French and American involvement

The French had attempted to reassert control over their former colonies in southeast Asia after the Second World War but been defeated by a nationalist insurgency led by Ho Chi Minh. The French had left Vietnam by 1956.

- The French were replaced by US military advisors who sought to prevent a 'domino effect' of countries falling to communism. In the following years, American involvement in Vietnam would gradually increase. The peak involvement of US troops was between 1964 and 1973.

Military operations

The war was probably unwinnable from the start for the Americans. Instead of fighting a conventional war, the North Vietnamese engaged in a guerrilla campaign, never allowing the full military might of the USA to be deployed effectively. Far more North Vietnamese were killed than Americans during the war but the North successfully turned the war into a patriotic one against an imperialist USA. The tactics used by the USA, including carpet bombing, defoliation through the use of Agent Orange, and massacres like that at My Lai, turned significant parts of the civilian population against them.

US opposition

Internal opposition to the war in the USA was also crucial in determining the outcome. As troop casualties mounted, and without any obvious progress being made, public opinion turned against the war, particularly after the Tet Offensive in January 1968. Students demonstrated against the draft that operated between 1969 and 1972, and politicians increasingly spoke out against the war. Once the USA had withdrawn its troops in 1973, Congress forbade their return. North Vietnamese violations of the peace accord therefore went unpunished and this contributed to the rapid military collapse of South Vietnam in 1975.

Parallels

Interesting parallels can be drawn between Vietnam, the American Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In each case a military superpower was defeated by a lightly armed foe waging a guerrilla war. All three were fighting far from home, which created logistical problems, and all involved a steep decline in domestic support for the war that ultimately made it untenable.