

Reasons for US failure in Vietnam

Had a look

Nearly there

Nailed it!

The weaknesses of US armed forces

The Americans lacked an understanding of the Vietnamese culture, geographical environment and political landscape, which made it difficult for them to win in Vietnam despite their military strength.

Lack of knowledge and awareness

- 1 Vietnam was very 'alien' to most Americans, who did not understand anything about the country they were at war with. US soldiers found the war more difficult as a result.
- 2 Many Americans underestimated their enemy and held ignorant and racist views about their inferiority as an opponent.
- 3 US military leaders and strategists did not try to understand the conflict from the viewpoint of the Vietnamese people and this put them at a real disadvantage.

The geographical distance between the USA and Vietnam is over 13 500 km.

Political and economic weaknesses

- For the first time, the USA fought a war for which there was no clear public agreement about whether the conflict was justified.
- Also for the first time in US history, war veterans wanted the war to stop and even handed in their medals in protest.
- There was a lot of media criticism about the war aims and the methods used.
- The US government ignored public opposition to the war but ultimately had to listen to the anti-war movement, as presidents and members of Congress relied on public support to be elected.
- When Congress restricted funding of the war after 1971 there were shortages of equipment for US troops.

Failure of US tactics

The US army benefited from superior military technology, including helicopters and advanced weaponry. However, in this context it did not help the US military to secure a victory. The USA:

- failed in its tactics, mistakenly believing that victory could be won by deploying more troops and ordering more bombing of North Vietnam
- over-estimated its successes, basing calculations on how many villages they destroyed or Vietcong they killed rather than how much territory they controlled.

US troops were young and inexperienced and lacked relevant training in guerrilla warfare. The failures bred low morale. This in turn led to fragging (the intentional killing of officers by troops) and drug abuse. Many soldiers used alcohol and marijuana. When the US army clamped down on this, soldiers turned to other drugs, including heroin.

Failure to win Vietnamese hearts and minds

While propaganda claimed the USA wanted democracy for South Vietnam, the South Vietnamese saw the USA as simply a foreign power interfering in their country. So the US-backed South Vietnamese government was very unpopular. It was also hated for its ties to French colonial interests of the past that were seen as anti-Vietnamese.

Many local people in South Vietnam had far more sympathy with the ideas and values of the Vietcong and North Vietnam than with a government imposed on them by the USA.



US chart for training soldiers, to help them understand the enemy.

Now try this

Write **one** paragraph to explain the main weaknesses of the USA in fighting the Vietcong.

Tasks:

1. Explain three ways the Vietcong and North Vietnamese fought against the USA.
2. Create a spider diagram and explain the reasons for the failure in Vietnam.
3. In your opinion what was the most important reason the USA failed in Vietnam?