

## Chapter 52

# Facing Frustration in Vietnam

*What made the Vietnam War difficult to win?*

### 52.1 Introduction

"We seem to have a sinkhole," the new secretary of defense, Clark Clifford, told President Johnson in March 1968. "We put in more, they match it." For three years, the United States had been putting more troops, weapons, and money into Vietnam but was more bogged down than ever. While Clifford described the conflict as a sinkhole, others called it a swamp, a quagmire, or a morass. The idea was the same: the United States was stuck in Vietnam with no easy way out.

Clifford was not the only policy adviser with a negative message. The war had turned several hawkish advisers into doves. They now counseled Johnson to cut back on the bombing, reduce troop levels, and pursue negotiations.

One of LBJ's closest friends in Congress, Senator Mike Mansfield, gave him similar advice. When the president wanted to send 40,000 more troops to Vietnam, the senator objected. "You're just getting us involved deeper," he said. "You've got to offer the American people some hope . . . It's costing too much in lives. And it's going to cost you more if you don't change your opinion."

When Johnson became president in 1963, few Americans were paying much attention to the war because it did not involve U.S. combat troops. Two years later, however, the war had escalated and had become front-page news. Every day, the public learned more about U.S. soldiers fighting and dying in Vietnam. Yet most Americans still supported the president's efforts to contain communism in Southeast Asia.

By 1968, however, many of those Americans were blaming Johnson for a war that was out of control. They called it "Johnson's War." For LBJ, the burden of responsibility was heavy. He had made great strides with his Great Society agenda for social reform. But with public opinion shifting against his war policy, he feared that he would also lose public support for his civil rights and anti-poverty programs. The enormous pressures and frustrations of the Vietnam War were taking a toll on Johnson and his presidency.



Even before the United States introduced combat troops to Vietnam in 1965, some U.S. soldiers were dying in the conflict. This photograph shows war dead returning home in 1962. As the number of troops increased and the death count rose, more Americans turned against the war.



U.S. soldiers spent much of their time on patrol, seeking to engage the enemy. They trudged through dense vegetation, swamps, and other difficult terrain, carrying rifles, ammunition, and packs weighing 90 pounds or more.



The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) supported the Viet Cong in South Vietnam with troops and materiel. They also supplied military training to the largely peasant army of insurgents.

## 52.2 U.S. Troops Face Difficult Conditions

Initially, much of the pressure on LBJ came from hawks in Congress and from the military, who called for more troops in Vietnam. LBJ wanted to fight a limited war with a limited number of soldiers. The American public, he believed, would turn against him if he allowed troop levels—or casualties—to rise too high.

By 1968, most of the ground troops in Vietnam were not professional soldiers like the marines who first landed at Da Nang. As the war progressed, more and more of the fighting was done by men who had been drafted into the army. Many of them took a dim view of the war. In a letter home, one draftee summed up the feelings of many soldiers when he wrote, “We are the unwilling working for the unqualified to do the unnecessary for the ungrateful.” This attitude toward the war reflected the difficult conditions that U.S. soldiers faced in Vietnam.

**Fighting in Unfamiliar Territory** One set of difficulties had to do with the geography and climate of South Vietnam. Few American GIs had ever experienced such hot and humid conditions. In some areas, temperatures rose above 90°F much of the year, and heavy monsoon rains fell from May to October. One GI recalled his reaction upon landing in Vietnam, when the plane door first opened. “The air rushed in like poison, hot and choking . . . I was not prepared for the heat.” This uncomfortable tropical climate also gave rise to a host of insects and other pests, as well as diseases like malaria.

Perhaps the greatest geographic challenge for U.S. soldiers, however, was Vietnam’s rugged topography. Troops had to march through soggy, lowland rice paddies and swamps and over steep, jungle-clad mountains. The heavily forested terrain often made it difficult to locate the enemy. Unlike U.S. soldiers, the Viet Cong and the **North Vietnamese Army (NVA)** knew this land intimately and were skilled at concealing themselves in the dense tropical vegetation.

In an effort to deny the enemy its forest cover, the U.S. military sprayed chemical herbicides from the air. These herbicides stripped the foliage from plants and killed many trees. The favored herbicide was **Agent Orange**, named for the color of the barrels in which it was stored. The military sprayed Agent Orange along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and in many other areas. It also used herbicides to kill crops that might feed the enemy. However, this spraying had a limited effect on enemy operations because the forest cover in Vietnam was so extensive. It also contaminated the soil and water, destroyed civilian food sources, and exposed civilians and soldiers to toxins that posed long-term health risks.

**Engaging an Elusive Enemy** As the United States escalated its commitment to the defense of South Vietnam in 1965, the Viet Cong and NVA realized that they could not match superior U.S. firepower. To win they had to engage in guerrilla warfare, relying on the element of surprise and their skill at disappearing into the landscape.

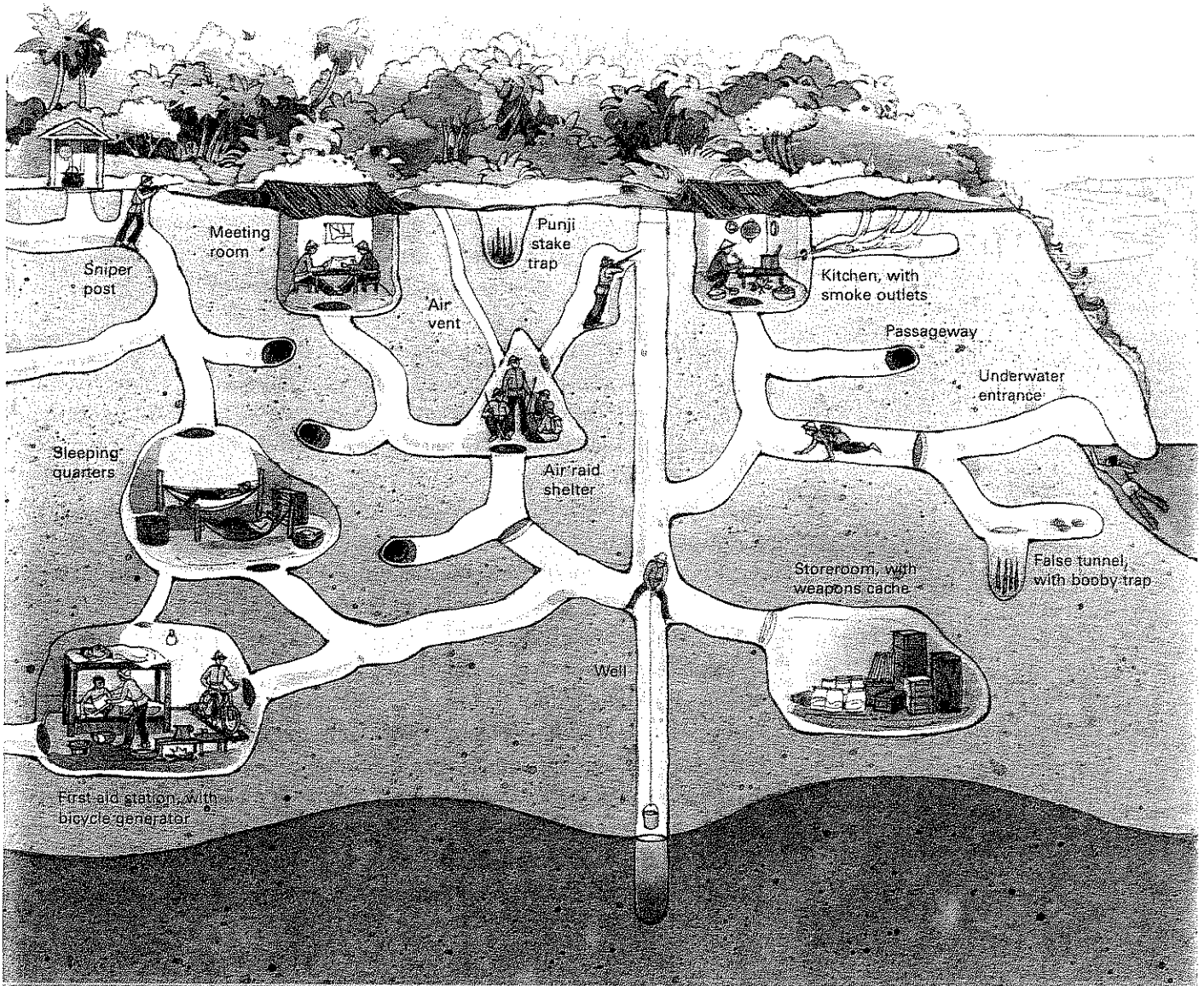
The ability of the insurgents to avoid detection frustrated U.S. commanders. Besides concealing themselves in the jungle, Viet Cong and NVA soldiers often hid from their American pursuers in underground tunnels. Some of these tunnels had several exits, which made escape easier. Others were even more elaborate, containing living areas, storage spaces, and even kitchens.

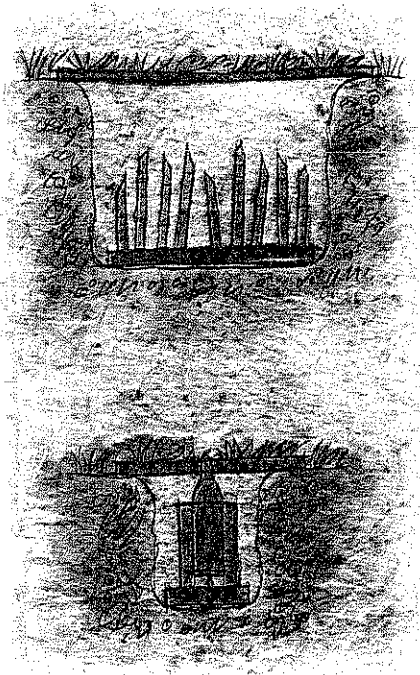
The Viet Cong also had the ability to “hide in plain sight.” A South Vietnamese peasant tilling the soil by day might be a guerrilla killing Americans by night. GIs passing through a small village could not tell friend from foe. They could trust no one, not even women or children.

To counter these guerrilla war tactics, the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, decided to fight a *war of attrition*—a military campaign designed to wear down the enemy’s strength. The United States hoped to eliminate so many enemy troops that the Viet Cong and NVA could no longer fight the war.

### How Did the Viet Cong Survive Underground?

The Viet Cong built underground tunnels to hide from U.S. troops and to serve as base camps for their forces. These tunnel networks were sometimes quite extensive, with many rooms and passageways in all directions.





The communists laid many types of booby traps to injure or kill U.S. troops. One type was the punji stake trap, made with bamboo stakes often coated with poison. These stakes were sharp enough to pierce a soldier's boot when he stepped into the trap. Another type was the cartridge trap, in which a bullet cartridge was rigged to fire into a soldier's foot when he stepped on it.

The chief tactic in this strategy was the search-and-destroy mission. Small units of soldiers, called platoons, would search out insurgents and draw them into a fight. Then they would call in an air strike by helicopter gunships or jet fighter-bombers to destroy the enemy force. This search-and-destroy tactic appeared effective when measured by the enemy body count—the number of soldiers killed. Communist deaths far exceeded American losses. For Westmoreland, the body count became the key measure of U.S. progress in the war.

Search-and-destroy missions, however, made U.S. combat soldiers clear targets for enemy attack. Insurgents frequently ambushed platoons as they marched through the jungle. Snipers, or sharpshooters, sometimes picked off U.S. soldiers from concealed locations. Soldiers also fell prey to **land mines**—explosive devices, buried just below ground, that blew up when stepped on. Men on patrol also had to watch for booby traps, such as tripwires connected to explosives and sharpened stakes coated with poison.

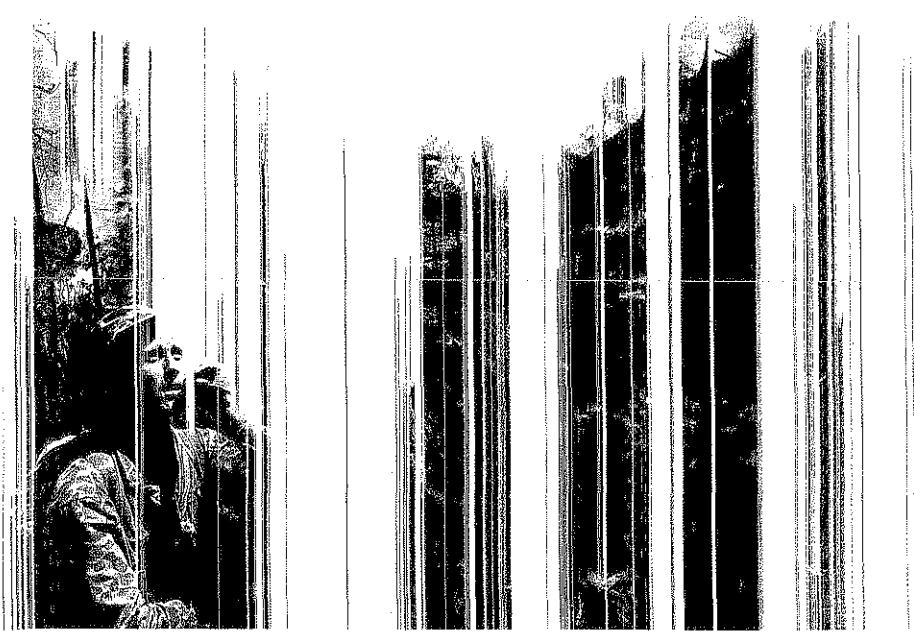
Many soldiers managed to overcome these challenging circumstances. They served with distinction and carried out their combat duties as required. Others, however, became severely demoralized. During their 12-month tour of duty in Vietnam, some soldiers focused solely on survival, avoiding combat when possible. Low morale also led to increased drug use.

**The Limited War Proves Ineffective** The United States had reasons for pursuing a limited war. First, General Westmoreland believed that a war of attrition could achieve victory. The goal was to kill more enemy soldiers than North Vietnam or the Viet Cong could replace. If the strategy worked, the communists would have to give up eventually. Through limited war, Westmoreland thought, the United States could achieve its main goal of establishing a democratic South Vietnam.

Second, U.S. leaders saw grave dangers in pursuing a total war with no limits. Total war calls for the complete mobilization of a nation's resources to achieve victory. This approach would have meant invading North Vietnam and forcing the communists to surrender. It would likely have led to an enormous American death toll. Also, China and the Soviet Union, which were providing military aid to North Vietnam, might be provoked to intervene directly, potentially resulting in a nuclear confrontation.

The limited war proved ineffective, however, because the strategy of attrition failed. There were simply too many enemy forces to eliminate. Ho Chi Minh had once warned the French, "You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and I will win." The same held true a decade later. Some 200,000 North Vietnamese men reached draft age every year. Westmoreland's annual body counts never came close to that figure. The war continued, and antiwar sentiments began to grow in the United States. Most Americans could not tolerate a war, especially an undeclared war, that seemed to drag on endlessly at a growing cost in American lives.

Ultimately, Americans underestimated their enemy. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese saw the United States as another colonial power that had to be expelled from their country. They were determined to fight on, no matter how long the war took or how deadly it became. The commitment of the United States to the war was much less certain.



GIs on search-and-destroy missions often burned or bombed South Vietnamese villages. Such actions were authorized if soldiers were fired upon or if the people in the village were known to support the Viet Cong. These tactics turned millions of peasants into refugees.

### 52.3 The War Divides the People of South Vietnam

The Vietnam War deeply divided the South Vietnamese people. Some, especially in the countryside, joined the Viet Cong or supported their cause. Others, mostly in the cities, backed the government of South Vietnam. A third group, perhaps even the majority, remained neutral in the conflict. They were often caught in the middle when fighting broke out. One of those in the middle made a plea to both sides:

Our people no longer want to take sides in this war that is gradually but inexorably destroying us. We have no desire to be called an “outpost of the Free World” or to be praised for being “the vanguard people in the world socialist revolution.” We simply want to be a people—the Vietnamese people.

—Ly Qui Chung, Saigon newspaper editor, 1970

**Contending for the Loyalty of the Vietnamese People** American leaders knew that gaining the trust and support of people like Ly Qui Chung was a crucial element in defeating the insurgency. So, in addition to the “shooting war,” the United States mounted a separate campaign to win over the Vietnamese people and undermine support for the Viet Cong. The key to this “other war” was **pacification**—a policy designed to promote security and stability in South Vietnam.

Pacification involved two main programs, both run by the Saigon government but organized by the U.S. Army and the CIA and funded by the United States. The first aimed to bring economic development to rural South Vietnam. Rural development projects ranged from supplying villages with food and other goods to building schools and bridges. This program also spread propaganda designed to persuade the Vietnamese to support the government of South Vietnam. In this way, the United States hoped to “win the hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese people.

The second pacification program sought to undermine the communist insurgency by having the **Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)** remove the Viet Cong and their sympathizers from villages. The goal was to cut off the flow of recruits to the enemy and make it safe for rural Vietnamese to support



Few Vietnamese survived napalm bomb blasts, and those who did often suffered severe burns. Napalm is a sticky gasoline gel that adheres to everything it touches and burns everything in its path. About 10 percent of all bombs dropped on Vietnam contained napalm.

the Saigon government. As one CIA officer put it, “If we were going to win the war, what we had to do was get in and eliminate the ability of the VC [Viet Cong] to control or influence the people.”

The pacification campaign had many problems, though. First, the ARVN lacked the leadership, skills, and dedication to effectively provide security for villages being pacified. Some ARVN units fought with distinction, but many lacked training or the will to fight. Second, the U.S. forces in Vietnam were too busy fighting the Viet Cong to pay much attention to “the other war” for villagers’ “hearts and minds.”

The lack of security, in turn, made it difficult for rural development teams to carry out their mission of building roads, schools, and other basic infrastructure. In some areas, they might make progress on a project only to see it disappear when a U.S. bomb destroyed their village. In other areas, development workers were targeted by the Viet Cong. Not surprisingly, some fled. Those who stayed on risked death. During a seven-month period in 1966, the number of rural development team workers killed or kidnapped reached 3,015.

**The Viet Cong Maintain Popular Support** The Americanization of the war also undermined efforts to lure rural Vietnamese away from the Viet Cong. Search-and-destroy missions often created more enemies than friends among the peasants. One GI described a typical search for Viet Cong in a rural community:

We would go through a village before dawn, rousting everybody out of bed, and kicking down doors and dragging them out if they didn’t move fast enough. They all had underground bunkers inside their huts to protect themselves against bombing and shelling. But to us the bunkers were Viet Cong hiding places, and we’d blow them up with dynamite—and blow up the huts too . . . At the end of the day, the villagers would be turned loose. Their homes had been wrecked, their chickens killed, their rice confiscated—and if they weren’t pro-Viet Cong before we got there, they sure as hell were by the time we left.

—U.S. Marine William Ehrhart

Several other aspects of the U.S. war of attrition hurt the pacification cause. The “destroy” part of search and destroy often included air strikes. A village that had been secured by pacification workers might suddenly be bombed or shelled by U.S. forces trying to hit a Viet Cong target.

Missiles and bombs from U.S. planes leveled villages, killed thousands of civilians, and produced a steady stream of refugees. But a different kind of weapon, *napalm*, may have brought the greatest agony to the Vietnamese people. Napalm is jellied gasoline. It was dropped from planes as an incendiary bomb designed to burn forests and destroy enemy installations. When it hit the ground, it set fire to everything—and everyone—it touched.

The Viet Cong had significant popular support among Vietnamese nationalists. But the insurgents also used brutal means to ensure loyalty. By intimidating, kidnapping, or assassinating local leaders, including schoolteachers and religious figures, they eliminated voices of opposition. These ruthless tactics helped the Viet Cong gain control of much of South Vietnam.



## 52.4 Growing Opposition to the War

Before 1966, vocal opposition to the Vietnam War came mainly from college students, pacifists, and a few radical groups. Most Americans considered those protesters unpatriotic. In 1966, however, criticism arose from within the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. In early February, the committee chairman, Arkansas Democrat J. William Fulbright, began public hearings on U.S. policy in Vietnam, seeking to answer the questions, “Why are we fighting in Vietnam, and how do we plan to win?”

The committee questioned several prominent witnesses, including former ambassador George Kennan, whose ideas in the late 1940s had inspired the containment doctrine. U.S. leaders used this doctrine to justify their policies in Vietnam. At the committee hearing, Kennan spoke against those policies. He said, “If we were not already involved as we are today in Vietnam, I would know of no reason why we should wish to become so involved, and I could think of several reasons why we should wish not to.”



**The War Comes to America's Living Rooms** Americans might have paid little attention to the Fulbright hearings if they had not been televised by the three major networks. Instead, millions of people across the country watched as Fulbright and other respected senators criticized Johnson administration policies. From then on, more Americans would feel free to oppose the war in Vietnam.

Television continued to play an important role in how Americans perceived the war. Night after night, news of the war was broadcast into their living rooms. At first, those news reports struck a positive note. They described U.S. successes and told upbeat stories about the courage and skill of American soldiers. As the war continued, however, television reports began to show more scenes of violence, suffering, and destruction—the human toll of the war.

**Escalating Costs Raise Questions** The soaring costs of the war, both human and economic, began to trouble more Americans. In 1968, troop levels rose to over 500,000 and the number of GIs killed in action exceeded 1,200 per month. During the same year, the government spent \$30 billion on the war. This huge expense led to increased inflation and higher taxes for the American people.

As Americans began taking a closer look at the war, some began to question LBJ's policies. They criticized the bombing of North Vietnam and the sending of combat troops without a declaration of war. A growing number began to echo Senator Fulbright's question: “Why are we fighting in Vietnam?”

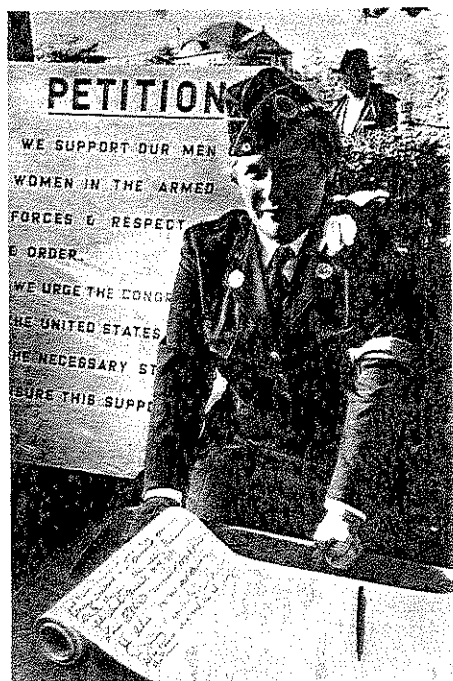
Television networks now focused most of their news coverage on the war. Viewers saw graphic images of combat and rows of body bags containing dead U.S. soldiers. In April 1968, General Westmoreland declared, “We have never been in a better relative position.” Yet to many Americans, the administration's optimistic assessments of the war now seemed overblown and even deceitful. Television newscasts emphasized a *credibility gap*—the difference between the reality of the war and the Johnson administration's portrayal of it.

The news media brought stark images of the Vietnam War into American homes. As the war progressed, television news and the print media increasingly displayed the grim realities of war. Here an army medic treats a wounded soldier in 1966.



Many critics of the Vietnam War joined peace demonstrations around the country. In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. aligned himself with the antiwar movement. He called the war a "tragic decision" and said the nation must stop the "madness in Vietnam."

Other Americans continued to back the war effort. Here a member of the armed forces presents a petition supporting the men and women serving in Vietnam.



## Hawks and Doves Divide the Nation

Public opinion polls showed that by 1967 the American public was about evenly divided on the war. The views of hawks and doves were pulling the nation in two directions. Hawks believed in the containment doctrine. They argued that the war was morally correct and could be won by giving the military a free hand to expand the fighting. Doves regarded U.S. actions as immoral and futile. In their view, the war was a civil conflict in which the United States had no right to interfere. They wanted LBJ to seek peace.

The peace movement, or antiwar movement, blossomed on college campuses. In March 1965, faculty members at the University of Michigan held a nightlong "teach-in" and debate on Vietnam and U.S. policy. Other teach-ins followed at campuses across the nation. Sit-ins, borrowed from the civil rights movement, also became a popular way to protest the war. In February 1967, students at the University of Wisconsin at Madison occupied a campus building to protest the arrival of recruiters from the Dow Chemical Company, the maker of napalm. When the students refused to leave, police officers dragged them out. Other sit-ins followed around the country, including at Columbia University in 1968.

Younger students also took action. Three students in Des Moines, Iowa, aged 13 to 16, wore black armbands to school to protest the war. When the school suspended them for breaking school rules, they sued the school district and later took their case to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1969, the Court ruled in *Tinker v. Des Moines* that students have a right to engage in symbolic speech—actions that express an opinion in a nonverbal manner.

Protesters also turned to civil disobedience. Some publicly burned their draft cards, while others took the more serious step of refusing induction into the armed forces. One such "draft dodger," world-champion boxer Muhammad Ali, echoed the sentiments of many when he said, "I ain't got no quarrel with no Viet Cong." Other young men between the ages of 18 and 21 complained that they could be sent off to fight even though they had no right to vote against the war. Congress took their complaint seriously. In 1971, it passed the **Twenty-sixth Amendment** to the Constitution, which lowered the voting age to 18. The states ratified the amendment just three months later.

Many young men took advantage of college deferment, a law that exempted college students from the draft. However, they could be drafted after graduation, which is partly why many students opposed the war so strenuously. Still, the draft fell disproportionately on poor Americans and minorities who were unable to attend college. This led some critics to label Vietnam a "rich man's war and a poor man's fight." Citing the large proportion of African Americans in Vietnam, Martin Luther King Jr. called it "a white man's war, a black man's fight."



## 52.5 1968: A Year of Crisis

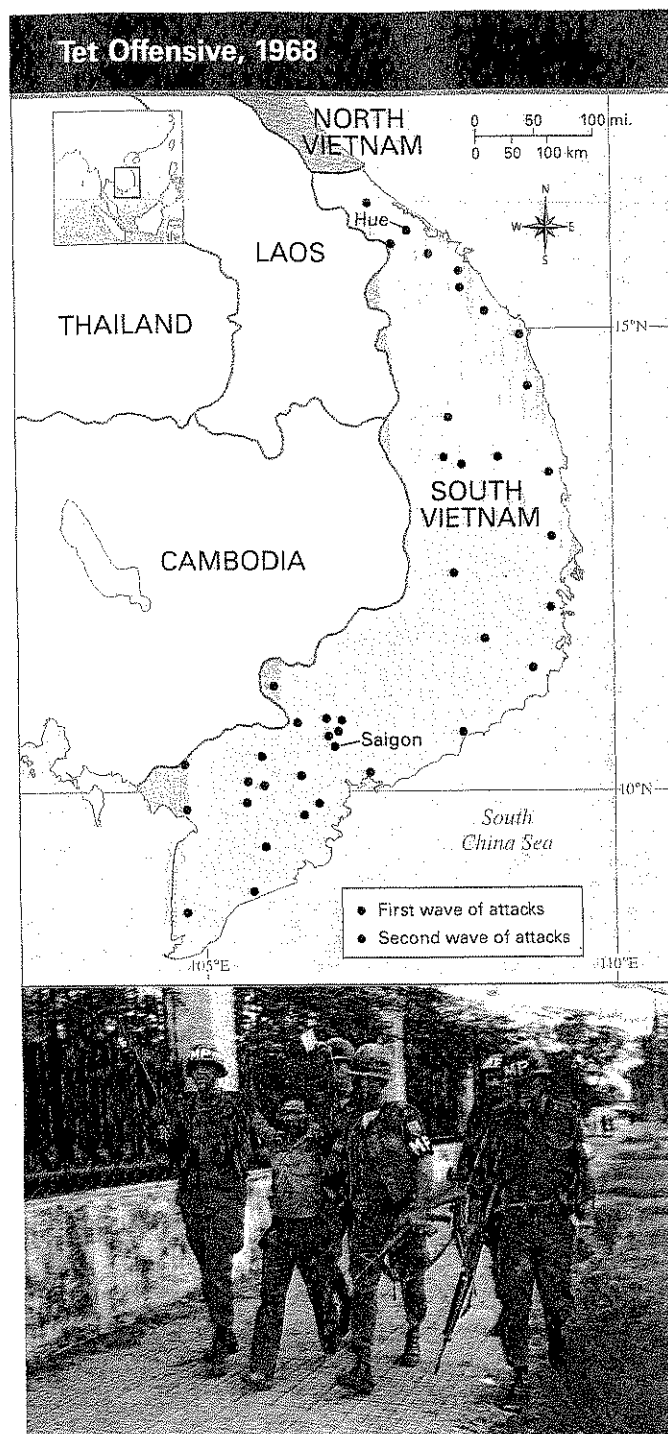
By 1967, antiwar protesters had turned on President Johnson. Demonstrators chanted, "Hey, hey, LBJ. How many kids did you kill today?" To counter growing opposition to the war, the Johnson administration tried to persuade Americans that there was "light at the end of the tunnel." Officials presented statistics and reports to show that the United States was winning the war. They showed journalists captured enemy documents that implied the insurgency was failing. LBJ visited military bases, where he touted U.S. prospects in Vietnam.

LBJ's campaign to restore confidence worked. American support for the war effort increased—at least for a few months. Then in January 1968, the Viet Cong and NVA started a campaign of their own, also aimed at influencing American public opinion.

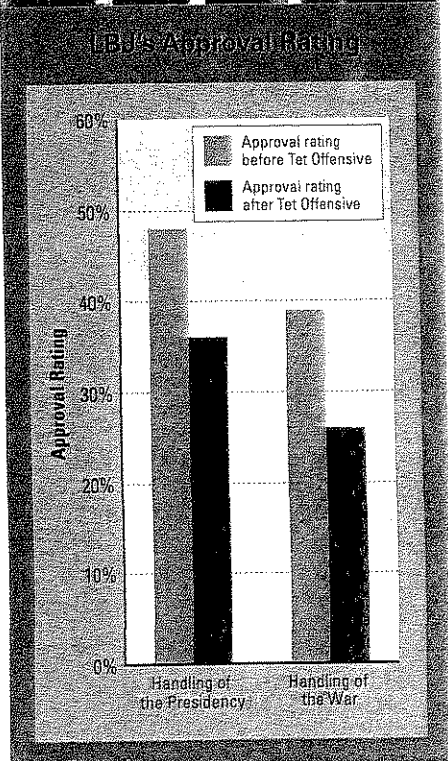
**Tet Offensive Changes Americans' View of the War** In the summer of 1967, North Vietnamese military planners decided on a risky new strategy. They would launch attacks on cities in South Vietnam, while staging an uprising in the countryside. Communist leaders hoped this strategy would reveal the failure of pacification efforts and turn Americans even more against the war. They planned the attack to coincide with the Vietnamese holiday known as Tet. This holiday marked the lunar New Year, when many ARVN troops would be home on leave.

On January 31, 1968, the **Tet Offensive** began. Like a shockwave rolling through South Vietnam, some 85,000 Viet Cong and NVA soldiers attacked cities, villages, military bases, and airfields. In Saigon, North Vietnamese commandos blew a hole in the wall surrounding the U.S. embassy, but U.S. military police fought them off. The North Vietnamese succeeded in holding the city of Hue for nearly a month, but that was their only real military success. In battle after battle, South Vietnamese and U.S. forces pushed back the attackers. As many as 45,000 enemy soldiers, mostly Viet Cong, were killed. In the countryside, no uprising occurred. In fact, the brutality of the communist assault boosted rural support for the South Vietnamese government.

Although it was a military disaster for the communists, the Tet Offensive shocked the American people and became a psychological defeat for the United States. On their TV screens, Americans saw enemy soldiers inside the walls of the U.S. embassy. They saw U.S. bases under attack. They heard journalists' startled reports about the enemy's ability to penetrate American strongholds. No amount of positive analysis from the administration could persuade reporters or the public that this was a U.S. victory. Instead, many Americans saw these statements as another example of a widening credibility gap.



In 1968, during the Tet holiday, Viet Cong and NVA soldiers launched a major offensive across South Vietnam. Key battles took place in and around Hue and Saigon. Viet Cong guerrillas did most of the fighting and suffered most of the casualties. Some were also captured. In fact, after Tet, the NVA had to handle most of the combat in the war.



The Tet Offensive had a major impact on American views of the Johnson presidency and the Vietnam War. Public opinion polls taken after Tet showed that many Americans had lost faith in the president and his handling of the war.

**Johnson Decides Not to Run for Reelection** As public confidence in Johnson fell, the president suffered another sharp blow. This time it came from the nation's most respected television news anchor, Walter Cronkite. Cronkite, who had traveled to Vietnam to cover the Tet Offensive, delivered an on-camera editorial expressing his view that Johnson had misled the American people. In a solemn voice, he said, "It seems more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate." Hearing this editorial, LBJ remarked, "That's it. If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost America."

After Tet, polls showed that only 26 percent of Americans approved of LBJ's conduct of the war. Two Democratic senators thought they could do better. Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, a fierce critic of the war, had already entered the race for the Democratic presidential nomination. Now Robert Kennedy of New York, a favorite of civil rights and antiwar activists, announced he would also run against Johnson.

LBJ saw Tet as a political catastrophe. But General Westmoreland saw it as an opportunity to finish off the communists. He asked the president for 206,000 more troops. Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford told LBJ that even "double or triple that quantity" would not be enough to destroy the enemy forces. LBJ decided to reject the increase, leaving U.S. troop levels at around 500,000. He then removed Westmoreland as commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam. The president also considered Clifford's advice to try to open peace talks.

On March 31, 1968, Johnson stood before national television cameras to make a momentous announcement. The United States, he said, would try to "deescalate the conflict" by cutting back on the bombing of North Vietnam and by seeking a negotiated settlement of the war. An even bigger announcement followed. LBJ told Americans, "I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president."

**The Chaotic Election of 1968** The war had exhausted the president, and he seemed to think he had lost his political influence. Although LBJ might have won the nomination if he had chosen to run, he threw his weight behind his vice president, Hubert H. Humphrey. In June 1968, Humphrey became the likely nominee when his most experienced rival, Robert Kennedy, was assassinated on the campaign trail by a lone gunman.

1968 had already been one of the most turbulent years in recent American history. The country was reeling from the combined effects of the Vietnam War, antiwar protests and other social unrest, and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Now it was stunned by yet another assassination, this time of one of its leading political figures. And there was more upheaval to come.

In August, delegates gathered in Chicago for the Democratic National Convention. Many of them backed the antiwar views of McCarthy. Following a bitter debate, however, the convention endorsed a campaign platform that supported President Johnson's Vietnam policy. Under pressure from LBJ, Humphrey approved the platform and won the Democratic nomination.

Meanwhile, thousands of antiwar protesters rallied in parks near the convention center. At times they confronted police and national guardsmen called in by Mayor Richard Daley. On August 28, the violence escalated. A clash occurred

between Chicago police and a group of rowdy protesters trying to march into the convention center. Some protesters threw rocks and bottles at the police, and police fired tear gas and beat protesters and onlookers with batons and rifle butts. Americans watching the spectacle on television were appalled.

In contrast, the Republican National Convention was a tidy affair. Delegates chose Richard M. Nixon, Eisenhower's vice president, as their candidate for president. Nixon's speech accepting the nomination blasted LBJ and the Democrats:

When the strongest nation in the world can be tied up for four years in a war in Vietnam with no end in sight, when the richest nation in the world can't manage its own economy, when the nation with the greatest tradition of the rule of law is plagued by unprecedented lawlessness . . . then it's time for new leadership for the United States of America.

—Richard M. Nixon, August 8, 1968

Humphrey and the Democrats never quite recovered from their disastrous convention. Nixon connected with voters by promising to maintain "law and order" at home and secure "peace with honor" in Vietnam. In November 1968, Americans voted for change, electing Nixon as their new president.



Violence erupted at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The police attacked antiwar protesters, and the protesters fought back. During a violent clash on August 28, some 100 demonstrators were injured while 175 were arrested.

## Summary

**The United States decided to wage a limited war in Vietnam, with limited troop strength. Fighting an elusive enemy on unfamiliar terrain frustrated U.S. soldiers. The South Vietnamese people themselves were unsure whom to support: the Saigon government or the communist-backed Viet Cong. As the war dragged on, American antiwar protests grew. Opposition to the war greatly affected the 1968 elections.**

**War of attrition** The U.S. military waged a war of attrition, hoping to wear down the enemy by inflicting heavy losses. Increasing the enemy body count became a key military goal.

**Opposing Vietnamese armies** Regular troops of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) joined forces with Viet Cong insurgents. The United States trained the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to defend South Vietnam.

**New weapons of war** The United States sprayed the herbicide Agent Orange to clear forest vegetation and expose the enemy. It dropped napalm firebombs that burned forests and buildings and caused widespread destruction. Both weapons had devastating effects on the Vietnamese population.

**Credibility gap** The Johnson administration's optimistic public assessments of the war did not match reality. This created a credibility gap, and many Americans lost faith in the president.

**Protest movement** Antiwar protesters on college campuses and elsewhere held demonstrations and carried out acts of civil disobedience. The protesters called for peace negotiations and an end to the war.

**Tet Offensive** Some 45,000 Viet Cong and NVA soldiers died after launching a major offensive in 1968. But the Tet Offensive also boosted U.S. opposition to the war and undermined the Johnson presidency, helping to pave the way for Richard Nixon's election in 1968.