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After WW II, **Chiang Kai-shek** wanted a Republic in China, faced Communist opposition, was supported by the USA, and was the chief power in Southern China of the “Nationalists.”

In Northern China, Communist **Mao Zedong** was gaining power and peasant support. He wanted a Communist revolution to occur in China. After Japan was pushed out of China, at the conclusion of WW II, the North and South ceased cooperation, since their common enemy was defeated, and started competing for power with one another. In May of 1949, Chiang and his followers were forced to flee to the island of **Taiwan**. Mao Zedong established Communism on the mainland of China. The USA refused to accept China as a nation. The Truman Doctrine of Containment failed. Communism was gaining strong holds around the world, particularly in Asia. Many claimed that Communist spies had infiltrated the United States and radical hysteria began to spread.

When WW II ended, Japan relinquished control at the **38th parallel** of Korea to the USSR. This gave the USSR the power to implement Communism in the area. In 1948, The Republic of Korea was formed in **South Korea** and was led by **Syngman Rhee** in Seoul.

Also in 1948, The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, led by **Kim Sung Il**, in Pyongyang, was formed as a Communist nation in **North Korea**. They had the support of the USSR. In June of 1950, The Northern Communists invaded the Southern Peninsula. The Korean War began. South Korea asked the United Nations for help, the USSR boycotted the meeting due to the existence of Taiwan. The absence of the USSR helped the vote to pass. Truman sent troops

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to support South Korea. **General Douglas MacArthur** led the effort in Korea to keep the South free for Democracy.

In response to the northern invasion, MacArthur launched a defensive attack to keep the southern region free. China sent troops to assist North Korea. The war was between North and South Korea, but it was also about the Chinese military fighting USA military. There were moments when the North advanced and moments when the South advanced. Yet, for the most part, a standstill developed in Korea. Neither the Communists nor the Democratic South could deliver a decisive victory. MacArthur wanted to unleash the most powerful force the USA could use. He wanted to drop nuclear bombs on China.

The struggle was against North and South Korea; yet, China was the main force behind North Korea and North Korea would never fall until China stopped helping them. President Truman refused to use nuclear weapons and MacArthur openly critiqued Truman for the decision. Truman fired MacArthur as a result. Neither side could achieve a decisive victory, so an armistice was signed by the two sides. Technically, this did not end the war, it simply meant cooperation would exist between the regions. In South Korea, Democracy could be established. Yet, North Korea remained under Communism. To this day, there is tension between the two areas.

<https://ushistoryteachers.com/korean-war/>

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Iraqi aggression, oil, and power

The **Gulf War** started on August 2, 1990 when the forces of Iraqi dictator **Saddam Hussein** invaded oil-rich Kuwait. Hussein hoped that Kuwait's oil reserves would help to pay off the massive debt Iraq had accrued in its recent war with Iran, as well as give Iraq significant bargaining power as the gatekeeper to Middle Eastern oil.



Map of the Persian Gulf region. [Map](#) adapted from Wikimedia Commons.

Map showing Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Israel.

US officials worried that the invasion of Kuwait might be Iraq's first step in a larger effort to consolidate its power over other nations in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia. With about one million soldiers in its armed forces, the Iraq Army was the world's fourth largest military force—in part, ironically, because the United States had furnished weapons to Iraq to aid in its fight against Iran. (The United States and Iran had been on bad terms since 1979, when Islamic fundamentalists had ousted the pro-American government in Iran and [taken American embassy workers hostage](#).)

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait posed a geopolitical oil crisis. If Saddam Hussein gained control of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, he would have control over twenty percent of world oil reserves and become the world's dominant oil power. As President George H.W. Bush explained, "Our jobs, our way of life, our own freedom and the freedom of friendly countries around the world would all suffer if control of the world's great oil reserves fell into the hands of Saddam Hussein.

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The United States and United Nations Security Council immediately condemned the invasion. The Security Council passed resolutions placing economic sanctions on Iraq and set a deadline of January 15, 1991 for Iraq to withdraw forces from Kuwait.

The Gulf War

The response to the invasion of Kuwait took place in two stages:

Operation Desert Shield (August 1990 - January 17, 1991)

Five days after Iraq invaded Kuwait, President Bush commenced Operation Desert Shield. Building a 34-nation coalition in the United Nations and enhancing US troop strength in the region to more than 500,000, the president explained Operation Desert Shield as “a line in the sand”—both to protect Saudi Arabia and liberate Kuwait.

Operation Desert Storm (January 17 - February 28, 1991)

Operation Desert Storm was the combat phase of the conflict. It began with a five-week bombing campaign of some 2,000 sorties a day that employed "smart bombs"—bombs able to find their target with pinpoint accuracy—against a broad range of strategic Iraqi targets. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, and General Norman Schwarzkopf orchestrated the US-led attack.



US Air Force war planes flying over burning oil wells during Operation Desert Storm, 1991. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia

Commons.

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Iraq, in turn, launched largely-ineffective short-range “Scud” missiles at civilian and military targets in Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The Gulf War was the first American conflict shown on live television (though footage from the Vietnam War was shown on TV, video coverage of events lagged by several days). CNN aired live images of bombs exploding and other events of the war onto people’s home television sets.

The end of the Gulf War

After the four-day ground campaign, by February 28, Iraqi forces fled Kuwait (having set fire to hundreds of oil wells). President Bush declared a ceasefire, and the Gulf War was over. Kuwait had been liberated.

Saddam Hussein was allowed to remain in power in Iraq, though Iraq was subsequently required to submit to searches for weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). President Bush had built the UN coalition around removing Iraq from Kuwait, not around the ouster of Saddam Hussein, and the decision to allow Hussein to remain in power proved controversial.

The Gulf War was hardly the end of United States involvement in the Middle East. Rather, it signaled that at the end of the twentieth century, the foreign policy of the United States was becoming ever-more enmeshed in the politics of the Middle East.

Following the terrorist attacks of [September 11, 2001](#), a second war in Iraq began in 2003 after US intelligence agencies and spy agencies around the world asserted that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction.

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-us-history/period-9/apush-1990s-america/a/the-gulf-war>

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Origins of the war in Vietnam

The origins of American involvement in Vietnam date back to the end of the Second World War, when the Vietnamese were struggling against the continued French colonial presence in their 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 Marxist-Leninist revolutionary ideology. In 1954, after a prolonged guerrilla war to liberate Vietnam, the Viet Minh captured Dien Bien Phu, and decisively routed the French.



Map of Vietnam. The red line indicates the separation between North and South Vietnam following the peace negotiations in Geneva in 1954. Before the country was unified under the North Vietnamese government in 1975, Ho Chi Minh City was named Saigon. [Map of Vietnam](#) adapted from Wikimedia Commons.

In peace negotiations at Geneva, 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.

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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, the [administration of John F. Kennedy](#) expanded US support for the South Vietnamese government, including an increase in US military advisers, the doubling of military assistance, and authorization of the use of napalm, herbicides, and defoliants.

The escalating US involvement in Southeast Asia was driven by the logic of the **domino theory**, which contended that the falling of one country to communism would result in other surrounding countries succumbing to communism, much as one toppled domino will take down others in a row. The containment strategy, laid out by [George Kennan in the Long Telegram](#), dictated 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.

Lyndon Johnson and the war in Vietnam

In August 1964, two North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked US destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. [President Lyndon Johnson](#) requested authorization from Congress for the use of military force, resulting in the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which laid the groundwork for the full-scale US military commitment to Vietnam. The resolution declared the support of Congress for “all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the armed forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”

Johnson was motivated by both domestic political and international balance of power considerations. He fully subscribed to the domino theory and to the containment strategy, and also feared appearing weak in the eyes of his domestic political opponents.

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In 1965, Johnson dramatically escalated US involvement in the war. He authorized a series of bombing campaigns, most notably Operation Rolling Thunder, and also committed hundreds of thousands of US ground troops to the fight. Fearful that the war would jeopardize his domestic agenda, Johnson concealed the extent of the military escalation from the American public.



President Lyndon Johnson awards a medal to an American soldier during a visit to Vietnam in 1966. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

The 1968 **Tet Offensive**, a bold North Vietnamese attack on the south, convinced many US officials that the war could not be won at a reasonable cost. Heightened opposition to the war was one of the major factors in Johnson's decision not to run for re-election in 1968.

Richard Nixon and Vietnam

[Richard Nixon](#) campaigned for the presidency with a “secret plan” to end the war in Vietnam. Once in office, his administration sought to achieve “peace with honor.” Nixon ultimately expanded the war into neighboring Laos and Cambodia, while simultaneously encouraging the “**Vietnamization**” of the war effort, which entailed the gradual withdrawal of US troops and an increasing reliance on the South Vietnamese armed

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forces. By the end of 1969, the number of American troops in Vietnam had been cut in half.

The **Paris Peace Accords** established the terms according to which the last remaining US troops in Vietnam would be withdrawn. In 1975, the North Vietnamese finally achieved the objective of uniting the country under one communist government. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam was formally established on July 2, 1976, and Saigon was renamed **Ho Chi Minh City**. Though the outcome of the war was a clear defeat for the United States, the countries surrounding Vietnam did not subsequently fall to communism, demonstrating the flawed reasoning of the domino theory.

The war in Vietnam had lasting consequences for US foreign policy. Congress passed the **War Powers Act** in 1973, in a clear attempt to reassert a measure of control over the making of foreign policy and to impose constraints on presidential power. For well over a decade, American public opinion was hostile to the idea of foreign interventions. This was known as the “**Vietnam syndrome**,” and it entailed an unwillingness to become bogged down in foreign wars in which American national security interests were unclear.

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-us-history/period-8/apush-1960s-america/a/the-vietnam-war>

What do you think?

Why did the United States become involved in **Vietnam**?

What were the assumptions underlying the US involvement in Southeast Asia? Were they correct?

Was the war in Vietnam a civil war or a global Cold War confrontation?

What do you think?

Was the United States led effort to oust Iraq from **Kuwait** a prudent one?

What did the United States hope to accomplish in the Gulf War?

What might the consequences have been if Iraq had been allowed to annex Kuwait?