

# Military Advisors in Vietnam: 1963

**Topic:** Vietnam

**Grade Level:** 9-12

**Subject Area:** US History after World War II

**Time Required:** 1 class period

## Goals/Rationale

In the winter of 1963, the eyes of most Americans were not on Vietnam. However, Vietnam would soon become a battleground familiar to all Americans. In this lesson plan, students analyze a letter to President Kennedy from a woman who had just lost her brother in South Vietnam and consider Kennedy's reply, explaining his rationale for sending US military personnel there.

**Essential Question:** What were the origins of US involvement in Vietnam prior to its engagement of combat troops?

## Objectives

Students will:

- analyze primary sources.
- discuss US involvement in the Vietnam conflict prior to 1963.
- evaluate the “domino theory” from the historical perspective of Americans living in 1963.

## Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

*National Standards: National Center for History in the Schools*

Era 9 - Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s), 2B - The student understands United States foreign policy in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America.

Era 9, 2C - The student understands the foreign and domestic consequences of US involvement in Vietnam.

*Massachusetts Frameworks*

US II.20 – Explain the causes, course and consequences of the Vietnam War and summarize the diplomatic and military policies of Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon.

## Prior Knowledge

Students should have a working knowledge of the Cold War. They should be able to analyze primary sources.

## Historical Background and Context

After World War II, the French tried to re-establish their colonial control over Vietnam, the most strategic of the three states comprising the former Indochina (Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos). Following the defeat of the French, Vietnam was partitioned by the Geneva Accords of 1954 into Communist North Vietnam and South Vietnam, which was non-Communist, but divided on religious and political lines. The United States supported a military government in the South and the decision of its leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, to prevent free elections which might result in the unification of the country under the control of the Communists. In an effort to take over South Vietnam, the Communist North supported attacks by guerrilla forces on the South. The Geneva Accords quickly began to crumble.

American foreign policy after World War II had been based on the goal of containing Communism and the assumptions of the so-called "domino theory"—that if one country fell to Communism, the surrounding countries would fall, like dominoes. The Eisenhower administration was concerned that if Vietnam fell under Communist control, other Southeast Asian and Pacific nations, including even the Philippines, would fall one by one. In response to that threat, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was formed in 1955 to prevent Communist expansion. President Eisenhower sent some 700 military personnel as well military and economic aid to the government of South Vietnam. This effort was foundering when John F. Kennedy became president.

In May 1961, JFK authorized sending an additional 500 Special Forces troops and military advisors to assist the pro-Western government of South Vietnam. By the end of 1962, there were approximately 11,000 military advisors in South Vietnam; that year, 53 US military personnel had been killed. The president would soon send additional military advisors to support the South Vietnamese Army. By the end of 1963, the numbers had risen to 16,000.

## Materials

- “Historical Briefings: JFK, the Cold War, and Vietnam”
- February 18, 1963 letter from Bobbie Lou Pendergrass to President Kennedy
- March 6, 1963 letter from President Kennedy to Bobbie Lou Pendergrass

## Procedure

1. Have students read “Historical Briefings: JFK, the Cold War, and Vietnam” and answer the following questions:
  - What was the Cold War?
  - How and when did the Korean War begin? What forces were fighting?
  - How did the conflict in Vietnam become part of the Cold War?
  - Why did Eisenhower send military personnel to South Vietnam beginning in 1955?
  - What were the military advisors sent to South Vietnam to do?
2. Provide students with the February 18, 1963 letter from Bobbie Lou Pendergrass to President Kennedy and his March 6, 1963 reply.
3. Discuss the following:

- What are Pendergrass’s main concerns about troop involvement in Vietnam?  
*(It’s not like World War II or the Korean War: “They were wars that our country were fighting, and that everyone here knew that our sons and brothers were giving their lives for their country.”*  
*Half of our country never heard of Vietnam.*  
*Our solders can’t even fight back.*  
*Is the small number of military in Vietnam sufficient to win there?*  
*What justifies the loss of life there?)*
  - How does JFK respond to these concerns?  
*(Vietnam must not fall under Communist control. If South Vietnam becomes Communist the whole region may be lost to the Communists--which would ultimately threaten our country).*
4. Put students in pairs. Using these documents as the basis for a script, have students create an imaginary phone conversation between the President and Mrs. Pendergrass in which she raises the questions she poses in her letter and he responds.
  5. Have each pair of students perform these skits for the class.

### **Assessment**

For homework, have students write an imaginary diary entry for Mrs. Pendergrass that she might have written in which she describes her conversation and discusses to what extent she was convinced by President Kennedy’s arguments. Students may include outside research as part of this assignment.

# Historical Briefings: JFK, the Cold War, and Vietnam

By the education staff at the Kennedy Library

## The Cold War Begins

During World War II, despite mutual suspicion and distrust, the United States and Great Britain joined the Soviet Union in an effort to defeat their common enemy, Nazi Germany. The alliance began to crumble immediately after the surrender of the Hitler government in May 1945. Tensions were apparent during the Potsdam Conference in July, where the victorious Allies created the joint occupation of Germany. Determined to have a buffer zone between its borders and Western Europe, the Soviet Union set up pro-communist regimes in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Albania and eventually in East Germany. Recognizing that it would not be possible to force the Soviets out of Eastern Europe, the United States developed the policy of containment to prevent the spread of Soviet and communist influence and power in Western European nations such as France, Italy and Greece.

These events and decisions marked the beginning of the Cold War, a struggle between communism and the free market systems of Europe and the United States, fought with propaganda, rising military budgets, wars by proxy, covert activities and the political use of military and economic aid. During the decade of the 1940s, the United States reversed its traditional reluctance to become involved in European affairs. The Truman Doctrine (1947) pledged aid to governments threatened by communist subversion. The Marshall Plan (1947) provided billions of dollars in economic assistance to eliminate the political instability that could result in communist takeovers of democratically elected governments. When the Soviets cut off all road and rail traffic to Berlin (1948), the United States and Great Britain responded with a massive airlift that supplied the besieged city for 231 days until the blockade was lifted. In 1949, the United States joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the first mutual security/military alliance in American history.

During the next decade, with the European situation essentially frozen in place, the conflict between East and West took place mainly in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The struggle to overthrow colonial regimes frequently became entangled in Cold War tensions as the superpowers competed to influence and control anti-colonial movements. In 1949, the communists triumphed in the Chinese civil war, setting off a bitter political debate in the United States concerning "who lost China." In 1950, after North Korea invaded South Korea, the United Nations and the United States sent military forces. When Communist China also intervened, several years of bloody campaigns were fought until a truce was signed in 1953 ending the Korean War.

Closer to home, the Cuban resistance movement led by Fidel Castro deposed the pro-American military dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in 1959. Castro's Cuba quickly became militarily and economically dependent on the Soviet Union. In early 1961, the

Eisenhower administration broke diplomatic relations with Cuba, tacitly acknowledging the presence of a Soviet foothold just ninety miles off the coast of Florida.

## **JFK and the Cold War**

The 1960 presidential campaign was dominated by Cold War rhetoric. John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon both pledged to strengthen US military forces and both promised a tough stance against the Soviet Union and international communism. Kennedy warned (inaccurately) of a missile gap with the Soviets and pledged to revitalize US nuclear forces. He also criticized the Eisenhower administration for permitting the establishment of a pro-Soviet government in Cuba.

John Kennedy was the first American president born in the 20th century and his entire political career had taken place in the context of the Cold War and the nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union. His inaugural address stressed the contest between the free world and the communist world, and he pledged that the American people would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty."

During the period between his election and inauguration, JFK was briefed on a plan drafted during the Eisenhower administration to train Cuban exiles for an invasion of their homeland. The plan anticipated that support from the Cuban people and perhaps even from members of the Cuban military would lead to the overthrow of Castro and the establishment of a non-communist government friendly to the United States. Kennedy approved the operation and some 1,400 exiles landed at Cuba's Bay of Pigs on April 17. The entire force was either killed or captured. Kennedy took full responsibility for the failure of the operation.

In June 1961, Kennedy met with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna, Austria. Khrushchev threatened to sign a separate peace treaty with East Germany, effectively cutting off Allied access to Berlin. Kennedy was surprised by Khrushchev's combative tone. At one point, when the Soviet leader identified the Lenin Peace Medals he was wearing, Kennedy retorted "I hope you keep them." In August, in order to stop the flood of East Germans fleeing to West Germany, Khrushchev ordered the construction of the Berlin Wall, a massive structure of concrete blocks dividing the two parts of Berlin.

As a result of these threatening developments, Kennedy ordered substantial increases in US intercontinental ballistic missile forces. He also added five new army divisions and increased the nation's air power and military reserves. The Soviets meanwhile resumed nuclear testing and President Kennedy responded by reluctantly reactivating American tests in early 1962.

In the summer of 1962, Khrushchev reached a secret agreement with the Cuban government to supply nuclear missiles capable of protecting the island against another

American-sponsored invasion. In mid-October, American spy planes photographed the missile sites under construction. Kennedy responded by placing a naval blockade (which he referred to as a "quarantine") around Cuba while demanding the removal of the missiles and the destruction of the sites. Recognizing that the crisis could easily escalate into nuclear war, Khrushchev finally agreed to remove the missiles in return for an American pledge not to reinvade Cuba. But the end of Cuban Missile Crisis did little to ease the tensions of the Cold War. The Soviet leader decided to commit whatever resources were required for upgrading the Soviet nuclear strike force. His decision led to a major escalation of the nuclear arms race.

## **Vietnam**

After World War II, the French tried to re-establish their colonial control over Vietnam, the most strategic of the three states comprising the former Indochina (Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos). Following the defeat of the French, Vietnam was partitioned by the Geneva Accord of 1954 into Communist North Vietnam and South Vietnam, which was non-Communist, but divided on religious and political lines. The United States supported a military government in the South and the decision of its leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, to prevent free elections which might result in the unification of the country under the control of the Communists. In an effort to take over South Vietnam, the Communist North supported attacks by guerrilla forces on the South. The Geneva Accords quickly began to crumble.

American foreign policy after World War II had been based on the goal of containing Communism and the assumptions of the so-called "domino theory"—that if one country fell to Communism, the surrounding countries would fall, like dominoes. The Eisenhower administration was concerned that if Vietnam fell under Communist control, other Southeast Asian and Pacific nations, including even the Philippines, would fall one by one. In response to that threat, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was formed in 1955 to prevent Communist expansion. President Eisenhower sent some 700 military personnel as well military and economic aid to the government of South Vietnam. This effort was foundering when John F. Kennedy became president.

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Internal corruption, divisiveness, and mounting successes by the Vietcong (Vietnamese Communists) guerrillas weakened the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem. Attempted coups and public protests over the repression of Buddhists, the major religious group of South Vietnam, threatened Diem's regime. Kennedy accelerated the flow of US aid and gradually increased the US military advisors to more than 16,000.

At the same time, he pressed the Diem government to clean house and institute long-overdue political and economic reforms.

The situation did not improve. In September of 1963, President Kennedy declared in an interview, "In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help them, we can give them equipment, we can send our men out there as advisors, but they have to win it--the people of Vietnam against the Communists... But I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake.... [The United States] made this effort to defend Europe. Now Europe is quite secure. We also have to participate--we may not like it--in the defense of Asia."

A few weeks later, on November 1, 1963, in a coup given tacit approval by the Kennedy administration, the South Vietnamese government was overthrown. President Diem, refusing an American offer of safety contingent upon his resignation, was assassinated. In the final weeks of his life, Kennedy wrestled with the need to decide the future of the United States' commitment in Vietnam. Whether or not Kennedy would have increased military involvement in Vietnam or negotiated a withdrawal of military personnel still remains a hotly debated topic among historians and officials who served in the administrations of President Kennedy and President Lyndon B. Johnson.

**Please answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper:**

1. What was the Cold War?
2. How and when did the Korean War begin? What forces were fighting?
3. How did the conflict in Vietnam become part of the Cold War?
4. Why did Eisenhower send military personnel to South Vietnam beginning in 1955?
5. What were the military advisors sent to South Vietnam to do?

9/10

7/22

February 18, 1963

Dear President Kennedy,

My brother, Specialist James Delmas McAndrew, was one of the seven crew members killed on January 11 in a Viet Nam helicopter crash.

The Army reports at first said that communist gunfire was suspected. Later, it said that the helicopter tragedy was due to malfunction of aircraft controls. I've wondered if the "malfunction of aircraft controls" wasn't due to "communist gunfire." However, that's neither important now, nor do I even care to know.

My two older brothers entered the Navy and the Marine Corps in 1941 immediately after the war started - they served all during the war and in some very important battles - then Jim went into the Marines as soon as he was old enough and was overseas for a long time. During those war years and even all during the Korean conflict we worried about all of them - but that was all very different. They were wars that our country were fighting, and everyone here knew that our sons and brothers were giving their lives for their country.

I can't help but feel that giving one's life for one's country is one thing, but being sent to a country where half our country never even heard of and being shot at without even a chance to shoot back is another thing altogether!

Please, I'm only a housewife who doesn't even claim to know all about the international situation - but we have felt so bitter over this - can the small number of our boys over in Viet Nam possibly be doing enough good to justify the awful number of casualties? It seems to me that if we are going to have our boys over there, that we should send enough to have a chance - or else stay home. These fellows are just sitting ducks in those darn helicopters. If a war is worth fighting - isn't it worth fighting to win?

Please answer this and help me and my family to reconcile ourselves to our loss and to feel that even though Jim died in Viet Nam - and it isn't our war - it wasn't in vain.

I am a good Democrat - and I'm not criticizing. I think you are doing a wonderful job - and God Bless You -

Very sincerely,

Bobbie Lou Pendergrass  
1615 French Street  
Santa Ana  
California

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FEB 27 8 40 AM '63  
OFFICE OF THE  
MILITARY AIDE

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MAR 6 1963

Bobbie Lou

Dear Mrs. Pendergrass:

\*MCANDREW, JAMES D.  
x

I would like to express to you my deep and sincere sympathy in the loss of your brother. I can, of course, well understand your bereavement and the feelings which prompted you to write.

The questions which you posed in your letter can, I believe, best be answered by realizing why your brother -- and other American men -- went to Viet Nam in the first place. When this is understood, I am sure that the other related questions will be answered.

Americans are in Viet Nam because we have determined that this country must not fall under Communist domination. Ever since Viet Nam was divided, the Viet Nameese have fought valiantly to maintain their independence in the face of the continuing threat from the North. Shortly after the division eight years ago it became apparent that they could not be successful in their defense without extensive assistance from other nations of the Free World community.

In the late summer of 1955, with the approval of President Eisenhower, an Advisory Group was established in Viet Nam to provide them with adequate weapons and equipment and training in basic military skills which are essential to survival in the battlefield. Even with this help, the situation grew steadily worse under the pressure of the Viet Cong. By 1961 it became apparent that the troubles in Laos and the troubles in Viet Nam could easily expand. It is also apparent that the Communist attempt to take over Viet Nam, is only part of a larger plan for bringing the entire area of Southeast Asia under their domination. Though it is only a small part of the area geographically, Viet Nam is now the most crucial.

If Viet Nam should fall, it will indicate to the people of Southeast Asia that complete Communist domination of their part of the world is almost inevitable. Your brother was in Viet Nam because the threat to the Viet Namese people is, in the long run, a threat to the Free World community, and ultimately a threat to us also. For when freedom is destroyed in one country, it is threatened throughout the world.

I have written to you at length because I know that it is important to you to understand why we are in Viet Nam. James McAndrews must have foreseen that his service could take him into a war like this; a war in which he took part not as a combatant but as an advisor. I am sure that he understood the necessity of such a situation, and I know that as a soldier, he knew full scale war in Viet Nam is at the moment unthinkable.

I believe if you can see this as he must have seen it, you will believe as he must have believed, that he did not die in vain. Forty-five American soldiers, including your brother, have given their lives in Viet Nam. In their sacrifice, they have earned the eternal gratitude of this Nation and other free men throughout the world.

Again, I would like to express to you and the members of your family my deepest personal sympathy.

Sincerely,

John F. Kennedy

Mrs. Bobbie Lou Pendergrass  
1615 French Street  
Santa Ana, California