Understanding Vietnam's political, cultural and economic background.

During the 19th century Vietnam was ruled by France and known as Indo-China. Vietnam became very profitable for the French, due to its rich supplies of coal, tin, zinc and rubber. To transport all these goods, the French built a network of railways, roads and canals.

The French soon began to change the Vietnamese way of life dramatically. For example, people converted to Catholicism, abandoning Buddhism. French customs were introduced and those who resisted were punished. This created a new elite class who helped the French keep control of the 30 million people living in Indochina.

French schools were soon established to educate Vietnamese administrators. In 1902 Hanoi University was opened.

Although one of the purposes of this education was to develop people who would remain loyal to the French Empire, some students began to question the right of France to rule their country. One such student was Ho Chi Minh!
Ho Chi Minh was born in 1890. His father, a NATIONALIST, taught his children to resist the rule of the French. He grew up a committed nationalist willing to fight for Vietnamese independence.

Ho, as a sailor discovered that Vietnam was not the only country to suffer from exploitation. Eventually, he converted to COMMUNISM and when the French Communist party was formed, he became one of its founder members.

Ho Chi Minh was greatly inspired by the Russian Revolution and while in the Soviet Union, he wrote to a friend saying that all communists duties were to:

“make contact with the masses to awaken, organise, unite and train them, and lead them to fight for freedom and independence.”

The first major blow to French power came in 1940 when France was defeated in WWII by Germany. The Japanese (Germany’s allies) took control of the main resources in Vietnam.

Ho and General Vo Nguyen Giap formed an organisation called VIET MINH. This was a strong anti-Japanese resistance movement. Ho inspired the Vietnamese people to fight for an independent Vietnam. They received ammunition and weapons from the Soviet Union and America after the bombing of Pearl Harbour.
Complete these tasks with your neighbour in the next 7 minutes. Be prepared to share with the class.

1. Using a dictionary or your phone, write down the definitions of these words: NATIONALIST, COMMUNIST, EXPLOITATION and INDEPENDENCE
2. Explain why Vietnam was valuable to the French.
4. Who was Ho Chi Minh?
5. Who were the Viet Minh?

When WWII ended in 1945, the Viet Minh controlled the north of the country (they set up an independent Vietnam with its capital at the northern city of Hanoi.)

The French refused to accept independence and for 9 years French troops fought against the Viet Minh troops. He kept quiet about wanting a communist country as many countries, such as the USA were sympathetic towards him.

However in 1949 the communists took over China and began to help Ho Chi Minh. The USA feared a communist takeover of South-East Asia and poured $500 million a year into the French war effort. They helped the French set up a non-communist government in South Vietnam.

The war dragged on from 1946-1954. The French effectively controlled the towns and the Viet Minh the countryside.

The decisive event came in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu. A large, well-armed force of French paratroopers was comprehensively defeated.
There were several important consequences:

- The French lost 3000 dead in the battle and 8000 more died in captivity.
- The Viet Minh forces had defeated the French in open battle with the help of modern weapons from the USSR and China.
- A small Asian state had defeated a rich European state through a combination of effective leadership, the right tactics, and sheer domination.
- At the 1954 peace Conference, the country was effectively divided into North and South Vietnam until elections could be held to decide its future.

The Democratic Republic North Vietnam was set up by Ho Chi Minh (communists country).

The South Vietnamese government was led by the American-based Ngo Dinh Diem (anti-communists country).

Under the terms of the cease fire, elections were to be held within two years to reunite the country. However the USA prevented the elections from taking place because it feared that the Communists would win.

Why?

President Eisenhower was convinced that China and the USSR were planning to spread Communism throughout Asia. The idea was often referred to as the Domino Theory. “If Vietnam fell to Communism, then other Asian countries might also - like a row of dominoes.”

The USA saw Vietnam first in the line of the dominoes and were determined not to let it fall.

Guerrilla Attacks - (a form of irregular warfare and refers to conflicts in which a small group of combatants use military tactics such as ambushes, sabotage, raids, the element of surprise, to harass a larger and less-mobilised traditional army, or strike a vulnerable target, and withdraw almost immediately.)
One of the most famous photographs in the history of the world is the photo of the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc sitting in the lotus position in a busy intersection in Saigon on June 11, 1963 after he set himself on fire to protest the treatment of Buddhists by South Vietnam’s Catholic President Diem.

In 1963 and 1964 tension between North and South Vietnam increased and so did American involvement. However President Kennedy said he was determined that the USA would not ‘blunder into war, unclear about aims or how to get out again.’ JFK was assassinated in 1963, his successor President Johnson was more prepared to commit the USA to full-scale conflict in Vietnam to prevent the spread of communism.

In August 1964 North Vietnamese patrol boats opened fire on US ships. In a furious reaction, the US Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

On March 8th 1965 3500 US combat troops entered Vietnam. America was now at war.

**Tonkin Gulf Resolution** gave Pres. Johnson the power to take all necessary measures to prevent further aggression and achieve peace and security. It effectively meant Johnson could take the USA into full scale war if he felt necessary.

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a) Describe what happened at the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964

In 1964 the Gulf of Tonkin was attacked by North Vietnamese patrol boats. This led to the passing of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution by US Congress. This gave American President Johnson the power to send US troops to Vietnam. 3500 US marines arrived in Vietnam which started the Vietnam War.

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Complete these tasks with your neighbour in the next 7 minutes. Be prepared to share with the class.

1. Describe the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu.
2. Who was Ngo Dinh Diem?
3. Draw a sketch of the ‘Domino Theory’ and give an explanation below it.
4. Explain the term Guerrilla Attacks.
5. Explain how the USA, under President Johnson, was more prepared for war with Vietnam than the USA under JFK.
6. Explain why the Tonkin Gulf Measure was important to the start of the Vietnam War.