

# The Vietnam War

## 1968-1973



# Turning Point in Public Support for Vietnam – The Tet Offensive

- The night of January 30, 1968, more than 70,000 Communist troops staged a coordinated attack on 100 cities, bases and main urban areas of South Vietnam (violating a truce agreed to allow for the celebration of Tet, the lunar New Year.)
  - The attacks took place all over South Vietnam, including major urban centers such as Danang, Hué, and Saigon itself.
  - In the capital, Vietcong commandos raided the U.S. Embassy, which had to be evacuated.
  - The VC and N. Vietnamese troops took over every major southern city.



# The Tet Offensive, January 1968

- Most Vietcong units were repelled or crushed by U.S. & South Vietnamese troops.
  - In the former imperial capital of Hué, though, U.S. troops and Vietcong units fought for the control of the city for nearly a month.
  - During the occupation of Hué, the Communist troops detained and executed three thousand people, in one of the darkest episodes of the war.
- Militarily, the Tet offensive was a serious setback for the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese army was debilitated BUT it was seen as an American defeat by the media.
  - They suffered losses in the tens of thousands, whereas the U.S. had a total of two thousand casualties and the South Vietnamese had a total of four thousand casualties.
  - The communist structure in South Vietnam suffered a severe blow, and replacements had to be sent from the North. For the U.S., though, the real damage was not on the battlefield, but in the home front.



Vietnam was the first televised war in history:

- *Television news coverage increased the impact* and led to an outpouring of backlash from the American public

- Americans were shocked by scenes of the shooting inside the American Embassy compound; by the summary execution of a bound Viet Cong prisoner by South Vietnam's Chief of Police; by the sight of South Vietnamese soldiers looting Vietcong soldiers' bodies for valuables; and finally, by the mounting American casualty list.



- Millions watched/listened as tv news anchor Walter Cronkite (known for his objectivity & trustworthiness) said "it now seems more certain than ever that the bloody experience in Vietnam is to end in stalemate."
- Many Americans started wondering whether the U.S. could really win the war AND whether the corrupt South Vietnamese government was worth the sacrifice.



"I hope the Viet Cong know this!"

# Impact of the Tet Offensive

- Domestic U.S. Reaction:
  - Disbelief, anger, distrust of the Johnson Administration
- After Tet, more & more Americans opposed the war
  - polls showed majority opposed the war.
- LBJ rarely left the White House for fear of being assaulted by angry protestors.
- LBJ declared in a nationally televised speech that he would not run for another term as President. His VP, Hubert Humphrey ran in his place.



*Hey, Hey LBJ! How many kids did you kill today?*

- In March 1968, **Robert Kennedy** announced he would run for the Dem. nomination. (assassinated in June 1968)





Johnson's popularity dropped in 1968 from 48% to 36%.



# Getting out of Vietnam

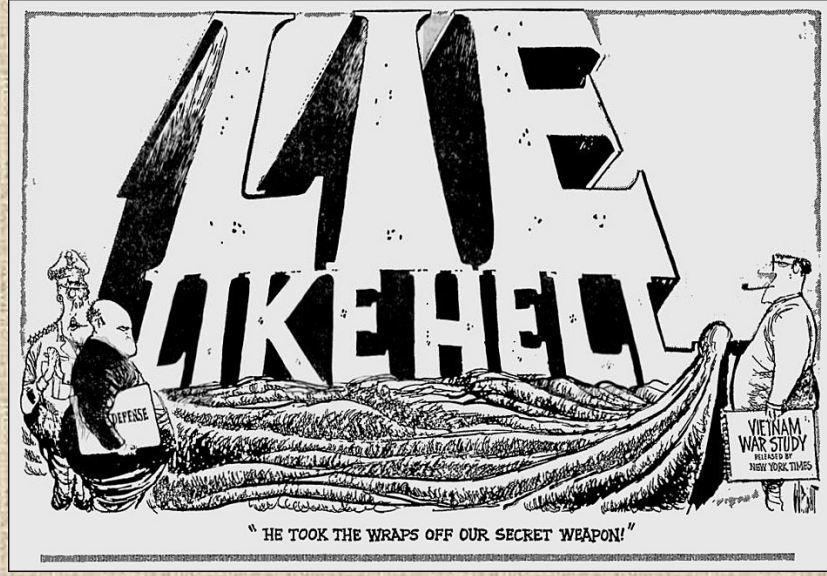
- **LBJ:** As his term was coming to an end, he cut back on bombing North Vietnam and called for peace talks which failed.
- **Nixon:** Claimed in the 1968 election that he had a secret plan to end the war. Promised Americans “peace with honor.”
  - 1969, he announced a policy known as **Vietnamization**: removing American forces and replacing them with South Vietnamese soldiers.
- As much as Nixon wanted to stop the protests against the war, he also didn’t want to lose the war.
- So while he withdrew American troops, he also ordered secret bombing raids on major targets in North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (along the Ho Chi Minh trail) and then invaded Cambodia.
  - Goal: to wipe out Communist training camps and cut off supply lines to VC.
  - Said the U.S. would not stand by like “a pitiful helpless giant” while the VC attacked from Cambodia.
  - Knew invasion of Cambodia wouldn’t win the war but thought it would help when the U.S. was bargaining to end the war.

*By 1972, American troop strength had decreased from over 500,000 to 24,000 troops.*





# “Pentagon Papers,” (1971)



- Former defense analyst Daniel Ellsberg leaked govt. docs. regarding war efforts during Johnson’s administration to the *New York Times*.
  - Documents indicated that the govt. misled Congress & the American people regarding its intentions in Vietnam during mid-1960s.
  - Revealed that the primary reason for fighting the war was not to eliminate communism but to avoid humiliating defeat.
- US govt sued the paper to stop the release (*New York Times v. United States*) and lost.



# The End of the War – FINALLY!

- Congress withdrew the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1970, effectively removing their support and money for the war.
- American withdrawal:
  - Paris Peace talks dragged on on > in Jan. 1972 Nixon announced North Vietnam had refused to accept a proposed settlement.
  - March 1972, N. Vietnamese launched a major assault in S. Vietnam which led Nixon to launch the most intensive bombing campaign of the war
    - MADE MANY QUESTIONS WHETHER THE WAR WAS EVER GOING TO END!
- Not until after Nixon was re-elected in Nov. 1972 and another series of B-52 bombings that peace finally came.

# Peace Negotiations



Why did negotiations  
take so long?

The U.S. & Vietnamese  
argued for 5 months  
over the size of the  
conference table!

Dr. Henry Kissinger (US Sec. of State) & Le Duc Tho  
(North Vietnamese leader after Ho Chi Minh)

# Paris Peace Accords, 1973

- January 1973, the U.S., South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and the Viet Cong signed a formal agreement in Paris. Ironically, LBJ died the day before the treaty was signed.
- Provisions included:
  - US would withdraw all its forces from South Vietnam within 60 days.
  - All prisoners of war would be released.
  - All countries would end military activities in Laos and Cambodia.
  - The 17th parallel would continue to divide North and South Vietnam until the country could be reunited.

# Response to Paris Peace Accords



Source: *Toronto Star*, "Nixon on Vietnam: A pullout, but not yet a peace," newspaper editorial, 1973.

It's evidently impossible for a president of the United States to come clean about Viet Nam; there is too much shame and failure in the American record to be even hinted at. Pres. Nixon kept proclaiming the achievement of "peace with honor", when all he can really promise is that the Americans are going to pull out of that wretched area in fairly good order, with their prisoners returned, instead of fleeing in abject humiliation. "Exit with face saved" would have been a more accurate phrase than peace with honor; for, whatever the terms of the Paris agreement may say, it's obvious that there is no guarantee of peace between North and South Viet Nam.

- American involvement ended in 1973 but fighting between North and South continued for another 2 years.



- South Vietnam steadily lost ground to the North – in the spring of 1975, North Vietnamese launched a major strikes against strategic cities throughout the South – final goal being the seat of govt in Saigon.

- The U.S. Evacuation and Fall of Saigon:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0BVRhsqHE5M>

# The Fall of Saigon



*April 30, 1975*



America Abandons Its Embassy



North Vietnamese  
at the Presidential Palace





- US carried out evacuation
  - American helicopters airlifted more than 1000 Americans and nearly 6000 Vietnamese from the city to aircraft carriers waiting off-shore.
- April 30th, North Vietnam conquered Saigon and the S. Vietnamese govt surrendered
- Vietnam was finally one nation under a Communist govt.

# A United Vietnam



# Aftermath of the war in Southeast Asia:

- The U.S. initially got involved because of the domino theory = after the Vietnam War, 2 other dominos did fall – Laos and Cambodia both became communist.
- Cambodian suffering was tremendous as a result of the war. In April 1975, Cambodia fell to the communist Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot.
  - In the previous 5 years of fighting, Cambodia had lost 1/2 million civilian casualties (mostly by American bombs). Khmer Rouge declared war on anyone tainted by Western ways and killed roughly 1.5 million Cambodians (1/4 of the population). Many were shot, others died from starvation, disease, mistreatment in labor camps, or on forced marches.
- Vietnam's new leaders forced 100s of thousands of S. Vietnamese soldiers, govt workers, and other professionals into "re-education camps."



- 1.5 million Vietnamese fled Vietnam by boat, leaving all possessions behind in escape. (Many Cambodians and Laotians also fled their homelands making their way to the US.)

After the fall of Saigon, a North Vietnamese officer declared, “The war has ended today. All Vietnamese are victors.” An American said, “There were no winners. Only victims.”

Explain & compare these 2 views.

**LIFE**

# THE VIETNAM WARS

**50 YEARS AGO—TWO COUNTRIES TORN APART**

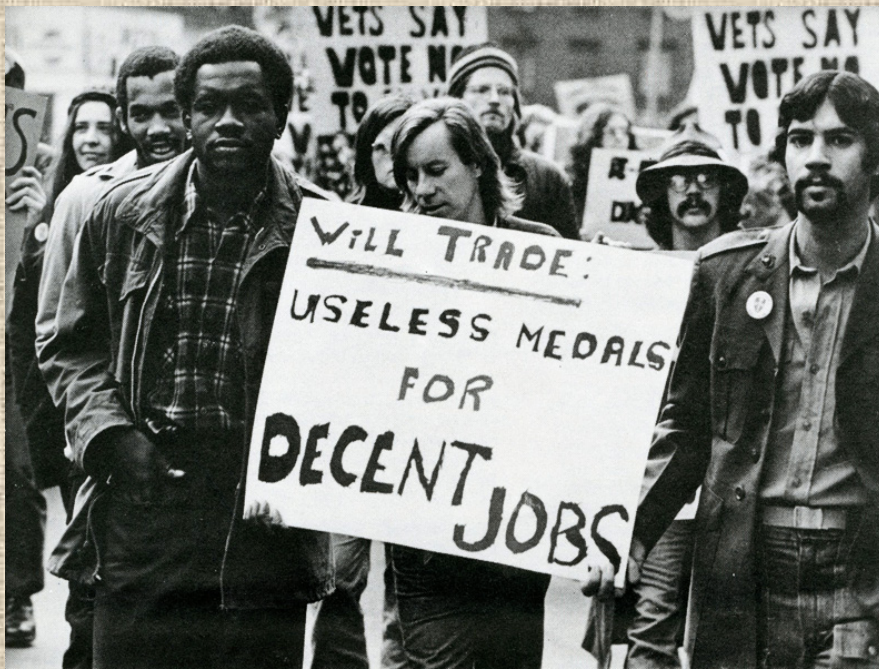
**FOREWORD BY BOB SCHIEFFER • NEW REPORTING AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY LIFE**



# Cost of the war - soldiers

- More than 58,000 Americans were killed in battle and 300,000 wounded.
- More than 2,500 POWs (prisoners of war) and MIAs (missing in action) at the end of the war – many are still unaccounted for.
- Unlike veterans of WWII, who returned to a grateful and supportive nation, Vietnam vets returned to indifference and often outright hostility from those who opposed the war.
  - Many Americans called Vietnam vets “baby killers” or other derogatory names





- Trouble readjusting to life at home
  - High unemployment (estimated 850,000 Vietnam vets are unemployed), homelessness (7% of the US population has served in the military but they make up 26% of our homeless population), alcohol & drug abuse
  - Poor care of disabled vets: underfunded vets hospitals, lingering medical issues:
    - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Agent Orange health problems (16,000 applications for Agent Orange compensation), birth defects in vets' children.



- Vietnam was the longest and most unsuccessful war in US history.
  - US spent at least \$150 billion on the war which led to growing inflation (11%), economic instability, and decreased funding for domestic programs to address poverty.
  - Americans lost their sense of self-confidence and invincibility. After WWII Americans believed they could defend the world from communism anywhere with the help of American resolve, \$ and technology – WRONG!

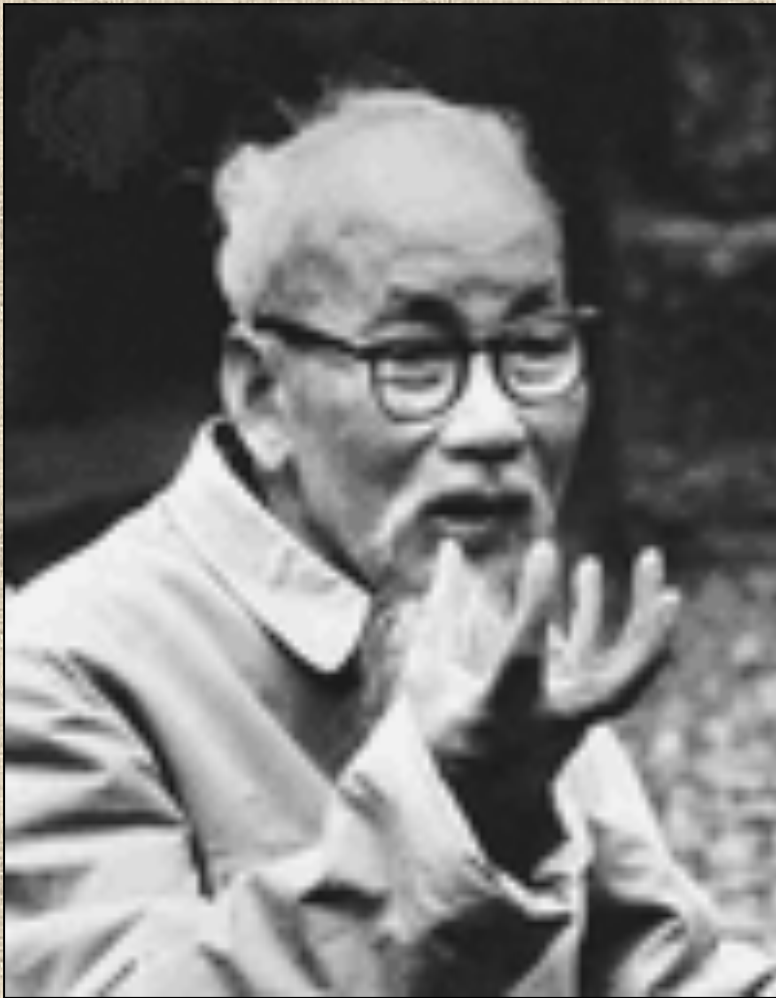


Vietnam suffered as well more bombs hit Vietnam than did all of the Axis powers in WWII. Number of dead and wounded soldiers ran into the millions, 3 million Vietnamese were killed (many of whom were civilians.)

# The Impact (cont.)

- U.S. morale, self-confidence, trust of government, destroyed
- 26th Amendment: lowered the voting age to 18-years-olds
- Nixon abolished the draft → all-volunteer army
- **War Powers Act** (1973): President must notify Congress within 48 hours of deploying military and must check in regularly with Congress while forces are overseas.

# And in the End....



Ho Chi Minh:

*If we have to fight, we  
will fight. You will kill  
ten of our men and we  
will kill one of yours,  
and in the end it will  
be you who tires of it.*

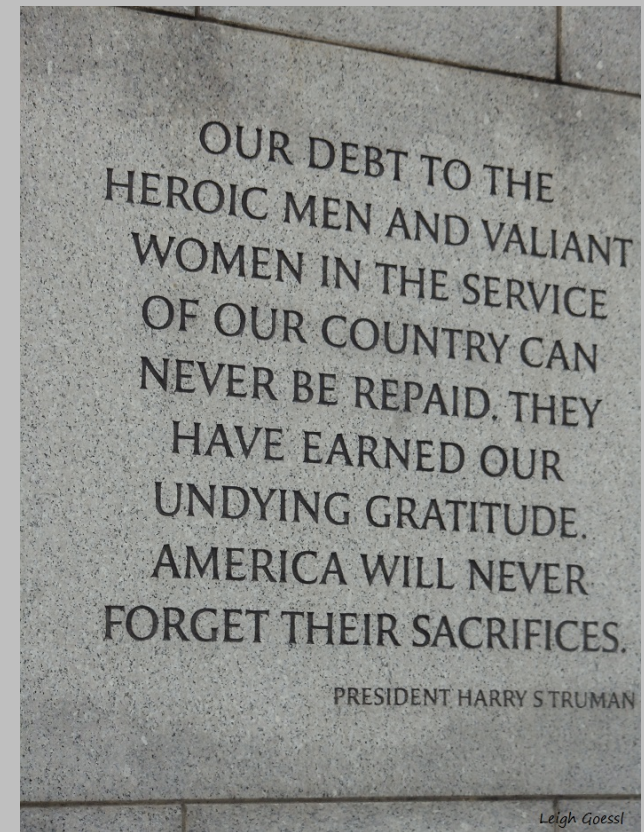
**Healing:** In 1979, a group of veterans started planning the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. They held a contest to design the memorial, which a 21-year-old college student won. The memorial was completed in 1982.



# The Vietnam Memorial, Washington, D.C.



As a point of  
comparison....  
consider the  
WWII Memorial  
(completed in 2004)



**Question (to Ken Burns, director of a new PBS documentary on the Vietnam War): Are there any hopeful lessons to be drawn from the Vietnam War? Or any lessons at all?**

**Answer:** History provides many lessons and the Vietnam War is no exception. But maybe more, it startles us with resonances, with parallels with our present world. Just think about it.

You want to understand Wikileaks? Let's go back to the Pentagon Papers.

You want to understand about a political campaign reaching out to a foreign power in the midst of a war? It's all over the news today and very much part of the story of Vietnam.

What about an epic conflict between the news media and the White House?

A disconnect between the politicians who make the policies, the generals who design the military strategy and tactics, and the service members who do the fighting and dying?

Vietnam reveals all of this and so much more. To study the Vietnam War is to arm yourself in the best sort of way for how to make sense of our own incredibly fraught moment. It is more relevant than ever. Whether or not we have learned from this history is a question we cannot answer.

Source: "The Vietnam War' co-directors Ken Burns and Lynn Novick explain why Vietnam is relevant to us today,"

<https://www.csmonitor.com/Books/chapter-and-verse/2017/0912/The-Vietnam-War-co-directors-Ken-Burns-and-Lynn-Novick-explain-why-Vietnam-is-relevant-to-us-today>