

# The Cause of the Vietnam War

by Corwin Pederson

The cause of the Vietnam War is very hard to determine because we entered the war incrementally between 1950 and 1965. We started to get involved in the Vietnam conflict in 1950 when Harry S. Truman authorized a modest program of economic and military aid to the French who were fighting to retain control of their Indochina colony, including Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

The communist North was separated from the non-communist South by the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel after the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Dwight D. Eisenhower refused to accept this arrangement and undertook to build a nation from South Vietnam by fabricating a government there, taking control of the French and dispatching military advisors to train the South Vietnamese.

In 1961, John F. Kennedy felt he had to prove his resolve to the American people and his communist adversaries. He secretly sent 400 Special Operations Forces (Green Berets) to teach the south how to fight the counter insurgency war against the communist guerrillas in the south. By 1963 when he was assassinated, we had committed more than 16,000 military advisors in South Vietnam and more than 100 had been killed.

Lyndon B. Johnson committed the U.S. most fully to the war. In August of 1964, he secured from Congress a functional (not actual) declaration of war: The Tonkin Resolution. The resolution authorized the president “to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” The resolution was passed after the North Vietnamese allegedly launched an “unprovoked attack” against a U.S. destroyer on “routine patrol” in the Tonkin Gulf on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, and that North Vietnamese PT boats followed up with a “deliberate attack” on a pair of U.S. ships two days later. This was the official story as told by LBJ and has since been a topic of debate.

In February and March of 1965, President Johnson authorized the sustained bombing of targets north of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. Legal declaration or not, we were at war.

The topic for the essay is “What do you think was the cause of the war in Vietnam?” I think there are many things that caused the Vietnam War.

The biggest reason was fear. The U.S. was gripped with the fear of communism. Americans believed that if they didn’t make a decisive stand in Vietnam that all of Southeast Asia would fall to Marxist Communism. And the “domino effect” would lead to other nations falling to communism as well. As we committed bit-by-bit, inertia developed against withdrawal. Withdrawal would ultimately result in communist victory. We, the U.S., gave our word to stand by our South Vietnamese allies. If we abandoned the south, our word would be regarded as unreliable. On top of the fear of communism, the credibility of the United States was also at stake.

For my essay, I interviewed my Dad, Kevin Pederson. He joined the service like my grandfather and great-grandfather had before him. He was sworn to protect our country and democracy against foes both foreign and domestic. He thought it wasn’t his business to ask why, even though they failed to let him know why. “Ours isn’t to ask why, it is to do or die.”

The Vietnam War is still today a very controversial topic. The Vietnam War split my fathers generation then, and it continues to define it today.