

Revelations about a brutal massacre by U.S. soldiers of unarmed old men, women and children in the village of My Lai began to surface in 1969. The resulting trial of Lieutenant William L. Calley added fuel to the anti-war protests and raised deep moral questions about the mass killing of civilians.

- 1 What happened at My Lai, and what effects did it have on American public opinion?
- 2 What does this massacre suggest about the attitudes and morale of American troops on the ground in Vietnam?

The Paris Peace Talks

At the peace talks which officially opened in Paris on 13 May 1972 and dragged on until January 1973, Henry Kissinger negotiated with the North Vietnamese, who were also determined to achieve 'peace with honour'. Neither side was willing to compromise, the North demanding that it have representation in the government of the South, and all sides continuing to try to win an advantage at the negotiating table by achieving an upper hand on the battlefield. For the Americans this meant using airpower to put pressure on the Communists – even bombing targets in the North that had previously been considered too sensitive. Another strategy used by Nixon and Kissinger was that of pursuing 'détente' with the Soviet Union and China (see Chapters Eleven and Twelve). One of the aims of trying to develop better relations with the Soviets and the Chinese was to get them to put pressure on North Vietnam to agree to the peace settlement.

Finally, a peace settlement was signed on 27 January 1973. All American troops would withdraw from Vietnam and both North and South would respect the dividing line of the 17th parallel. The last American troops withdrew from Vietnam two weeks after the signing of this peace agreement. However, peace did not come to Vietnam. The North took the initiative and by April 1975, it had taken Saigon.

By the end of 1975, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos had all fallen to the forces of Communism. Containment had failed – the dominoes of Indochina had fallen.

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Review and discussion questions

- 1 Why did Nixon need to end the Vietnam War?
- 2 What did he mean by 'peace with honour'?
- 3 What strategies did he use to achieve his aim?
- 4 Did Nixon achieve 'peace with honour'?

War of attrition failed
Tet changed public perception
no party humiliated
defence with USSR & China so they would work with N. Vietnam

Was Vietnam a failure of the American policy of containment? Historians' views

The image of dominoes falling, first used by President Eisenhower in 1953, became a reality. It certainly seems obvious that the Vietnam War failed categorically to contain Communism in Indochina. Many historians of the Cold War hold this view. Indeed, as a case study, and in isolation, the Vietnam War is America's biggest and most overt failure. In its attempt to stop the 'cancer of Communism' spreading from the North across the 17th parallel into the South in Vietnam, it had indirectly fostered the growth of Communist regimes in Cambodia and Laos.

However, some historians have seen that in a broader context the Vietnam War was not a total failure for the United States in terms of containment of Communism. Jim Rohwer in

Vietnam War Moratorium Day, 15 October 1969

As public opinion in the United States turned against the Vietnam War, what had been sporadic demonstrations by hippies and left-wing activists spread to students, the middle-aged and the middle class. Then, on 15 October 1969, across the United States anti-war demonstrations involving over two million people took place. Most wore distinctive black armbands to show their support and to pay tribute to the nearly 45,000 Americans killed in the conflict.

his book *Asia Rising* (Simon and Schuster, 1998) writes that 'the broader aims of America's effort in Vietnam were to keep the capitalist semi-democracies of Southeast Asia from falling to communism' and that Vietnam allowed other countries in the region, such as Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore – all of whom faced Communist threats – the breathing space they needed. 'In other words ... America ... accomplished in a spectacular way the broader aims of Asian stability and prosperity that the intervention was intended to serve'. Indeed, in support of this thesis, the former Singapore premier, Lee Kuan Yew, noted in his book, *The Singapore Story*:

America's action [in Vietnam] enabled non-Communist Southeast Asia to put their own houses in order. By 1975 they were in better shape to stand up to the Communists. Had there been no US intervention, the will of these countries to resist them would have melted and Southeast Asia would most likely have gone Communist. The prosperous emerging market economies of ASEAN were nurtured during the Vietnam War years.

From Lee Kuan Yew's The Singapore Story (Prentice Hall, 1999)

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Cartoon analysis

Explain the meaning of each of the 'myths' in the cartoon. A bloodbath is what was supposed to happen if the North invaded the South. Nixon said in an interview with the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1971 that 'if the United States were to fail in Vietnam, if the Communists were to take over, the bloodbath that would follow would be a blot on this Nation's history from which we would find it very difficult to return'.

- 1 What do all of these 'myths' have in common with regard to U.S. policy in Vietnam?
- 2 Why has the cartoonist put all the 'myths' in a retirement home?
- 3 What is the overall message of the cartoon?



This cartoon by Marlette appeared in 1975 in the US newspaper, the *Charlotte Observer*.

'Hi, everybody! Look who's here!'

Review activity

Plot a timeline of key events relevant to the Cold War in Asia from 1945 to 1975. Use a different colour to represent each different Asian country. Add to this 'bullet points' of information explaining when and why the United States became involved, and the outcome of involvement.

Review question

Research why U.S. involvement in Vietnam helped to destabilize the governments of Laos and Cambodia. What impact did the Communist takeover in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge have on the people of Cambodia? What was the impact of the war on Laos?

Conclusions on the U.S. policy of containment in Asia

Up to 1949, it can be said that the U.S. policy of containment in Europe had been successful. Territorially Communism had made no gains and the one obvious attempt at Soviet expansion after 1947 had been stopped by the Berlin airlift of 1948. The Marshall Plan had helped to revive European economies and stop the threat of Communist parties gaining control in countries such as Italy and France. Containment in Asia, however, as Vietnam shows, was less successful. This was partly due to the fact that Communism in Asia was much more diverse. Unlike in Europe, it was often linked to strong nationalist movements. Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh had so much support in their countries because of local circumstances and their struggles for independence. Although the United States was trying to fight against Soviet imperialism, it actually ended up fighting against local movements and nationalist feeling. This explains why the USA could never be as successful in containing these revolutionary movements as they had been in Europe.

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Working on your essay introduction

After having worked through this chapter, it should now be possible to attempt the essay set at the beginning of the chapter. To what extent was the U.S. policy of containment successful in Asia?

One of the key parts of an essay is the introduction. Refer back to the essay planning grid at the end of Chapter Three and check what should be included in a good introduction. Then have a look at the introductions below and discuss which you think is the best one and why. How could each one be improved?

Introduction 1: In 1947, the United States adopted a policy of containment in the belief that the Soviet Union would keep trying to extend its power unless stopped. The policy of containment was applied in Europe and was successful in stopping Communism from spreading. When China became Communist in 1949, and with the 'Red Scare' putting pressure on his government at home, President Truman decided to extend this policy of containment to Asia. There were several places where the policy of containment was applied – in Korea, in Vietnam, in Japan and in Taiwan. Although the USA can be said to have been successful in containing Communism in Korea, Taiwan and Japan, it failed dramatically in Vietnam.

Introduction 2: The United States faced several threats in Asia in the 1950s and 1960s. China had become Communist in 1949, and then North Korea attacked South Korea in 1950. The island of Formosa (Taiwan) was threatened by mainland China, and Japan was also in danger. The USA believed that it had to deal with these threats. How successful was it?

Introduction 3: Containment became the cornerstone of U.S. policy in 1947 when President Truman issued the Truman Doctrine. This set down the belief that the USA should help any government that was trying to resist Communism, and it led to economic aid in Europe with the Marshall Plan and also a direct confrontation with the Soviets over Berlin in 1948. With China becoming Communist in 1949, the US saw all Communism as a monolithic threat which had to be dealt with in any part of the world. The new ideas for defence were set out in NSC-68, and when North Korea attacked South Korea in 1950, the United States, with UN backing, put containment into action in Asia by sending forces to resist the North Koreans. Following this event, the USA then attempted to contain Communism by building up Japan, protecting Taiwan and fighting Communist forces in Vietnam.

Also try this essay question

What part did the Vietnam War play in the development of the Cold War?