

Military Conflicts of the Cold War

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During the Cold War, the United States and its allies had a policy called containment. The idea was that they could not allow communism and its ideas to spread to other countries. They were willing to go to any length, including war to make sure that democracy was the government that people chose when setting up their new governments after World War 2. Since both the US and Soviets had nuclear weapons, often these wars would be between one of the super-powers, and a local government supported by the other one.

Korea

The first conflict came in 1950, when the Soviet Union decided to back Kim Il Sung, a communist leader in



The 38th Parallel is the latitude line that served as the guide for the demilitarized zone. It is still the line that divides North and South Korea.

the Northern half of Korea, while the US and its military backed a democratic government in the Southern half. Joseph Stalin and the Soviets believed that if they supported the Northern government, and provided them with weapons, that the US would not risk war with the Soviet Union, and would leave the South to fight for themselves.

They were wrong, and the US army did not leave. At first, the North Koreans had the advantage, and almost pushed the US and United Nations forces off the peninsula entirely. The United Nations and US responded by sending massive numbers of troops and supplies for a counter-offensive that almost ended the war by conquering all of the North Korean forces. China, which had recently ended its own revolution after WW2 and established a communist state sent troops to join with the North Koreans and pushed the United Nations forces

back to the 38th Parallel, and for the next 2 years, it became mostly a trench war, with neither side moving much.

After 3 years of fighting, with little progress being made by either side, they agreed to an armistice. There is still a 2.5 mile wide de-militarized zone between the two countries where nobody from either side's military is allowed to go. This zone has electric fences, land mines, and is very dangerous for anyone. Since both governments in North and South Korea claim that they are the only true government of Korea, there has never been an end to the war, and both sides still talk of unifying the country under one government. North Korea has further complicated matters by developing nuclear weapons despite very large sanctions against them by the United Nations. Kim Il Sung's son and grandson have succeeded him to rule the country, so even though it is technically considered a communist country, it is more of a dynastic dictatorship. There are heavy Stalinist influences in the North Korean government.

Vietnam

The Vietnam War lasted from 1955 to 1975, with most of the fighting taking place between 1960 and 1972. Again caused by the American goal of containment, the US began to support an anti-communist government in South Vietnam, while a North Vietnamese communist government was supported by troops and supplies by China. A third group, called the Viet Cong, was a guerrilla group that conducted raids, sabotage, and terror attacks in South Vietnam with the hope that the South would give up and become communist, but they were not directed by the Northern Vietnam government.

Vietnam used to be a French colony until about 1950, when the Vietnamese people began to fight against the French. By 1954, the French had almost completely left the country, and two groups were fighting for control of the country, a communist group in the North, and a democratic group in the South. The United Nations tried to create two different countries, just like they had in Korea, but the effort failed as the two groups continued to fight against one another.



The Vietnam War is known as the "helicopter war."

As conflicts escalated, the US military became more and more involved in the fighting, until by the mid 1960's, they were fully committed to war. Vietnam was known as the "helicopter war" since the new technology allowed American troops to be moved quickly to battlefields. It was also the first war where reporters were allowed to follow the troops, and video actual combat. This had a major impact on public opinion, since they could see the war playing out in their living rooms.

The combination of new technology and the jungle environment of Vietnam led to many atrocities and unintended consequences. Disease was difficult to deal with, and while helicopters allowed the United States to move quickly, the jungle allowed the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Armies to hide easily. One of the things the Americans began to do was to spray herbicide called "Agent Orange" on the jungle to kill all of the vegetation. Dumping thousands of tons of the chemical on the jungle has had major long-term effects on the ecosystem. Since the chemical eventually ended up in the ground water and rivers, Vietnamese people today still have higher than average cancer rates, and abnormal births due to poisoning from the Agent Orange.

As the war dragged on, and it became more and more clear to the people in the United States that the Vietnamese were not going to give up, public opinion began to push President Nixon to end the war. In 1972, the last US forces left Vietnam, and quickly after that, the North Vietnamese army conquered the South, and today Vietnam is a unified, communist country.



The Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. lists the 68,000 American Soldiers who lost their lives fighting in a War that the US failed to achieve its objective. While not technically a lost war, Vietnam is seen as a military failure.

Afghanistan

Beginning around 1975, Afghanistan began to make large changes to its government, including modernizing the Islamic country. This made many conservative groups angry with the government, and by 1978, they had begun to revolt. Seeing an opportunity to expand its influence, the Soviet Union sent military troops into the country in 1979 to support the government against the rebels. Since the USSR had sent troops first, the United States and NATO countries had to resort to sending weapons and providing training to the rebel groups. These groups, known as the Mujahideen, were really composed of two different groups, one supported by the US, UK, Saudi Arabia and others called the Peshawar Seven, and the other supported by Iran called the Tehran Eight.

Over 10 years of fighting, somewhere between 1 and 1.5 million civilians would die in the war. Due to the difficult terrain, and the fact that about 80% of the country was in open rebellion against the Soviet-backed government, the Soviets would never be able to get rid of the rebel groups. In 1988, the Soviets would begin to withdraw, and by 1989, they had totally left the country. Many people refer to the Afghanistan war as the Soviet

Union's "Vietnam" since they spent tremendous resources, time, and soldiers to ultimately quit a war without succeeding in its objective. Many historians consider the Afghanistan War to be the longest active war in modern history, since the Taliban and Mujahideen continue to fight against other groups in Afghanistan. Ironically, about 17 years after the Soviets left the Afghanistan War, the US would begin its own war, fighting against the side that it had initially helped.

The most lasting impact of the Afghanistan-Soviet War was the American training and millions of dollars of supplies given to the rebel groups. Without this support, it is questionable if they would have been able to effectively resist Soviet control. However, since they were the more conservative (and radical) Islamic groups in the country, most of these fighters joined terrorist organizations after the war. One such group was led by a US-trained rebel leader named Osama Bin Laden. Bin Laden had been very effective fighting against the Soviets, having received millions of dollars, weapons, supplies, and training by the CIA. He would go on to establish the terrorist

group al-Qaeda, and just 4 years after the end of the Afghan-Soviet war, would begin to use his training, resources and leadership position given to him to attack the very nation which had supported him: the United States of America.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Why did the US fight in Korea and Vietnam and support rebel fighters in Afghanistan?
2. Why was the Vietnam War a failure?
3. Why did people call the Afghan-Soviet War the Soviet Union's "Vietnam?"

Write about it.

US support of Bin Laden during the Afghan War demonstrates the dangers of taking sides in a war that doesn't directly impact the United States. If you could give advice to the President of the United States, Ronald Regan in 1980 concerning the Afghan-Soviet War, what would you tell him?