Vietnam's Long Shadow

Trace how wartime choices influenced U.S. foreign policy in the 1970s.

SS24.US2.16a "Analyze how America's foreign policy decisions in the Vietnam War shaped Cold War actions in the 1970s, including détente and increased concern for human rights."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline the two U.S. choices in Vietnam, then circle the later Cold War response linked to each choice. Number each choice and its linked response 1 or 2 to show the two cause-and-effect chains.

Two Lessons from Vietnam

(1) In 1968, U.S. leaders faced a war that resisted their predictions. They had chosen to keep large numbers of American troops fighting in Vietnam to prevent a communist victory. The Tet Offensive showed that North Vietnamese forces and communist forces in the South could still strike widely, even though U.S. officials had suggested progress. Television reports of fighting and rising casualties deepened public doubt. This long military commitment did not end the Cold War rivalry. It did, however, make another costly showdown with a communist power look less attractive to many U.S. leaders.

(2) That experience helped shape détente, a 1970s policy of easing tensions with communist rivals while continuing to compete with them. President Richard Nixon sought talks with China and visited Beijing in 1972. That same year, the United States and Soviet Union signed an agreement limiting certain strategic missile launchers. The costly U.S. commitment in Vietnam made negotiation seem more useful than treating every dispute as a battlefield. Fear of nuclear war and the split between China and the Soviet Union also shaped these moves. Détente was a shift in methods, not an end to competition.

(3) A second Vietnam decision raised a different question: What values did U.S. alliances defend? American officials continued to support South Vietnam's government even as that government restricted political opposition and civil liberties. For many critics, that support exposed a gap between U.S. claims about freedom and its actions abroad. In the 1970s, lawmakers and activists increasingly pressed leaders to weigh human rights in foreign policy. President Jimmy Carter made human rights a stated priority after taking office in 1977. Vietnam was not the sole cause of that concern, but the alliance supplied a forceful example of its urgency.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the U.S. decision to keep large numbers of troops fighting in Vietnam help make détente appealing?

2. How did U.S. support for South Vietnam's government help increase calls to consider human rights?

3. Why would it be inaccurate to say Vietnam alone caused détente? Name two other factors in the passage.

4. How did détente and the growing emphasis on human rights address different problems exposed by U.S. choices in Vietnam?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine you advise the U.S. president in 1978: a U.S. partner has jailed peaceful critics while tensions rise with a communist rival. In one paragraph, recommend one action to ease tensions and one action to defend human rights, and connect each to a different Vietnam lesson from the passage.

ANSWER KEY

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GRADE 11 · SS24.US2.16a

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline the two U.S. choices in Vietnam, then circle the later Cold War response linked to each choice. Number each choice and its linked response 1 or 2 to show the two cause-and-effect chains. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the U.S. decision to keep large numbers of troops fighting in Vietnam help make détente appealing?	**The costly, prolonged fighting made negotiation with communist rivals seem more useful than risking another military showdown.**
2	How did U.S. support for South Vietnam's government help increase calls to consider human rights?	**The government restricted opposition and civil liberties, so U.S. support for it exposed a gap between American claims about freedom and American actions.**
3	Why would it be inaccurate to say Vietnam alone caused détente? Name two other factors in the passage.	**Fear of nuclear war and the split between China and the Soviet Union also shaped détente.**
4	How did détente and the growing emphasis on human rights address different problems exposed by U.S. choices in Vietnam?	**Détente offered negotiation as an alternative to costly military confrontation. The human rights emphasis addressed the contradiction between U.S. claims about freedom and support for a government that restricted civil liberties.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would propose talks with the communist rival to reduce the risk of a military clash. Vietnam showed that a long military commitment could be costly without ending Cold War competition. I would also publicly urge our partner to release the peaceful critics and make future assistance depend on its treatment of them. U.S. support for South Vietnam showed how backing a government that restricts civil liberties can weaken American claims about freedom.

Accept responses that link prolonged fighting to the appeal of negotiation and support for South Vietnam's government to increased scrutiny of allies' human rights records. Do not require students to claim Vietnam was the sole cause of either shift.