Theories of the Vietnam War

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Our Claims

Psychological: Personalities of Lyndon B. Johnson and Ho Chi Minh were extremist. Paired with the American fear of Communism and misperceptions on Johnson’s part, this caused the war.

Hegemonic War: The Cold War that resulted from the end of World War II between the US and the USSR, two hegemons, forced proxy wars around the globe, including the Vietnam War.
French Indochina

Divided Vietnam at 17th Parallel
A Brief History

1885: French Indochina (Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia)

WWII: Japanese control Vietnam → when defeated French come back

1945: First Indochina War (French vs. Viet Minh)

1954: Geneva Conference (division of Vietnam at 17th parallel)

1955: Ngo Dinh Diem elected as President of South Vietnam

1963: President Diem assassinated

1964: Gulf of Tonkin Incident and Resolution

1965: Ky and Thieu elected as South Vietnam leaders

1968: Tet Offensive & My Lai Massacre

1971: Pentagon Papers Released

1973: Paris Peace Accords

1975: Fall of Saigon → Ho Chi Minh City
Outcomes

- President Thieu abandons South Vietnam with $15 Million in gold and 15 Tons of luggage
- First war America lost
  - Hurts ability to influence on the global stage as well as within nation
  - American prestige declines
  - Domino Theory disproved
  - Economy bloated by war inflation
- 1-3 Million Vietnamese killed
- 58,000 American troops killed
- Hundreds of thousands killed in Cambodia and Laos
Major Players
South Vietnam, United States and Allies

- Truman
- Kennedy
- Johnson
- Bao Dai
- Ngo Dinh Diem
- Thieu

- American Troops
- Army of the Republic of Vietnam
North Vietnam and Allies

Viet Minh Guerrillas

Ho Chi Minh

North Vietnam Army

Viet Cong
Individual Level of Analysis: Psychological
Psychological Theory of War

- Claim: There is something psychologically different about national leaders (and their decision-making processes) who have the authority to send their nation into war.

- Weaknesses: Nation’s leaders do not make decisions alone or independent of the political, economic and cultural climate of the state.
  - Based purely on the brain’s propensity for aggression
Individual Level: Psychology

President Lyndon B. Johnson

- Paranoid about Communist threat to his position of power
- Followed the principle of the strong overpowering the weak
  - Believed in military intervention
  - Disproportionate use of force
- Governed by own misperceptions of Asian reality
- Conclusion: Dogmatic personality
  - Close-minded: transplanted containment theory to Indochina
Individual Level: Psychology

Ho Chi Minh

- Not tempted by destruction or money
- As much a Vietnamese nationalist as a Communist
  - “Part Gandhi, part Lenin, all Vietnamese”
- Distinct quality: incorruptibility
  - Set in his view of a unified Vietnam
- Ability to walk humbly among his own people, very selfless
International Level

Hegemonic War
Setting the Stage

Conferences regarding Post-WWII Europe

○ The “Big Three” (Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin) had differing views of what Europe should look like, where borders would be drawn, and what the balance of power would be at the end of the war
○ Yalta Conference (February 1945), Allied Conference (April 1945), Potsdam Conference (July 1945)

The Development of the Eastern and Western Blocs

○ The USSR consolidates its power and expands its sphere of influence
○ 1949: The US responds with a global containment strategy to challenge Soviet power and the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance
○ Both sides begin competing and jostling for influence over newly independent nations, Latin America, and other countries around the world
Pre-Conditions for Hegemonic War

1. Intensification of conflicts
2. The perception that a fundamental historic change is approaching and the growing fear by at least one state that time is working against it, creating preventive motives for war
3. The course of events begins to escape human control
HEGEMONIC WAR | THE ‘RED SCARE’

International Events

- 1945: Ho Chi Minh declares Vietnamese independence from France
- 1949: USSR successfully tests a nuclear weapon
- 1949: Mao Zedong and the Communist Party take over China
- 1953: Korean War
- 1954: France defeated by North Vietnam forces
- 1957: Sputnik & the Space Race

Concepts & Perceptions

- “Iron Curtain”
- McCarthyism

Imbedded theories

- Domino Theory
- Containment Theory
- Deterrence/Arms Races
- Fear
Proxy wars function best in this type of environment:

- Belligerent nations, especially during the Cold War, cannot engage for the fear of Mutually Assured Destruction so they fight in other ways
- Maintaining the distribution of power outweighed the desire for peace

U.S. Course of Action:

- Started with military aid to the French (Truman Administration)
- When France was defeated, the US took on the task of containing Communism in Vietnam (Eisenhower)
- Thousands of military advisors are committed to the region including the Green Beret (Kennedy)
- Air bombing and physical combat begins (Johnson)
- Detente reached between China and the Soviet Union - but not Vietnam (Nixon)
The Vietnam War was the result of the international environment created by the Cold War between two hegemonic nations, the United States and the Soviet Union, struggling over the distribution of power in the international system at the end of World War II.


Questions to Consider

● Do you think that the psychological makeup of President Johnson and Ho Chi Minh were significant enough to cause the war?
● What weaknesses of psychological theory are applicable to the circumstances of the Vietnam War?
● Why do politicians, like President Johnson, withhold information from the public and does that support the psychological theory of war?
● The hegemonic theory of war rests on the interaction between the challenger and the hegemon. At the time of the Vietnam War, which would you consider, between the United States and Soviet Union, the challenger and which would you consider the hegemon? Why?
● Is the Vietnam War considered a conventional war? Are our theories applicable?
QUESTIONS?

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING