Why did the U.S. become involved in Vietnam and why did it eventually withdraw.

Vietnam is a country that is located in Southeast Asia. In 1858, France colonised and controlled most of Southeast Asia and began to utilise their valuable resources. This area became known as French Indochina. Then in World War II, Japan invaded French Indochina and took control of it. The Vietnamese were happy to see the French gone but still feared Japan resulting in Ho Chi Minh and others founding the Vietminh (Independence) league. After Japan’s defeat in the war in August 1945, the French sought to take control of the area once again, however Ho Chi Minh and his supporters staged a guerrilla war against the French. U.S. president Truman gave military aid to the French in keeping with the Truman doctrine as he believed Ho Chi Minh was getting arms and advice from Stalin.

In 1953, Eisenhower became U.S. President. He also believed in containment of communism and the domino theory (meaning if one country fell under communist control, all the surrounding countries would soon also fall under communism, like a row of dominos). Due to this he increased the number of U.S. military advisors in Vietnam. However in 1954, the French were defeated by Vietnamese forces in a decisive battle at Dien Bien Phu and soon surrendered to Ho Chi Minh and his forces. In the same year, an international peace conference in Geneva, Switzerland, set up two new countries, Laos and Cambodia and divided Vietnam along the 17th degree parallel line of latitude. It was agreed that elections would take place to establish a democratic government for the whole country of Vietnam but the U.S. feared this would lead to a communist victory so refused to allow elections in South Vietnam which was under the control of a non-communist government ruled by Ngo Dinh Diem and was supported by the U.S. and French. North Vietnam was led by Ho Chi Minh and his communist supporters and was supported by the U.S.S.R. and China

The U.S. supported Diem as leader of South Vietnam, who maintained the South Vietnam was a peace-loving democracy and that the Communist wanted to take over South Vietnam. The U.S. provided Diem aid and more U.S. military advisors and this number had reached 1,500 by 1960. Diem was unpopular among South Vietnamese peasants who instead supported the Vietcong, who in turn received support from Ho Chi Minh, backed by China and the U.S.S.R. When John F. Kennedy became U.S. president he increased financial support to South Vietnam and increased the number of U.S. military advisors to 23,000 by 1963 but didn’t want to involve U.S. troops in Vietnam. However after Diem and his brother began raiding Buddhist pagodas in South Vietnam, claiming they were harbouring communists, Diem was portrayed as an unpopular, corrupt dictator worldwide and he decided not to hold scheduled elections promised to the people. As a result in 1963, Diem was assassinated by a U.S. backed group of South Vietnamese generals who planned a coup. However weeks later, President Kennedy was assassinated and Lyndon Baines Johnson became president.

Johnson did not want the U.S. to become involved in a full scale war. Instead he wanted to create a fair and just society for all U.S. citizens. He called this the “Great Society Programme”. In this he set up plans to provide cheap housing and rents, and education to poorer areas of society in order to allow people have a better chance in life. However Johnson also believed in the domino theory like the presidents before him. He had kept Kennedy’s advisors and turned to them for help. They worried that if the U.S. withdrew, their public image would be damaged and that it would lead to a rise in communism in the region. As a result the U.S. increased its number of military advisors and aid to South Vietnam, including increasing the number of planes, tanks and other military equipment sent to South Vietnam. Johnson hoped this would help the U.S. succeed. However on the 3rd of August 1964, the U.S.S. Maddox reported that it had been fired upon by North Vietnamese boats. They again repeated this two days later. They had been fired upon while on patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam, hence the name the Tonkin Incident. This gave the U.S. the perfect reason to increase its involvement in Vietnam. The U.S. soon passed the Tonkin Resolution giving Johnson the power to protect American interests in Southeast Asia by taking all necessary steps, including the use of military force, and allowed Johnson to attack North Vietnam as they were supporting the Vietcong. After the U.S. were unable to win a decisive victory on the ground, they commenced a series of bombing raids on North Vietnam called Operation Rolling Thunder which, originally planned to last 8 weeks, continued for 3 years and involved the U.S. dropping more bombs in that period than all the bombs dropped in World War II. The U.S. had hoped the bombing would badly affect Vietnamese morale and destroy the Ho Chi Minh Trail, being used to supply the Vietcong from North Vietnam, but it did not have any of these effects. The U.S. also sprayed defoliants over the jungle to destroy the cover of the Vietcong and used Napalm, which is a jelly like substance used in bombs that burns to the bone. The U.S. also used the policy of pacification, meaning destroying any villages suspected of helping the Vietcong and killing its villagers. Success was counted in the number of Vietnamese that were killed. The Vietnamese however felt greater hatred and more desire to win the war against the U.S. and built new supply routes as one was destroyed.

However as the war went on, tensions began to grow among the U.S. public. At the start of the war the media had passed on government reports without question but, when they discovered these were not true, the media became critical of policy and began to question whether the U.S. should be fighting the war at all. This led to a credibility gap among the U.S. citizens. The media reported and showed pictures of the war that made it look a lot different to what the government was saying. Major turning points in the war also made people further question the government’s reports. Two of these turning points were the Tet Offensive and the My Lai Massacre. These events showed that the war was not going to end soon and was far from over, highlighted the North Vietnamese and Vietcong would not give up and the My Lai Massacre sickened and disgusted the American people after it was leaked to the media revealing U.S. soldiers had killed over 300 innocent people in the village of My Lai in Vietnam.

The media and these events contributed to the anti-war movement which was led by students. This grew massively as it highlighted problems the war was causing, such as: costing the U.S. $30 billion per year, when this money could be better spent at home; the number of casualties the war cost, 50,000 lives; the failure of the military to answer the North Vietnamese and Vietcong guerrilla tactics and they also questioned whether America had any right to be fighting to prevent communism when most of Vietnam wanted to be communist anyway. The students attracted huge media coverage, held debates, organised protest marchers and burned draft cards. This had a huge effect on Johnson’s career afterwards. The movement had only started small with a “teach-in” in the University of Michigan but had grown massive within 4 or 5 years and had spread across the U.S. The growth of the anti-war movement led Johnson to withdraw from the next presidential race and caused him to call a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam and start peace talks in Paris in 1968 between the North Vietnamese and the U.S. This was seen as a partial success for the anti-war movement.

Johnson was succeeded by Richard Nixon in 1969. Nixon knew he had to withdraw but wanted “peace with honour” which meant he didn’t want South Vietnam to be taken over by the North Vietnamese when the U.S. left as it would be a sign of U.S. weakness and would be the equivalent of a defeat. He had to withdraw due to the large anti-war protests and opposition to the war, the massive cost the U.S. Was having to pay for the war, the high number of casualties and the increase in the credibility gap. Nixon began a policy of Vietnamisation, which involved training up South Vietnam soldiers to take the place of the U.S. soldiers as they were being withdrawn. Nixon hoped this would enable the South Vietnamese army to defend South Vietnam well. In 1969, however, Nixon began a secret bombing of Loas and Cambodia, and this was followed by an invasion the next year with the aim of destroying the Ho Chi Minh trail and communist bases in Laos and Cambodia. This was kept secret for a few months, but it was leaked by the New York Times to the public causing massive uproar and an increase in protests. One of these protests resulted in four students being shot dead by U.S. National Guards in Kent State University, Ohio.

Peace talks continued during these events, but little progress was made. The U.S. wanted North Vietnam to accept the government of South Vietnam, but it refused. Nixon launched a ten day bombing raid on North Vietnam which was so aggressive that it surprised many neutral countries as a result of a North Vietnamese attack on South Vietnam. This continued U.S. bombing and pressure from the U.S.S.R. and China finally resulted in North Vietnam signing a peace treaty in Paris on 27 January 1973. It stated that: two governments would be established, one in the North and one in the South, the U.S. would withdraw from South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and all prisoners of war would be returned. However, the North Vietnamese did not honour this peace treaty for long as in 1975 they attacked and took control of South Vietnam and Vietnam was united under communism.

The Vietnamese War had huge consequences for the U.S. as: Over 50,000 U.S. soldiers were killed and another 150,000 wounded; the U.S. failed in containing communism in the region as Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were now all communist; the U.S.’s world image was damaged, changing from being seen as fighting for freedom and democracy to being seen as a country that uses chemical weapons and takes part in massacres of innocent people (My Lai Massacre); the U.S. Congress ended up reducing the power of the president after it believed he had exceeded his powers and took advantage of them; and finally the war cost the U.S. a staggering $150 billion overall ($30 billion per year) weakening the U.S. economy and affecting society. After the Vietnam War the U.S. attempted to improve and build better relations with the U.S.S.R. and China in the hope that it would lead to a reduction in spending on arms and nuclear weapons for the U.S. (détente).