

DBQ: How did the United States Justify the Vietnam War?

This task is based on the accompanying documents and your knowledge of the Cold War. The essay is designed to test your ability to work with historical documents. As you analyze the documents, take into account any provided dates, the source of each document, and the author's point of view.

Historical Context. The end of World War II sparked the beginning of the Cold War, an ideological, economic, political, and military competition between the Soviet Union and the United States. Although the U.S. did not engage in direct warfare with the Soviet Union, fear of the global spread of communism propelled the United States to become involved in a violent and drawn out military campaign in Vietnam.

Task. Analyze each document in order to examine the reasons why the United States became involved in a military struggle in Vietnam.

Part A – The documents relate to the series of events and popular ideologies that propelled the United States to take military action in Vietnam. Examine each document carefully and answer the questions that follow.

Doc 1. Ho Chi Minh addresses a French crowd in Vietnam (1946).

“If [you] force us into war, we will fight. The struggle will be atrocious, but the Vietnamese people will suffer anything rather than renounce their freedom.”

Based on this quote, how did Vietnamese nationalist Ho Chi Minh feel about the French occupation of Vietnam?

Doc 2. The Pentagon Papers describe the formation and power of the Viet Minh (1970).

“[T]he Viet Minh was the main repository [warehouse] of Vietnamese nationalism and anti-French colonialism. There were other such groups promoting Viet independence but none were competitive on a country-wide scale. It is also true that the disciplined, well-organized, and well-led Indochinese Communist Party was the controlling element in the Viet Minh . . . ICP strategy was to unify nationalist elements to achieve the immediate objective of independence . . . [T]he Viet Minh was sufficiently popular and effective to turn itself into a Vietnam-wide government that could have extended its authority throughout the country after World War II – except for the obstacle of reasserted French power . . . However, it seems likely that in the absence of the French, the Viet Minh . . . would have overridden indigenous tribal, religious, and other opposition in short order.”

1. According to this document, what was the focus of the Viet Minh and Indochinese Communist Party?
2. What did the United States believe to be the military potential of the Viet Minh?

Doc 3. Interview with President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1954).

“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. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences . . . [W]ith respect to more people passing under this domination, Asia, after all, has already lost some 450 million of its peoples to the Communist dictatorship, and we simply can't afford greater losses . . . But when we come to the possible sequence of events, the loss of Indochina, of Burma, of Thailand, of the Peninsula, and Indonesia following, now you begin to talk about areas that not only multiply the disadvantages that you would suffer through loss of materials, sources of materials, but now you are talking really about millions and millions and millions of people . . . It takes away, in its economic aspects, that region that Japan must have as a trading area or Japan, in turn, will have only one place in the world to go -- that is, toward the Communist areas in order to live . . . So, the possible consequences of the loss are just incalculable to the free world.”

1. Why did Eisenhower use the metaphor of dominos to explain the spread of communism in Southeast Asia?
2. According to Eisenhower, what were negative outcomes of Vietnam falling to Communism?

Doc 4. Letter from U.S. President Eisenhower to Ngo Dinh Diem (1954).

“The implications of the agreement concerning Vietnam have caused grave concern regarding the future of the country temporarily divided by an artificial military grouping, weakened by a long and exhausting war, and faced with enemies without and by their subversive collaborators within. Your recent requests for aid to assist in the formidable project of the movement of several hundred thousand loyal Vietnamese citizens away from areas which are passing under a de facto rule and political ideology which they abhor, are being fulfilled. I am glad that the United States is able to assist in this humanitarian effort . . . The purpose of this offer is to assist the Government of Vietnam in developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means . . . Such a Government would, I hope, be so responsive to the nationalist aspirations of its people, so enlightened in purpose and effective in performance, that it will be respected at home and abroad and discourage any who might wish to impose a foreign ideology on your free people.”



1. How does Eisenhower view the threat being experienced by South Vietnam?
2. What is Eisenhower offering to South Vietnam in this letter?

Doc 5. Letter from U.S. President Kennedy to South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem (1961).

“The situation in your embattled country is well known to me and to the American people. We have been deeply disturbed by the assault on your country. Our indignation has mounted as the deliberate savagery of the Communist programs of assassination, kidnapping, and wanton violence became clear . . . They have thus violated the provisions of the Geneva Accords designed to ensure peace in Vietnam and to which they bound themselves in 1954. In accordance with that declaration, and in response to your request, we are prepared to help the Republic of Vietnam to protect its people and to preserve its independence. We shall promptly increase our assistance to your defense effort as well as help relieve the destruction of the floods which you describe. I have already given the orders to get these programs underway. The United States, like the Republic of Vietnam, remains devoted to the cause of peace and our primary purpose is to help your people maintain their independence.”

1. Based on the document, what threats was communist North Vietnam allegedly imposing on South Vietnam?
2. Describe President Kennedy’s pledge of assistance to South Vietnam.

Doc 6. U.S. President Johnson’s Message to Congress (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 . . . This is not just a jungle war, but a struggle for freedom on every front of human activity. Our military and economic assistance to South Vietnam and Laos in particular has the purpose of helping these countries to repel aggression and strengthen their independence.

1. What did President Johnson claim happened on the night of August 4, 1964?
2. Based on the tone of the letter, what do you think President Johnson was proposing the U.S. do in response?