

Chapter 5 sample exam-style questions with sample answers

- a) Describe American involvement in South Vietnam during the Presidency of John F. Kennedy. (4)

The role of the USA was varied during Kennedy's reign. While no troops were committed, Kennedy sent over 1,000 US military advisors to South Vietnam to help train the South Vietnamese army. America also provided financial support leading to an increase in the size of the South Vietnamese army from 150 000 to 170 000.

Kennedy also introduced "strategic hamlets". This was the forced removal of peasants from their villages into secure compounds in order to limit the influence of communist infiltrators. This programme was deeply unpopular, and actually drove a number of South Vietnamese peasants into supporting the North Vietnamese communists. As the conflict developed Kennedy and his advisors became certain that the South Vietnamese leader Diem wasn't capable of defeating the North. With this in mind the USA supported a coup to overthrow Diem in November 1963.

- b) Why was the Vietcong an effective fighting force? (6)

There are many reasons why the Vietcong were effective as a fighting force. Firstly, their use of guerrilla tactics made them very difficult to fight against. Their avoidance of set-piece battles with the Americans, instead focusing on hit and run attacks and ambushes, made them difficult to identify and fight against. Furthermore this style of fighting meant that they were often able to inflict casualties without suffering any themselves.

Another key reason why they were effective was their levels of support. The Vietcong were able to gain support from the Vietnam peasantry after the years of suffering they had endured under numerous corrupt governments. Propaganda from Ho Chi Minh and the communists promised a fairer life if they succeeded. This level of support meant the Vietcong were effective as North Vietnamese army troops could be infiltrated into South Vietnam, making guerrilla attacks more frequent and undermining the US attempts to control the South.

A final reason for the Vietcong's effectiveness was its organization. The knowledge and use of the Vietnam terrain meant they exploited the jungle to their advantage. They also built tunnels to avoid capture and to ensure they had safe bases across the country. The base area at Cu Chi is a good example of these vast networks, with nearly 200 miles of tunnels.

- c) "The results of the Cuban Missile Crisis were a bigger defeat for Russia than they were for America." How far do you agree with this statement? Explain your answer. (10)

It can be argued that the Cuban Missile Crisis was in some ways a defeat for Russia. Under the terms of the settlement signed, Russia withdrew its nuclear weapons from Cuba, meaning that it looked as if it had backed down in response to America's aggression and ultimatums. The negativity surrounding the response to the resolution of the crisis can be seen as a reason for Premier Khrushchev's removal the following year.

However, it is perhaps short-sighted to see it as a bigger defeat for Russia than America. While Russia had to remove the weapons from Cuba, America was also forced to remove its long-range weapons from Turkey which had been capable of striking Russia. This meant that Russia was safer in any future conflict. Furthermore President Kennedy's refusal to agree to military action can be seen as a victory for Russia, as it led to tensions within the USA. Lastly, the resolution of the crisis led to a heightened influence of Russia over Cuba. This was an economic victory for Russia, meaning it strengthened its influence over other communist states.

Therefore while the Cuban Missile Crisis appeared to be a defeat publicly for Russia, privately the economic gains and the removal of US missiles can be seen as more positive.

Do it yourself: how could each of the following exemplar responses be improved?

Explain the “domino theory” in relation to why the US became involved in Vietnam.

The domino theory was a belief that was first popularised by President Eisenhower of America. The theory was that as one country fell to communism it would be more likely that surrounding ones would be affected, just like dominoes toppling into each other. The idea was supported by events since the Second World War; China had fallen to communism and it had then spread to Korea.

How could this response be improved?

The question asked is in two parts. The first part asks you to explain the domino theory, and the second part then asks you to link it to the US involvement in Vietnam. What this response does well is answer the first part—it explains the theory. What it doesn't do though is address the second part of the question and link the theory to American involvement in Vietnam. Therefore to improve this answer you could include:

1. how America feared that Vietnam would be the next “domino” to fall after Korea
2. that this belief was strengthened by the rise of Ho Chi Minh and his communist supporters in North Vietnam.

“The Tet offensive was a decisive turning point in the Vietnam War.” How far do you agree with this statement? Explain your answer.

The Tet offensive was a real turning point in the Vietnam War. In 1968, at a time when no attacks were expected and after years when the North had pursued guerrilla tactics, they suddenly used large, public attacks on US strongholds. Waves of attacks followed, with more than 80 000 communist troops striking more than 100 towns and cities. The offensive was the largest military operation conducted by either side up to that point in the war. While the North was eventually defeated, with the only set-piece battle at Hue a resounding victory for the US, it was still a decisive turning point.

How could this response be improved?

While this answer is very detailed on the Tet offensive and knows a great deal about the events, it doesn't direct the knowledge to the question being asked. While it makes the statement that it was a turning point, it doesn't actually explain why, focusing on telling the story of the offensive instead. Therefore to improve it needs to include:

1. evidence of why it is a turning point—consider the impact of the Tet offensive on the public in America as media coverage showed the American military in disarray; after being told they were winning the war, Tet seemed to suggest otherwise
2. an awareness of the impact of Tet—how policy changed afterwards towards one of pursuing a peaceful settlement and how troop numbers actually fell
3. consider that actually it wasn't the decisive event the question suggests—Tet actually achieves very little; America quickly took back control of cities and the North suffered far heavier losses. Instead, other events led to a downturn in American support such as the massacre at My Lai.
4. Add a supported conclusion—bring your arguments together and decide whether you believe Tet did mark a turning point, explaining why.