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The United States and the Vietnam War

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The Vietnam War

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Summary

From 1965 to 1973, the United States attempted to prevent the absorption of the non-Communist state of South Vietnam by Communist North Vietnam as part of its Cold War strategy of containment. In doing so, the United States had to battle both the North Vietnamese military and guerrillas indigenous to South Vietnam. The Johnson administration entered the war without a well-thought-out strategy for victory, and the United States quickly became bogged down in a bloody stalemate. A major Communist assault in 1968 known as the Tet Offensive convinced US leaders of the need to seek a negotiated solution. This task fell to the Nixon administration, which carried on peace talks while simultaneously seeking ways to escalate the conflict and force North Vietnam to make concessions. Eventually it was Washington that made major concessions, allowing North Vietnam to keep its forces in the South and leaving South Vietnam in an untenable position. US troops left in 1973 and Hanoi successfully invaded the South in 1975. The two Vietnams were formally unified in 1976.

The war devastated much of Vietnam and came at a huge cost to the United States in terms of lives, resources, and political division at home. It gave birth to the largest mass movement against a war in US history, motivated by opposition both to conscription and to the damage that protesters perceived the war was doing to the United States. It also raised persistent questions about the wisdom of both military intervention and nation-building as tools of US foreign policy. The war has remained a touchstone for national debate and partisan division even as the United States and Vietnam moved to normalize diplomatic relations with the end of the Cold War.

Keywords: Vietnam War, Cold War, Tet Offensive, antiwar movement, Johnson administration, Nixon administration, Viet Cong, counterinsurgency, nation-building

Subjects: Foreign Relations and Foreign Policy

Bright and early on the morning of March 8, 1965, two reinforced battalions of United States Marines waded ashore amid heavy surf at Da Nang, a port city on Vietnam's central coast. They were then taken in trucks to guard a US airbase on the western edge of the city. Mistaking the white men for Vietnam's former colonial masters, an elderly Vietnamese greeted them by exclaiming "Vive le France!"¹ Though not returning colonizers, the Marines were the first elements of a vast American war machine that would grind through South Vietnam in the coming years, profoundly changing that country and their own in the process.

Following the Geneva Accords of 1954, colonial Vietnam had been split into two halves. North Vietnam, ruled from Hanoi, became the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). It was dominated by the Communist Party of Vietnam, which had spearheaded the war that ejected the French colonizers. They aimed now to absorb South Vietnam, which was ruled by an American-backed regime—the Republic of Vietnam (RVN)—and whose governing and military personnel drew

heavily from the ranks of those Vietnamese who had collaborated with the French in the colonial period. Following years of guerrilla warfare, the regime in Hanoi had decided in September 1964 to dispatch units of its regular military, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) to aid the National Liberation Front (NLF, colloquially known as "Viet Cong"), indigenous southerners who were fighting the South Vietnamese government. Faced with the prospect that the Communist military campaign might bring about the collapse of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), the Johnson administration sought ways to respond.

In deciding exactly how to do so, Johnson relied on a close-knit group of advisors. The most influential administration figures on the war—Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and National Security Advisors McGeorge Bundy (1963–1966) and Walt Rostow (1966–1969)—saw defending South Vietnam as vital to containing Communist expansionism and demonstrating US credibility to its allies. They developed their strategy piecemeal, not holding an overall strategic review in the first years of the conflict but rather reacting to events.

The Communist "Winter-Spring" campaign of 1964–1965 led to two major American escalations. In February 1965, the administration began Operation Rolling Thunder, a sustained program of bombing against North Vietnam. Johnson also dispatched ground combat troops, starting with the Marines at Da Nang and increasing steadily thereafter. These actions were envisaged as signals of US resolve that would persuade Hanoi to give up its quest to conquer the South. But North Vietnam reacted by sending more troops of its own, starting a cycle of escalation in which both countries attempted to inflict enough violence on the other to break its will. General William Westmoreland, the US commander on the ground in South Vietnam, was soon requesting more troops of his own. By the end of 1965, there would be 184,300 in South Vietnam; by the end of 1967, 485,600; and in December 1968, just before Johnson left office, 536,100.² "I'm going up old Ho Chi Minh's leg one inch at a time," Johnson boasted to Senator George McGovern.³

The war quickly bogged down into a stalemate with high casualties on both sides, and the administration came under heavy criticism. On the one side were the hawks, led by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), who believed the administration's attempt to use gradually escalating military force to "signal" to Hanoi was pusillanimous and doomed to failure.⁴ Johnson feared that dramatic escalation would lead to conflict with China and the Soviet Union and place his domestic agenda, the Great Society, in peril. He ordered pilots to stay away from provocative targets in North Vietnam and refused to give the military the authority it wanted to expand the war into Cambodia and Laos, which were important transit hubs and rear areas for the NLF and PAVN. Rather than fighting a "limited war" of this type, the JCS and its political allies believed the United States needed to expand the war to ensure victory.⁵ Although Johnson approved a major expansion of bombing against North Vietnam in June 1966, he still did not go as far as the JCS wanted.

Johnson also faced arguments for de-escalation and a negotiated withdrawal. Undersecretary of State George Ball had argued against escalation in the fateful days of 1965 and soon found himself marginalized.⁶ A month-long pause in the bombing from Christmas Eve of 1965 failed to lead to any meaningful negotiations or political gains for Johnson at home. As the bombing resumed,

Democratic Senator William Fulbright, the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, organized televised Congressional hearings that became a forum for criticism of the war effort. After this experience, Johnson became skeptical of further peace moves. At the same time, McNamara's skepticism grew throughout 1966 and 1967. He doubted that a military solution could be found and counseled de-escalation, further bombing pauses, and negotiation.⁷ The result was that McNamara likewise found himself marginalized by Johnson, and in late 1967, he decided to leave the administration. Though there were various peace initiatives in 1965–1967, neither Hanoi or Washington was yet ready to fold, and they went nowhere. The stalemate would have to be broken on the battlefield.

The Shape of Battle

On that battlefield, American soldiers were undergoing a grueling and often deadly trial. The first US units to arrive were often brimming with confidence that the Communists could be quickly defeated.⁸ As time went on and American soldiers endured years of brutal and frightening guerrilla warfare, this attitude became harder to sustain.

The war in Vietnam was unlike other recent American military conflicts. It was a “war without fronts” in which finding enemy forces and holding them in place long enough to fight was often more difficult than actually defeating them in battle. With their intimate knowledge of the local terrain and often with the complicity of the local population, the NLF (National Liberation Front) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) usually chose when and where to initiate combat. This meant US units nearly always fought on the tactical defensive in confusing circumstances. They relied heavily on artillery and airpower to pound suspected enemy positions. The Vietnamese communist infantryman was well equipped thanks to aid from the Soviet Union and China, but communist forces lacked the heavy firepower that played such a central role in US tactics. More often than not, NVA and NLF forces would slip away quickly after initiating contact, and before US forces could truly get to grips with them.

The US war effort was defined by its attempts to use technology to make the war and even the country of South Vietnam as a whole more predictable, tractable, and legible.⁹ The Army used helicopters to ferry troops into combat for the first time as it sought to free soldiers from the “tyranny of terrain.”¹⁰ Millions of gallons of defoliants were dropped throughout the country to make it harder for the NLF and NVA to conceal themselves. The United States even made use of special sensors to detect human urine in an attempt to track their enemy. Entire areas of the country were labelled as “free fire zones,” with everyone inside assumed to be an enemy combatant and subjected to withering firepower.

Along with countless smaller engagements and guerrilla ambushes, US forces fought in a series of increasingly large search and destroy operations in 1965–1967, aiming to dislodge Communist forces from their base areas near Saigon. These actions were Westmoreland's attempt to flush out large NVA and NLF units and fix them in place long enough to be destroyed. Westmoreland hoped to eventually reach a “crossover point” in which the United States would be killing more enemy soldiers than could be replaced. But with two hundred thousand males reaching draft age in North

Vietnam every year, the goal remained elusive, and the size of Communist forces in South Vietnam actually grew from 1965 to 1967.¹¹ Meanwhile, the practice of measuring success by “body counts” led to hugely inflated reports of enemy deaths, as well as the labeling of civilian casualties as enemy guerrillas.

For the combat soldiers involved, these operations could be harrowing. Soldiers hacked through jungle and waded through paddy water, enduring leeches, booby traps, sniper fire, tropical diseases, and exhaustion. The local Vietnamese population sometimes bore the brunt of US soldiers’ fury. Though many American soldiers had high opinions of the fighting qualities of their enemy, it was common for them to hold racist attitudes toward the “gooks” they fought among and against. The soldiers’ inability to understand Vietnamese language or culture often made civilians appear sullen and suspicious to American eyes. Practices such as the retaliatory shelling and bombing of villages and the forced relocation of civilians occurred frequently, although the exact scale is not possible to determine.¹²

Americans sometimes fought alongside the South Vietnamese military, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), but American commanders and soldiers often had doubts about its fighting ability and motivation. While US forces focused on major combat operations against the enemy, the ARVN was assigned to “pacification,” the goal of combating NLF guerrillas on a local level and uprooting their political and military infrastructure from the villages. Training ARVN forces to be able to defend their country on their own was a necessity if the United States was eventually going to withdraw, but before 1968 it was subordinated to Westmoreland’s desire to reach the “crossover point” through the application of US firepower.

Meanwhile, the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign was failing to achieve its goals of breaking North Vietnam’s will or significantly impacting the infiltration of soldiers and supplies into South Vietnam. Over the course of the program, 643,000 tons of bombs were dropped, almost 90 percent of which hit transportation-related targets. This was not enough to stop the Communists from meeting their minimal resupply needs in the South, which amounted to less than a dozen trucks a day. Nor did the program have any apparent impact on Hanoi’s willingness to fight. Meanwhile, Rolling Thunder came at a high cost: by 1966, the United States was expending \$9.60 on bombing for every \$1 of damage to the North Vietnamese economy.¹³ It was also costly in human terms. Tens of thousands of Northern civilians died in the raids, and hundreds of US airmen were shot down and captured. In captivity, they were subjected to extreme torture and malnutrition as their captors aimed to break their will and compel them to make statements against the war that could be used as propaganda.

Building a Nation

At the same time as they were participating in a brutal war, Americans in South Vietnam also had another goal: nation-building. The American war aim of ensuring the continued existence of a stable, independent, and non-Communist South Vietnam meant that US officials began to concern themselves with South Vietnamese politics. They wanted to ensure that the Saigon

regime would be strong enough to collect the taxes and conscript the soldiers that would be needed to defend it after the eventual withdrawal of US forces. Others also pursued programs of social, economic, and political reform.

In 1965, the junta of Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky came to power in Saigon, ending the revolving-door coups that had characterized Saigon politics since the overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963. The relationship between the two ebbed and flowed in the following years, with Thieu eventually sidelining Ky and solidifying his own authority in 1968. Fearful of appearing to impinge on South Vietnamese sovereignty and hence giving the Communists a propaganda victory, American officials had to attempt to persuade Thieu and Ky to adopt governmental reforms rather than forcing them to do so.

Many Americans believed that South Vietnam would be much more likely to survive if it could improve the socio-economic conditions of the Vietnamese peasantry and give them a measure of democratic control over their own governance. Johnson especially was attracted to the idea of extending his Great Society agenda of social reform onto the international stage and encouraged his aides to find ways to deliver land reform, education, electrification, and other benefits to the South Vietnamese peasantry to win their hearts and minds. In April 1965, he gave a speech at Johns Hopkins University outlining an ambitious plan to carry out a massive development scheme on the Mekong river, replicating the Tennessee Valley Authority dam scheme. At the Honolulu Conference in February 1966, Johnson challenged the South Vietnamese to come back to him with proof showing “how have you built democracy in the rural areas? How much of it have you built, when and where?”¹⁴ But such grand plans proved impossible to pursue in wartime, and US nation-building efforts and South Vietnamese reform were mostly incremental before 1968.

Reform of South Vietnam was particularly difficult to achieve because the government sat atop a structure of corruption and patronage that Thieu and Ky depended on for their political survival. Shaking its foundations too hard might have brought the entire edifice crashing down, weakening the junta and hence the war effort. On the other hand, US officials felt the need to demonstrate to public opinion back home that the Saigon regime was a reforming ally worthy of US support. Officials particularly celebrated the South Vietnamese presidential election of 1967 and the transition to a new constitution with civilian rule, even if the effect was limited in practice. Thieu slipped out of his uniform and into the Presidential Palace, bringing about no dramatic change. As 1967 ended, he was still resisting major reforms to South Vietnamese politics, society, or the economy.

The War at Home

The escalation of the Vietnam War occurred at a febrile time for American society. The civil rights movement had just reached its crescendo and many groups of Americans were showing enhanced political and social consciousness after the relatively staid 1950s. The New Left, spearheaded by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), was remaking campus politics and looking for a way

to make an impact on the wider culture. Meanwhile, Johnson's liberal antidote to this radical activism—the Great Society—seemed increasingly to be taking a back seat to the war effort, creating a large space to the left of the administration that many rushed to fill.

Out of these conditions emerged the largest mass movement against a war in American history, one that had a deep and lasting impact on American culture. It brought together a diverse group of people: pacifists and bomb-throwers, priests and veterans, rich and poor, wannabe revolutionaries and seasoned politicians. Although the movement's celebration of diversity was one of the things that allowed it to grow so large, it also meant that it was wracked by recurrent internal divisions and unable to coalesce around a single leader.

Early public opposition to the war was spearheaded by college students and peace activists. These early opponents of the war often saw the war issue in the context of the civil rights movement in which, as one participant recalled, they had “seen how readily the government could divert its gaze from injustice.”¹⁵ “What kind of America is it whose response to poverty and oppression in South Vietnam is napalm and defoliation,” asked the SDS, while the country's “response to poverty and oppression in Mississippi is . . . silence?”¹⁶ The movement began with “teach-ins” at over a hundred colleges in 1965, during which students and faculty would stay up all night debating the war and educating future activists. SDS and another group, the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, arranged protests in April and November respectively that attracted about twenty thousand participants each.

As the war escalated further and more American troops were required, the number of young men drafted into military service increased. The threat of conscription, combined with the pervasive sense that the draft operated unfairly, helped to broaden the base of the antiwar movement. Thousands of young men burned their draft cards as an act of civil disobedience. Groups that had been skeptical of speaking out against the war, such as the civil rights organization the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, began to harden their position as it became clear that the war was draining all impetus from campaigns for social and racial justice at home.¹⁷ As the war expanded, protests got bigger too, with five hundred thousand gathering in New York in April 1967 and fifty thousand staging an illegal march on the Pentagon in October.

Although the antiwar movement was of a scale and visibility not previously seen in American history (or since), the overall picture of public opinion was more complex. In August 1965, 61 percent of Americans thought the United States had been right to send troops to fight in Vietnam, and the figure only dipped below 50 percent in July 1967. At the same time, between 1964 and late 1968, support for withdrawal never exceeded 20 percent. In 1967, which two scholars of public sentiment during the war label the “year of the hawk,” support for withdrawal dropped to 6 percent in May. In November of the same year, 55 percent of respondents to a poll favored a drastic escalation of the war by the United States.¹⁸ At the same time, polls showed the majority of Americans held an unfavorable view of the antiwar movement, with 70 percent of respondents in December 1967 saying that demonstrations were “acts of disloyalty.”¹⁹

Clashes between pro- and antiwar demonstrators sometimes turned violent, with crowds attacking antiwar marchers, throwing red paint and tomatoes, and displaying slogans such as “More Police Brutality” and “Give us joy, bomb Hanoi.”²⁰ The antiwar movement also had to deal with FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) intimidation, surveillance, and harassment as part of the bureau’s COINTELPRO (a portmanteau of COunter INTELLigence PROgram). Both FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and President Johnson were convinced that many in the antiwar movement were at best Communist dupes and, at worst, active Communists aiming to overthrow the US government. Activists who traveled to North Vietnam to meet with the country’s leadership—about two hundred in total during the war—aroused even more frenzied suspicions.²¹ The FBI intimidated movement participants, sought to disrupt their personal lives and have them fired from their jobs, and produced fake newspapers and pamphlets designed to discredit the movement.

As 1967 drew to a close, antiwar and pro-war forces in the United States were at something of a stalemate of their own. The antiwar movement had not succeeded in wringing any concessions from the administration. But, sensing the public’s growing impatience with the war—by December 1967 only 46 percent thought it had not been a mistake for the United States to get involved—the Johnson administration launched a public relations offensive designed to demonstrate progress.²² In November 1967, Westmoreland was recalled to the United States to give a speech at the National Press Club in which he promised that the war had reached a point “where the end begins to come into view.” “I am absolutely certain,” he continued, “that whereas in 1965 the enemy was winning, today he is certainly losing.”²³ These words would come back to haunt him soon thereafter.

1968

The year 1968 proved to be a dramatic turning point in the Vietnam War and, by extension, in post-war American history. On January 30, Communist forces in South Vietnam launched an audacious offensive against over one hundred urban centers. The South Vietnamese capital Saigon saw heavy fighting for the first time, and North Vietnamese commandos managed to fight their way into the US Embassy. Coming so soon after Westmoreland’s breezy assertion of progress, the Tet Offensive—so-called because it came during the Vietnamese Tet holiday period—had a striking impact on American official and public opinion. Far from there being light at the end of the tunnel, 1968 would turn out to be the deadliest year of the war to date for American forces.²⁴

The initial reaction to the Tet Offensive among many American policymakers was panic. But the Communist forces fairly quickly reached their culminating point and suffered massive casualties in American and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) counterattacks. In particular, the political and military infrastructure of the NLF (National Liberation Front) was devastated during the course of 1968, and from this point onward the burden of the war shifted much more heavily to North Vietnamese forces. The confidence of the American community in South Vietnam grew over the course of 1968, as the offensive—and atrocities the Communists had committed in the

city of Hue, where they murdered thousands of civilians—inspired the Thieu government to embark on a series of modest domestic reforms to strengthen the South Vietnamese government, including a dramatic increase in national mobilization into the ARVN.²⁵

Back in the United States, the offensive finally forced the overarching strategic review that the Johnson administration had neglected to carry out up until this point. On March 10, *The New York Times* printed a leaked request from Westmoreland for two hundred thousand more troops.²⁶ Meanwhile, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) were pressuring Johnson to mobilize American reserve forces and permit ground operations into Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam. Johnson ordered McNamara's replacement, Clark Clifford, to carry out an "A to Z" review of policy, and Clifford concluded that any escalation by the United States could be matched by Hanoi.²⁷ At the same time, a group of advisors from the foreign policy establishment known as the Wise Men counselled Johnson to de-escalate the war. Mounting evidence of the damage the conflict was doing to the US economy sealed Johnson's decision to reject the military's recommendations and instead de-escalate American involvement.

On March 31, Johnson announced his decision to the nation in a televised speech. He announced a new troop deployment of only 13,500 soldiers. At the same time, he stated that he was directing the military to cease almost all bombing of North Vietnam and aiming to open peace talks with Hanoi to find a negotiated solution to the war. Although Johnson at the same time insisted that the withdrawal of American forces from South Vietnam would be contingent on progress in these talks, his decision marked the high-water mark of escalation: from now on, political decisions in Washington would be about the pace of withdrawal. Talks opened several days after Johnson's announcement but made no progress throughout 1968.

Enter Nixon

The final point announced by Johnson in his March 31 speech was his intention not to seek re-election in 1968. Instead, Vice President Hubert Humphrey ran against Republican candidate Richard Nixon. Johnson suspected—and historians have since found evidence to corroborate—that Nixon sought to undermine Johnson's peace initiatives in the run-up to the election to prevent political benefit from redounding to Humphrey's benefit. In a move that Johnson considered "treason," Nixon reached out to Thieu via the lobbyist Anna Chennault, urging Thieu to stall peace talks and hold out for a better deal under a future Nixon administration. Historians agree that Thieu was likely to hold out anyway, but Johnson was enraged by Nixon's actions. Johnson's aides urged him to tell the public, but on November 4 they concluded that they lacked the "absolute proof" they needed. A day later, Nixon was elected president by a thin margin.²⁸

Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, wanted to end the war, but only if they could achieve "peace with honor." This meant avoiding the appearance that the United States had abandoned its goals and been forced into an ignominious rout. Although his administration steadily withdrew US troops from South Vietnam, the preoccupation with "peace with honor" led Nixon to also dramatically escalate the war. He sent ground troops into Cambodia in 1970 and supported an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) incursion into Laos in 1971. Nixon hoped to

intimidate North Vietnam into believing he might take even more drastic military action, forcing them to sue for peace. At the same time, he attempted to isolate Hanoi diplomatically by improving relations with its allies. He pursued *détente* with the Soviet Union and dramatically visited China in 1972.²⁹

Within South Vietnam itself, the cornerstone of Nixon's strategy was Vietnamization, the gradual handing of the war effort to ARVN and withdrawal of US forces. This allowed Nixon to slow the momentum of the US antiwar movement, and his replacement of the old Selective Service draft system with a random lottery helped to remove the draft as a political issue. Draft calls ended entirely in January 1973. Meanwhile, the ARVN became one of the largest and most well-equipped militaries in the world. The South Vietnamese government enjoyed its high-water mark in the period after the Tet Offensive, as the decimation of the National Liberation Front (NLF) allowed government forces to occupy much of the countryside. Pacification of the countryside was widespread, and some observers were convinced that the Saigon government had finally achieved the elusive task of nation-building. Nevertheless, there is little evidence that its popular support increased dramatically during this period.³⁰

Nixon's military initiatives did little to alter the war's fundamental dynamics. In his first year in office he planned a major escalation codenamed "Duck Hook," which would have involved widespread bombing of North Vietnam and the mining of its main port at Haiphong. Planners even considered the use of tactical nuclear weapons. The exercise was eventually abandoned, in part because of fears it would galvanize the antiwar movement. The expansion of the ground war into Cambodia in 1970 led to a national student strike that encompassed hundreds of thousands on over seven hundred campuses.³¹ On May 4, four students were shot by National Guardsmen, and on May 15 state police shot two and wounded twelve at Jackson State College in Mississippi. Pro-administration demonstrations also took place, and in New York City on May 8 around two hundred construction workers attacked anti-war protesters.

In the face of this pressure, Nixon pulled troops out of Cambodia before he had originally intended. With his capacity for escalation limited and US troop withdrawals continuing, the initiative passed clearly to the Vietnamese communist movement. US troops who were fighting for what increasingly seemed to be a lost cause suffered morale problems. "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?" asked young Navy veteran John Kerry in famous remarks before the Senate, which resonated with many.³² In late 1969, news emerged of a March 1968 massacre perpetrated by US forces that became known as the "My Lai massacre." The resultant trial focused attention on US war crimes and the moral cost of the war for its participants. "I sent them a good boy and they made him a murderer," the mother of one of the massacre's participants said.³³ Polls taken in March 1971 found that 58 percent of Americans believed it was "morally wrong" for the United States to fight in Vietnam, and 60 percent favored the withdrawal of US forces even if it led to a South Vietnamese collapse.³⁴ The release of secret government documents known as the Pentagon Papers later that year undermined support even further by revealing ways in which US leaders had deceived the American public about the war.

Peace at Last?

The last year of Nixon's first term, 1972, opened without apparent progress in peace talks to end the war. On January 25, Nixon revealed to the world that alongside the public peace talks taking place in Paris, Kissinger had been meeting with the North Vietnamese negotiator Le Duc Tho in secret negotiating sessions. The talks had taken a major step forward in May 1971, when the Nixon administration dropped its demand that all North Vietnamese forces be withdrawn from South Vietnam as a condition for a final agreement. But the talks remained stalemated over Hanoi's demand that Thieu be removed from power as part of any final agreement. Although Nixon and Kissinger now accepted that they might have to settle for merely the elapsing of a "decent interval" between an agreement and the collapse of Thieu's regime, bringing about this collapse themselves would violate their goal of "peace with honor."³⁵

In an attempt to break the deadlock, Hanoi launched the Nguyen Hue Offensive (known as the Easter Offensive in the West) in spring 1972. Columns of Soviet-made tanks drove into South Vietnam and human wave attacks overwhelmed Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) positions. In response, Nixon ordered a massive deployment of US airpower and the mining of Haiphong harbor. The momentum of the offensive was blunted, but Hanoi's troops were left in control of new swathes of South Vietnam. The offensive also raised questions about the effectiveness of Vietnamization, given that American air power had been vital in stopping the Communist advance.

The two sides returned to the negotiating table in July 1972. Hanoi dropped its demand that Thieu be overthrown. Instead, the two sides agreed that the future of South Vietnam would be decided by a commission that included representatives of both the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), the NLF's political wing, and Thieu's government, alongside neutralist elements. Kissinger thought he had clinched an agreement in October, but Thieu vehemently rejected both this formal role for the Communist movement and the fact that North Vietnamese troops would be permitted to stay in South Vietnam after the agreement.

In an attempt to change the terms further in Saigon's favor, Nixon ordered an intensive bombing campaign of North Vietnam. The campaign, which ran from December 18 to December 29, was known formally as Operation Linebacker II and informally as "the Christmas bombings." US B-52s unleashed one of the most intensive bombing campaigns in history against North Vietnam. Hanoi came back to the table, and in January 1973 the Paris Peace Accords were finalized. However, the agreement differed in only cosmetic respects from that reached in October. The demands that the United States had made subsequently at Thieu's behest were abandoned, leading Kissinger's aide John Negroponte to sarcastically note that "[w]e bombed the North Vietnamese into accepting our concessions."³⁶

The Endgame

Apart from a few US Marines serving as embassy guards, the final American forces came home from South Vietnam shortly after the agreement was signed. North Vietnam also released those it still held as POWs (prisoners of war), although controversy would boil for decades over the fate of Americans listed as Missing in Action (MIA). Despite these events, the war continued. Thieu refused to implement the Paris agreement, fearing—as had Nixon and Kissinger—that it would be his downfall. He launched military operations against North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces in South Vietnam and refused to countenance further negotiation with the Communists or coalition governing arrangements.

In the United States, the politics of the war underwent dramatic transformation. Concerned that the Nixon administration might get sucked back into the conflict to defend Thieu, Congress passed legislation to end US military involvement “in or over or from off the shores of” Indochina. Congress also passed the War Powers Act of 1973, which required Congressional approval for future military action anywhere in the world. Finally, Congress slashed economic and military aid to South Vietnam, making it increasingly clear that the success of Vietnamization would soon be dramatically tested.

Weakened by the unfolding Watergate scandal, Nixon was unable to fight back effectively against this Congressional activism. On August 9, 1974, Nixon was forced to resign the presidency after the scale of his involvement in the Watergate cover-up became clear. His successor, Gerald Ford, did not feel personally bound by commitments that Nixon had made to Thieu regarding the continued security of South Vietnam.

In late 1974, Hanoi launched the beginning of what would be its final offensive. Finding they were pushing against an open door, the Communists lunged onward, soon turning the offensive into a rout in spring 1975. Ford asked Congress for military aid to South Vietnam, but all the latter could agree on was \$300 million for humanitarian aid and evacuation. Seeing little chance of saving Saigon and unwilling to spend his political capital attempting to do so, on April 23 Ford declared that the Vietnam War was “finished as far as America is concerned.”³⁷ About a week later, Hanoi’s forces crashed through the gates of the Presidential Palace in Saigon, bringing the twenty-year-old conflict to an end. Images of Americans and their Vietnamese allies frantically scrambling for a place on a helicopter to leave the country before the Communist conquest was complete were broadcast around the world, dramatically underscoring what had been a humbling experience for American power.

Legacies

The fighting might have been over in South Vietnam, but the war’s legacies have lived on for decades. In South Vietnam itself, the communist victory inaugurated a period of political repression and economic chaos. Tens of thousands of South Vietnamese were executed and hundreds of thousands sent to re-education camps, where they endured starvation and torture.

Hanoi attempted to extend the collectivization of agriculture and other Stalinist economic policies into South Vietnam, which met with widespread resistance from the peasantry. Up to a million people fled the country in makeshift watercraft, becoming known as “boat people.”

In the United States, these developments fed into a debate over both the moral purpose of the war and practical details of the way it was fought, which continues to this day. Some commentators claimed that post-war developments in Vietnam showed that the war itself had been a lesser evil than the consequences of losing it.³⁸ By the 1980s, Ronald Reagan was referring to the war as a “noble cause.” Meanwhile, retired officers and right-wing commentators argued that the war could have been won if civilian politicians had untied the military’s hands and let them get on with the job of pummeling North Vietnam into submission. This narrative has been labelled the “stab in the back” myth.³⁹ Others decided that the war had not only been immoral, but that it had been fundamentally unwinnable and had distracted the United States from more pressing global challenges. This “liberal realist” viewpoint is most common among academic historians, while the “noble cause” and “stab in the back” narratives find support elsewhere in society.

The war also inspired belief in the “Vietnam syndrome,” which was the alleged skepticism of the American public and politicians regarding military involvement in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Debates about American military action still invariably evoke references to Vietnam, and the candidates’ wartime service has been an issue in most post-war presidential elections. While President George H. W. Bush declared the Vietnam syndrome to have been “kicked” after the US rout of Iraqi forces in the Gulf War, for many individual veterans the war left a more personal legacy of mental health problems and alienation from a society that had turned against the war in its final stages. American society was also affected by the several waves of Vietnamese refugees who came to the United States, many eventually settling in Texas and California. By 2016, there were over two million Vietnamese-Americans, and in that same year Viet Thanh Nguyen became the first Vietnamese-American to win the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Sympathizer*, which dealt with the war’s legacies.⁴⁰

One final legacy of the war was the strained relations that persisted for decades between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), as the united Vietnam became known. Negotiations over normalization broke down over Vietnamese demands for US reconstruction aid and due to persistent rumors that the SRV was still secretly holding POWs. When the SRV invaded Cambodia to overthrow the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in 1978, Washington took this as evidence that Hanoi was seeking to dominate the region, and even argued that the Khmer Rouge should continue to occupy Cambodia’s United Nations seat rather than the new Vietnamese-backed regime. Tensions cooled after the end of the Cold War, and new priorities began to assert themselves. Normalization of relations between the United States and the SRV was finally achieved in 1994. In 2016 President Barack Obama lifted an embargo on the sale of lethal military equipment to Vietnam and even hailed the SRV as a “defense partner.”⁴¹

Discussion of the Literature

The literature on the Vietnam War is enormous, so a guide is essential. Vital historiographical accounts include Gary Hess's *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*; and Marc Gilbert's *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*. David L. Anderson's *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War* provides an excellent introduction to numerous topics.⁴²

The main school of Vietnam War historiography is known as the orthodox school. Although authors in this school disagree on whether to characterize the war as a tragedy or a crime, they unite in declaring the war to have been unwinnable. Seeing the South Vietnamese government as having been hopefully ineffective and illegitimate, they believe it was immoral for the United States to cause such destruction in an attempt to defend it. Orthodox works also often frame the war as a war of national liberation against a (neo)colonial struggle for domination or as a civil war among the Vietnamese, rather than as a righteous Cold War struggle. The standard account of this school's views is George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*. Other key works include Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States in Vietnam, 1941–1975*; Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience*; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*; and Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990*.⁴³

There is a smaller group of authors, usually called revisionists, who dissent from the orthodox position. They tend to argue that the war was winnable and espouse elements of the “noble cause” and “stab in the back” narratives mentioned in this article, which stress the essential morality of US involvement in the war. Notable works here include Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*; Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965*; Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*; Michael Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War*; and Michael Kort, *The Vietnam War Reexamined*.

For those interested in a closer look at particular administrations, there is rather more written about the Johnson than the Nixon period. Key texts on the Johnson administration include Fredrick Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*; George Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*; and Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam*. Key texts to consult on Nixon and his administration include Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*; Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger and Betrayal in Vietnam*; and Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi and the Making of the Paris Agreement*. The Ford administration is discussed extensively in Johannes Kadura, *The War after the War: The Struggle for Credibility during America's Exit from Vietnam*.

One of the main topics that has been of interest to American writers is the failure of American military strategy in the Vietnam War. The best work in this genre has integrated its analysis with a sophisticated understanding of the Communist movement and the reasons for its success. The absolute classic in this vein remains Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province*; and other notable works include Eric M. Bergerud, *Dynamics of Defeat: The*

Vietnam War in Hau Nghai Province; and Kevin M. Boylan, *Losing Binh Dinh: The Failure of Pacification and Vietnamization, 1969–1971*. Andrew F. Krepinevich's *The Army and Vietnam* was an early work that blamed US failure on inappropriately pursuing a conventional war strategy rather than stressing counterinsurgency. This point of view has often been combined with a strident criticism of Westmoreland, as in Lewis Sorley's *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*. Gregory A. Daddis's *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* takes a much more sophisticated view of the general.

Those looking to understand the Vietnamese side of the conflict can benefit from a growing literature rooted in Vietnamese-language sources. These sources focus much more closely on the decisions of the Vietnamese side in the conflict, correcting an earlier American literature that tended to stress American agency. The history of the Communist movement boasts an impressive literature, including David Elliott's two-volume *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta*; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*; Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*; and Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology*. This new literature presents a more complex view of the Communist movement than early iterations of the orthodox scholarship and is particularly notable for stressing the role of Communist Party leader Le Duan over that of Ho Chi Minh from the early 1960s onward. The literature on South Vietnam is also growing but remains focused on the Diem period. Key texts include Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam*; and Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam*.

Books that discuss the impact of the Vietnam War on the home front and domestic politics include Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*; Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee*; Andrew Hunt, *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans against the War*; Melvin Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves*; and Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up? American Protest against the War in Vietnam, 1963–1975*.

Primary Sources

There are a huge number of archival collections around the world that are pertinent to the Vietnam War. The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) II in College Park, Maryland houses the records of many relevant federal government agencies, including the State Department, the Defense Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Central Intelligence Agency, and more. It also includes the records of the United States military and its various branches. Further military records can be found at the United States Army Center for Military History at Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania.

There are also extensive digital collections available. The Texas Tech University Vietnam Center and Archive contains over half a million documents covering various aspects of the war, with a particular strength in events on the ground in South Vietnam itself. Its contents are easily searchable and are often recommended as a starting point for researchers. The National Security Archive in Washington, DC also contains extensive digital materials.

The presidential archives of the relevant administrations from Truman to Ford all contain materials on the Vietnam War. These archives are useful not only for exploring presidential decision-making, but also because a huge number of documents from other agencies—such as State and Pentagon telegrams sent between the United States and South Vietnam—ended up in the White House archives as well. The presidential archives also have oral history collections that help to give context to the written documents, and these oral histories are often available online. The Miller Center at the University of Virginia runs the Presidential Recordings Program, which makes large quantities of audio recordings from the Johnson and Nixon administrations available online for research via its website.

There are also a large number of oral histories and interview transcripts that are available for students of the war. The Texas Tech archive has a large collection of oral histories. The Allen E. Goodman Papers in the Hoover Institution Archive contain a large collection of debriefing interviews that were carried out with Americans who worked on nation-building tasks in South Vietnam, as well as several with South Vietnamese government officials. Another somewhat underutilized resource are interviews that the RAND Corporation carried out with National Liberation Front (NLF) and NVA defectors and prisoners, which amount to some sixty-two thousand pages.

There are a large number of printed primary sources available for research. The *Foreign Relations of the United States* series can be found online and contains a number of volumes pertaining to the war. *The Pentagon Papers*, the massive Pentagon report leaked by Daniel Ellsberg, has been useful to generations of researchers. The CIA published a number of in-house histories of various aspects of its involvement in the war that quote documents not otherwise available to researchers. These can be found in Electronic Briefing Book No. 284 of the National Security Archive. The US Army Center for Military History published a series of “Indochina monographs,” authored by former South Vietnamese military officers and providing vital insight into South Vietnam. Merle L. Pribbenow translated *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*, and it is now available in English. Other key printed collections of documents include *Vietnam and America: The Most Comprehensive Documented History of the Vietnam War*; *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*; and *Vietnam: A History in Documents*.

Scholars trained in the Vietnamese language can attempt to access materials in Vietnam itself. Key collections here include North Vietnamese documents available at National Archives 3 and the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Hanoi, and documents from the South Vietnamese government in National Archives 2 in Saigon. Documents in the British National Archives in Kew can also be accessed for an interesting perspective on both American and Vietnamese activities in the conflict.

Links to Digital Materials

Antiwar and Radical History Project <<https://depts.washington.edu/antiwar/photosdocs.shtml>>.

Foreign Relations of the United States series <<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments>>.

Miller Center Presidential Recordings Project <<https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/secret-white-house-tapes>>.

The National Security Archive <<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/>>.

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Notes

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