Vietnam was because of pressure from his advisers.' Assess the validity of this view.

- McNamara and Rusk pushed for escalation prior to the Gulf of Tonkin incident.
- The North Vietnamese attacked two American ships, *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*, in 1964.
- *Maddox* was covertly collecting intelligence of the Gulf of Tonkin.
- Johnson believed in containment and the domino theory.
- Johnson had a firm belief in the superiority of the US military.
- The Working Group stated that American 'national prestige, credibility, and honor' were at stake.
- General Westmoreland requested more troops in 1965.
- The South Vietnamese Government was weakened by the assassination of Diem.

**Identify the significance of provenance**

(a) Look at what is said about the source:

- Who said it;
- What type of source it is;
- When it was said;
- Where it was said;
- And – crucially – why: what was the speaker's purpose?

(b) What does this suggest about its value as a source of evidence?

SOURCE

President Johnson responds to the Gulf of Tonkin incident in the Department of State Bulletin, 5 August 1964.

Last night I announced to the American people that the North Vietnamese regime had conducted further deliberate attacks against U.S. naval vessels operating in international waters, and I had therefore directed air action against gunboats and supporting facilities used in these hostile operations. This air action has now been carried out with substantial damage to the boats and facilities. Two U.S. aircraft were lost in the action.

After consultation with the leaders of both parties in the Congress, I further announced a decision to ask the Congress for a resolution expressing the unity and determination of the United States in supporting freedom and in protecting peace in Southeast Asia.

These latest actions of the North Vietnamese regime have given a new and grave turn to the already serious situation in Southeast Asia. Our commitments in that area are well known to the Congress. They were first made in 1954 by President Eisenhower. They were further defined in the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty approved by the Senate in February 1955.

Tactics and the relative strengths of both sides

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The table below summarises the status and strategies of both sides in the Vietnam War.

The USA	North Vietnam
<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Economically superior with the most modern military equipment. ● Utilised helicopters effectively to avoid ambush and to deliver troops and supplies. ● Had access to airfields and landing pads constructed across the country. 	<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Logistical support from USSR and China, although this could not continue indefinitely. ● The VC knew the topography of the land. ● The communists were disciplined with rules governing their interactions with local civilians, including not to destroy crops. ● The VC were ruthless with collaborators of the Americans, clubbing, shooting or burying them alive.
<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The ARVN were unreliable. ● The media coverage helped foster anti-war movements. ● Failed to win the 'hearts and minds' of civilians. ● Failed to have an answer for the guerrilla tactics of the communists. 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Northern economy could not sustain a prolonged war. ● The Tet Offensive demonstrated the limits of its support in the South.
<p>Tactics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Operation Rolling Thunder witnessed B-52 bombers attempting to weaken the North Vietnamese forces and its economy. It killed approximately 50,000; however, Northern infiltration into the South increased from 35,000 in 1965 to 90,000 troops in 1967. Northern transport of supplies continued. Resources were also replaced by the USSR and China and locals were often evacuated. ● The American air war was inefficient, costing nearly \$10 for every \$1 of damage it inflicted upon the North. ● Search and destroy was deployed in the hope of clearing an area of the VC. The Americans had difficulty in identifying members of the VC. Even when they cleared an area, like in Hamburger Hill in 1969, the ground was retaken by the communists as soon as the Americans left. ● Chemical weapons were continued under Johnson. Agent Orange was used as a defoliant, together with Agent Blue to destroy rice crops that supplied the VC. This did much to alienate Vietnamese peasants. ● Cluster bombs and anti-personnel bombs were used by the USA. These weapons released metal and even fibreglass; the latter undetectable on X-rays. The weapons were indiscriminate and upset local civilians. 	<p>Tactics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● General Giap's strategy of guerrilla warfare was effective in wearing down their enemies and against the superior technology of the US. They used tunnel networks to transport supplies and troops and booby traps such as Punji sticks, trip wires that ensnared and killed their enemies. ● The Ho Chi Minh Trail was especially effective in supplying the south with equipment and men. Frequently rerouted, it was dotted with hospitals, workshops and stores. ● North Vietnam's air defences were increasingly effective. The Soviets provided MiG fighters, anti-aircraft guns and surface-to-air (SAM) missiles. By the end of 1967, Northerners had shot down over 700 US aircraft. ● The communists had a network of informants and supporters.



Simple essay style

Below is a sample exam question. Use your own knowledge and the information on the opposite page to produce a plan for this question. Choose four general points, and provide three pieces of specific information to support each general point.

Once you have planned your essay, write the introduction and conclusion for the essay.

The introduction should list the points to be discussed in the essay.

The conclusion should summarise the key points and justify which point was the most important.

‘The reason why the Vietnam war dragged on without decisive victory for the US was because of their over-reliance on a high-tech war of attrition.’
Assess the validity of this view.



Identify the tone and emphasis of a source

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- the language
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- the emphasis of the source
- the overall tone.

What does the tone and emphasis of the source suggest about its value in terms of:

- the reliability of the evidence?
- the utility of the evidence for studying why the USA failed to score a decisive victory against the communists in Vietnam?

SOURCE

An extract from a report on America's involvement in the region written by Le Duan, a prominent official in the North Vietnamese Communist party, for communist leaders in July 1965.

With regard to the North, the U.S. still carries out its war of destruction, primarily by its air force: Besides bombing military targets, bridges and roads to obstruct transport and communications, the U.S. could also indiscriminately bomb economic targets, markets, villages, schools, hospitals, dikes, etc., in order to create confusion and agitation among the people. But the North is determined to fight back at the U.S. invaders in a suitable manner, determined to punish the criminals, day or night, and determined to make them pay the blood debts which they have incurred to our people in both zones. The North will not flinch for a moment before the destructive acts of the U.S., which could grow increasingly with every passing day. The North will not count the cost but will use all of its strength to produce and fight, and endeavor to help the South. For a long time, the Americans have boasted of the strength of their air force and navy but during five to six months of directly engaging in combat with the U.S. in the North, we see clearly that the U.S. cannot develop that strength in relation to the South as well as in relation to the North, but revealed more clearly every day its weak-points.