



Conflict in Vietnam

“The oppressed the world over are wrestling back their independence. We should not lag behind.... Under the Vietminh banner, let us valiantly march forward.”

—Ho Chi Minh, Vietnamese nationalist and Communist leader, 1945

◀ French soldiers in Vietnam

The War Begins

Objectives

- Explain how Vietnam became a focus of conflict after World War II.
- Explain why the United States was concerned about developments in Vietnam.
- Describe how American involvement began to increase under President Kennedy.

Reading Skill

Ask Analytical Questions As you read about history in this textbook, you may find yourself puzzled at times. *Why* did a particular event happen? *Why* did it have the effect that it did? The text may not answer these analytical questions, but raising them will help you in your reading.

Key Terms and People

Ho Chi Minh	guerrilla
domino theory	Lyndon B. Johnson
Ngo Dinh Diem	

Why It Matters In the 1950s, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union intensified. America and its allies were determined to stop the spread of Communist dictatorships. After the Korean War, Southeast Asia became a Cold War hot spot. As U.S. involvement slowly grew, few Americans imagined how destructive the war would become.

Section Focus Question: How did Vietnam become a major battlefield in the war against communism?

Origins of the Conflict

The Vietnam War was the longest war that the United States ever fought. Except for the Civil War, it was the most disruptive. While the war was going on, Americans were bitterly divided about the nation's involvement.

The causes of the war go back into Vietnam's history. Vietnam is a tiny land in Southeast Asia, stretching 1,000 miles along the South China Sea. In the 1800s, France seized Vietnam and ruled it for nearly 100 years as part of the colony of Indochina. During World War II, French rule was interrupted when Japan occupied Vietnam.

Declaring Independence In August 1945, the Japanese surrendered. Some Vietnamese saw the Japanese defeat as an opportunity to free themselves from French colonial rule. Ho Chi Minh (HOH CHEE MINH), a Communist, organized a revolt to end French colonial rule. Earlier, Ho had asked Americans for help. However, the Americans were suspicious because Ho was a Communist. With his followers, who called themselves Vietminh, Ho occupied Hanoi in North Vietnam. He proclaimed an independent Vietnam.

The First Indochina War The French refused to accept Vietnamese independence, and the two sides were soon at war. The United States threw its support, including large sums of money, behind France's struggle to regain control of its former colony. By helping France, U.S. leaders hoped to block any spread of communism.

Fighting between the French and the Vietminh continued for nearly 8 years. Ho's forces steadily gained strength and popular support. The turning point came in 1954, when the Vietminh forced the French to surrender after a 56-day battle at Dienbienphu, in northwestern Vietnam. The defeat was a major blow to the war-weary French, and they agreed to negotiate a settlement. French control over Vietnam was ended.



Ask Analytical Questions

Ask an analytical question about the text in this paragraph. You might focus on comparing America's response to the war in Indochina with its response to Communist movements in Latin America. Recall your reading in a previous chapter.

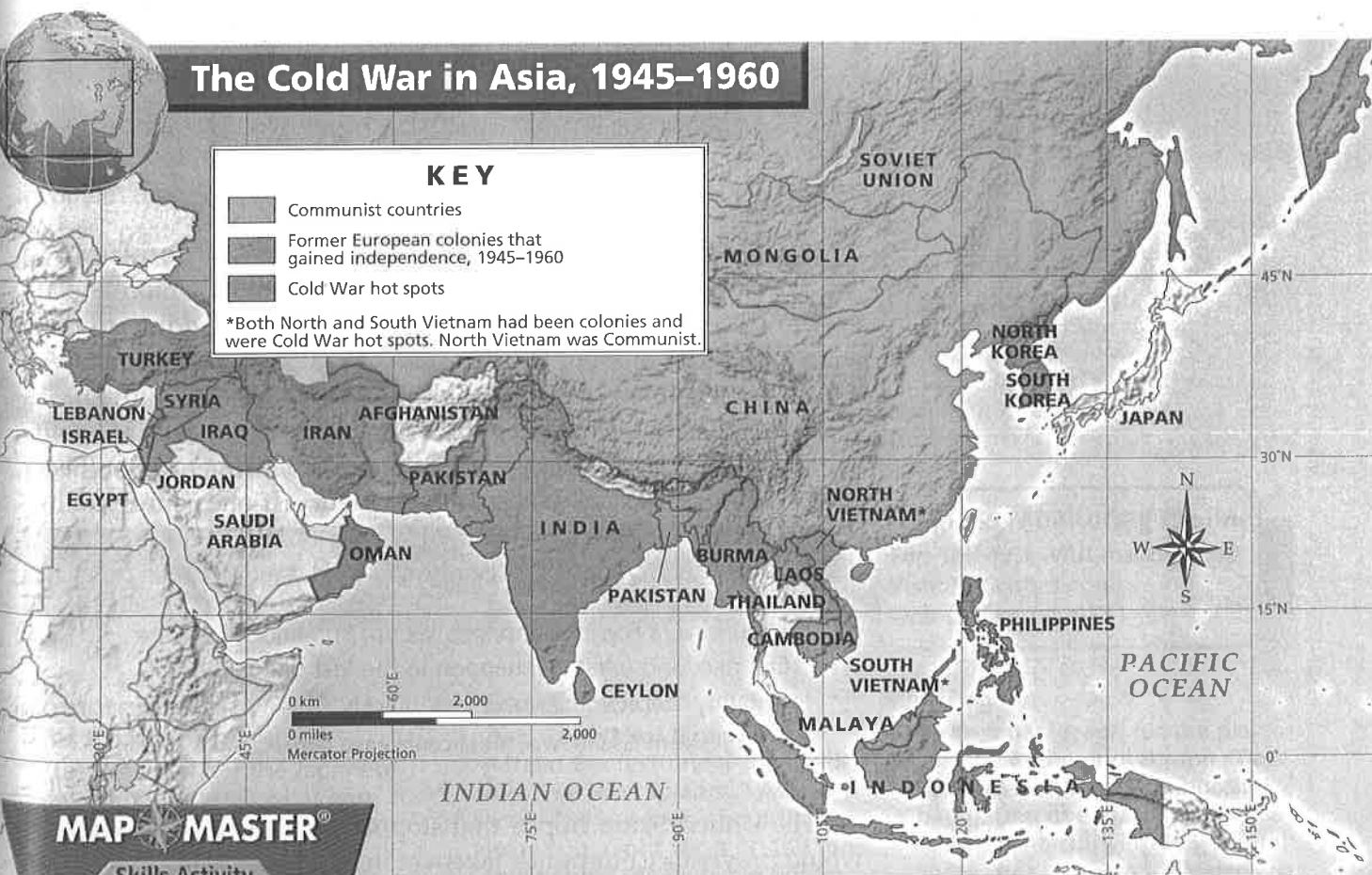
Checkpoint Why did the United States support the French side?

The Cold War in Asia, 1945–1960

KEY

- Communist countries
- Former European colonies that gained independence, 1945–1960
- Cold War hot spots

*Both North and South Vietnam had been colonies and were Cold War hot spots. North Vietnam was Communist.



The Cold War and the end of colonialism formed the backdrop for the Vietnam War.

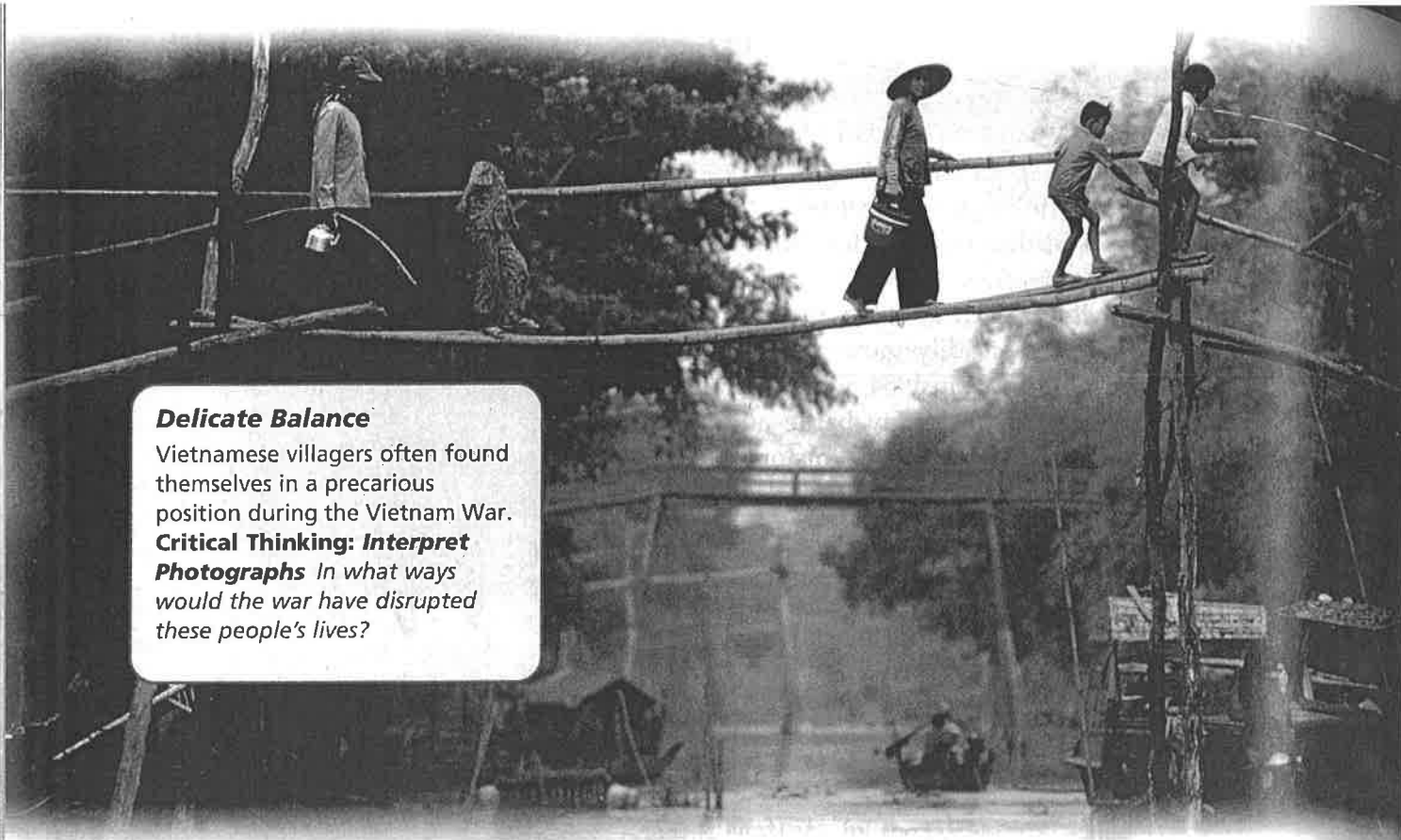
- (a) **Interpret Maps** Which Asian countries had Communist governments at the time of the Vietnam War?
- (b) **Explain Problems** What problems arose between Communist and non-Communist nations once colonialism ended?

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Delicate Balance

Vietnamese villagers often found themselves in a precarious position during the Vietnam War.

Critical Thinking: Interpret Photographs In what ways would the war have disrupted these people's lives?

The War Spreads

After World War II, U.S. leaders saw the Soviet Union and its system of communism as a threat to world peace. Adding to their fears, China came under Communist rule in 1949. The Korean War began in 1950, when Communist North Korea attacked South Korea.

When Ho Chi Minh defeated the French in 1954, many U.S. political leaders feared a widespread Communist takeover in Southeast Asia. This idea was called the **domino theory**. If one country fell to the Communists, it was thought that neighboring countries would follow. President Dwight D. Eisenhower explained the idea this way:

“You have a row of dominoes set up. You knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly.”

—President Eisenhower, press conference remarks, April 7, 1954

The United States hoped that stopping communism in Vietnam would prevent a Communist takeover in Southeast Asia.

Vocabulary Builder

fate (fayt) *n.* outcome; consequence or final result

Vietnam Divided After the French defeat, an international conference in Geneva, Switzerland, determined Vietnam's **fate**. Under the resulting Geneva Accords, Vietnam was temporarily divided into two states. North Vietnam, with its capital at Hanoi, was under the Communist rule of Ho Chi Minh. South Vietnam, with its capital at Saigon, was governed by Ngo Dinh Diem (noh din dee EHM). The United States pledged to support the South.

Elections were to unify the country within a few years, but the Diem government blocked them. A South Vietnamese movement organized to oppose Diem. In 1959, the movement launched an armed revolt. Guerrillas, or fighters who carry out hit-and-run attacks, waged a campaign of terror against villages controlled by Diem's officials. Using secret supply lines, the North Vietnamese furnished weapons to the guerrillas, who came to be called the Vietcong.

The American Role Deepens President John F. Kennedy continued Eisenhower's policy of support for South Vietnam. Kennedy sent more aid and many more military advisers.

In the meantime, South Vietnam's government was becoming unpopular. President Diem angered many South Vietnamese by imprisoning people who criticized his policies. Many of his handpicked officials were corrupt. U.S. leaders feared that Diem's actions were increasing support for the Vietcong.

In August 1963, when Diem ordered a crackdown against his opponents, Kennedy withdrew his support for Diem. This was a signal for the South Vietnamese military to act. In November 1963, military leaders seized control of the government and assassinated Diem.

Three weeks later, in an action unrelated to Vietnam, Kennedy himself was assassinated. With his death, Vietnam became the problem of the new President, Lyndon B. Johnson.

Checkpoint What kind of help did the United States give South Vietnam between 1954 and 1963?

Looking Back and Ahead At first, the United States supplied South Vietnam with money, weapons, and military advisers. In the next section, you will read how hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops became involved in a long, difficult war.

Vocabulary Builder

unify (yoo nuh fi) **v.** to unite; to make into one



Missile inspection by President Kennedy

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Comprehension and Critical Thinking

- (a) Recall** After the Japanese surrender in 1945, what happened in Vietnam that led to a new conflict?
(b) Apply Information Why do you think Ho Chi Minh gained a strong following in North Vietnam?
- (a) Describe** How did Ngo Dinh Diem run South Vietnam?
(b) Synthesize Information Why do you think Diem blocked elections during the early years of the government?

Reading Skill

- Ask Analytical Questions** Reread the text under the heading "The War Spreads." Ask an analytical question about the text. You might focus on the reasons behind the Vietcong fighting style.

Key Terms

Answer the following question in a complete sentence to show your understanding of the key term.

- How do guerrilla soldiers conduct warfare?

Writing

- Write a paragraph for the place you see in the photograph "Delicate Balance" (on the opposite page). Describe it as if it were a setting for a story in 1958, several years after Vietnam is divided.