

Why America lost the Vietnam War | A1 Sample answer

Why did the US lose the Vietnam War and/or what was the significance of the Moon landing? (2011 Topic 6 Q3)

The Vietnam War began as a civil war between the communist state of North Vietnam and the capitalist south. The North Vietnamese state wanted to join with the south as one united communist country. The United States supplied weapons and finance to the dictator of South Vietnam under the new US policy of containment. Containment was a policy adopted to control the expansion of communism and try to limit its control on surrounding countries. However, President Lyndon Johnson sent the first American combat troops into Vietnam in 1965. This was a major mistake and would lead to America experiencing what many say was the first lost war in American history. The reasons behind the catastrophic defeat are very clear.

Firstly, the Americans were poorly equipped for a war in Vietnam. The country was covered by dense jungle that made it extremely difficult for the American soldiers to find both the enemy and their way around. The Vietcong used the jungle to their advantage, attacking the armies before retreating back into the jungle out of sight in a form of Guerrilla Warfare that the Americans found hard to retaliate against. Determined to find bases and cut off supply routes, the Americans sprayed the vegetation with herbicides, most infamously Agent Orange. However they only used it on around 10% of the landscape and, although it killed the trees, it was futile in helping the Americans destroy bases and supply use to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. All it did was kill crops, causing Vietnamese civilians to go hungry. It also caused birth defects in Vietnamese children. This bred resentment from the civilian population of Vietnam towards to Americans.

The Ho Chi Minh trail also ensured Vietcong victory. This trail was a network of paths that served as a hidden route through the jungle for both Vietcong and Vietnamese civilians. It also ran through Laos and Cambodia to avoid US bombing raids. It was constantly relocated as they used it to move troops, weapons and other supplies around the country and they could not risk the Americans gaining too much knowledge about it. However it was too well hidden for the Americans to ever find it. Tunnels were also used by the Vietcong as a hiding spot. They also served as communication and supply routes, hospitals, food and weapon caches, and even as homes for the soldiers. They were well hidden and stretched for hundreds of miles which frustrated the Americans as they could not locate the hubs of their elusive enemy. This gave the Vietcong a distinct advantage.

American tactics were also poor, ineffective and mostly inhumane. Lyndon B Johnson gave his approval for an operation called Operation Rolling Thunder in February 1965 where they dropped thousands of bombs on towns and villages to decrease morale. It is estimated that more bombs were dropped in this time than were dropped in the entirety of World War 2. When this proved useless, foot soldiers went on Search and Destroy missions where they raided villages for soldiers and oftentimes simply destroyed the entire village. These would mostly kill innocent civilians. Neither this nor the bombing did anything to decrease morale; it only served to make people despise the Americans. The US soldiers destroyed what the Vietcong would later help rebuild, meaning they gained support with the civilians. Americans also used Napalm, an extremely flammable fluid that would burn through anything, if they believed they had found a Vietcong base. However it would often hit civilians, including children, which caused serious controversy at home. All in all the tactics the US used were brutal and did little else other than sully the American reputation.

The media also played a huge role in the Vietnam War. It was the first major war where the media had a large presence. It meant that more of the brutalities were documented and fed to the horrified American public. Everyone at home then knew when a major loss had been suffered even if the government tried to cover it up. While Search and Destroy missions were doing nothing to lessen the morale of the Vietnamese, the morale of the American public fell dramatically witnessing such atrocities from their sitting rooms. The media sparked a massive anti-war campaign amongst Americans who could not see a point in worthless massacre and continued fighting when it was becoming increasingly clear that the Vietnamese didn't want the Americans there. This was made worse by the Tet Offensive of 1968 where the Vietcong attacked the US Embassy. Even though the Vietcong lost in the end, losing 80-90% of their forces in three days, it caused political and public humiliation for the US. Johnson's popularity rating dropped to 28% and people questioned how communists even managed to hold siege to the Embassy for six hours. Walter Cronkite, the most popular news reporter in America at the time, had a significant influence in how the public saw the war. After the Tet Offensive, he claimed the war was 'unwinnable'. Johnson knew the power Cronkite had and is reported to have said 'If I've lost Walter Cronkite, I've lost Middle America.'

Another major reason for the US defeat came down to the soldiers being unmotivated and, in some cases, unfit for duty. The average age of a US soldier at the time was 19 and many were disillusioned entering the war, believing they were heroic and almost invincible. However this quickly changed once they entered battle. The booby traps the Vietcong hid were brutal, such as holes filled with excrement coated spikes, and left soldiers incredibly paranoid. Although America had superior resources and technology, the Vietcong

were better at hiding in the dense forests and dressing as civilians. The morale of the soldiers quickly dropped as they felt the war was unwinnable, against an enemy they couldn't even see. This wasn't helped by the youth of the soldiers in question. Young soldiers quickly became disillusioned with the greatness they'd previously seen of their country and the glory of the war. The frustration soldiers felt often boiled over into dreadful atrocities such as the My Lai Massacre. Troops on a Search and Destroy mission tortured and shot 347 innocent civilians in the village of My Lai. The squadron leader was eventually arrested and tried for mass murder. Events like these caused more trauma for the average soldier, made more Vietnamese hate the Americans and sparked more public outcry in the US.

The war was a humiliating defeat for the US. The administration wanted 'peace with honour' through 'Vietnamisation' which meant giving the war back to the South Vietnamese, but they did not succeed in getting this. A cease fire agreement claimed to bring 'peace and honour to Vietnam' was treated as nothing but a joke in 1973. They drained military efforts out slowly and the last American loss in Vietnam was when their helicopter, flying them out, crashed soon after the South Vietnamese president Duong Van Minh surrendered to the North on April 30th. In the end, there was nothing honourable in the way the war ended for the Americans.