

Vietnam War

Read the hand-out that follows and answer the questions below

Define the following: Ho Chi Minh, Domino effect, Viet Cong, Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Tet Offensive,

1. How did Johnson try to justify escalating U.S. involvement in Vietnam? What were the arguments in favor of U.S. intervention in Vietnam? Against U.S. Intervention
2. How did the war create divisions within the Democratic Party
3. How and why is 1968 an important “turning point year” with regard to the Vietnam War?

Vietnam: Sacrifice and Turmoil

Early U.S. Involvement

The Southeast Asian region known as Indochina is made up of three countries: Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. They were French colonies until the mid-1950s. The Japanese occupation of this area during World War II inspired nationalist groups to challenge French rule. After the war, guerrillas in Vietnam, led by the Communist-nationalist Ho Chi Minh, pushed the French out. The United States had backed the French in this conflict, and the Soviet Union had aided Ho. (See Chapter 17 for more details.)

An agreement at the 1954 peace conference in Geneva, Switzerland, divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel of latitude. Ho Chi Minh headed the Communist government of North Vietnam. The government of South Vietnam under Ngo Dinh Diem had the support of the United States.

Anti-Diem factions in the South, many aided by the Communist North, tried to bring down Diem's government. Their aim was to reunite the two parts of Vietnam. South Vietnam asked for help from the United States. In response, the Eisenhower administration sent a few hundred military advisers. President Kennedy later increased the number of advisers to a few thousand.

The repressive actions of Diem's government led to Diem's assassination. Successive governments were no more popular. By the mid-1960s, the Communist opposition appeared to be gaining strength.

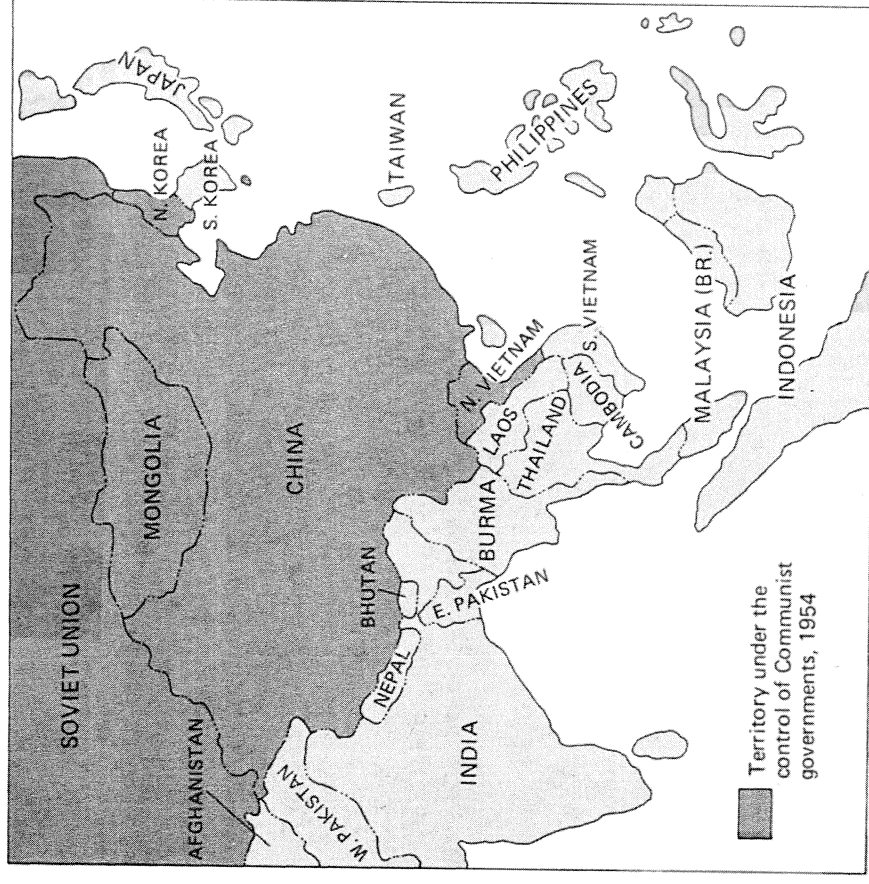
United States and the Spread of Communism

As you recall from Chapter 17, President Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, feared what they called a "*domino effect*." They compared the countries of Southeast Asia to a lineup of falling dominoes. If Vietnam fell to communism, for example, other "dominoes" in the region (Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand) might also fall. In addition, they believed that U.S. failure to respond to the Communist challenge in Indochina would lessen the credibility of U.S. commitments in other parts of the world during the cold war.

Johnson and Americanization of the War

Lyndon Johnson, who became president after Kennedy's assassination in 1963, promised "no wider war" in Vietnam. But he soon changed this policy when it became clear that the new leaders of South Vietnam were even less capable than Diem of winning the civil war against the Communists.

South Vietnam Under Threat In 1964 President Johnson concluded that South Vietnam's government was in danger of losing control of the country to the Viet Cong (the Communist guerrillas in South Vietnam). To counter the strong support given to the Viet Cong by the North Vietnamese government, Johnson decided that the use of U.S. troops was now necessary. He and many of his advisers wanted to prevent the Vietnam "domino" from

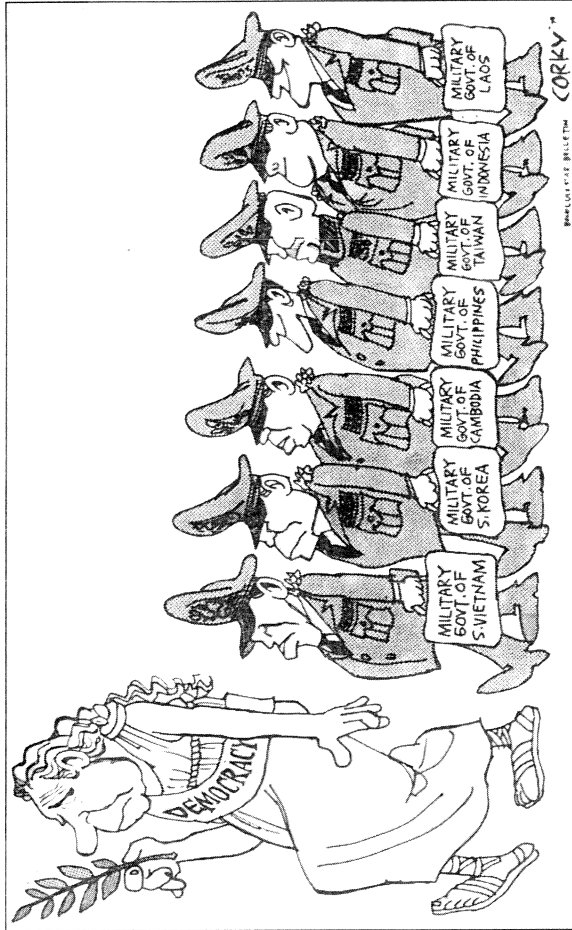


Asia in 1954

falling to communism so as to save the rest of Southeast Asia from the same fate.

An incident in August 1964 provided President Johnson with a specific reason for sending U.S. troops into combat. There were reports, which later proved inaccurate, that two U.S. ships had been attacked by North Vietnamese gunboats in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam. President Johnson used this event to ask Congress for a resolution supporting increased military aid to South Vietnam. The resolution authorized the president "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression."

Congress approved the *Tonkin Gulf Resolution* overwhelmingly, with only two senators voting against it. In effect, the resolution turned over to the president the power to use the armed forces in Vietnam in any way he

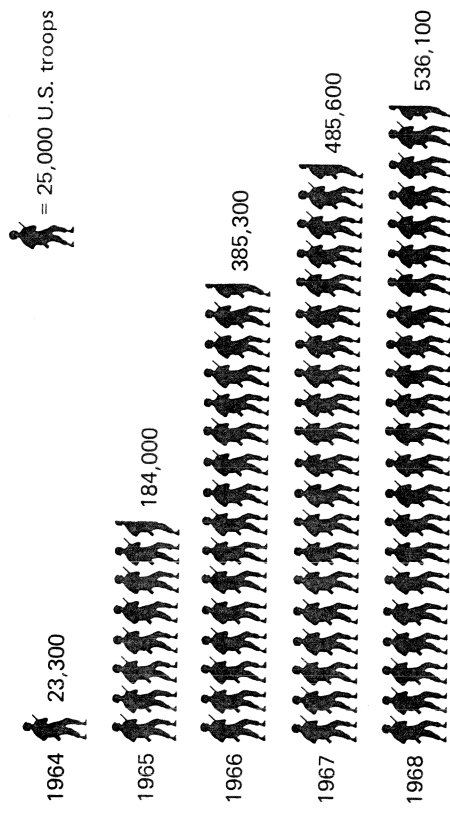


"Snow White and the Seven Experiments," a 1970 cartoon targeting U.S. hypocrisy in supporting military regimes in Asia

saw fit. For several years afterward, Congress entrusted the president with the power to make war. Thus, like the earlier war in Korea, the Vietnam War was fought without a formal declaration of war by the U.S. Congress.

Escalation and the Tet Offensive President Johnson waited until after the election of 1964 to begin a major military assault against North Vietnam. Early in 1965, U.S. planes began bombing enemy targets in the North. At the same time, U.S. combat troops arrived in South Vietnam by the thousands. In little more than three years, the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam rose from 184,000 in 1965 to 536,100 in 1968. TV and newspaper reports referred to the steady buildup of American forces in Vietnam as a policy of *escalation*. The administration assumed that increased bombing, especially in North Vietnam, as well as the increased number of American troops, would lead to a quick victory for the United States and the government of South Vietnam. Underlying U.S. policy was another assumption: that the two Communist powers, China and the Soviet Union, had plans to take control of much of Asia.

In January 1968, Communist forces launched an all-out attack against targeted cities in South Vietnam. TV news reports showed major Communist gains and the capital of Saigon in peril of being taken. Eventually, the attackers were pushed back, but the Communists' so-called Tet Offensive had dramatically demonstrated their strength. It also forced Americans to recognize the possibility that the war could go on for much longer.



U.S. Troop Buildup in Vietnam, 1964–1968

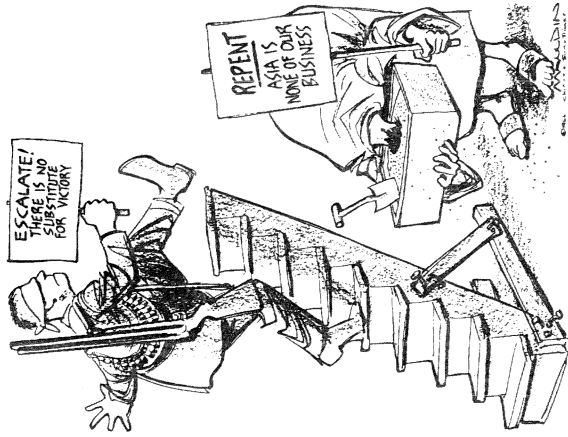
Controversy Over the War

Arguments for the War As U.S. involvement in the war escalated, Americans wanted to know “why are we in Vietnam?” In a 1965 speech at Johns Hopkins University, President Johnson gave these reasons:

- ★ “We are there,” said the president, “because we have a promise to keep.” Ever since 1954 the United States had pledged to help South Vietnam.
- To end U.S. commitments to South Vietnam would cause other nations to doubt whether they could trust U.S. commitments to them.
- ★ A Communist victory in South Vietnam would threaten neighboring countries in Southeast Asia and foster Communist aggression throughout the region.
- ★ The Communist government of the People’s Republic of China supported North Vietnam’s war effort as part of “a wider pattern of aggressive purposes.”

Arguments Against the War Opponents of U.S. involvement in Vietnam argued as follows:

- ★ The Communist nation of North Vietnam did not take orders from China or the Soviet Union. In fact, China and Vietnam had a long history of hostility and distrust toward one another. North Vietnam was fighting for nationalistic reasons.
- ★ The war was being fought in a distant area that was not vital for U.S. security. Nor were Vietnam’s economic resources vital to the U.S. economy.



"The Strategists," one for total commitment in Vietnam, the other for total noninvolvement—and both unrealistic

- ★ It was terribly costly for U.S. troops to be bogged down in a land war on the Asian continent.
- ★ The South Vietnam government was corrupt and undemocratic.
- ★ South Vietnam's army was not capable of fighting successfully against the Viet Cong guerrillas and the highly disciplined troops of North Vietnam. (North Vietnamese soldiers had begun fighting in South Vietnam in 1963.)
- ★ Thousands of Americans were being killed and wounded.

Student Protests

Draft Protesters and Political Radicals As more and more young Americans were drafted into military service and sent to fight in Vietnam, many people raised questions about Johnson's war policy. They began to doubt whether the United States was fighting for a worthwhile cause. They objected to fighting a war against an enemy on the other side of the world—an enemy that posed little threat to the United States. Many college students adopted various strategies for protesting the war policy. They gathered in groups and publicly set fire to their draft cards. They occupied buildings on college campuses and chanted defiant slogans such as "Hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" Among those who used radical methods of protest on college campuses were the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In addition, thousands escaped the draft law by moving to Canada.

The radical methods of the protesting students angered conservative groups who rallied to the flag and defended the U.S. war effort. By 1966, the nation was sharply divided between "doves" (those opposed to war) and "hawks" (those favoring even greater use of U.S. military power in Vietnam).

1968: Year of Turmoil

Cultural Radicals As 1968 began, a new movement among the nation's youth was in full swing. People in the movement were against the war and preached love and nonviolence. In addition, some students on college campuses adopted a style of life and dress that offended the older generation of their parents. Many people thought of radical students as those who wore their hair long and took drugs, although only a minority did either of these things. Rebellious youths valued personal honesty and creativity as ideals and generally opposed the norms of American culture—marriage, patriotism, and business. The radical lifestyle was known as the *counterculture*. Those adopting an extremely original lifestyle were known as "hippies" and "flower children." Some of them lived and worked together in what they called a communal family. These communes were generally located in rural areas.

Social Impact of the Vietnam War The Vietnam War created deep divisions within American society. Many members of the previous generation who had fought in World War II believed strongly that the right to disagree did not justify the antiwar protests or draft evasions. They believed that Americans should serve their country patriotically and objected to the actions of radical students and to the counterculture of the hippies. Returning Vietnam veterans. They did not understand why they were not given the same positive welcome that soldiers in prior wars had received.

Opponents of the war believed strongly that they had a responsibility to protest against a war that they believed to be immoral and that served no national interest. They challenged the trust that others placed in elected officials. They also challenged the view that the United States should act as the "policeman of the world."

The president and his military advisers stated many times that U.S. and South Vietnamese forces would eventually win the war. Many Americans, however, no longer accepted official reports about the war. They were more impressed by news reports on television, which showed that most villages in the South Vietnamese countryside were still under Viet Cong control. The commitment of more and more U.S. ground troops did not seem to make much difference. Members of the press spoke of a "credibility gap" between the government's view of the war and the public's view. Increasing numbers of people questioned the government's policy, and opposition to the war increased.

Johnson's Decision Not to Seek Reelection The beginning of 1968 was also the beginning of campaigns for the presidency. Most Americans assumed that President Johnson would be nominated for reelection by the Democratic party. But young people rallied to the support of an antiwar candidate, U.S. Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota. In an early primary in New Hampshire, McCarthy surprised the nation by winning more than 40 percent of the vote. Another challenger to Johnson's leadership, President John Kennedy's brother Robert, announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination. Following these events, President Johnson made a television address to the American people. He said that, in the interests of peace, he was ending the bombing of North Vietnam and opening up peace negotiations with the enemy. At the same time, to prevent politics from interfering with the success of his peace plan, Johnson announced that he would neither seek nor accept the nomination of his party for reelection.

Assassinations: Martin Luther King, Jr./Robert Kennedy In April 1968, an assassin shot and killed Martin Luther King, Jr. Many black communities across the nation showed their frustration and anger by erupting into riots. Just two months later in June, while Robert Kennedy was campaigning in California, he was shot and killed by an Arab nationalist named Sirhan Sirhan. The nation now mourned the second Kennedy to be killed by an assassin. Many believed that Robert Kennedy, if he had lived and won the presidency, could have helped to unite the country and overcome the divisions between young and old, blacks and whites.

Democratic Convention The Democratic National Convention in 1968 took place in Chicago. Although Eugene McCarthy was popular with antiwar Democrats, he did not have enough support to win the nomination for president. Johnson's vice president, Hubert Humphrey, won the nomination instead. Antiwar demonstrators led by well-known radicals Abbie Hoffman and Bobby Seale gathered in a Chicago park to protest the Democrats' choice of Humphrey. The Chicago police overreacted to verbal abuse and charged into the crowd of protesters. On television, people watched in dismay as the image on their screen flashed back and forth from the nomination of Humphrey inside the convention hall to the battle in the streets between the police and the protesters.

Election of Richard Nixon The violence associated with the Democratic convention and Humphrey's support of the war effort helped the Republicans and their candidate, Richard Nixon. A third-party candidate from Alabama, George Wallace, promised to take away thousands of votes in the South from both major candidates. Although Nixon was well ahead early in the campaign, Humphrey gained steadily in the opinion polls. On Election Day, Nixon emerged as the winner in one of the closest elections in U.S. history.

Long-term Causes of U.S. Involvement

