**The Vietnam War (5/21 Reading Activity)**

## **Overview**

* The Vietnam War was a prolonged military conflict that started as an anticolonial war against the French and evolved into a Cold War confrontation between international communism and free-market democracy.
* The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north was supported by the Soviet Union, China, and other communist countries, while the United States and its anticommunist allies backed the Republic of Vietnam (ROV) in the south.
* President Lyndon Johnson dramatically escalated US involvement in the conflict, authorizing a series of intense bombing campaigns and committing hundreds of thousands of US ground troops to the fight.
* After the United States withdrew from the conflict, North Vietnam invaded the South and united the country under a communist government.

## **Origins of the war in Vietnam**

The origins of American involvement in Vietnam date back to the end of WWII, when the Vietnamese were struggling against the continued French colonial presence (France was their Mother Country.) **Ho Chi Minh**, the leader of the Viet Minh (Vietnamese Independence League) and the founder of Vietnam’s Communist Party, successfully blended nationalist, anti-French sentiment with communist revolutionary ideas. In 1954, after a prolonged guerrilla war to liberate Vietnam from France, the Viet Minh captured Dien Bien Phu, and defeated the French. 



***Map showing the division between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. The two countries were divided along the 17th Parallel, also known as the Line of Demarcation. The 17th Parallel indicates the boundary separating North and South Vietnam***

In peace negotiations the decision was reached to divide Vietnam into northern and southern halves. The communists, headed by Ho Chi Minh, would govern the northern half, with its capital at Hanoi, while South Vietnam, with its capital at Saigon, would remain non-communist. The Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China supported the north, while the United States was determined to maintain an independent, non-communist South Vietnam.

In December 1960, the **National Liberation Front**, commonly called the **Viet Cong**, emerged to challenge the South Vietnamese government. A civil war erupted for control of South Vietnam, while Hanoi sought to unite the country under its own communist leadership. The Second Indochina War began in earnest with the US commitment to prevent the communists from overrunning South Vietnam. In spring 1961, President John F. Kennedy expanded US support for the South Vietnamese government, including an increase in US military advisers, the doubling of military assistance.

The escalating US involvement in Southeast Asia was driven by the logic of the **domino theory**, which was a belief that the falling of one country to communism would result in other surrounding countries falling to communism, much as one toppled domino will take down others in a row. The containment strategy, of the early cold war years stated that the United States do everything in its power to prevent the spread of communism. US officials believed that if South Vietnam fell to communism, so would the surrounding countries of Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, Laos, and Cambodia.