

VIETNAM WAR GLOSSARY

**Agent Orange:** the code name for an herbicide used as a chemical weapon by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War to clear areas of thick, tropical foliage and expose enemy forces; contains a disease-causing toxin called dioxin, which has caused serious health problems for many American and Vietnamese veterans of the Vietnam War

**bogged down:** to become impeded or sunken, as if in a bog; used to refer to the state of military action in Vietnam

**budget deficit:** the result of spending more than is earned

**Cabinet:** part of the executive branch of the United States government made up of the heads of all of the Federal Executive Departments, each of which is appointed by the president and serves as a presidential advisor; includes Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense

**Calley, Lt. William:** commander of American forces that perpetrated the My Lai Massacre of 1968; found guilty of war crimes and received a life sentence, but served only 3 years

**casualties:** those who disappear or are killed by or during a particular event, like a war or an accident

**censor:** to limit or edit information with the intent of suppressing anything considered objectionable

**Cold War:** the conflict between the United States and the former Communist USSR from the 1940s to the 1990s; the cause of many armed conflicts including wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan

**Commander in Chief:** title used to describe the role of the president of the United States as the head of the armed forces particularly in times of war

**communism:** a political and economic system based on Marxist-Leninist principles that strives to equally distribute economic resources among all citizens and often includes strict government control of society and the economy through highly bureaucratic structures

**containment of communism:** see Truman Doctrine

**domino theory:** the theory that if one country became communist, the same would occur to other countries in the region; the idea that if South Vietnam were to become communist, the same would happen in Laos, Cambodia, and all of Southeast Asia

**draft:** the practice of requiring certain people to participate in the military

**Eisenhower, Dwight D.:** 34th President of the United States (1953-1961); provided financial and military support to the French during the French Indochina War

**exit strategy:** a plan that outlines how to escape, avoid or end involvement in an activity, like war

**French Indochina:** a former French colony consisting of modern-day Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia

**French Indochina War:** the war fought from 1945 to 1954 between the French and the Viet Minh that ended with the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu

**Geneva Accords:** a peace agreement signed in 1954 by France and the Viet Minh recognizing an independent Vietnam in the north under Ho Chi Minh; the Final Declaration, which called for elections in July of 1956 to unify the country, was never signed, and elections did not occur

**genocide:** the intentional and methodical elimination of a cultural, racial or political group; the Cambodian genocide by the Khmer Rouge led to the death of approximately 1.7 million Cambodians between 1975 and 1979

**The Great Society:** the term used by Lyndon Johnson to describe what he sought to create through government social programs like welfare, Medicaid, and the War on Poverty

**guerilla war:** a type of irregular warfare in which sabotage and/or harassment by fighters in small, independent groups is used to attack a large, often occupying, army

**Gulf of Tonkin Incident:** a series of events off the North Vietnamese coast in 1964 that led to congressional authorization for war in Vietnam; *The Pentagon Papers* demonstrated that the first attack on a U.S. naval ship by North Vietnam was provoked by U.S. spying and that the second attack never occurred

**Ho Chi Minh:** (1890-1969) founder of the Viet Minh forces that fought in the French Indochina War and the first president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) from 1945 to 1969

**Ho Chi Minh City:** formerly Saigon, renamed in 1975 when North Vietnamese forces took control of the city

**Johnson, Lyndon B.:** 36th President of the United States (1963-1969); oversaw the escalation of the Vietnam War from 16,000 military advisors in 1963 to over 500,000 U.S. troops in 1968

**Joint Chiefs of Staff:** the advisory leadership group in the United States composed of the heads of the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and Navy

**Kennedy, John F.:** 35th President of the United States (1961-1963); provided support to the government of South Vietnam including 12,000 military advisors

**Kent State:** May 4, 1970 incident at Kent State University in which Ohio National Guardsmen shot into a group of retreating students who were protesting the U.S. invasion of Cambodia; four students were killed and others injured

**Korean War:** a war that spanned from 1950 to 1953 in which U.S. President Truman deployed U.S. forces to fight North Korean and Chinese communist forces and support the government of South Korea

**Mao Tse Tung:** leader of the Chinese Communist Party from 1935 and the first president of the People's Republic of China from 1949 until his death in 1976

**McNamara, Robert:** U.S. Secretary of Defense from 1961 to 1968 and one of the designers of U.S. military intervention in Vietnam

**missing in action (MIA):** a member of the armed forces who disappears during military action but who cannot be identified as dead; approximately 1,900 MIA have been declared from the Vietnam War

**My Lai Massacre:** an atrocity in which approximately 500 Vietnamese women, children, and elderly were killed by U.S. forces in the subhamlets of My Lai 4 and My Khe 4 in March of 1968; the incident was not disclosed until a year later and only one officer, Lieutenant William Calley, was punished

**napalm:** an incendiary weapon used by U.S. forces during the Vietnam War; made of a jellied gasoline mixture that kills victims by burning or asphyxiation

**National Guard:** armed forces organized by each U.S. state and economically supported by the federal government; managed by either the individual state government or the federal government

**Nixon, Richard M.:** 37th President of the United States (1969-1974); crafted the policy of Vietnamization that led to the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam, but also escalated the air war and invaded Cambodia

**North Vietnam:** commonly used name for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), country created in 1954 by the Geneva Accords and whose president was Ho Chi Minh until his death in 1969; unified with the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) in 1976 to form the Socialist Republic of Vietnam after DRV forces took control of South Vietnam in 1975, now officially Viet Nam.

**Pentagon:** the leadership of the U.S. military; U.S. military headquarters that is a five-sided building in Washington D.C.

**Pentagon Papers:** the classified document compiled by the U.S. government detailing the secret history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam from 1945-1967, including the misleading of the American public about the Gulf of Tonkin incident; leaked to the press in 1971 by Daniel Ellsberg

**post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):** a psychological disorder first identified among Vietnam veterans that is caused by traumatic events and that can lead to recurrent nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety, and depression

**quagmire:** marshy or boggy land; a situation that is difficult and has obstacles; used to refer to military difficulties encountered by the U.S. forces in Vietnam

**refugee:** a person who flees his/her country to escape political or military danger or persecution

**Saigon:** the capital city of South Vietnam before it was overtaken by North Vietnamese in 1975 and renamed Ho Chi Minh City

**Secretary of Defense:** the main presidential advisor on defense policy and a member of the Cabinet; responsible for developing and implementing the general national defense policy

**South Vietnam:** the Republic of Vietnam (1955-1975) that the U.S. government helped to create and then waged a war to support in order to stop the spread of communism

**Soviet Union:** formally the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR); the former communist union that spanned from Eastern Europe to Northern Asia and included 15 component republics; formed in 1917 and dissolved in 1991

**tax hike:** an increase in tax rates, used to bring in more money to a budget in order to cover spending costs

**Tet Offensive:** a series of attacks throughout South Vietnam by Viet Cong forces during Tet (the Vietnamese New Year celebration) in 1968; considered to be a turning point in the war after which U.S. public opinion turned against the war and the U.S. began its long withdrawal from Vietnam

**Truman Doctrine:** a policy developed by the Truman administration and continued throughout the Cold War that committed the U.S. to the containment of communism through economic and military support for nations and groups fighting the spread of communism

**Truman, Harry S.:** 33rd President of the United States (1945-1953); established the policy of containment of communism at the beginning of the Cold War

**Uncle Sam:** a drawn character used to represent the United States government; depicted as an old, thin man with a white goatee and star-spangled suit and hat

**Viet Cong (VC):** short for "Vietnamese Communist"; the term coined by American and South Vietnamese officials in reference to the National Liberation Front (NLF), a South Vietnamese guerilla group that fought against the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces

**Viet Minh:** created by the Indochinese Communist Party in 1941; sought to create an independent Vietnamese nation and fought French and Japanese forces who attempted to colonize Vietnam

**Vietnamization:** the term coined by the Nixon administration referring to the policy of replacing U.S. soldiers with South Vietnamese soldiers, allowing the U.S. to withdraw U.S. troops and end the draft

**War Powers Act:** a joint resolution passed by the U.S. Congress in 1973 in response to presidential decision-making during the Vietnam War; limited presidential power to engage U.S. forces in long-term combat without congressional approval

**Watergate:** the scandal that led to the resignation of President Nixon in 1974 and that derives its name from the Watergate complex where Democratic National Committee offices were burglarized by men working for the Committee to Reelect the President

**Westmoreland, Gen. William:** commander of the U.S. military forces in Vietnam from 1964-1968 and a primary strategist for U.S. military action in the war

**whistle-blower:** a person who releases hidden information; often a corporate or government employee who makes public secret information that is damaging to the employer