

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: A NATION DIVIDED: THE VIETNAM WAR, 1945–1975

READING AND STUDY GUIDE

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Vietnam was America's longest war, a conflict that over time divided the nation to an extent not seen since the Civil War. For thirty years the United States invested money and then eventually soldiers in the struggle to prevent the establishment of communism in the small Southeast Asian country of Vietnam. From 1945 to 1964, the United States fought a proxy war by funneling supplies and aid to others willing to take up arms against the Vietnamese Communists. In 1965, the conflict became an American war when President Lyndon Johnson sent U.S. ground forces to fight in Southeast Asia.

By 1967 the antiwar movement had taken to the streets to protest America's involvement in Vietnam. On October 21, 1967, antiwar protesters gathered to hold a peace rally before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., after which thirty thousand demonstrators linked arms and marched to the Pentagon, the national headquarters for the Department of Defense. When they arrived, armed guards greeted them. As the soldiers advanced toward the crowd with their guns drawn, an eighteen-year-old actor from New York with a flare for the dramatic stepped forward holding a bouquet of pink carnations and carefully placed each one into soldiers' rifles. Washington Star news photographer Bernie Boston captured this poetic gesture in his photograph "Flower Power," an iconic photo of the civil strife that the war triggered. Competing interpretations of this image revealed key divisions of the era. For peace advocates, the photograph illustrated the stark contrast between government-sponsored violence in Vietnam and

American citizens' demand for peace. Critics of the peace movement, who accused activists of destroying respect for law and order, viewed the gesture as a ploy meant to distract the soldiers moments before demonstrators stormed the steps of the Pentagon and armed guards beat them back.

The Vietnam War originated as an anti-colonial struggle to win independence from France, and then evolved into a civil war between North and South Vietnam. At first the crucial debates about Vietnam took place behind closed doors in the White House. Over the course of the country's thirty-year engagement in Vietnam, despite being presented continuously with other viewpoints, five American presidents chose escalation when faced with the option of pulling back or pressing forward. Viewing the Vietnamese conflict through the prism of the global Cold War, each president feared that losing all of Vietnam to communism would set off a chain reaction of communist revolutions throughout Southeast Asia.

World War II had united the nation. Vietnam fractured it. The guerilla war under way in South Vietnam, in which Communist soldiers intermingled with the civilian population to avoid detection, made it particularly difficult for Americans to separate enemy combatants from civilians. When the American military tried using overwhelming force to flush Communist guerrillas out of South Vietnamese villages, the rising civilian death toll turned many Americans against the war. The conflict ultimately tore apart both Vietnam and America before the United States finally withdrew in 1973. The war ended with a Communist victory in 1975.

Learning Objectives

After a careful examination of Chapter 26, students should be able to do the following:

1. Identify and explain the historical significance of the term "Rolling Thunder."
2. Define the term *search and destroy* and explain its significance to American military strategy during the Vietnam War.
3. Explain the realist position regarding the American role in Vietnam.
4. Identify and explain the historical significance of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and explain the political philosophy and approach presented by the SDS in the Port Huron Statement.
5. Identify and explain the impact of the Tet Offensive.
6. Explain the role of television in shaping the American perception and understanding of the Vietnam War.
7. Identify the factors that led to Lyndon Johnson's withdrawal from the 1968 presidential election.
8. Identify the significance of *Vietnamization* and the *Nixon Doctrine* as the cornerstones of the Nixon policy in Vietnam.

9. Describe the impact of the secret war in Cambodia on domestic protests against the Vietnam War.

Key Terms & Definitions:

Vietminh The term initially used to describe all Vietnamese communists, and used after 1954 solely for North Vietnamese communists. (780)

domino theory The fear that a communist Vietnam would open the door to a complete communist takeover of Southeast Asia. (781)

Geneva Accords (1954) Called for a temporary partition of Vietnam along the seventeenth parallel, with the Vietminh in the north and the French in the south, and a general election in two years to reunify the country under one government. (782)

Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) 1954 alliance among the United States, Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, and Pakistan who pledged to “meet common danger” in Southeast Asia together. (783)

Vietcong Slang term for South Vietnamese communists. (783)

Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (1964) Gave Johnson permission “to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression” in Vietnam. (787)

Ho Chi Minh Trail A 600-mile North Vietnamese supply route that ran along the western border of Vietnam through neighboring Laos and Cambodia. (789)

agent orange A defoliant that stripped trees of their leaves to expose Vietcong hideouts and killed crops. (790)

peace movement A loose coalition of antiwar activists that included pacifists, students, professors, clergy, hippies, civil rights activists, and middle-class liberals. (790)

Tet Offensive (1968) A massive, coordinated Communist assault against more than a hundred cities and towns in South Vietnam. (792)

My Lai A Vietnamese village where American soldiers massacred five hundred civilians in 1968. (799)

Vietnamization A Nixon administration policy that turned the bulk of the ground fighting over to the South Vietnamese Army. (801)

silent majority Nixon’s term for the large number of Americans who supported the war quietly in the privacy of their homes. (801)

détente Relaxing Cold War tensions by using diplomatic, economic, and cultural contacts to improve U.S. relations with China and the Soviet Union. (803)

Watergate scandal (1972) A botched Republican-engineered break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington, D.C., that eventually forced Nixon to resign in 1974. (806)

Study Questions:

How did differing views on the war influence interpretations of this photograph in 1967? (778)

Who was Ho Chi Minh to his supporters and foes? (780)

What political and strategic importance did Vietnam assume in U.S. foreign policy by the mid-1950s? (781)

What key choices did Eisenhower make in 1954 that increased U.S. involvement in Vietnam? (782)

Why did the civil war in Vietnam reignite in the late 1950s and early 1960s? (783)

What conflicting recommendations did Kennedy receive from his advisors about Vietnam? (784)

What insights does the story behind this 1963 photo offer into the Vietnam War? (785)

How did images both provoke and quell controversy surrounding the Kennedy assassination? (786)

Why was the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident a turning point in the Vietnam War? (787)

Why was Johnson's decision to escalate U.S. troop levels in 1965 important? (788)

What messages did North Vietnamese propaganda send? (789)

What motivated American men to volunteer to fight in Vietnam? (790)

What tactics did the military adopt to fight the Vietcong? (791)

What problems surfaced from using enemy body counts to measure victory? (792)

Why did the 1968 Tet Offensive have such tremendous political fallout? (793)

Why did this image become the defining one of the Tet Offensive? (794)

How does this image compare to combat photographs from World War II and the Korean War (see Chapters 23 and 24)? (795)

What differing visions did peace activists offer on the war? (796)

How did domestic concerns influence the peace movement? (797)

Why did the peace movement have trouble winning support from mainstream America? (798)

Why did photos of the My Lai massacre provoke conflicting responses from Americans? (799)

What was the ultimate historic significance of the My Lai massacre? (800)

What motivated Nixon to implement Vietnamization? (801)

What does this data reveal about the various stages of America's involvement in Vietnam? (802)

How did Nixon try to win the war? (803)

What competing visions emerged in response to the Kent State killings? (804)

How did Nixon reshape the contours of the Cold War? (805)

How did the Vietnam War finally end for the United States and the Vietnamese? (806)

Why does the Vietnamese War continue to provoke controversy among Americans? (807)