The Cold War in Asia: Crash Course US History #38

Crash Course: U.S. History
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Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course US History, and today we're going to talk about the Cold War again. Really less about the "cold," more about the "war." As usual, we're not going to focus so much on the generals and the tactics, but instead on why the wars were fought and what it all meant.

And today we get to visit a part of the world that we haven't seen much on this series: [spins] Asia. Not my best work.

(Intro)

=====Korean War (0:28)=====

So, we're gonna start today with the place where the Cold War really heated up, at least as far as America's concerned.

Mr Green, it's Vietnam.

Close, Me from the Past, but like all your romantic endeavors, unsuccessful. The correct answer is of course Korea. Like Me From the Past, many Americans have forgotten about the Korean War, which lasted three years from 1950 to 1953 and is sometimes called the Forgotten War. But it was real.

The Korean War was the first real like shooting war that Americans were involved in after World War II and it was the only time that American troops directly engaged with an honest to goodness Communist power. I'm referring not to North Korea, but to China, which became communist in 1949 and qualifies as a major world power because it was, and also is, huge. We love you, China. Just kidding, you're not watching, because of the Great Firewall!

So the end of WWII left Korea split between a Communist north led by Kim Il "Crazypants" Sung and an anti-communist but hardly democratic South led by Syngman Rhee. The two were supposed to reunite, but that was impossible because they were constantly fighting, fighting that cost around 100,000 lives.

The civil war between the two Koreas turned into a full-fledged international conflict in June of 1950, when Kim Il Sung invaded the South, and the US responded. Truman thought that Kim's invasion was being pushed by the Soviets, and that it was a challenge to the "Free World."

Truman went to the United Nations and he got authorization, but he didn't go to Congress and never called the Korean War a "war." Insisting instead that American troops were leading a UN "police action", but that was kind of a misleading statement.

General Douglas MacArthur was in command of this tiny little police force at the start of the war, because he was the highest ranking general in the region. He was also really popular, at least with the press, although not so much with other generals, or with the president.

Under MacArthur, UN forces – which basically meant American and South Korean forces -- pushed the North Koreans back past the 38th parallel where the two countries had been divided, and then Truman made a fateful decision: the United States would try to re-unify Korea as a non-communist state. Which, if you've looked at a map recently, you'll notice went swimmingly.

America's allies and the UN all agreed to this idea, so up north they went, all the way to the northern border with China at the Yalu river. At that point, Chinese forces, feeling that American forces were a smidge too close to China, counter-attacked on November 1, 1950, and by Christmas, the two sides were stalemated again at the 38th parallel, right where they started.

The war dragged on for two more years, with the U.S. pursuing a "scorched earth" policy and dropping more bombs on Korea than had been dropped in the entire Pacific theater during WWII. The two sides tried to negotiate a peace treaty, but the sticking point was the repatriation of North Korean and Chinese prisoners who didn't want to go back to their communist homelands.

Meanwhile, at home, Americans were growing tired of a war that they weren't winning, which helped to swing the election of 1952 for Dwight Eisenhower. Also he was also running against perennial presidential loser Adlai Stevenson, who was perceived as an egghead intellectual because his name was Adlai Stevenson.

In addition to helping get Ike elected, the Korean War had a number of profound effects. First and most importantly, it was expensive, both in terms of lives and money. In 3 years of fighting 33,629 Americans were killed, 102,000 were wounded and nearly 4 million Koreans and Chinese were killed, wounded, or missing. The majority of Korean casualties were civilians.

The Korean War also further strengthened executive power in the United States – Truman went to war without a declaration, and Congress acquiesced – this doesn't mean that the war was initially was unpopular, it wasn't. People wanted to see America do something about Communism, and allowing Kim to take the south and possibly threaten Japan was unacceptable.

However, the whole idea that you don't really need to declare war to go to war, while not new in America, sure has been important the last 60 years. And the Korean War also strengthened the Cold War mentality. I mean, this was the height of the Red Scare. Also, the Korean War set the stage for America's longer, more destructive, and more well known engagement in Asia, the Vietnam War.

=====Mystery Document (4:17)=====

Oh it's time for the Mystery Document? The rules here are simple. I guess the author of the Mystery Document. I'm either right or I get shocked. Alright, let's see what we've got.

> The Declaration of the French Revolution made in 1791 states: "All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights." Those are undeniable truths. Nevertheless, for more than eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, have violated our Fatherland and oppressed our fellow citizens. They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice. In the field of politics, they have deprived our people of every democratic liberty.

Well, Stan, that sounds like a Frenchman who really doesn't want to be French anymore. So it's somebody who's very disappointed by the way the France has been running their colonies. I'm going to guess that it's North Vietnamese leader and Crash Course chalk board person: Ho Chi Minh. Wait, Stan says he needs his real name. It's Nguyen Sinh Cung. Yes!

So, this document it points out that, at least rhetorically, Ho Chi Minh was fighting for liberation from a colonial power as much as, if not more than, he was trying to establish a communist dictatorship in Vietnam. But because of the Cold War and its prevailing theories, the United States could only see Ho as a communist stooge, a tool of the Kremlin.

=====Vietnam War Background (5:36)=====

Under the so-called “domino theory”, Vietnam was just another domino that had to be propped up or else the rest of South East Asia would fall to communism like a row of, dominoes.

Now, in retrospect, this was a fundamental misunderstanding, but it’s important to remember that at the time, people felt that they didn’t want the Soviet Union to expand the way that, say, Nazi Germany had. America’s involvement in Vietnam, like most things Cold War, dates back to World War II, but it really picked up in the 1950s as we threw our support behind the French in their war to maintain their colonial empire.

Wait, Stan, how- why would we fight with the French to maintain a colonial empire? Oh right, because we were blinded by our fear of communism.

Now, Eisenhower wisely refused to send troops or use atomic weapons to help the French. Really good call. And the Geneva Accords were supposed to set up elections to reunite North and South, which had been divided after WWII, but then we didn’t let that happen. Because sometimes democracies don’t vote for our guy.

Instead, the U.S. began supporting the repressive, elitist regime of Ngo Dinh Diem as a bulwark against communism. Diem was a Catholic in a majority Buddhist country and his support of landowners didn’t win him any fans. But he was against communism, which was good enough for us.

=====American Involvement (6:42)=====

The first major involvement of American troops, then called advisors, began in the early 1960s. Technically, their role was to advise the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, also called ARVN. It was doomed. How did they not know this was doomed? Let’s fight for ARVN. Against this guy. You are scary. Seriously.

Anyway, pretty quickly, this advising turned into shooting, and the first American advisors were killed in 1961, during John Kennedy’s presidency. However, most Americans consider Vietnam to be Lyndon Johnson’s war, and they aren’t wrong. The major escalation of American troops started under Johnson, especially in 1965 after the Gulf of Tonkin incident. This is one of the great incidents in all of American history.

So, in August 1964, North Korean patrol boats attacked US warships in the Gulf of Tonkin. As a result, Johnson asked Congress to authorize the president to take “all necessary measures to repel armed attack” in Vietnam, which Congress dutifully did with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

So why is this one of the great incidents in American history? Because the whole patrol boats attacking warships thing? That didn’t happen. None of that stuff happened, except we did actually go to war.

Now, in retrospect, this seems like a terrible idea, but it was very popular at the time because, to quote the historian James Patterson, “Preventing Communism, after all, remained the guiding star of American policy.”

Wait a second, did I just say to quote historian James Patterson, like the crime novelist? Oh it’s a different guy apparently. That’s a bummer. He doesn’t write his own books because he’s so busy with his secret career - being a historian.

So, the number of American troops began a steady increase and so did the bombing. The frightfully named Operation Rolling Thunder began in the spring of 1965. And in March of that year, two Marine battalions arrived at Da Nang airbase authorized to attack the enemy. No advising about it.

But, Johnson didn’t actually tell the American public that our troops had this authorization, which was part of a widening credibility gap between what the government told Americans about the war and what was really happening. Let’s go to the Thought Bubble.

=====The Vietnam Battleground - Thought Bubble (8:41)=====
By 1968 there were about half a million American soldiers in Vietnam and the government was confidently saying that victory was just around the corner. But then in January, Vietnamese forces launched the Tet Offensive and while it was eventually repelled, the fact that the North Vietnamese were able to mount such an offensive cast doubts on the claims that U.S. victory was imminent.

The Vietnam War itself was particularly brutal, with much of the ground fighting taking place in jungles. Rather than large-scale offensives, troops were sent on search and destroy missions and often it was difficult to tell enemy from civilians. Capturing territory wasn’t meaningful, so commanders kept track of body counts. Like, if more enemy were killed than Americans, we were winning.

In addition to jungle fighting, there was a lot of bombing. Like, more bombs were dropped on North and South Vietnam than both the Axis and Allied powers used in all of World War II. The U.S. used chemical defoliants like Agent Orange to get rid of that pesky jungle, and also napalm, which was used to burn trees, homes, and people.

Television coverage meant that Vietnam was the first war brought into American living rooms. And people were horrified by what they saw. They were especially shocked at the My Lai massacre, which took place in 1968 but was only reported a year later, in 1969.

These draftees were young, and disproportionately from the lower classes because enrollment in college or grad school earned you a deferment. So unlike previous American wars, the burden of fighting did not fall evenly across socioeconomic class. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

=====Nixon's Policy (10:05)=====
So, as Americans at home became increasingly aware of what was going on in Vietnam, protests started. But it’s important to remember that the majority of Americans were not out in the streets or on college campuses burning their draft cards. Right up through 1968 and maybe even 1970, most Americans supported the Vietnam War.

During the 1968 presidential campaign, Richard Nixon promised that he had a secret plan to end the war and appealed to the silent majority of Americans who weren’t on board with the anti-war movement. So, the first part of Nixon’s secret plan was “Vietnamization” - gradually withdrawing American troops and leaving the fighting to the Vietnamese.

The second part involved more bombing and actually escalating the war by sending American troops into Cambodia in order to cut off the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail, named for this guy, a supply line that connected north to south. Not only did this not work, it also destabilized Cambodia and helped the Khmer Rouge to come to power.

The Khmer Rouge represented the absolute worst that Communism had to offer, forcing almost all Cambodians into communes and massacring one third of the country’s population. So, not a great

secret plan.

In the United States, by 1970, the anti-war protests had grown and discontent within the armed forces was enormous. Vietnam veterans, including future almost-president John Kerry, were participating in protests. And things got even worse in 1971, when the New York Times published the Pentagon Papers, classified documents that showed that the government had been misleading the public about the war for years.

Congress eventually responded by passing the War Powers Act in 1973, which was supposed to limit the president's ability to send troops overseas without their approval and prevent another Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Oh, how does that work out, Stan?

Stan: Not great.

John: Yeah. I'll say.

After five years of negotiations, Nixon and his secretary of state Henry Kissinger were able to end America's involvement in Vietnam. In 1973 the Paris Peace Agreement made it possible for America to withdraw its troops, although it left North Korea in control of some of South Vietnam.

=====Outcome (12:03)=====

The war between North and South Vietnam, however, continued until 1975, when the North finally conquered the South and created a single, communist Vietnam. The Vietnam War cost the United States more than $100 billion; 58,000 Americans died as well as between 3 and 4 million Vietnamese people.

And Vietnam was the first war in America that we definitively lost. We lost it because we didn't understand the Vietnamese, and we didn't understand why they were fighting. To return to the historian James Patterson, "the unyielding determination of the enemy … wore down the American commitment, which proved to be far less resolute."

America expected that its superior technology and wealth would eventually wear down the Vietnamese, and they'd just give up communism. But the Vietnamese weren't fighting for communism. They were fighting for Vietnam. This fundamental misunderstanding, combined with the government's dishonesty, changed Americans' relationship with their leaders.

Before Vietnam, most Americans trusted their government, even when they knew it did horrible things. But, after the war, and largely because of it, that trust was gone. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

=====Credits (13:09)=====

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Thanks again for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.