

The Vietnam War and Agent Orange

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HIST 405 United States History

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The Vietnam War that occurred during 1955– 1975 was a long, costly, and divisive conflict between communist North Vietnam, which was supported by China and the USSR, and non-communist South Vietnam, which the United States backed. The struggle to gain independence from French colonial rule sparked the Vietnam War in 1954. By the late fall of 1945, Vietnam was divided between Viet Minh, which was controlled by the north, and the south was controlled by the French (Isserman, 2016).

Between the years of the 1950s through 1975, the United States became involved with Vietnam to contain communist expansion under the “domino theory,” in fear that if South Vietnam fell, surrounding nations would soon follow. During this time, it was a Cold War-era proxy war between Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, which resulted in over 3 million deaths, including 58,000 Americans. Eventually, it ended with a North Vietnamese victory and national unification (Spencer, 2026). In 1950, former President Truman authorized direct financial and military assistance to the French, as the United States Government sought France’s cooperation to stop the spread of communism in Europe.

During the Vietnam War, the United States was deeply polarized with the intensifying social, political, and economic tensions through the widespread anti-war protests, a profound crisis of trust in government, and severe financial instability. The social tension during 1964 - 1975 rapidly escalated with protests, drawing millions to demand an end to the conflict. This movement created a sharp generational divide between “hawks” and “doves,” often pitting the youth against authority. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution of 1964 granted Johnson broad war-making powers, reduced congressional oversight, and sparked political friction that eventually led to efforts to resist presidential authority. In March 1972, former President Nixon had hoped to isolate North Vietnam by regularizing American relations with both the Soviet Union and China, who were both North Vietnamese supporters (Jones, 2016). At this time, the economy was not progressing well due to the massive war spending, funding, and