

This Day in History... January 27, 1973

Paris Peace Accords

On January 27, 1973, the Paris Peace Accords ended US involvement in the Vietnam War.

In the years leading up to the war, Vietnam had been under the control of France and Japan before earning its independence in 1954. The country of Vietnam was divided along the 17th parallel, with a communist North and an anti-communist South Vietnam. A general election was planned for 1956, when the country would reunite under the form of government chosen by its citizens.

Ngo Dinh Diem was appointed prime minister of the State of Vietnam, in the South, in 1954. The next year he was elected president of the renamed Republic of Vietnam in an election that showed clear evidence of rampant fraud. Diem announced that South Vietnam would not participate in the upcoming joint North/South elections, claiming there could be no free elections in the communist North. The United States supported him in his fight against what Senator John Kennedy called "the Red Tide of Communism."



Stamp picturing the ribbon of the Vietnam Service Medal.

Those who opposed Diem's government formed the National Liberation Front (NLF), commonly known as the Viet Cong, in the southern delta of South Vietnam. With the help of Ho Chi Minh in the North, they planned to rid Vietnam of President Diem and his American allies. On November 2, 1963, Diem was assassinated. A period of political instability began, while military generals fought for control of the government.

The number of American advisors in Vietnam grew, and by the end of 1963, there were 16,000 US military personnel in Vietnam. That number increased significantly after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident on August 2, 1964. During the night of August 1-2, South Vietnamese commandos raided a North Vietnamese radio transmitter located on an offshore island. The following morning, the USS Maddox was patrolling in international waters off the coast of North Vietnam near where the raid had occurred, and was fired on by North Vietnamese boats. Two days later, a second attack was alleged to have taken place against the USS Maddox, and the USS Turner Joy. However, military reports quickly cast doubts on whether the attack happened, but was actually the result of overeager sonar men. When the attack was first reported, a single aircraft was launched from the nearby USS Ticonderoga. The pilot later reported, "I had the best seat in the house to watch that event and our destroyers were just shooting at phantom targets – there were no PT boats there... there was nothing there but black water and American firepower." The second attack was reported to Congress as having definitely happened though, and on August 7, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, giving President Johnson power to increase the country's involvement in Vietnam without declaring war.

The first ground troops, 3,500 Marines, landed in Southeast Asia the following March. 400,000 American soldiers were fighting in Vietnam by the end of 1966. The goal of American intervention was to destroy the Viet Cong and train the South Vietnamese Army to defend itself against the further spread of communism. The Viet Cong, with support from North Vietnam, grew in numbers and skill as the years progressed. Rather than running from helicopter or tank assaults, as they had initially, they dug trenches and fought. Their intricate system of tunnels and knowledge of the land gave them the ability to attack then disappear. The NLF used civilians to build booby traps or feed the troops, making it difficult for Americans to tell friend from enemy.



The VVM displays the names of over 58,000 Americans who died in the war.

Peace talks began in Paris in May 1968, but were repeatedly stalled. After Richard Nixon took office as US president in 1969, he introduced a plan to end America's involvement in the war – "Vietnamization." Nixon began removing troops from Vietnam, with the hope the South Vietnamese would continue fighting.

In May 1972, Nixon made a major concession, announcing that the US would begin removing troops from South Vietnam without requiring North Vietnam to do the same. This ended the deadlock and allowed the talks to progress in the coming months. Then, after much debate, Nixon announced on January 15, 1973, that the US was suspending actions against North Vietnam. American, and South and North Vietnamese delegates met at the Hotel Majestic in Paris on January 27 to sign the agreement.

Though the last Americans left on March 29, 1973, North and South Vietnam continued to fight. The South Vietnamese Army was not able to hold back the communists attacking from both the North and within their own country. Two years later, South Vietnam's capital, Saigon, fell and the government surrendered. Vietnam was reunited as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976.



About 2.6 million Americans fought in Vietnam.



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