

Introduction

The nearly 20 years that the United States was involved in the deadliest of the nation's Cold War conflicts, the Vietnam War, also saw a major shift in attitudes about the military and the government. Until the War on Terror of the 2000s, the Vietnam War was the longest war in the nation's history, and the length of the conflict contributed to a social and cultural fatigue that ultimately saw more and more Americans question the foundations of American militarism and the legitimacy of the nation's foreign policy agenda. The Vietnam War ended in an unqualified loss for the United States, resulting in the communist takeover of Vietnam, a brutal despotic regime in Cambodia, and one of the worst humanitarian crises until the Syrian refugee crisis of the 2010s. The war also generated one of the more influential anti-war movements in American history, urging a new generation of Americans to think critically about their government and its role in the world.

Topics Covered in this Chapter Include:

- Vietnam War
- Anti-war movement
- Dwight D. Eisenhower
- Richard Nixon
- Lyndon B. Johnson
- John F. Kennedy

This Chapter Discusses the Following Source Document:

Johnson, Lyndon B., "Gulf of Tonkin Incident," August 4, 1964



The Vietnam War, also known as the Second Indochina War (1955–1975), was, in part, both an independence struggle and a political contest in the Cold War effort to establish capitalist/communist allies in strategic locations around the world. US involvement in the war, spanning over two decades, was disastrous from a public relations perspective, ultimately bringing about a new level of cynicism and criticism of the US government and foreign policy.

Creating Indochina

The area now known as Vietnam has been continually occupied for at least half a million years, and anthropologists have discovered many artifacts illustrating the early spread of humans into the Mekong River region. After centuries of development, including an independence war against the Chinese Empire, Vietnam became the powerhouse of East Asia, with Vietnamese monarchs exerting extensive influence over the neighboring kingdoms in Laos and Cambodia. The Vietnamese monarchy had a trade and cultural relationship with the French empire in the nineteenth century, but repeated conflicts over French interference in the nation's economic and social realms led to a war in which Napoleonic French forces attacked and conquered Vietnam, turning the nation into a French territory in 1858. Over the next half century, there was a near-continuous effort to reestablish Vietnamese independence from the French, resulting in a number of short-lived independence wars in parts of the country. In 1940, the Japanese captured all of Indochina, but left the pro-Nazi Vichy French administration in Vietnam in place as a puppet government. It was during this period that a revolutionary leader named Nguyễn Ái Quốc, better known as Hồ Chí Minh, established the Việt Minh Front in Northern Vietnam, which became the biggest player in the independence movement.

The Việt Minh Front's chief goal was to establish Vietnamese independence, and the group encompassed a number of workers' rights and Communist Party subgroups. In the closing years of World War II, Việt Minh agents worked closely with the Allies to undermine Japanese colonial powers. When Allied forces defeated the Japanese in 1945, Hồ Chí Minh officially proclaimed the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), in which he would serve as the nation's new chief executive. However, the socialist Việt Minh were not the only party interested in controlling Vietnam, and a rival faction under former emperor Bao Dai, who controlled the remnants of the Vietnamese National Army, which was supported by the French and ultimately the United States, fought the Việt Minh, and the People's Army of Vietnam, which eventually drew support from the Soviet Union and China.





President Kennedy's 1961 news conference on the Vietnam Conflict. By Abbie Rowe, National Park Service, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, via Wikimedia.

The First Indochina War (1945–1954) went through many stages, with violence escalating and then waning and then escalating again. On the French and US side, political analysts were concerned that the communist takeover of the nation would provide a strategic advantage to China and the Soviet Union, and the effort to prevent the Việt Minh from unifying the country was similar to the concurrent US effort to prevent the communist takeover of Korea. Just after the United States retreated from Korea with the armistice that created the modern states of North and South Korea, France was preparing to abandon the failed effort in Vietnam with what many historians view as an effort to save themselves from the embarrassment of a loss by dividing Vietnam into northern and southern states. The south would be led by former French-backed Bao Dai, while the north would be left to the Việt Minh.



France had also converted their former territories of Laos and Cambodia into independent monarchies, but with governments designed to preserve some degree of French influence and favored trading partner status. French military attention then shifted to the independence movement in the former French territory of Algiers in North Africa, which ultimately led to the end of France's Fourth Republic.

The Second Indochina War

The Geneva Peace Accords between France and Vietnam, signed in the summer of 1954, contained a provision for a series of elections in 1956 to reunify the country. The Dwight D. Eisenhower administration, and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, felt that the communist party was likely to win the election, turning Vietnam into a communist nation and a satellite of America's Cold War enemies, the Soviet Union and China. Working with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in secret, and openly through the UN and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, the United States spearheaded the creation of a new pro-democracy revolutionary movement in South Vietnam. This new, American-created government, known as the Republic of Vietnam, staged an election of questionable legitimacy to place anti-Communist ideologue Ngô Đình Diệm in charge as the new nation's president. Claiming that his government was under threat from a possible North Vietnamese attack and utilizing CIA intelligence, Diệm arrested thousands of religious, student, and socialist activists seen as a threat to his regime, and he established a secret police force that arrested thousands without due process.

In reality, the North Vietnamese were initially not trying to overthrow the Republic of Vietnam, as communist advisors from the Soviet Union and China had put forth a political approach. However, Diệm instigated attacks against communist organizations in the south, and the Communist Party in the DRV began pushing for a military response. Diệm continued to use the threat of communist aggression to justify arresting and killing political opponents to his regime, and his treatment of Buddhists and anti-military activists was especially concerning to human rights activists.

Back in the United States, the presidential elections led to John F. Kennedy's rise to the presidency and a new approach for the growing tensions in Vietnam. In 1961, Kennedy sent a group of advisors to Vietnam to assess the situation. In December, the team issued their recommendations, now known as the "December 1961 White Paper," and recommended a massive increase in military forces in Vietnam, on par with a full-scale invasion sufficient to bring about the end of the DRV. Some Kennedy advisors were on board with enhancing the



nation's military effort, while others wanted to seek a diplomatic solution. Kennedy's team chose a third option, increasing military equipment and economic aid, but without sending more soldiers directly into Vietnam. This middle ground strategy was a failure. Diệm's authoritarian and draconian methods had resulted in a near-total loss of public support, culminating with Diệm's brother's raids of Buddhist temples, claiming that the Buddhists were harboring communists. After a series of protests against the Diệm regime, the Kennedy administration ultimately, and secretly, supported a coup that removed Diệm and his brother from power. In November of 1963, Diệm and his brother were captured and later killed by revolutionary forces, but back in the United States, the shocking assassination of Kennedy brought a brief halt to any further development in Vietnam.



Quảng Đức during his self-immolation. By Malcolm Browne for the Associated Press, via Wikimedia.



The Most Emotional Image

Upon gaining power in Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm staged a brutal campaign to eliminate political and social opponents that stood in the way of his consolidation of power. A member of the nation's Catholic minority, Diệm was openly hostile toward the Buddhist community in Vietnam, seeing them as a threat to his absolute authority. Diệm justified oppressing the Buddhists by claiming that Buddhist temples and monks were conspiring with communists to undermine his regime.

Journalist and photographer Malcom Wilde Browne was the first Associated Press member permanently assigned to cover developments in the nation. Browne arrived in Vietnam in 1961 and watched the military situation deteriorate over three years. On May 8, 1963, South Vietnamese soldiers fired on a group of Buddhist monks who were flying a Buddhist flag, an act that was banned under the Diệm regime. Nine of the monks were killed, and Buddhists across Saigon staged a number of demonstrations. On June 10, Browne received a call from Thích Đức Nghiệp, a monk representing Xá Lợi Pagoda in Saigon. According to Browne, the monk told him to come to a memorial service the following morning and said that something very important would happen, though he could not reveal the nature of the event.

When Browne arrived at the memorial, the monks were already gathered and were performing a chant commonly performed at funerals. From there, they marched toward the center of Saigon, at the intersection of two of the city's main streets. A car arrived, bringing two younger monks who were supporting an elder monk. The elder monk headed for the center of the intersection, and the two young monks approached with a can of gasoline. The elder monk, Thích Quảng Đức, seated himself and the two younger monks covered him in gasoline and ignited him. Browne snapped several iconic images of the monk's body as he was consumed in flame.

It was many years before the story of Thích Quảng Đức was more widely known. The elder monk was a native of Central Vietnam and had left home at seven years old to study Buddhism with his uncle. At age 15 he became a fully ordained monk. After spending three years in religious exile, he traveled to central Vietnam teaching Buddhism in local communities. He served as Inspector for the Buddhist Association in Ninh Hòa and in Khánh Hòa and oversaw the construction of some 31 temples in Central and Southern Vietnam.^a

Browne dispatched the film via a passenger on a commercial airline to Manilla, and from there the film was sent back to the Associated Press, where it was developed. Browne, relatively isolated in Saigon, had no idea what happened to the picture and only learned later that it had been published around the world. President Kennedy is said to have remarked on the image that "No news picture in history has generated so much emotion around the world as that one."^a



The Most Emotional Image continued

Works Used

- a. Ben-Halliday, Reginald. "The Photograph That Generated So Much Emotion around the World." *Medium*. 16 May 2021, medium.com/lessons-from-history/the-photograph-that-generated-so-much-emotion-around-the-world-f03c4c9bffe8.



Entering the presidency in the midst of chaos, President Lyndon B. Johnson was forced to rapidly determine how to modify the Kennedy administration's strategy in Vietnam to achieve success. But Johnson was faced with uncomfortable realities. Press coverage of the Vietnam Conflict had tainted public opinion. While a majority of Americans still supported the American effort to fight the war, based largely on propagandistic depictions of the effort as a fight against communist advances, the anti-war movement was growing in strength. When the DRV attacked two US ships stationed in the Gulf of Tonkin, this pushed the Johnson administration into following the recommendations in the earlier White Paper calling for a more direct commitment of American forces to Vietnam. On August 4, 1964, President Johnson gave the following speech:

“GULF OF TONKIN INCIDENT”

by Lyndon B. Johnson

August 4, 1964

Source Document

My fellow Americans: As President and Commander in Chief, it is my duty to the American people to report that renewed hostile actions against United States ships on the high seas in the Gulf of Tonkin have today required me to order the military forces of the United States to take action in reply.

The initial attack on the destroyer Maddox, on August 2, was repeated today by a number of hostile vessels attacking two U.S. destroyers with torpedoes. The destroyers and supporting aircraft acted at once on the orders I gave after the initial act of aggression. We believe at least two of the attacking boats were sunk. There were no U.S. losses.

The performance of commanders and crews in this engagement is in the highest tradition of the United States Navy. But repeated acts of violence against the Armed Forces of the United States must be met not only with alert defense, but with positive reply. That reply is being given as I speak to

you tonight. Air action is now in execution against gunboats and certain supporting facilities in North Viet-Nam which have been used in these hostile operations.

In the larger sense this new act of aggression, aimed directly at our own forces, again brings home to all of us in the United States the importance of the struggle for peace and security in southeast Asia. Aggression by terror against the peaceful villagers of South Viet-Nam has now been joined by open aggression on the high seas against the United States of America.

The determination of all Americans to carry out our full commitment to the people and to the government of South Viet-Nam will be redoubled by this outrage. Yet our response, for the present, will be limited and fitting. We Americans know, although others appear to forget, the risks of spreading conflict. We still seek no wider war.



continued

I have instructed the Secretary of State to make this position totally clear to friends and to adversaries and, indeed, to all. I have instructed Ambassador Stevenson to raise this matter immediately and urgently before the Security Council of the United Nations. Finally, I have today met with the leaders of both parties in the Congress of the United States and I have informed them that I shall immediately request the Congress to pass a resolution making it clear that our Government is united in its determination to take all necessary measures in support of freedom and in defense of peace in southeast Asia.

I have been given encouraging assurance by these leaders of both parties that such a resolution will

be promptly introduced, freely and expeditiously debated, and passed with overwhelming support. And just a few minutes ago I was able to reach Senator Goldwater and I am glad to say that he has expressed his support of the statement that I am making to you tonight.

It is a solemn responsibility to have to order even limited military action by forces whose overall strength is as vast and as awesome as those of the United States of America, but it is my considered conviction, shared throughout your Government, that firmness in the right is indispensable today for peace; that firmness will always be measured. Its mission is peace.¹

Resolution and Resignation

With the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the United States launched an aggressive bombing campaign in Vietnam that drew tremendous criticism from anti-war activists. Known as Operation Rolling Thunder, the campaign killed thousands and destroyed vast swaths of territory in the North. Back in the United States, the perception that US forces were now destroying villages and killing civilians strengthened the student movement and the anti-war movement.

The turning point in the Vietnam War came with the 1968 Tet Offensive. Beginning in January of 1968, North Vietnamese forces launched a series of surprise attacks against several key South Vietnamese cities and against military and civilian command centers. The goal for the Northern leaders was to force Johnson and US military leaders to negotiate a political truce and to cease air raids. The cost to North Vietnamese forces was considerable, with at least 75,000 dead in the aftermath of the attacks, which lasted months. However, it was also the most successful Northern Vietnamese offensive of the war, killing at least 45,000 in the South, including several hundred US soldiers, the highest death toll for the United States since beginning the war.

Historians and military analysts have argued that the Tet Offensive was a failure for the North Vietnamese, as the attacks did not force America to the negotiation table or achieve any of the other goals that North Vietnamese leaders hoped would result. However, over





A B-66 Destroyer and four F-105 Thunderchiefs dropping bombs on North Vietnam during Operation Rolling Thunder. By Lt.Col. Cecil J. Poss, USAF, via Wikimedia.



the longer term, the offensive was a success in that press coverage back in the United States shocked the US public. Even hawkish Americans who had believed that the United States was on the path to a rapid victory were forced to reconsider their positions after the Tet Offensive revealed that American and allies were still vulnerable. Support for the anti-war movement soared, and Johnson announced that he would not be seeking reelection, stepping away from the presidency in disgrace.

Richard Nixon continued a trend that had been building since Eisenhower of hiding the extent of US foreign policy initiatives from public scrutiny. While US diplomats were secretly negotiating with North Vietnamese representatives to achieve a ceasefire, CIA-mediated bombing raids were launched in Laos and Cambodia in an attempt to cut off supplies flowing into North Vietnam. The attacks on Laos and Cambodia were a step too far for some Americans in terms of morality. The United States was not at war with either Laos or Cambodia, and attacks on the soil of allied, neutral countries, resulting in thousands of civilian casualties, inspired widespread protests, especially on college campuses.

In 1970, National Guard troops clashed with students at Kent State in Ohio and opened fire on protestors, killing four students. Nixon and his administration had become the number-one enemy of the progressive left, and the student movement and pressure to end the war was growing and matriculating into the circles of previous administration stalwarts. The final straw for the Nixon administration's disastrous management of the war came with the "Christmas bombings" of Hanoi, a series of ill-advised raids conducted by the US military in 1972 against targets in Hanoi and Haiphong. These not only drew criticism from the US anti-war movement but also international condemnation. From January 1973 on, the United States was no longer



Heavily bandaged woman burned by napalm; a tag attached to her arm reads "VNC Female," or Vietnamese civilian. By Philip Jones Griffiths, National Library of Wales, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia.



committed to the war effort, and though they promised their allies in South Vietnam that they would remain committed to maintaining the democratic government, the United States ultimately allowed Saigon to be captured by DRV forces, completing the reunification of Vietnam under the communist regime.

The Nixon administration attempted to portray the US withdrawal from Vietnam as a strategic tactic rather than a military defeat, and Nixon and allies blamed their lack of success on previous administrations and decisions. But the more historians and political scientists learned about the Vietnam War, through declassified documents and government communications, the more it became clear that the United States had engaged in one of the most disastrous attempts at nation building in history, beginning with the installation of the artificial southern Vietnamese state through the unpopular civilian bombing campaigns that marked the end of the Nixon administration's failed efforts to secure some form of victory for the United States.

The impact that the Vietnam War had on public opinion was not immediately apparent. Even at the height of the anti-war movement, in the late 1960s, a majority of white Americans were fully in support of the war and, more so, were even critical of spiteful protests and the anti-war movement. In a 1968 poll in December, researchers found that 40 percent of Americans did not believe that American citizens should have the right to protest the war. Another poll found that more than 56 percent of Americans approved of police using violent tactics against protestors. What is not clear from polling, however, is how things had already changed. During World War II, support for US military activity and criticism of anti-war activists was much more pronounced. Though there are few opinion polls measuring these factors of public opinion directly, indirect sources suggest that around 80 to 90 percent of Americans had near-complete or total faith in the presidency and the military establishment until the late 1950s. Polls from around 1967 and 1968 indicate that a shift was taking place. The majority of Americans were now divided in their opinion on the government and the way that it had used the military and, more to the point, younger Americans were more critical and less likely to voice their support.²

Over the course of the Vietnam War era, journalists helped to shape this shift in public opinion. One of the biggest events was the discovery of the Pentagon Papers, a series of leaked government documents that revealed the extent to which Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon had utilized the CIA and the American military, in secret, to establish a pro-US government in Vietnam and to escalate the war while misleading Congress, the press, and





Anti-war demonstration in Virginia in 1967. By S.Sgt. Albert R. Simpson, Department of Defense, via Wikimedia.



the American people about the government's intentions and involvement in the region. Revelations like the Pentagon Papers stimulated a level of cynicism and skepticism about the government and its actions that had been previously unknown in America. A majority of Americans in the twenty-first century view American involvement in the Vietnam War as a mistake, and only 22 percent continue to believe that the United States was justified in getting involved.³

One of the other factors that helped to shift public opinion on the war was that highly visible public figures spoke out against Vietnam in a way that was lacking in previous wars. This happened in part because of the culmination of numerous separate but interrelated social justice movements in the United States. In many ways, the Baby Boomer generation left behind the absolutist patriotism of the Greatest Generation and proved more willing to think critically about their nation and its impact in the world. Members of the counterculture and youth movement were dismissed by elders in the establishment as "anti-American," but it was within these circles that a new, more critical view of Americanism began to emerge, and this has shaped American popular culture as well as perceptions of race, family, gender, sexuality, and patriotism.

One famous American who expressed skepticism at embracing the nationalistic views espoused by establishment politicians was famed civil rights Leader Martin Luther King Jr. In April of 1967, as the anti-war movement was growing rapidly, Dr. King delivered a speech entitled "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," where he expressed what many others in the anti-war movement perceived, a deeper moral responsibility to humankind that was incompatible with the US government's operations in South East Asia:

*"Now, it should be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war. If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read: Vietnam. It can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over. So it is that those of us who are yet determined that America will be are led down the path of protest and dissent, working for the health of our land."*⁴



CONCLUSION

The Vietnam War was, in many ways, America's most embarrassing war. Lasting for nearly two decades, with little to show for a massive investment of American lives and resources, the war demonstrated the effectiveness of guerilla warfare and the ineffectiveness of American military strategy in this particular situation. Opinions about the war differ widely, with Americans still divided on whether or not the Vietnam Conflict was the right thing for America to do at the time. But there is a higher level of consensus on the position that the war failed to accomplish the American government's aims. Ultimately, the embarrassment of the Vietnam War, at the time and since, contributed to increased cynicism about the US government and about the employment of the US military.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Is it accurate to claim that the United States lost the Vietnam War? Why or why not?
- Why did Martin Luther King, Jr. oppose the Vietnam War?
- How was the partition of Vietnam a contributing factor to the war?
- Was the partition of Vietnam into southern and northern nations a sound political strategy? Why or why not?
- Why was the bombing of Cambodia illegal under US and international law?
- Do the mistakes of the Vietnam Conflict indicate that the United States did not learn from the Korean War? Why or why not?

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