

UNIT 12

AMERICANS IN INDOCHINA

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Chapter 1 The French in Indochina

Vietnam! Today the name conjures images of desperate fighting, a tragic loss of American lives, and a foreign policy failure. In the early 1950's, few Americans had ever heard of that country.

Vietnam was not even a place one could find on a map. However one could find a French colony in Southeast Asia. What we now call Vietnam was once owned and run by France. From the late 1800's to 1954, Vietnam was part of a French colony called French Indochina.

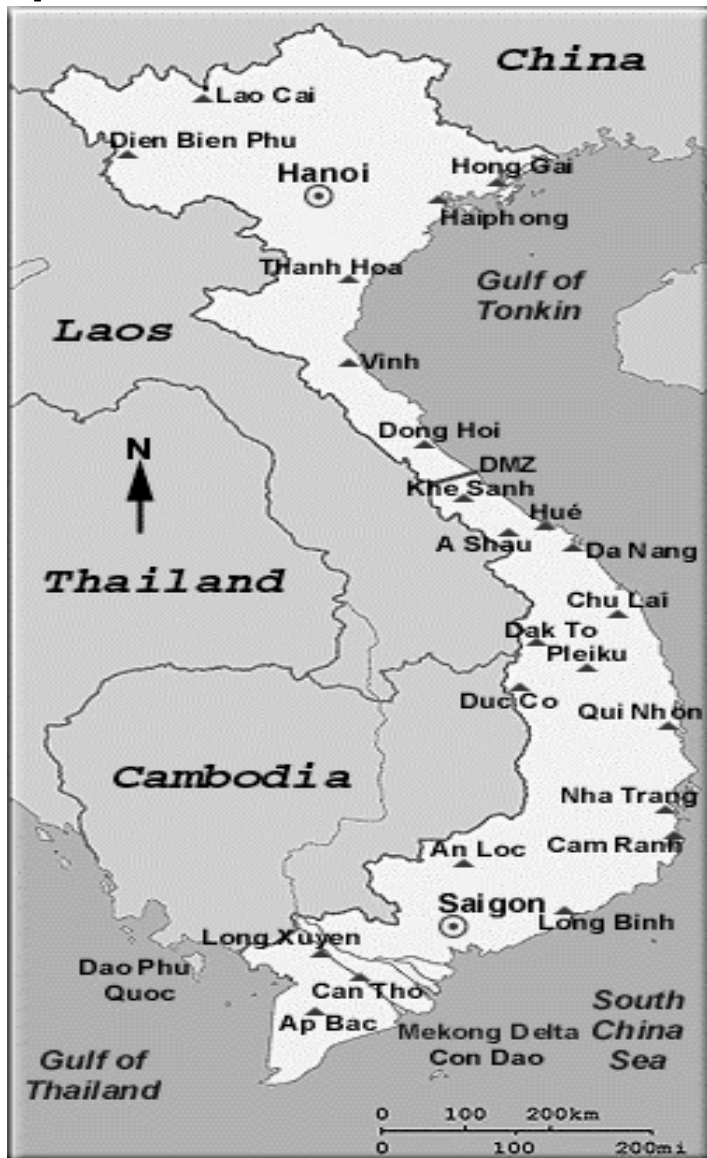
When the French first became interested in Indochina French missionaries sought to convert the Vietnamese to Catholicism, the religion of France. French merchants saw opportunities to enrich themselves by securing rice coffee, tea and rubber, and the French government also was eager to establish a strategic presence in Southeast Asia.

This chapter briefly reviews the early history of the French involvement in Vietnam, and the effects of French influence on the Vietnamese. The information in this chapter will help readers decide whether the United States should have helped France to keep its colony of French Indochina.

Life in Vietnam Before the French

Before the French came to Indochina, Vietnam, the Khmer Empire (Cambodia), and the Laotian Kingdom (Laos) were independent countries. Vietnam had been ruled by neighboring

China for hundreds of years, but after centuries of resistance the Vietnamese people overthrew their Chinese rulers and became independent. The tradition of armed struggle against foreign occupation had a long and noble history in Indochina as the French as well as the U.S. later learned to their regret.



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In the three centuries preceding the French arrival, the Vietnamese were ruled by a series of emperors whose nominal rule included collecting revenue. But, the taxes were modest and the emperor had relatively little real power over the Vietnamese. "The edicts of the emperor," according to an old Vietnamese saying, "stop at the edge of the village." The men who ruled the hundreds of small villages and hamlets in which the vast majority lived were chosen locally based on their education, wisdom, and family's status. The lives of the people in these villages were seldom affected by outside events. They knew little of what was happening beyond the circle of the huts in which they lived, and fields on which they tilled their crops.

Life in the villages was usually pleasant and peaceful. Much of Vietnam was well suited for growing rice, and Chinese conquerors had taught the Vietnamese people the difficult art of planting and harvesting this crop. The Vietnamese diet consisted mainly of rice and fish. A man was considered well off if he had a water buffalo to help him in his farming. Most of his clothes were home-made, and he had little need for goods made outside of his village. His religion was usually Buddhist, with its attending set of beliefs, priests, and rituals. Women exercised a surprising amount of authority, and the level of education in the villages was unusually high. On the average 4 out of 5 Vietnamese were taught to read and write in their own language using the calligraphy introduced by the Chinese.

The French Come to Indochina

France did not set out to conquer Indochina all at once. Over a period of more than 350 years the French gradually extended their control over Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. As early as the 16th century European missionaries were welcomed in Indochina for their technical skills and connections to European suppliers of modern weapons and western merchandise. The French East India Company, a trade organization formed to expand trade and propagate Catholicism, gained a foothold in Indochina in 1668. Thereafter a pattern was established which continued for centuries. When French soldiers, traders, or priests were attacked and/or killed in Indochina, the French would revenge the loss of their nationals, and use the resistance to their authority as an excuse to extend their power. Vietnamese were forced to surrender control over their land and to provide the French with special privileges. The French also took part in wars between rival Vietnamese factions. As a reward from the winning faction, the French would be given control over more land and the right to sell French goods and spread the French religion. In the process, the French replaced local leaders with their nationals – by 1925, a bureaucracy of some 5,000 Frenchmen ruled over a country totaling 30,000,000. In time, France had extended its control to encompass Laos, North and South Vietnam, and Cambodia, which they called French Indochina.

The French Civilization: Religion and Culture

The French have traditionally taken great pride in what they called their '*civilization Francais.*' This included the language, religion, literature, poetry and music of France, as well as its culture, laws, form of government, educational system, and technological achievements. One of the reasons the French gave for expanding their colonial empire throughout the world was to spread this civilization to "inferior" native peoples.

For the Vietnamese, spreading French civilization meant making them into Frenchmen. The French taught the Vietnamese to speak their language. French priests converted the Vietnamese to Catholicism. French teachers educated Vietnamese in French history, literature, and law. The Vietnamese were also taught math, science, and engineering in special private schools attended by 20 percent of Vietnamese boys. This prepared the smartest young Vietnamese, if their parents could afford it, to attend the French colleges in Indochina or a university in France. In their new schools Vietnamese students took the same courses in French history and literature that were taught in France. In this way, French culture was

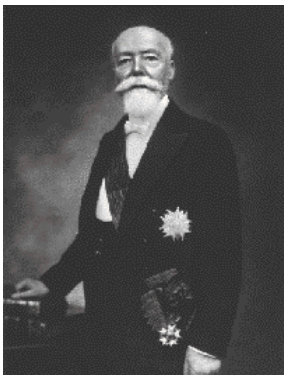
instilled in the brightest and wealthiest Vietnamese children, and young men were prepared to help the French rule their country

French Civilization in Vietnam: Modern Life

The French made many changes in Vietnam. They modernized the country by building railroads connecting the major cities. Of special pride to both the Vietnamese and the French was a railroad connecting the northern capital, Hanoi, to Saigon the largest city in South Vietnam. In addition to the railroads, the French imported trucks and cars, paved streets, and built roads and bridges.

Though it was confined primarily to larger cities and towns, the French brought electricity to Vietnam. They made sections of Saigon and Hanoi into beautiful, modern cities with fine public parks, and wide streets. They built hotels that are still in use. The outdoor restaurants, modern buildings, and broad boulevards in Saigon resembled Paris. The French even started a law and medical school as well as an excellent college, and they introduced the practice of modern medicine.

The French installed their own legal system in Vietnam which was based on the famous Napoleonic Codes. Their system replaced the one used by the Vietnamese for hundreds of years. Before French intervention, for example, women accused of adultery were trampled to death by elephants and people found guilty of robbery were often beheaded. The French reduced penalties in those cases. They thought their system of justice was far more humane than the one practiced in Vietnam. Since this system was French, the French ran it. Vietnamese would be brought to trial in French courts, represented by French lawyers before French judges.



Paul Doumer

The French also changed the schools of Vietnam. They replaced the hard to learn Chinese characters with a far easier Roman alphabet used in Western Europe. They educated about 20% of Vietnamese males – usually the sons of the well to do. Trained to pass the exams for French Universities, many Vietnamese were able to complete their schooling in the land of their colonial rulers.

French Civilization in Vietnam - Economics

Until the late 1890's the French spent far more money expanding and governing their Indochinese Empire than they collected in revenues. In 1897, France sent a prominent politician, Paul Doumer, to govern Indochina. Doumer was determined to put Indochina on a paying basis. He wanted the Vietnamese to bear the administrative costs of running Indochina, and he wanted Indochina to provide a market for French products and be a source of profitable investment

by French businessmen.

To raise money, Doumer encouraged the use of opium, which had hitherto been confined to a small part of the Chinese population. Once more Vietnamese were addicted, Doumer leveled a tax on opium which eventually raised 1/3rd of the revenue needed to govern Indochina. Heavy taxes were also placed on the wine and salt trade. The Vietnamese who could or would not pay their taxes, lost their houses and land, and often became day laborers.

Before the arrival of the French, the emperors did not allow rice to be sold outside the country. The French, however, believed they could enrich themselves by exporting rice. They encouraged expanded production of rice on lands that had been confiscated for non-payment of taxes. The French took over the land of these unfortunate farmers and then hired them to plant and harvest the rice. As a result of these practices Vietnam became the third largest rice exporting country in the world, only lagging behind

Burma and Thailand. Despite the increase in production, many Vietnamese were not paid enough to buy food for themselves and their families.

Vietnam also became well known for its rubber plantations. The famous Michelin tire company, for example, bought up thousands of acres of land in Vietnam. Many of the Vietnamese who had lost their land for failing to pay taxes were hired to work on these plantations. These poor peasants were forced to work for the French and often suffered from malaria, dysentery, and malnutrition. From the French perspective, these landless workers were fortunate to find employment.

The French also opened coal mines in Vietnam, and used unemployed and landless peasants to work in them. As on the rice fields and the rubber plantations, the miners were barely paid a living wage.

The French Civilization in Vietnam – Government

In Vietnam's cities, the French took all of the high government positions. In the countryside, Vietnamese loyal to France played a more important role. Following orders from French government officials they ran the smaller towns and villages, collecting taxes, supervising road construction and repair, and enforcing French laws. But the highest paid among these Vietnamese officials made less money than the lowest paid Frenchman.

The French were proud of the way they spread their civilization to Vietnam. They were equally proud of the many Vietnamese who had become Catholics, spoke fluent French, and were educated in French history and literature. But not all Vietnamese appreciated France's contributions to their country. There were many who would have been happy to rid their country of its French civilization and the Frenchmen who forced it on the people of Vietnam. Armed resistance to French rule continued during the entire colonial period.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Summarize the early history of Vietnamese people up to their domination by the French.
2. What changes did the French make in Indochina?
3. From the perspective of a landless peasant, a French official, or an objective observer, explain whether and why you think that French rule was good for the Vietnamese.

Chapter 2

Communism, Guerrillas and Falling Dominoes

World War II had a profound effect on French Indochina. What the French called their civilizing mission ended in the summer of 1941 with the Japanese invasion and occupation of Vietnam. The French could not do anything to stop this incursion because World War II had started in Europe, and Germany had smashed through France's defenses in May, 1940 in its successful drive to destroy its European rival.

Many Vietnamese initially welcomed the Japanese invaders. They believed they would suffer less under domination by Asian rather than by European rulers. But others saw no reason for trading the Japanese wolf for the French tiger. Vietnamese nationalists, who had struggled for years against French occupation, redirected their energies to throw the Japanese out of Vietnam. Although well versed in the language and culture of France, their fiery leader, Ho Chi Minh, maintained a revolutionary and ideological commitment to rid his country of foreign rule. Minh had joined the French communist party in the 1920's, maintained a commitment to socialism, and fought valiantly against Japanese occupation of his country during World War II. He cooperated with American forces in Vietnam against the common enemy. During that period, Ho played down his communist leanings and emphasized his love for his native country. The organization he started (originally the Vietnam Independence League) was called the Vietminh. It was dedicated to (1) freeing all of Vietnam, north and south from foreign rule; and, (2) establishing a socialist government in Vietnam.

This chapter explains how the French tried to regain control of Vietnam after World War II and how the Vietnamese fought for their independence. Readers will be asked to decide if the U.S. should enter the war to help the French keep Vietnam and prevent the spread of communism.

The Second War for Vietnam

During the waning months of World War II, U.S. officials asked their British counterparts to occupy South Vietnam and disarm the Japanese. The British took over the southern part of Vietnam, including the city of Saigon. They disarmed the Japanese, put down a Vietnamese rebellion, and turned South Vietnam over to the French. But in the North, in August 1945, the Japanese surrendered to Vietminh troops under the command of Ho Chi Minh.

When the French made an agreement with Ho Chi Minh in March of 1946, it seemed that fighting over the control of Vietnam might be avoided. Under this agreement, France promised to leave Vietnam with the Vietminh in charge. But fighting broke out in November, 1946 before the last French troops left. This began what will be referred to in these pages as the second war for Indochina. It would last longer than World War II.

Fish, Oceans, and Guerrilla Tactics

In choosing to fight their war against superior French forces guerrilla style, Ho Chi Minh and his Vietminh entourage followed the strategy developed by Mao Zedong, communist leader of China. This Chinese rebel leader had fought a guerrilla war for more than 20 years against his Nationalist opponents, and the war continued in neighboring China. Mao believed that the guerrilla is to the people, like a fish is

to the ocean. Just as the fish swims in the ocean — the guerrilla can only fight if the people in the country he wants to free support him. Mao outlined three distinctly different but interrelated stages of guerrilla warfare which were applied simultaneously:

1. Gain the support of the people — specifically, the peasants in the countryside. This stage required guerrillas to help the poor farmers with their problems. Guerrillas were instructed never to take anything from local people, not even a needle or thread; they were expected to take part in the harvest, feed the people, provide them with responsible jobs, give land to the landless peasants, and/or under certain conditions kill landlords and unpopular government officials. Guerrillas taught the people to read and write, and the more educated cadres taught the peasants Marxist ideology. The guerrilla army would do anything to gain the people's support, respect and trust, in order to eventually recruit them to fight in their organization.
2. Fight in small units using hit and run tactics. This strategy included blowing up the barracks where the enemy eats and sleeps, killing unpopular officials, attacking policemen, and ambushing enemy soldiers as they march to the defense of local installations. Guerrillas were taught to immobilize their opponents by interrupting travel by road or rail in order to drive the enemy out of the countryside and confine him to urban centers.
3. Obtain help from other Communist countries and use captured weapons to build a credible conventional military force. When the enemy is sufficiently weakened, mount full-scale attacks with conventional weapons. By this time, opposing forces will be so demoralized that the sight of a hostile army will cause them to throw away their weapons and run.

Ho Chi Minh modeled his strategy according to the stages of guerrilla warfare. The basic strength of his movement lay in support from the dispossessed who hated the French for what they had done to them. Many Vietnamese peasants, it should be remembered, lost their lands for non-payment of taxes and were forced to work for the French and rich Vietnamese. Educated Vietnamese had to take demeaning jobs at low pay working for the French. The Vietminh knew what the people wanted, nursed their grievances, and exploited the many mistakes made by colonial rulers.

U.S. Views of the Indochina Conflict

When the Vietnam War started in 1946 the U.S. opposed France's efforts to re-impose colonial rule. The U.S. had freed the Philippines in 1946 and England would leave India in 1947. It seemed that the age of western colonialism was over and the U.S., remembering its own Revolution, sided with the struggles of third world people that were seeking their independence.

However, after the French fought the Vietnamese for four years, the United States changed its mind and began to help France. Why did the U.S. change its mind?

The Domino Theory

In 1949, Mao Zedong and the Communist Party beat the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek. As a result, all of mainland China came under Communist rule, raising American fears that communism would soon spread throughout Asia. This fear was heightened in 1950 when communist North Korea attacked an unsuspecting non-communist South Korea. Soon U.S. soldiers were fighting North Korean as well as Chinese Communist troops in the hills of Korea. American leaders began to think differently about Ho Chi Minh, their collaborator against Japan during World War II. After all, Ho Chi Minh, like Mao Zedong and the North Korean leader, Kim Il Sung, was a Communist. Just as North Korea, with the

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support of the Soviet Union's, was trying to take South Korea, it seemed, Ho Chi Minh, with communist China's help, was seeking to control North Vietnam. After that, people believed, communism could spread to the rest of French Indochina, i.e. South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, followed by Thailand, Burma, and maybe even India, the Philippines and so on.

President Dwight Eisenhower (1953-61) compared the spread of communism to the fall of a row of dominoes, with the first knocking down the second all the way to the end of the line. This explanation, known as the 'domino theory', provided many Americans with a clear and understandable image that gave them a reason to support France against China and the Soviet backed forces in Southeast Asia.

Another Theory About Communism

Not all people believe that countries capitulate to communism like falling dominoes. Some believed that communism is like a disease that strikes the weak but not the strong. According to this theory, abject poverty, an extremely uneven distribution of wealth and the lack of hope, attracts people to Communism. If poor farmers can get land of their own, they won't be persuaded to become Communists. If their government treats them decently they would not want to live under a totalitarian regime. The most effective way to defeat Communism, according to this theory, would be to help the common people in foreign countries in their struggle against poverty, disease, and despair. To use Mao's metaphor, such aid would dry up the 'ocean' in which the guerrillas swam and halt the spread of communism.

The Ink Blot Plan and Dienbienphu

Even with a several billion dollars of American aid that began in 1950, the French kept losing their war against Ho's Vietminh. The French were able to hold the cities but kept losing in the countryside to an enemy employing stages one and two of guerrilla warfare.

Hard pressed to reverse his string of loses, French general Henri Navarre, came up with a new strategy to combat guerrilla warfare. It was called the 'inkblot plan.' French troops would set up land-air bases deep in Vietminh territory and expand outward from these bases like a drop of ink spreading over a blotter. In this way, the French hoped to deny the Vietminh control of the countryside.



Dienbeinphu in a futile

When the French applied their inkblot strategy deep in North Vietnam at a narrow valley called Dienbeinphu the Vietminh were ready to employ stage 3 of guerrilla warfare. After taking apart captured U.S. artillery that the Chinese communists had taken from the Nationalists in China, the Vietminh mounted the parts on bicycles and laboriously pushed them up steep mountain trails overlooking the French base. Every night they moved in a little closer to the French encampment. Every morning they were able to fire more artillery shells into the French base, gradually closing down the adjoining airport.

With no places to land their planes the French had to parachute supplies down to their base camp. As the Vietminh crept closer even the airdrops failed. The Vietminh and not the French were able to pick up the supplies that came in by parachute. When one French colonel was given a battlefield promotion, the champagne to help him celebrate as well as his general's insignia landed among the Vietminh.

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By the Spring of 1954 the situation faced by the French was becoming more desperate every day. Unless they received direct American military support, the French feared, it would only be a matter of weeks before they would have to surrender 13,000 soldiers or lose them in an uneven battle. Following such a devastating defeat on the heels of eight fruitless years of war in Southeast Asia France would be forced to abandon all of Indochina. Rather than face a humiliating defeat in the hands of communist forces the French made a dramatic request for more American aid.

When the French asked the United States for more help, America's implacable foe of communism, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, thought it would be a good idea. Vice-President Richard Nixon agreed with the Secretary. Admiral Radford, the top U.S. military commander, thought 60 B-29's stationed in the Philippines could break the siege at Dienbienphu. General Matthew Ridgeway, who had commanded U.S. forces in Korea, disagreed with his boss. He did not think the war could be won from the air and predicted it would take 7 American divisions to help the French win in Vietnam – 12 if the Chinese entered the war. The final decision of course, was not Dulles's, Nixon's, or Radford's, but President Eisenhower's.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Explain the three stages of guerrilla warfare, and explain the domino theory, the 'sick man' theory, and the inkblot strategy.
2. Describe the battle of Dienbeinphu.
3. Do you think the U.S. should enter the war in Vietnam to help France prevent the spread of communism before the French would be forced to surrender at Dienbeinphu? Why or why not? Your answer should consider Ho Chi Minh's politics, the price of American involvement, and the threat to the U.S. if Ho Chi Minh succeeds.

Chapter 3

'Sink or Swim, with Ngo Dinh Diem'

Without help from the U.S., the French had no choice but to surrender their remaining garrison of 13,000 soldiers at Dienbeinphu. But the French were more successful in diplomacy than they were at war. With the intervention of China's Prime Minister, Chou En-lai, the French were able to salvage a temporary relief from total defeat. At the famous 14 Nation Geneva Conference, the following "accords" were reached, most of them made in secret meetings with only a few players on each side.

1. All fighting in Indochina would stop.
2. Vietnam would be temporarily divided into two sections, North and South, along the 17th parallel.
3. Free elections would be held within two years to chose a government for a united Vietnam
4. Free movement would be allowed for Vietnamese in the North and South to migrate to the other section.
5. A government under the puppet Emperor, Bao Dai would be allowed to operate in the meantime and to make preparations for elections that would come by June, 1956.
6. Poland, Canada, and India would send representatives to supervise the fairness of the election.

After the French left Vietnam, the U.S. was the only country capable of preventing further spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Without U.S. aid, South Vietnam would surely become a communist country. According to the domino theory, other countries such as Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, etc., could also become communist.

There was one person in Vietnam who might help stop spread of communism in Southeast Asia. That one person was Ngo Dinh Diem, who replaced the playboy Emperor, Bao Dai and was elected President of South Vietnam. Diem hated communism and all communists and he would do anything to drive them out of his country.

President Eisenhower had a difficult decision to make: (1) support Diem, (2) draw the line against communism somewhere else, or (3) do nothing to prevent the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. At the end of this chapter, you will be asked to make a similar decision. For you, for President Eisenhower, and for the American people, the choice in Vietnam was whether to 'sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem.'

A Strong Anti-Communist Leader in South Vietnam

At Geneva, Ho Chi Minh agreed to stop fighting in part because he was sure he'd win an election in South Vietnam. He thought that was a smart move because it would save money and lives. However, Ho was prepared to take up arms if the elections were not held or if his side lost. When his Vietminh guerrilla soldiers who lived in South Vietnam went home, they hid their weapons in case they were needed.

Meanwhile, a committed anti-communist, Ngo Dinh Diem came to power in South Vietnam. A devout Catholic, Diem was educated in French schools in Vietnam. He rose rapidly to a post of governor by the time he was 25 years old in 1926. In his post Diem tried to counter communist propaganda by

writing pamphlets on improving the conditions of the peasants. In 1933 he was appointed Minister of the Interior by the Emperor, Bao Dai, the puppet ruler of Vietnam whose strings were pulled by his French handlers.

After three months in his new job, Diem quit because he would not go against the interests of his country. As a result, the French stripped him of his honors and decorations, and Diem went into a self-imposed exile for the next 20 years. He spent most of that time in France and three years in a Catholic monastery in New Jersey where he devoted his time to prayer and doing menial work. But he also met with American and French leaders whom he impressed with his strong anti-Communist views. When the French left Vietnam in 1954, the playboy emperor through whom they had ruled appointed Diem Prime Minister. With help from the U.S., Diem was elected President of South Vietnam.

In his new position, Diem had no intention of holding the election promised at the Geneva Agreement because he and President Eisenhower believed would result in a victory for Ho Chi Minh. Diem was too strong an anti-Communist to allow Vietnam be united under Ho, and President Eisenhower was ready to help him as the following excerpts from a letter by the U.S. President to Diem dated October 23, 1954 indicates:



President Eisenhower & Secretary of State Dulles welcoming Ngo Dinh Diem to the U.S.

DEAR MR. PRESIDENT:

We have been exploring ways and means to permit our aid to Viet-Nam to be more effective and to make a greater contribution to the welfare and stability of the Government of Viet-Nam. I am, accordingly, instructing the American Ambassador to Viet-Nam to examine with you in your capacity as Chief of Government, how an intelligent program of American aid given directly to your Government can serve to assist Viet-Nam in its present hour of trial, provided that your Government is prepared to give assurances as to the standards of performance it would be able to maintain in the event such aid were supplied.¹

To strengthen his position in South Vietnam, Diem sent the playboy Emperor back to France. Diem gained control over the army by promoting the generals who backed his government and firing those who opposed him. Diem appointed government officials loyal to him. He made his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu chief of the secret police. Nhu used ten different organizations to find out who supported his brother's government and those who didn't. He even employed spies to spy on other spies. .

The Geneva Accord had allowed Vietnamese citizens in the South to move North and those in the North to move South. Altogether 800,000 North Vietnamese, mostly Catholics, moved South. One hundred thousand, mostly Vietminh soldiers from the North, came home. Diem was able to find jobs for the many Catholics who escaped from Ho Chi Minh's government. These displaced Catholics formed the largest single group in South Vietnam that supported Diem.

¹ The Department of State Bulletin (November 15, 1954), pp. 735-736.

Anti-Communism Under Ngo Dinh Diem

Meanwhile, Diem worked hard to rid South Vietnam of communist influence. Papers suspected of printing news from a communist point of view were closed. The secret police under Diem's brother Nhu informed on disloyal officials. Diem arrested thousands of Vietnamese who he thought supported the Vietminh. Although reliable sources report a far higher number, the South Vietnamese government admitted that 25,000 suspects were thrown in prison. Some of the suspects spent months being 're-educated' with lessons on the evils of communism. Others were killed or jailed for years.



Ho Chi Minh

North Vietnam Under Ho Chi Minh

Meanwhile, in North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh and his government engaged in a campaign of terror directed against landlords and men who were suspected of collaborating with the French.

Ho Chi Minh had peasants divided into five separate classes ranging from landlord and rich peasants to farm workers. He decided that one out of twenty farmers were landlords and sent officials to 'liquidate' them. Their land supposedly would be divided among the other nineteen farm workers. This goal of one in twenty had to be met even if there were no landlords in a particular village.

Ho Chi Minh's state terrorism touched off a civil war in many villages. Peasants tried to get on the good side of the government by denouncing others as landlords. Meanwhile opposition to the government was put down without mercy. In Ho's own province 6,000 peasants were killed and/or deported for demonstrating against his government. Furthermore, torture was freely used to root out Vietnamese who had worked for the French and even those whose only crime was not being sufficiently loyal to the Vietminh. Ho Chi Minh later apologized for these and other 'excesses' carried out in North Vietnam, and blamed them on his Chinese advisors.

'Sink or Swim'

Although, American leaders were upset by the way Diem ran his government, there was little the U.S. could do about it. If they tried to change Diem, he would complain. He'd say since he was fighting a ruthless enemy in his country and government his tactics were absolutely necessary. As soon as his problems with his communist adversaries were solved, Diem said, he'd go back to respecting the rights of all of his people.

As one U.S. official put it, the U.S. had little choice. There was only one strong anti-Communist leader in South Vietnam. There were no other alternatives, except communists. Like him or not, it was 'sink or swim, with Ngo Dinh Diem'.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. After summarizing the main provisions of the Geneva Accord, comment on Eisenhower's policies toward South Vietnam and Diem.
2. Should the Eisenhower administration have continued supporting No Diem Dinh despite his faults? Why or why not?

Chapter 4

Fighting Against Guerrillas: The Strategic Hamlet Program

This chapter will describe a program designed to help beat Ho Chi Minh's Vietcong – the communist guerrilla organization attempting to overthrow the Diem government.

The program was called the Strategic Hamlet Program. The idea behind it was to get South Vietnamese into special villages so they could protect themselves against the Vietcong (known as the VC). The reader will learn about the program, its purpose, and about one village, An Loc, that was taken over by the VC. Readers will be asked whether to order an air attack against the village in order to drive the VC out.

Vietminh Become the Vietcong

It should be recalled that Ngo Dinh Diem decided not to hold the national elections to unite North and South Vietnam called for by the Geneva Accord. The promised elections that were supposed to have been held in June of 1956 were never held.

In the meantime, Diem tried to gain control of hundreds of villages by appointing chiefs loyal to him. He also removed people in the villages that may have fought for the Vietminh in the war against France. As reported in Chapter 3, thousands of suspected Vietminh and their suspected sympathizers were rounded up. With the exception of a few men in each village, Diem's wide net came close to catching all of the Vietminh left in South Vietnam.

The Vietminh had expected to win South Vietnam by free elections. Because Diem decided not to hold these elections, Ho gave the word that the armed resistance would begin. In order to achieve the victory for which he dedicated his life, Ho realized that his followers would have to fight, not vote. Slowly Ho's followers got themselves organized again. They decided to call themselves the National Liberation Front to emphasize the fact they were fighting for a united Vietnam. The Diem government said they were the Vietnamese Communists (Vietcong or VC.)

Guerrilla Warfare: Stages 1 and 2

The VC often came into villages to recruit people to fight on their side. These recruiting missions would often start with a few 'get acquainted' visits to get to know the people and their problems. Occasionally the VC would help people in a village who did not have enough food to feed their families they might help plant or harvest crops, dig irrigation ditches, or supply seeds. They also encouraged people to share their grievances against local officials, greedy landlords, or corrupt merchants, who were blamed for all their problems

But the Vietcong did not always come to a village to do some noble deed. They might show their power by killing an unpopular local leader who had been appointed by Ngo Dinh Diem, or by ridding the area of a particularly wealthy and unpopular landlord or by terrorizing a popular leader to discourage others from siding with the government of South Vietnam.

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Using many different methods, the Vietcong proved that they could do whatever they wanted in the villages. They could be helpful, and they could kill people who did not cooperate with them. They had more power than the South Vietnamese government because they were able to take over almost any village at almost any given time.

The Vietcong did more than recruit peasants to side with them against Diem's government. They attacked police stations, blew up bridges, ambushed South Vietnamese soldiers, and destroyed government buildings. Diem had a real revolution on his hands that threatened to destroy his government.

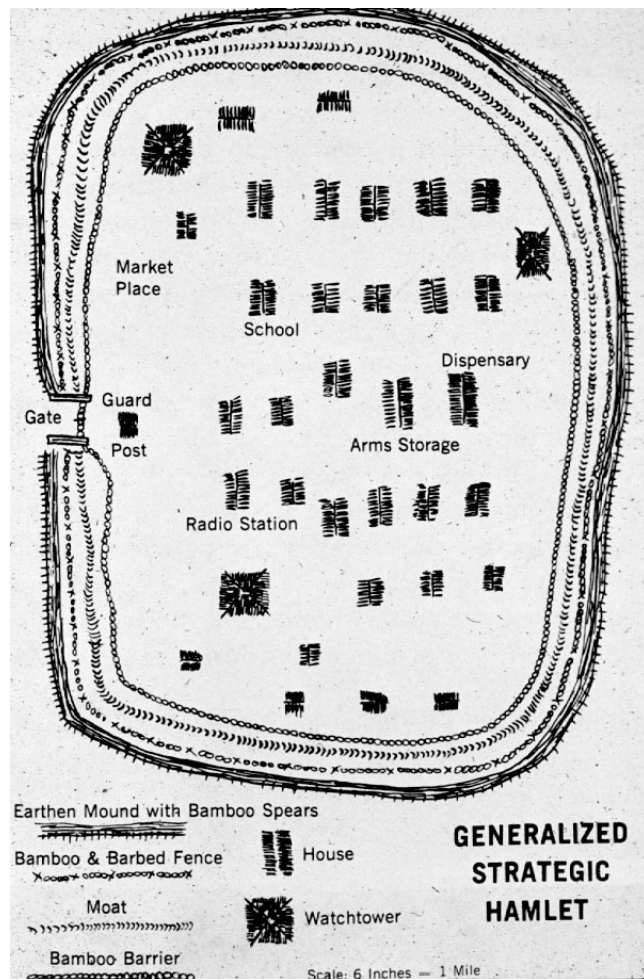
The Strategic Hamlet Program

President Ngo Dinh Diem realized that he was losing South Vietnam to the Vietcong village by village. He therefore decided to start the 'strategic hamlet program' which, with U.S. aid, became the main way to prevent the spread of communism in South Vietnam.

Strategic hamlets were special villages built for loyal South Vietnamese. To encourage the South Vietnamese to move into these hamlets, there would be a school, a hospital, electricity and some modern conveniences. A barbed wire or a bamboo fence to keep the VC out would surround the hamlet. The men in the hamlets would be provided with weapons and military training to enable them to defend themselves and their families from the VC. South Vietnamese Army defense forces would be stationed in the region to come to the aid of hamlets if necessary.

The main purpose of the strategic hamlet program was to separate the loyal South Vietnamese from the Vietcong. All the people in the hamlets were considered ² friendly. Those living outside of the hamlets could be thought of as the enemy. To use the analogy of the guerrilla and the people – the hamlets were a way to dry up the ocean that gives life to the fish (guerrillas).

The Strategic Hamlet Program gained the support of U.S. military planners and was advocated by President Eisenhower as well as his successor, John F. Kennedy. By September 1962, over one-third of the population of South Vietnam, an estimated 4,300,000 South Vietnamese, were living in strategic hamlets.



² <http://history.acusd.edu/gen/USPics2>

Problems with the Strategic Hamlet Program

The Hamlet Program was not without its faults. The following is a partial list:

- Many peasants did not want to leave their own villages where their families had lived for hundreds of years to go to these strategic hamlets.
- Sometimes, the hamlets were too far away from the fields in which the peasants worked.
- Often the promised military, medical, and agricultural supplies,, never got to the hamlets. The supplies often disappeared somewhere on the road from Saigon. and they often re-appear for sale in market places in towns and cities.
- The village chiefs, appointed by Diem, were often unpopular. Many stole and cheated the people in the hamlets.

What happened at An loc

There was no moon that night. Even alert guards might have had difficulty seeing the 50 men who suddenly emerged from the jungle and ran toward the gate. They were wearing the plain peasant clothing known to Americans as black pajamas. Each member of the village defense force was struck and knocked down from behind with a single blow. Their throats were cut and they were left to die. The guerillas captured the village chief, brought him in plain view for all in the hamlet to see. They killed the chief and his family, while denouncing Diem and the South Vietnamese government. They blamed Diem and his American advisors for forcing them into An loc in the first place. Then they dared the South Vietnamese Army to come to the aid of the village.



US evacuating wounded. Convoy had been ambushed on way to support an advanced camp.

Ten miles away, Captain Carnham's field telephone rang — it was Captain Cam of the South Vietnamese army. He had just been told that the Vietcong had captured An loc. His soldiers were 10 miles away. It would be too difficult for his men to drive the Vietcong out. There were too many places on the road for the enemy to hide and ambush his men. Cam decided to ask Captain Carnham to bomb the village and kill the invaders.

Carnham thought long and hard about this request, before answering.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Comment on the rationale behind the strategic hamlet program and its and the strengths and weaknesses of
2. Do you think that Captain Carnham should order an air strike of An loc as requested by his South Vietnamese counterpart, Captain Cam? Consider, strength of the program, domino theory, and character of Diem regime.

Epilogue

The story of An loc is based on an incident depicted in Robin Moore's book, *The Green Berets*, an account of the elite US forces serving in Vietnam as counter-insurgency duty. In the real life story, the U.S. ordered an attack on the hamlet by American air planes. Here is part of Robin Moore's description of the results:

Badly wounded and burned children were dying everywhere. Men, women, and cows lay dead, and smelled to high heaven. The South Vietnamese Army had come into the village after American bombing and artillery had driven out the enemy. The [South Vietnamese] did not even have a man wounded. The South Vietnamese had refused to fight the V.C. in armed combat.

Despite the good intentions of the United States its policies in Vietnam often paralleled the tragic results dramatized in this chapter. The U.S. underwrote programs like the Strategic Hamlet plan to make it easier to win the war. But the people who were supposed to be helped frequently were not consulted, often did not cooperate, occasionally were corrupt, and seldom wanted to fight. As a result, the U.S. on many occasions was called in to use its superior firepower that killed the very civilians they had come to Vietnam to protect.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. What is the moral of this story?

Chapter 5

Exit Ngo Dinh Diem and the Gulf of Tonkin Incident

A thin, elderly Buddhist monk stopped in the middle of a Saigon street on June 11, 1963. He was dressed in the usual manner of Buddhist priests: sandals and loose clothes that hung on him. His face was serious as he sat down and crossed his legs while several monks and nuns stood



Altogether 7 Buddhist monks burned themselves to protest various aspects of Diem's policies, including bans on celebrating Buddha's birthday

around him. One of them poured gasoline on his head; another lit a match. The monk put his hands together in prayer as his robe and then his body were consumed by a bright flame. Traffic stopped; shocked passers-by knelt in prayer. When an ambulance finally arrived on the scene the body remained on fire with only the heart still intact.

In the summer of 1963 other Buddhist monks protested the policies of the U.S. backed Diem government. Some also set themselves on fire. The protests by these monks were only the "tip of the iceberg." They represented a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the government of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. The dissatisfaction was so great that it paralyzed all efforts to win the war against the Vietcong. Some example of the reasons for the South Vietnamese unhappiness follow:

- The jails were full of thousands of people, some communists, but others just enemies of the Ngo brothers.
- The brothers were Catholic while most South Vietnamese were Buddhist. Catholicism was considered non-Vietnamese. It was the religion of the French who had conquered and ruled Vietnam.
- In August, 1963 Diem's brother Nhu rounded up thousands of monks, nuns, students and ordinary citizens in a crack down on Buddhist temples all over the country, touching off a wave of fury against the brothers
- To stop real or imagined plots against them, the Ngo brothers constantly moved generals from one army to another. They were most scared of generals who were popular with the soldier These were the men, the brothers thought, who might use the army to take control of the government away from them. The chiefs who the brothers appointed in the villages were hated. Many kept

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the money they were supposed to use for the hamlets. Anyone who complained could be considered a communist and thrown in jail.

- The government was so corrupt that everything had its price: a promotion in the army; a permit to build a building; a passport granting permission to travel outside of Vietnam. Hardly anything was done without money changing hands.

Exit Diem and Nhu

By 1963, President Kennedy and his advisors believed it would be impossible to win the war in Vietnam with Diem and Nhu running the country. After some discussion among his advisors, President Kennedy let the top American civilian leader in Saigon, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, know that the U.S. would not object to having someone other than Diem and Nhu in charge of the government. Lodge passed the word to generals in Saigon. Caught in a series of contradicting instructions from President Kennedy, Lodge later described his role in the coup as having sowed the seeds on orders from Washington and then not having prevented their flowering.

On November 1, 1963, Nhu and Diem learned of the last of a series of military plots to get rid of them. The brothers retreated to their underground shelter in the palace and made frantic telephone calls to generals, commanders, and loyal government officials. However, nobody promised they would help save them. Realizing they had lost all support, they appealed to Ambassador Lodge.

Lodge informed the brothers that the U.S. might get them safe conduct out of the country, but no arrangements had been made to find a plane to fly them or a country that would accept them. The brothers decided to escape on their own. They fled through a mile long tunnel, and came out in a Catholic church where they were given communion. Shortly afterwards they were discovered by army plotters, thrown into the back of an armored car, and killed.

Too Early to Celebrate

Word quickly spread that the brothers were dead. Hearing the news, people poured into the streets, singing and dancing with great merriment. Jails were thrown open to free political prisoners; enemies of the regime came out of hiding, chefs prepared sumptuous feasts, and the bars filled with revelers. There was no denying that the people of Saigon were overjoyed that the hated Ngo brothers were gone.

In Washington, DC, there was both shock and relief that Nhu and Diem had been eliminated. But less than three weeks later, on November 22, 1963, there was a far greater shock in Washington when President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was shot and killed in Dallas, Texas. As Americans mourned their much-loved leader, Lyndon Baines Johnson became President of the United States.

Shortly after taking the oath of office, President Johnson made an important decision. He would continue the war in Vietnam until the V.C. were defeated. He did not plan to be the first American president to lose a war.

From Bad to Worse

Winning in Vietnam turned out to be much more difficult than Lyndon Johnson had ever imagined. The generals who had worked together to overthrow Diem and Nhu could not cooperate with one another to form an effective and stable government. For the next 19 months they played a power game. By shifting alliances with one another each sought to control the power and patronage that would allow

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them to give lucrative jobs to friends and relatives. No sooner would one group form a government than another would rebel and replace it. There were 7 different governments in Saigon in the 19 months from November 1963 to June 1965 producing a new set of leaders that would hold office on the average for fewer than three months at a time. •

While all this pushing and shoving was taking place in Saigon, no one in the countryside was minding the store. As a result, one strategic hamlet after another collapsed. Some were taken over by the Vietcong, but in many cases families of disgruntled peasants simply pulled up stakes and went back to the villages where they had lived all their lives. Meanwhile the Vietnamese army was even less effective than before Diem's demise; American troops were playing a larger role in the war, pacification efforts were failing, and the Vietminh presence in South Vietnam was increasing. It was becoming increasingly obvious that the aid from the North and the lack of a coherent government action in the South was dooming the American war effort. Unless some changes were made, Ho Chi Minh would unite Vietnam under his leadership. President Johnson might still become the first American president to lose a war.

The Goldwater Challenge

1964 was an election year in the United States. The Republican candidate, Barry Goldwater, charged President Johnson with not using enough force to win the war. In his acceptance speech before a jubilant Republican National Convention in San Francisco, Goldwater reeled off a series of accusations that Johnson and the Democrats were 'soft on Communism'. Charged by opponents with extremism, Goldwater countered with the ringing declaration that:

... Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice.

While President Johnson did not want to be accused of not doing enough to win the war in Vietnam he was confronted by a growing chorus of anti-Vietnam war demonstrators who accused him of sending American boys to needlessly die in Asia. Beset by both sides of the debate over Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson needed an incident that would unite public opinion behind him. On August 2 and 4, 1964, it seemed that he had one which would suit his purposes.

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident



The C Turner Joy in 1964

A few days after the event, Americans heard that an American destroyer, the U.S.S. *Maddox*, had been attacked by North Vietnamese PT (patrol torpedo) boats. It seemed there had been no cause for this attack, which took place outside the three mile limit that the French had claimed belonged to them when they ruled Indochina. The *Maddox* had escaped with one bullet hole but was forced to dodge torpedoes from three North Vietnamese boats. The fighting ended with one of the patrol boats sunk and the others badly damaged. President Johnson's response to the August 2 incident was a restrained but hard warning to the North Vietnamese that another attack would lead to 'grave consequences'.

• with the ascent of President Nguyen Van Thieu in June, 1965 some measure of stability was established and the same leader remained in power for ten years.

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Two days later another incident took place. The second event occurred at night, and involved two ships, the *Maddox* and another destroyer, the *C. Turner Joy*. These ships, it was reported, were attacked by North Vietnamese PT boats while they were in international waters (assuming North Vietnam still held to the 3 mile territorial limits claimed by the French.) This time, Johnson did not play down the incident.

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

Upon hearing of the second occurrence, President Johnson ordered a full-scale air attack on North Vietnam. The targets, chosen a long time before the incident, included 14 huge oil storage tanks, and the North Vietnamese 54 boat navy. About half the ships were destroyed.

The day after these air strikes, President Johnson spoke to the nation on TV:

The North Vietnamese have decided to attack the U.S. This fact is plain for all the world to see. If we do not challenge these attacks, they will continue....

But this was not the first time they have provoked us

For 10 years, three American Presidents, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and myself, have been trying to protect South Vietnam from the communist government of North Vietnam. All we have wanted to do is to have North and South Vietnam:

- *honor their international obligations*
- *leave each other alone;*
- *settle their differences peacefully;*
- *try to better the lives of their people by fighting against poverty, disease and ignorance*

Peace requires that we and our allies stand tall against the attacks from North Vietnam.

President Johnson then introduced the following resolution to Congress which had actually been in preparation since February 1964:

Whereas ships from communist Vietnam, broke the rules of international law and attacked U.S. ships;

Whereas these attacks are part of a plot of this communist country waging war against its neighbors . . .

And whereas the U.S. is helping the people of Southeast Asia to protect their freedom and live in peace.

Resolve that Congress agrees with and supports the President to take all needed steps to repel any armed attack against U.S. forces and to prevent further aggression by communist North Vietnam.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. What was the situation in South Vietnam and the U.S. during the eight-month period prior to the Gulf of Tonkin incident and how might it affect the war effort?
2. Do you agree with President Johnson's analysis of the situation in Vietnam as expressed in the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution? Explain.
3. Would you have voted for the above Resolution? Why or why not?

Epilogue

Congress voted overwhelmingly for the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. The vote was 89 to 2, in the Senate and there was not a single dissenting vote in the House of Representatives. President Johnson got what he had long desired during the Vietnam war: The power needed to do what he thought necessary to 'prevent further aggression' in Vietnam.

In retrospect, one sees that President Johnson was not completely honest in his description of the events in the Tonkin Gulf. Was the Maddox in international waters when it was attacked? It was 10 miles from the shores of North Vietnam. Most countries claim their territorial waters extend to 12 miles. When the French ruled Vietnam, they only claimed 3 miles - and North Vietnam never officially declared their territorial waters. But China, its ally and neighbor in the North, claimed a 12 mile limit

Whether in international waters or not, the Maddox was on a support mission for South Vietnamese commandos. They were sent in PT boats to identify targets along the coast of North Vietnam. The Maddox was supposed to pick up signals of North Vietnamese radar. From this information Vietnamese and American military planners could find what parts of the coast were being defended.

While the incident on August 2nd occurred pretty much the way it was reported, the second incident did not. On the night of August 4, 1964 the seas in the Gulf of Tonkin were rough; the crew was expecting an attack. Experts now believe that heavy seas made waves appear like PT boats on the radar screen. The bullets fired by the Turner Joy were probably shot at these phantoms. Captain Herrick of the *Maddox* had reported his doubts about the incident, saying his crew had not made any "actual visual sightings," and blamed the blips supposedly revealing enemy ships on "freak weather effects."

President Johnson had been told that the second incident was probably a case of mistaken identity. That is not what he wished to hear. The President went ahead with the speech written before he learned the truth. One of his aids even said, "We don't know what happened, but it had the desired result." The outlines of the resolution had been written five months before the incident took place. The President had used the Gulf of Tonkin incidents to get what he wanted from Congress -- the power to expand the war in Vietnam.

A Serious Question

We know that President Lyndon Johnson had purposely misled (some would say lied to) the American people on the events in the Gulf of Tonkin. Their support for the U.S. government was asked on the basis of this misleading information. We know from previous chapters that the American people were not told the whole truth about Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu, democracy in South Vietnam, the Strategic Hamlet Program, and the progress that was made in the Vietnam war.

The events in this chapter necessarily give rise to two important questions. (1) does the President of the United States have the right to lie to the American people to give him/her the power to carry out policies he/she thinks are good for the country; and (2) if the government lies to the American people to get their support, are the people who were deceived by their government still morally bound to support its conduct of that war by paying taxes and fighting for it?

Chapter 6

Fighting a Guerrilla War

When President Johnson decided to escalate the war by sending American soldiers to Vietnam, these men were given the near-impossible task of rooting out an unseen enemy in hundreds of small villages throughout the country. Because the Americans did not trust the South Vietnamese Army, it was assigned the easier task of guarding the 'secure areas'. U.S. soldiers were given the difficult job of clearing enemy forces out of what was considered 'hostile country.' The enemy might be gathered in battalion strength one day, and completely disappear the next. Villagers who appeared to be friendly might be working with the National Liberation Front. It was almost impossible to distinguish between those who sided with the Government of Vietnam and those who backed the NLF. It was equally difficult to define who actually was a member of the NLF. Was it a woman who worked in the association of the old people and/or a child who carried messages for the Vietcong? Was a teen-age boy forced to dig tunnels for the V.C., and/or a wealthy farmer who felt he had to pay taxes to the NLF, an enemy of the U.S.? Or was the enemy a woman whose husband was jailed as a suspected NLF organizer and/or an entire village, angry at the terrible treatment it received from Government of South Vietnam (GVN) officials.

Added to these difficulties were dilemmas caused by anti-guerrilla warfare. In 'search and destroy' operations, U.S. troops were sent to unfriendly villages to look for hidden supplies of food prepared to feed the enemy. But how was one to know whether the rice buried in the villager's hut was intended for the Vietcong or simply hidden from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam?



US soldier and family of suspected Vietcong

How could an American soldier know for sure that the young boy with his hands behind his back was holding a grenade or a piece of fruit? And, how could Americans be certain that fire from a seemingly peaceful hamlet was a sign that a strong contingent of enemy troops were in the area, or was simply intended by a lone gunman to alienate another village by drawing return volleys from US soldiers?

The following accounts, reported in the words of Vietnam veterans, describe the problems they had in fighting against an unseen enemy and their reactions in the face of uncertainty.

The Only Vietnamese I Ever Got Close to

I met this girl in a village store. She was about 17 or 18, sort of pretty and very shy. I guess she was the only Vietnamese I ever got close to. By then I spoke a little of their language and I found she was studying English and math. I said I could help her in both subjects and twice we took a short walk to the end of the village. She was afraid of me at the beginning, but later she got over it, and I started to look forward to being with her.

One day we were on this patrol. It was raining, and suddenly, we were caught in an ambush. Our guns returned the fire. We hit them hard and then called in the gunships for support.

Then, maybe thirty minutes after, the firing stopped and we moved out to look for the wounded and to take a body count. There was a bunch of bodies around, all V.C., and all women. One of them was my little girlfriend, now dead, bullets through her head and chest. She had an automatic near her. I was shocked. She was a V.C. ³

They Said I Was Doing My Duty

We were outside Bac Lier, out on an eighteen-man patrol with fifteen ARVNs. Our orders were to move ahead and seek out, and not hesitate to shoot at anything suspicious. We were about ten kilometers from town when there was some shooting. It lasted about ten minutes.

My God, how I remember that damned day. Hot and sticky – the mosquitoes were driving' me crazy. And there was this little boy, about eight or nine. He was climbing out of a tree. I grabbed him and blurted out in Vietnamese – what little I knew – 'Who are you and what are you doing here?'

He was afraid of me and pulled away. He had his hand opened behind his back, like he was hiding something. 'Grab him,' someone screamed, 'he's got something.' I made a move for him and his hand moved again. 'Shoot' .

Because of my training, because I was afraid and this was the first enemy I had come across, I fired at him. again, and again until I emptied my whole M-2 carbine at him. When I look again, he was cut in two, with his guts all around. I vomited. I wasn't told; I wasn't trained for that. It was out-and-out murder; I can never forgive myself and I can never forget it. They're the enemy, but they're fighting for their country. Then I told the psychiatrist and the Catholic chaplain, they said I was only doing my duty.⁴

It Was a Big Thing to Kill a North Viet in Battle

A platoon had been ambushed; we were sent out to help, but got pinned down ourselves in a rice paddy, for a whole day. It was my first contact with North Vietnamese. We managed to circle the village while they tried to break out. Finally, they pulled out, leaving this guy who had been carrying a Chinese rifle. He had a bad wound.

By now we were all fed up with gooks. We'd lost a lot of men that day and nobody wanted to doctor him. Nobody. Also, nobody wanted to call for a dust-off (evacuation by helicopter) so my platoon sergeant said I should finish him off with my .45. I went up to where he was lying and moaning and waited for about thirty minutes, hoping he'd die first; then I closed my eyes and fired – and missed. I didn't want to kill him. I remember very well just sitting there looking at him. And he wouldn't die. Finally, the sergeant came up and said I'd have to do something. Was I chicken? So I fired.

3 Quoted in Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1971, pp. 102-103

4 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 82

When I walked back to the other men, they were all proud of me. It was a big thing to kill a North Viet in battle and this, so to speak, was in battle. He was an enemy and we didn't even have enough coptors to take out our own wounded. It was a battle. Everyone said I was a good soldier.⁵

They Were Sent to Kill a Whole Country

They (those who opposed the war) couldn't stand the system lying to them. They found themselves, if they were in combat, killing people who were innocent. They're going to come back home and ask themselves why? There is no reason this time like when Hitler or the Japs were around. They were sent to a foreign country to kill a whole country, and now we have the god-awful lifetime job of having to atone for it. At least some of us do.^{6 7}

Why Don't Anybody Talk About That?

I've seen VC kill civilians deliberately. I never saw Americans do it deliberately. Why don't anybody talk about that?

One time we were on guard and I heard some crying coming from a nearby hamlet. The next morning we went to see, and with my own eyes I saw. The VC had come and gone and left a sixty-five year old man hanging and a small girl dead. So who's doing what killing and what terrorizing?⁸

We Were There to Help

On one patrol we were in another village giving out C-rations to two women and five kids. My buddy was at the well and a medic was treating the kids for some kind of infection. All of a sudden some women grabbed their kids and went inside their hooches [huts]. Twenty seconds later we were under fire by VC and we took three casualties. One of our guys got hit in the jugular vein. Those women could have saved our guys, who were in that god-forsaken place to help them, to give them what we had in our country. Instead, they said nothing. We were there to help. The Vietnamese are so stupid they can't understand that a great people want to help a weak people.

The Vietnamese are afraid of the VC. They take all the Americans have to offer and give us nothing, and give the VC all they have and take nothing. It doesn't make sense.^{9 10}

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. If the teacher directs, prepare two or three of the stories to tell to your class. What do these stories tell you about the problems faced by soldiers fighting this war?

5 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 39.

6 Quoted in *ibid.*, p 78.

7 Pictured in Gerald Danzer, et. al., *The Americans*, McDonald Littell: Evanston, Illinois, 1998). P. 981

8 Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

9 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 23-24.

10

Chapter 7¹¹

How My Lai Was Pacified

Calley was at the drainage ditch on the eastern edge of the village, where about seventy to eighty old men, women, and children not killed on the spot had been brought. Calley ordered the dozen or so platoon members there to push the people into the ditch, and three or four GIs did. Calley ordered his men to shoot into the ditch. Some refused, others obeyed. One who followed Calley's order was Paul Meadlo, who estimated that he killed about twenty-five civilians. Calley joined in the massacre. At one point, a two-year-old child who somehow survived the gunfire began running towards the hamlet. Calley grabbed the child, threw him back in the ditch, then shot him. ¹²

You have just read part of a description of what happened at My Lai in Vietnam. The man held responsible for the events in My Lai on March 16, 1968 claimed he was acting under orders, and higher ups should be held responsible for his actions. Spiro Agnew, Vice-President of the United States thought that it was unfair to punish a patriotic American boy who answered his country's call to duty and allow Americans who deserted and skipped off to Canada to go free. Some wanted Calley's superior, Captain Medina, who spent most of the day just 150 yards away from My Lai, to be punished. Americans strongly opposed to the war thought that the top officials in the U.S. government who were responsible for blanket bombings in Vietnam that killed hundreds of thousands were also chargeable for individual acts of brutality committed by American soldiers not properly instructed to respect the lives of innocent civilians.

This chapter examines the many questions raised by the My Lai incident and the trial of Lt. William Calley that followed.

My Lai: The Cast of Characters

The reader should know the people whose names are closely associated with the My Lai massacre:

Paul Meadlo — with Calley at My Lai. He said he was told to shoot prisoners in a ditch and obeyed orders; Meadlo was granted immunity from prosecution and testified at the court martial trial.

Hugh Carter — told to shoot civilians. He shot himself in the foot to avoid carrying out these orders.

Lt. William Calley — the U.S. soldier directly accused of killing and ordering the death of 350 innocent civilians. He said he was carrying out orders.

11

12 Testimony by Hugh Thompson in Doug Linder, An Introduction to the Court Martial Trial, My Lai home page.

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Captain Ernest Medina – Captain of Charley Company, 150 yards away from where the killing took place. He said he did not know what was going on, and did not give orders to kill civilians; he also claimed only 20-28 civilians were killed at My Lai.

General Westmoreland – U.S. Commander in Vietnam. He said he knew nothing about My Lai, and that U.S. soldiers always acted according to the rules of war.

President Johnson – President during the military build up in Vietnam. He misled the American public, directed the escalation of the war, and was ultimately responsible for the manner in which it was prosecuted.

Preparation for My Lai

Under the command of Captain Ernest Medina, Charley Company was patrolling an area where the Vietcong 48th Battalion was operating. On February 25, 1968, 18 men in Charley Company were killed or injured crossing a minefield. Two weeks later a popular soldier was killed. At the funeral service, Captain Medina told his men not to be afraid to show their feelings.

The next day, Charley Company was scheduled for action around My Lai, Captain Medina allegedly told his men to 'destroy everything with life'. Medina later denied this in court. But he admitted to allowing his soldiers to believe that the only people in the area would be enemy soldiers.

What Happened at My Lai?

Early on March 16, 1968, Lt. Calley and his platoon were flown to My Lai. When they arrived, another helicopter cleared the landing place by covering the area with bullets. Calley and his men landed without drawing enemy fire. Calley entered the village and ordered his men to round up Vietnamese for questioning. But he never questioned them. Instead, Calley and other soldiers in his platoon began to kill women, children and old men.

One group of 15 - 20 women and children were in a temple where they were kneeling, crying, and praying. American soldiers came up behind them and shot all of them in the head.

Publication of this and other pictures taken at My Lai by Ronald Haeberle on the day of the massacre led to an official investigation and eventual a trial of five

13 Meanwhile, Calley had 80 women, children, and old men taken out of their huts and brought to the center of the village. Calley told Private Meadlo that he knew what to do with them. When he came back 10 minutes later, Calley saw these prisoners were still alive. He then ordered Meadlo to "waste (kill) them" and the private obeyed. Calley helped out, firing somewhere between 250-300 shots into the crowd.

QuickTime™ and a
Photo - JPEG decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

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Altogether some 350 old men, women, and children were killed at My Lai that day. None of the men were of military age. The Vietcong in the area had plenty of time to leave My Lai before Calley arrived. No enemy shot at American soldiers that day. The only American hurt was Carter, who shot himself in the foot to avoid carrying out orders to kill Vietnamese civilians.

There was some question where Captain Medina was on March 16. He said, he never entered My Lai while the shooting was going on, but several soldiers including Calley said he saw him there. He admitted his helicopter landed about 150 yards away from the village.

In his report at the end of the day, Captain Medina stated that 125 Vietcong had been killed, and 3 weapons captured. He later admitted that there were 20-38 civilian casualties.

Word of My Lai Gets Out Slowly

Medina's report on My Lai made first page news in some American newspapers. But no one in Saigon or in America seemed to be surprised that so many enemies could be killed and only three weapons captured. None of the men on the 60 helicopters that flew over My Lai that day believed what they saw there was so unusual that a special report was needed. An official photographer took pictures of women tied and shot, and ditches full of dead women and children. It was not until Life magazine published these pictures seventeen months later that American public showed concern about the incident. Faced with overwhelming evidence that a massacre had taken place, the Army launched an investigation and brought Calley to trial.

The Rules of War

Some people have considered it an exercise in futility. Nevertheless, over the centuries, international lawyers and judges have drawn up a series of laws known as the "rules of war." These international rules, revised at the Geneva Convention in 1949, include the following:

- It is forbidden to kill or wound an enemy that has surrendered.
- The attack or bombardment, by whatever means, of undefended towns, villages, or buildings, is prohibited.
- Volunteer corps" (or guerrilla fighters) have the same rights and duties as armies.¹⁴

QuickTime™ and a
Photo - JPEG decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Bodies of dead left lying on the side of the road just out-

During their military training, U.S. soldiers, including Calley, were supposedly instructed about the rules of war (Calley claimed he never was). But once they got to the rice paddies of Vietnam, little if anything was said about these rules, and many didn't believe they should be applied in Vietnam.

14 LIFE, December 5, 1969 Pathfinder.com/photo/essay/mylai/mylaihp.htm

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At his trial in 1971, Lt. Calley's main defense was that he was obeying orders and that he could be court martialled for refusing to obey them. He had been told by Medina that everyone in My Lai was an enemy, and:

Not to let anyone get behind us. It was paramount in our mission that we would have to go through My Lai 4,5, and 6 as secondary objectives and then our primary objective was My Lai 1. When we went through there again he stressed let no one get behind you while moving through there. Everyone and everything would be destroyed. The only remark he made as to civilians was...[t]hat all civilians had left the area. And anyone there should be considered enemies.¹⁵

After the case had been presented, the judge instructed the jury to decide whether:

"a man of ordinary sense and understanding would know the order (Calley followed or thought he followed) was unlawful"

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Review what you think are the important facts in this case, including the definitions given for war crimes.
2. Do you think there should be such a thing as a war crime, and do you think one was committed at My Lai?
3. Do you think Lt. Calley was guilty of having committed crimes that should result in a prison sentence of at least ten years. Or do you think he was he a loyal soldier merely following orders?
4. Aside from Calley, how far up and down the chain of command should responsibility for My Lai go? Explain.

15 Quoted in Arthur Everett, Katheryn Johnson, and Harry Rosenthal, Calley, Dell Publishing Company, New York, 1971, p. 262.

Epilogue

After deliberating for a record thirteen days, the military jury found Lt. Calley guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced him to life in prison. Following an overwhelming popular opposition to the verdict, President Richard Nixon ordered Calley transferred from a military stockade to house arrest. In 1974 Calley was paroled, in 1976 he was married and found a job selling jewelry in his father-in-law's store.



Children fleeing a misdirected

(napalm) that could not be extinguished and burned right down to the bone; they repeatedly used anti-personnel weapons that would blow the leg off a man, woman, or child; and they routinely used a defoliating, cancer-causing contaminate called agent orange to destroy areas where enemy troops may be seeking cover. Before setting their helicopters down near villages, U.S. soldiers commonly sprayed the area with bullets that often killed civilians. Furthermore, the U.S.'s actions forced a third of Vietnam's population out of the countryside and into crowded towns and cities, creating 870,000 orphans, and driving 200,000 women into prostitution.

In the light of the horrors just described, Calley's crime was only a miniscule sample of what the United States did in an effort to save the Vietnamese from communism. If Lt. Calley indeed was guilty of deliberately murdering Vietnamese civilians one should ask who should be held responsible for the policies which resulted in the death of many thousand times the number that died at My Lai.

In discussing the issue of responsibility, one might again consider the words of Albert Speer, Hitler's architect, as he contemplated his own guilt:

In the final analysis I myself determined the degree of my evasion . . . Whether I knew or did not know, or how much or how little I knew, is totally unimportant when I consider what horrors I ought to have known about and what conclusions would have been natural ones to draw from the little I did know. Those who asked me are fundamentally expecting me to offer justifications. But I have none. No apologies are possible.¹⁶

¹⁶ Quoted in Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1972, pp.275-76

Chapter 8

The Tet Offensive

For over 20 years, government officials told the American people that they were winning the war in Indochina. Americans heard encouraging words about the war as far back as 1950, when General MacArthur predicted that 150,000 top French troops should end this war in 4 months." In 1951 President Harry Truman assured Americans that "the Communist attacks in Indochina have been stopped." Similar statements came from President Eisenhower, Attorney-General Robert Kennedy Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, and of course, President Lyndon Johnson. Perhaps the most famous optimistic statement was made by U.S. commander, General Westmoreland, who assured Americans, "there is light in the end of the tunnel."

The Success Offensive

By 1967, many people both in and out of the government, had started to wonder how long the U.S. would be fighting in Vietnam. They saw too little progress over too many years. To make sure they would have a winning attitude, President Johnson started his 'Success Offensive'. Its purpose was to maintain popular support for the war. The President had computerized printouts published in the newspapers to prove that the U.S. was winning. These printouts showed that:

- there was a decrease in attacks by the Vietcong.
- more of the enemy were being killed in battle.
- more hamlets were 'pacified'.
- fewer soldiers from North Vietnam were coming into South Vietnam.

Officers were told to produce numbers to be processed into data by computers to show that we were winning the war. If they did not do that, they could be criticized for 'failing to have a winning attitude.'

All of this good news, as we shall see, came much closer to fooling the American people than the Vietcong.

North Vietnamese Strategy

As you remember, the Vietminh won the First Indochina War against France in 1954 with a surprise attack on Dienbienphu. The loss of Dienbienphu after eight years of fighting convinced the French that it was time to stop the war. As a result they made the best deal they could at the Geneva Conference in 1954 and pulled all of their forces out of Indochina.

In the summer of 1967, military planners in Hanoi led by General Giap were preparing a dramatic attack which they hoped would persuade the American people to end the war. The North Vietnamese were wise enough to realize that they could not win a battle against American forces similar to their victory over the French in Dienbienphu. Instead, they planned a

simultaneous attack on Saigon and nearly all of the major cities and towns in South Vietnam. They anticipated that this coordinated attack would lead to a sudden mass uprising against the Government of South Vietnam. Failing a mass uprising, such an attack might, at the very least, cause Americans to oppose the war. For tactical as well as political reasons the attack was planned for the Tet (lunar New Year) celebrations, the longest and most important Vietnamese holiday.

During previous Tet holidays both sides had stopped fighting for three days. During those holidays, one half of the South Vietnamese army often returned to their homes to celebrate with friends and family. In this year the Tet holiday came six weeks before the voters of New Hampshire would decide who would represent their state in the Democratic and Republican Presidential Convention later that year. Not entirely by accident the Tet Offensive was timed for the moment the American political system was most open to change.

Preparations for the Tet Offensive

The planned Tet offensive involved about a combined 67,000 Vietcong and Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam, about one-third of their entire armed forces. It required a massive movement of men and supplies over hundreds of miles of jungle trails coupled with careful coordination of separate units in widely scattered parts of the country. The Vietminh and Vietcong had no planes, tanks, trucks, helicopters, or sophisticated communications equipment. Yet they planned an attack against an army of nearly 1,000,000 South Vietnamese soldiers and civil defense units and over 500,000 U.S. servicemen. The U.S. forces commanded the most modern and sophisticated military equipment and communications gear ever produced and included 2,600 airplanes, 3,000 helicopters, and 3,500 armed vehicles.

The planning and preparations for the Tet attack were made right under the noses of the American forces and the ARVN [Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam]. Thousands of people must have known about it, but gave no warning either to the U.S. or to the South Vietnamese.

The Tet Offensive in Saigon

The attacks were launched on January 30, 1968, striking some one-hundred towns and cities. The most dramatic success of the Tet offensive was the attack on the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon. Imagine the impact on American citizens who had been led to believe that the enemy was on the verge of defeat. Now the evidence was as clear as the picture on the TV screen; that not even the American embassy in Saigon, headquarters for U.S. diplomats, was safe. A suicide squad of some 19 Vietcong had blasted its way through the high walls surrounding the embassy compound. The squad held out for six hours until finally silenced by helicopter gunships who left their bullet riddled corpses strewn all over the lawns and walks outside of the embassy.

The Vietcong who invaded Saigon itself were not so easily removed. Some five battalions had infiltrated into the city along with several weeks' supply of food and ammunition. It took weeks to end their determined resistance. In the process, American planes and artillery destroyed whole sections of Saigon, including the captured radio station and the only low-income housing project in the nation. Although they were completely unsuccessful in starting a revolution against the GVN, the Vietcong had started to organize their own governments in some sections of the city.

The Tet Offensive and Counterattacks in Hue and Elsewhere

Other cities in South Vietnam were also hit hard and in some cases with more success than in Saigon. In the ancient Vietnamese capital city of Hue, the Vietcong and DRV forces scored their greatest triumph. Despite the 500 and 700 pound bombs dropped on the city, the communist forces remained in Hue for most of the month. By the time they were driven out, some 10,000 soldiers and civilians in Hue were killed. The city was reduced to rubble and rotting corpses.

When the last of the communists were finally out of Hue a horrible sight awaited returning citizens. The Vietcong had arrested some 3,000 noncombatants (supposedly 'enemy agents') and brutally murdered them by bashing in their heads with clubs and sticks or shooting them from close range. This inexcusable mass murder served to support the argument of those who believed the United States must remain in Vietnam to prevent a 'blood bath' which would be directed primarily against South Vietnamese who had cooperated with the United States and served in the South Vietnamese army and/or government.

In another battle, in the fertile, southern Mekong delta section of Vietnam, allied forces completely destroyed a town in order to drive out the communist forces. An American official explained this event to a questioning reporter with the often-quoted words:

*We had to destroy it [the town] in order to save it.*¹⁷

*Some one-hundred towns were 'saved' from the Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops at the cost of 165,000 Vietnamese civilians killed and the loss of homes for some 2,000,000 people. Commenting on Tet and its aftermath, one American official complained, "[I]n six weeks here, we have seen that the [South Vietnamese] Government cannot protect the people, or control them, or administer them, or help them recover."*¹⁸

The enemy suffered such heavy casualties it took them more than a year to rebuild their forces. Their losses caused a loss of morale among the usually highly motivated and committed communist combatants. General Westmoreland, however, remained optimistic. "The Tet offensive," he wrote, "had the effect of a 'Pearl Harbor'; the South Vietnamese government was intact and stronger; the armed forces, particularly those of the Vietcong were much weaker."¹⁹ The General was so "confident" that he asked for 206,000 more American soldiers. Westmoreland wanted to bring troop strength in Vietnam up to 700,000.

The 1968 Election Campaign

As far as the anti-war movement in the U.S. was concerned the Tet Offensive could not have come at a better time. Its immediate effect in the U.S. was quickly felt in New Hampshire. When the anti-Vietnam war Democrat, Senator Eugene McCarthy, filed his candidate papers for the New Hampshire primary on January 3, 1968, few thought he had any chance of winning. The Tet Offensive started 27 days later and suddenly there were hundreds of college and even high school students in New Hampshire ringing doorbells, mailing literature, and making phone calls to support the Senator. Despite an increase in enthusiasm most experts did not think McCarthy would win more than 25% of the New Hampshire

¹⁷ Quoted in Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake, The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company), 1972, p. 93.

¹⁸ Quoted in Francis Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 398.

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vote. When the votes were counted on March 12, 1968, candidate McCarthy was only 230 votes shy of an outright victory over President Johnson. The anti-war movement had scored its first significant victory.

Four days after the primary, one of President Johnson's worst nightmares came true when Robert F. Kennedy announced that he would seek the Democratic presidential nomination. With the popular brother of the former president a serious and dangerous candidate, Johnson suffered another shock. Members of his own cabinet now announced opposition to his Vietnam policies. His new Secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford unexpectedly advised President Johnson to stop bombing North Vietnam and to seek a political settlement. Three years of nearly continuous bombing in both North and South Vietnam, Clifford informed the President, had completely failed to halt the flow of enemy troops and supplies. Continued bombing would prevent meaningful peace talks. Johnson received similar advice from a specially gathered panel of 'wise men' who had served in high offices under previous Presidents. Meanwhile, he was bracing for what he had been warned would be a defeat in the Wisconsin primary by Eugene McCarthy.

Shaken by this lack of support, the President sought more advice but did not share his plans with his advisors. Thus the entire nation was shocked and many were pleasantly surprised only three weeks after the New Hampshire primary when President Lyndon Johnson announced that he had ordered a partial bombing halt of North Vietnam and had decided that:

**JOHNSON SAYS HE WON'T RUN;
HALTS NORTH VIETNAM RAIDS;
BIDS HANOI JOIN PEACE MOVES**

**New York Times headline announcing
President Johnson won't run for re-
election.**

*I shall not seek and I will not accept the
nomination of my Party for another term as your President.*

As April and May followed March, Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy continued to campaign for the anti-war vote. The former President's brother dramatically won the Indiana primary (about the same day Martin Luther King was assassinated by a white supremacist in Memphis, Tennessee) only to lose to McCarthy in Oregon. The show down between the two peace candidates came with the California primary in the first week of June. Robert Kennedy had proved himself popular with all kinds of voters from 'hard-hats' to racial minorities, rich and poor, well educated and working class. His popularity was proved by the rousing reception he received in Watts, the African-American sector of Los Angeles that had been the scene of a harrowing race riot. Robert Kennedy went on to win the California primary, which almost insured him the Democratic nomination. But then tragedy once again struck the Kennedy family and the country. On his way from the podium after delivering his victory statement on June 5, 1968, Robert Kennedy was shot and killed by Sirhan Sirhan, an Arab nationalist. The American people were stunned by the loss of the man who so many thought would become President and end the war in Vietnam.



**A mortally
wounded
RFK**

The anti-War Movement at Its Apex

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Stung by the loss of the one who might have been able to win the election and end the war, extremists in the anti-war movement decided they would express their rage at the Democratic Convention in Chicago later that summer. Abbie Hoffman formed an organization known as the Youth International Party (Yippies) and called for its followers to stage guerrilla theatre in Chicago. He wanted them to expose what he and others saw as the depravity and bigotry of the police and to express their hostility for the system which drove the U.S. into the Indochina war. Thousands of students stormed into Chicago where Mayor Richard Daley prepared 12,000 policemen to keep order in his city at any cost. The result was a massive confrontation that served to divide the nation even further.

On August 28, 1968, at the convention hall in Chicago, the Democrats were about to nominate Hubert Horatio Humphrey to run for President. Not far away, an embittered crowd was chanting:

'Hey, Hey, LBJ

How many kids did you

Kill today?'

'Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh

The NLF is going to win'

But peace was not going to come either to Vietnam or the streets of Chicago. Armed with billy clubs, the Chicago police force waited for the demonstrators on Michigan Avenue. As the front line of marchers tried to stop, those in the rear pushed them forward. From his third floor window in the Blackstone Hotel, reporter Theodore White could hear, see, and almost feel the surging crowd and the heavy contact of bodies below as the demonstrators crashed into the firm line of policemen. "Stop the War, Stop the War," the crowd yelled while their red flags of Revolution and North Vietnam banners waved defiantly. No U.S. flags could be seen among the demonstrators, except for those sewn on the seats of pants. Rolls of toilet paper, ripe fruit, and glass bottles came flying out of hotel windows and crashed among the blue helmets on the street below.

More screams and swear words followed, and then a flying wedge of policemen cracked its way into the crowd to break it up. Demonstrators ran with policemen following in hot pursuit smashing hard clubs on young skulls. As blood spilled over the streets youngsters were dragged by their legs with their heads bumping along the sidewalk and pushed into waiting police vans. Both sides paused, regrouped, and another wedge of policemen charged into the crowd – and then more sickening cracks on skulls and more blood on the streets.²⁰

20 Account based on Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1968*, Atheneum Press, 1969, pp. 346-49.



A picture taken of the Chicago confrontation with demonstrators which was called a 'police riot' in a prestigious government commission

Nixon Elected President

Although the majority of the American people probably still supported the war, a very large part of the general public had stopped believing their government. This 'credibility gap' was the result of the years of official optimism about the war was continually contradicted by the news coming from Vietnam. As a result of this loss of trust, increasingly larger numbers of Americans believed that the war, even if it could be won, was not worth fighting, supporting, or continuing. The brutal repression by the Chicago police only served to upset the anti-Johnson Democrats and further polarize the nation.

Public opinion, however, turned against the anti-war movement. Many Americans saw the badly dressed and foul-mouthed demonstrators on their TV screens and sympathized with the police. They were happy to see the police bash the heads of the young protesters, who they thought were rude and unpatriotic.

In the general elections that fall, Richard Nixon became the candidate to beat. Calling for 'peace with honor', and claiming to have a 'secret plan to end the war' in Vietnam, Nixon won the votes of those who continued to support it. He defeated the Democratic candidate, Vice-President Hubert Horatio Humphrey by a very small margin. The comparatively large vote for third party anti-integrationist and pro war George Wallace, however, showed the majority of the American people supported the war. The 'silent majority', to which Nixon appealed, was more numerous than the noisy, anti-war minority.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Describe the timing, success, and effect of the Tet Offensive.
2. How and why was the anti-war movement energized and eventually frustrated?
3. Did the events preceding the Convention (including the lies told the American people and the death of American leaders) justify the rage expressed by the demonstrators or the tactics they used to protest the war.

Chapter 9

Vietnamization

While he was on the campaign trail in 1968, presidential candidate Richard Nixon claimed he had a 'secret plan' to end the Vietnam War. When the details of the plan were finally revealed in 1969, they turned out to be "the complete withdrawal of all U.S. combat ground forces, and their replacement by South Vietnamese forces on an orderly scheduled timetable."²¹ What Richard Nixon proposed to do was to end the Vietnam War by turning the fighting over to the Vietnamese. While President Nixon 'Vietnamized' the war he secretly entered into negotiations with the North Vietnamese, and, also secretly, bombed suspected enemy bases in North and South Vietnam and even in Cambodia. In the course of four years these negotiations accompanied by 'vietnamization' and bombing resulted in a peace agreement that was supposed to allow free elections in the South.

This chapter discusses President Nixon's vietnamization plan and the peace treaty he negotiated. After reading the chapter you will be asked to evaluate the plan and the treaty.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

How the U.S. 'Vietnamized' the Vietnam War

The U.S. was not the first nation to try to vietnamize the Vietnam war. The French had tried it, but it did not work for them. President Eisenhower and Kennedy sent military advisors to teach the Vietnamese how to fight, but the South Vietnamese army never became an effective fighting force and U.S. troops were called in to save South Vietnam. So, what was Nixon going to do that would lead to a different outcome?

President Nixon

One thing that Nixon did was to spend much more money to arm the South Vietnamese. He gave them the best guns, planes, artillery, etc. in the U.S. arsenal. He spent billions of dollars on rapid-fire machine guns, modern tanks, and the best M-16 rifles. He turned 1,200 airplanes and 600 helicopters over to the South Vietnamese, providing them the 4th biggest air force in the world. Nixon also spent a great deal of money training the South Vietnamese to fight. He brought their officers to the best military academies in the United States. Vietnamese soldiers were taught to use and repair their new weapons. They were trained to use napalm bombs, support ground troops with air cover, and conduct effective 'search and destroy' operations.

U.S. units were withdrawn from Vietnam as South Vietnamese troops were pronounced ready to take over their combat positions. With U.S. participation in the war ever decreasing, President Nixon was spared the violent anti-war protests that disturbed Lyndon Johnson during his last years in office. The Vietnamization policy seemed to be working.

President Nixon Expands the War to Cambodia

In order to buy time for the South Vietnamese, President Nixon thought the U.S. should shut down enemy supply lines from North Vietnam. Supplies came to the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese army

²¹ <http://www.tamu.edu/scom/pres/speeches/rmnvietnam.html>

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along a series of jungle paths through Laos and Cambodia known as the Ho Chi Minh trail. Enemy food and weapons would be stored in secret hideouts in Cambodia and brought into Vietnam when they were needed. Nixon therefore decided to bomb these trails and places where supplies were stored and to keep these raids a military secret. Even though it meant flying B-52's about 4,000 miles from bases in the Pacific, Nixon went ahead with these raids. These bombings, which were secret to the US public but not to the people targeted, were not effective. The bombs could not reach deep into underground supply bases dug by the Vietcong unless the B-52's were fortunate enough to score several hundred direct hits.

On April 30, 1970, President Nixon escalated the war in Indochina even further by ordering U.S. troops to invade Cambodia. In addition to the supplies, Nixon hoped to find and destroy the North Vietnamese field headquarters. Nixon had the support of the military government of Cambodia, who the U.S. had encouraged to take control of their country from the once popular but ineffective leader, Prince Sihanouk. But the President did not have the support of the U.S. Congress nor the American people.

Effects of the Invasion of Cambodia



Morning death of Jeffrey Miller at Kent State

U.S. soldiers invading Cambodia succeeded in destroying hundreds of tons of enemy supplies but not the enemy headquarters which had been closed several weeks before the troops arrived. But this attack stirred up a hornet's nest of enraged demonstrators in the U.S. In Kent State, Ohio, protest lead to tragedy. On May 4, 1970 the National Guard fired on demonstrators, killing 4 and wounding 11 innocent bystanders. The long-term result of the invasion, was the downfall of the military government that had encouraged it. As a result, the Khmer Rouge, under the murderous dictator, Pol Pot, took control of Cambodia. Under his merciless regime, over one million Cambodians were put to death.

The invasion of Cambodia may have bought more time to train and arm the Vietnamese. But the real

test for this army ²²was what it could do in battle.

The South Vietnamese Army in Laos

On February 8, 1971, the Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam began an attack on Laos. Its purpose was to break up concentrations of North Vietnamese troops, interrupt the flow of supplies from North Vietnam, and test how well the army could fight. As the ARVN entered Laos, North Vietnamese troops fell back as if in full retreat. But just at the incisive moment, the North Vietnamese sprung their trap and attacked South Vietnamese forces from three sides. The South Vietnamese immediately called for air cover, but the bombs intended for the North Vietnamese hit the troops they were called to protect. Pushing the panic button, South Vietnamese soldiers ran and called for helicopters to rescue them. When the whirly birds finally arrived, military discipline broke down completely. Fearing they would be left behind, South Vietnamese soldiers clawed one another trying to climb into the helicopters even if it meant just hanging on to its landing runners. As the helicopters barely cleared surrounding trees South

²² www.cris.com/~Mppa/ethics.html

Vietnamese soldiers were scraped off the runners and dropped to their death on the ground. It was a terrible scene – a military rout -- and a clue that Vietnamization was not working.

The Peace Agreement of 1972

Under President Nixon, formal negotiations with the North Vietnamese began in January, 1969. In August of that year, foreign policy advisor Henry Kissinger had met secretly in Paris with his North Vietnamese counterpart. When they met again in February 1970, the talks were so secret that Nixon's Secretary of State, William Rogers, did not know they were being held. It was not until January 25, 1972 that President Nixon told the world that Kissinger had been secretly negotiating with the North Vietnamese.

Little progress was made in the negotiations during the summer of 1972. In October, however, with presidential elections only a few weeks away, North Vietnam proposed an 'in place' cease fire, allowing North Vietnamese troops to remain in South Vietnam. In exchange the North Vietnamese dropped their insistence that the South Vietnamese government, still under President General Nguyen Thieu, be disbanded. Instead, the South and the North Vietnamese would arrange for a new government to supervise free elections which would determine the future of South Vietnam. Combined with other issues such as returning prisoners of war, the final treaty included the following, and in many ways resembled the 1954 Geneva Accords:

1. North Vietnamese, Vietcong, and South Vietnamese soldiers would stop fighting and hold on to all territory they occupied at the time of the cease-fire.
2. American troops would leave South Vietnam.
3. North Vietnamese troops could stay in South Vietnam
4. American Prisoners of War (POWs) would be returned while U.S. troops leave Vietnam.
5. The government of South Vietnam would allow a commission consisting of North and South Vietnamese to prepare for a democratic election.
6. The newly elected government would take over and run Vietnam.

South Vietnam Opposes the Peace Treaty

General Thieu had served as the chief executive officer of South Vietnam for seven years. He did not like the peace treaty that allowed a communist army of 145,000 soldiers and guerrillas to remain in South Vietnam while the United States completed its troop withdrawal. But Nixon got Thieu's approval by making several concessions: He ordered bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong, the communist capital and port city. He turned more weapons over to Thieu and he wrote him a personal letter dated January 5, 1973 promising him more aid if needed, and warned him of dire consequences if he did not cooperate.

The peace treaty ending U.S. participation in the Vietnam War was finally signed on January 27, 1973. The question we must ask ourselves – was the price too high; or was the treaty too favorable to the north.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Describe Nixon's Vietnam policy and then evaluate it considering these possibilities:
 - a. Nixon expanded the war and continued the killing for four more years than necessary.
 - b. Nixon did the right thing. The U.S. had to give President Thieu a chance to hold out against North Vietnam after the U.S. left.
 - c. Nixon sold out the South Vietnamese. He should have stayed until all North Vietnamese troops left South Vietnam.

Chapter 10

The War is Finished

This chapter tells the story of the collapse of the South Vietnamese army and government. It raises the question whether the U.S. deserted its ally at the end of a noble, if unsuccessful, effort or if it simply had made a serious mistake from the beginning.

Readers will remember that the final peace agreement signed on January 27, 1973, allowed President Thieu and his government to remain in power during the U.S. withdrawal. The treaty also allowed the North Vietnamese to stay in South Vietnam, and called for an election to unite North and South Vietnam. The election would be supervised by a 'National Council of Reconciliation', and not the present government of South Vietnam. This Council was to be set up 'immediately after the cease-fire.'

North Vietnamese government officials were prepared to use the election to take control of South Vietnam. They gave orders for their followers in the south to prepare for a political campaign. If they did not win, of course, North Vietnam still had a 145,000-man army in South Vietnam.

President Thieu, however, never planned to allow a communist take over of South Vietnam by way of an election. "If we allow the communists to operate," he said, "we will lose control of the country." That explains his order to his police the day after he signed the Paris Peace Accord, to kill Vietnamese "who suddenly begin taking a communist tone."

Violations of the Cease Fire

As it turned out, both sides cheated on the peace agreement before it even went into effect. Shortly after he accepted the in-place cease-fire, Henry Kissinger telegraphed Thieu to take more territory from the Vietcong. The day before the agreement was signed, the Vietcong took over some 300 villages controlled by South Vietnam. On the first day of the peace agreement the South Vietnamese government started attacking these villages to drive the Vietcong out.

From the winter of 1973 to the spring of 1975, the South Vietnamese government more or less followed the orders given by President Thieu. Communists were arrested and put in jail. No steps were taken to form the National Council of Reconciliation that was supposed to prepare for an election. And no elections were held.

Corruption in South Vietnam

According to an old Vietnamese expression, 'a house leaks from the top.' President Thieu promoted military officers based on their loyalty to him, and not their ability and performance as soldiers. He did nothing to stop the corruption in his government. Thieu's wife and her friends made millions of US dollars buying and selling real estate in Saigon. They made their purchases based on what they knew the government wanted to buy. Generals kept the money that was supposed to pay their soldiers. Army officers sold weapons and ammunition to the Vietcong. Soldiers who were supposed to deliver military supplies to the ARVN sold them on the black market. People who criticized the government were arrested and thrown in jail. At the very bottom of this chain of corruption, the South Vietnamese soldier did not have enough money to feed his family. Poorly motivated, led, trained, and fed, when the time came, he was not prepared to fight.

Stage 3 of Guerrilla War

The South Vietnamese had failed to take the first steps that were supposed to lead to the Council of National Reconciliation that would run free and democratic elections. The North Vietnamese subsequently prepared for their final military campaign. After years of guerrilla warfare, North Vietnam was prepared for Stage 3 – large unit attacks. The famous Ho Chi Minh trail, that for years had been used to infiltrate men and supplies into South Vietnam, was a narrow jungle trail under protective covering of trees. North Vietnam converted the trail into an all-weather highway. It stretched from North Vietnam, through Laos and Cambodia and into the Mekong delta, south of Saigon. With its various feeder roads, it covered 12,000 miles. A 3,000-mile long pipeline was built to supply needed gas for the North Vietnamese army. The road even had rest, service and repair stations. Anti-aircraft guns guarded the roadway. Trucks, tanks and armed cars drove south down these roads. The Vietnamese had come a long way from their guerrilla war days, and when the time came, they would be ready to strike.

Stage 3 of guerrilla warfare, full army attacks, began on March 10, 1975. First the South Vietnamese Air Force was chased off by Russian anti-aircraft guns. Then North Vietnamese tanks poured in to their first targeted town, Banmethout. Suddenly confronted by Russian tanks and a well-armed enemy, South Vietnamese troops panicked and fled.

President Thieu decided to give up all of his positions near the North Vietnam border to concentrate his troops in the southern region around Saigon. Then he changed his mind and ordered a defense of the North. But the army general defending Pleiku fled by plane, leaving his soldiers and their families to escape on their own. Before long some 200,000 leaderless men, women, and children were fleeing toward Danang on the coast. But Danang itself was under attack. Soon, the South Vietnamese army had turned into a terrorized mob of fleeing men. They used their weapons, if at all, to shoot civilians in their path. Reaching the water's edge:

the soldiers went down to the beach, where some threw away their weapons and their uniforms and dived into the sea to swim out to waiting American ships, while others commandeered boats and then began firing at one another on the open water. Soon the scenes in Danang were repeated in cities through most of South Vietnam. In one city, the soldiers were shooting at the owners of the restaurants where they ate. Something deeper than the collapse of an army's discipline was taking place. It was the disintegration of a society that had been pulverized by war and corrupted by foreign invaders for thirty years. A society that had lost all sense of self-respect and that despised itself for its subservience to one foreign master after another – a society that had been turned into a literal brothel for millions of soldiers from foreign countries – was tearing itself apart in a fury of self-destruction.²³

Similar scenes were taking place in other cities. Thieu's million-man army equipped with excellent American weapons simply self-destructed seeking some kind of safety, somewhere other than in Vietnam.

The Last Days of Saigon

This spreading panic threatened Saigon as that city prepared to defend itself. Gerald Ford, formerly Nixon's vice-President, became commander in chief in 1974 after Richard Nixon resigned because of his

²³ The New Yorker, (April 14, 1975), pp. 27-28.

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involvement in the cover up of a break-in of the Democratic Party headquarters in Watergate. President Ford and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, asked Congress for another \$700 million to defend the rest of South Vietnam. But Congress, by this time tired of the long war, refused. Kissinger, Thieu and others later blamed the U.S. Congress for the defeat, which followed.



Desperate Americans and Vietnamese escaping from Saigon, April 30, 1975

One month after the fall of Danang the North Vietnamese army marched into Saigon. As the enemy army approached the capital, the ARVN collapsed completely and surrendered with hardly a fight. With it, billions of dollars of U.S. equipment fell into the hands of North Vietnam. Meanwhile men, women and children tried desperately to escape the enemy. Fifty thousand people fled Saigon the week before the communist forces arrived. Seven thousand were air lifted by helicopter to waiting U.S. ships off shore in the last 18 hours. The million Vietnamese who had depended on the U.S. had good reason to fear living under control of the victorious communist army

after 29 years of brutal warfare.

Although the outcome certainly could not please the U.S., at least the long war was finally over.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Describe and try to account for the failure of the 1973 peace agreement and the subsequent collapse of the South Vietnamese government in the Spring of 1975.
2. Do you think that Congress made the right decision not to vote for an additional \$700 million to defend Saigon? Why or why not?
3. Given the final outcome of the war, evaluate U.S. policy in Vietnam - a mistake from the beginning or a noble, but unsuccessful effort. Explain. (Note: last chapter focuses totally on this question).

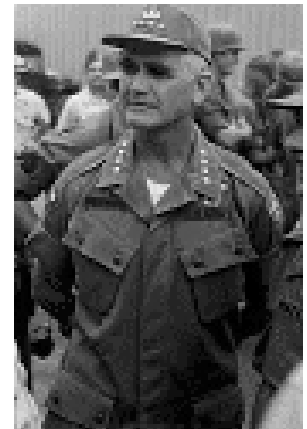
Chapter 11

Was the 'Whole Thing a Lie' or a 'Noble Crusade'

"If Vietnam was such a mistake, how come the leaders of our country, the wisest men we have, the men we elected in free and democratic votes, the men who have all the facts, how come they sent us in?"²⁴

This chapter presents two totally different points of view on the U.S. role in Vietnam. General William Westmoreland, U.S. commander during the escalation of the conflict, presents the 'hawks' side. Westmoreland firmly believed in the cause for which the war was being fought. After retiring from the army he became a spokesperson supporting U.S. actions in Vietnam. He believed the main issue of the war, in John F. Kennedy's words, was "to assure the survival and success of liberty."

Donald Duncan, formerly a master sergeant in the Special Forces, presents the 'dove' position. A once gung-ho member of an elite fighting team, Duncan became increasingly disillusioned by what he saw in Vietnam, eventually concluding that "there was no freedom to preserve in Vietnam . . . only anti-Communism." He turned down a field commission to the rank of Captain and retired from the army in 1965. His was one of the first outspoken criticisms voiced against our Vietnam policy, and it caused quite a stir when it was first published in 1966.



**General
Westmoreland**

General William Westmoreland: A Noble Crusade

History may judge that American aid to South Vietnam constituted one of man's more noble crusades, one that had less to do with the domino theory and a strategic interest for the United States than with the simple equation of a strong nation helping an aspiring nation to reach a point where it had some reasonable chance to achieve and keep a degree of freedom and human dignity. Even though American resolve fell short in the end, it remains a fact that few countries have ever engaged in such idealistic magnanimity and no gain nor attempted gain for human freedom can be discounted.

Sergeant Donald Duncan: The Whole Thing Was a Lie

The whole thing was a lie. We weren't preserving freedom in South Vietnam. There was no freedom to preserve. To voice opposition to the government (in South Vietnam) meant jail or death. Neutralism was forbidden and punished. Newspapers that didn't say the right thing were closed down. People are not even free to leave, and Vietnam is one of those rare countries that don't fill its America visa quota. Its all there to see once the red film is removed from the eyes. We are the Russian tanks blasting the hopes of an Asian Hungary (a European country that the USSR invaded in 1956.)

²⁴ Quoted in Murray Polner, *No More Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam Veteran*, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York, 1971, p. 37.

²⁵ William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, Doublday, New York, 1980, p. 422

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If only the Communists are to assist people of emerging nations, what hope is there for those who aspired to freedom? We may well be unable to afford to be the world's policemen, but neither can we afford to fail to live up to the responsibilities that the accidents of a wealthy land and generous fate have placed upon us. We tend in this age of cynicism to put down idealism, patriotism, and zeal; but if there are to be no more Vietnams, is there to be no more support of aspiring freedom, or protection of the weak against the strong? What of John F. Kennedy's stirring pledge to "assure the survival of liberty?" As many have observed, the price of freedom is never cheap, nor is even the survival of existing freedom.²⁵

It is not democracy we brought to Vietnam – its anti-Communism. This is the only choice the people of the village have. This is why most of them have embraced the Viet Cong and shunned the alternative [in this case Diem's rule] The people remember that when they were fighting the French for their national independence it was the Americans who helped the French. It's the American anti-Communist bombs that kill their children. It's American anti-Communism that has supported one dictator after another in Saigon. When anti-Communist napalm burns their children it matters little that the anti-Communist Special Forces medic comes to apply bandages.

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Student Exercises:

1. Answer each of the following as completely as you can.
 - a. What do you imagine were the different military experiences of Sergeant Duncan and General Westmoreland?
 - b. – c. What were the major arguments made by General Westmoreland?
 - d. – e. . What were the major arguments made by Sergeant Duncan?
 - f. Review other information you have about Vietnam and come to class prepared to share it.

2. Do you think that Vietnam was "a lie from the beginning," "a noble crusade," or "a well-intentioned mistake." Briefly explain your argument, and cite examples from what you have studied in this unit.

3. If your teacher directs, expand your argument into a major essay of about 600 words. Your essay should cover three of the following topics:
 - A. **The reasons the U.S. became involved in the war:**
Did the U.S. have good reasons for getting involved?
 - B. **Comparison of the two sides:**
Did the U.S. make the right decision in supporting the South Vietnamese government?
 - C. **The means the U.S. used to fight the war:**
Did the U.S. use the best available methods?
 - D. **The outcome of the war:**
What is the final lesson can be learned from or outcome?

Your essay should contain:

- a. A thesis statement, an outline foreshadowing your major argument) (about 50 words)
- b. A main body which develops your arguments with a strong connective tissue of facts and logic (about 450 words) covering at least three of the suggested topics.

26 Donald Duncan, "The Whole Thing Was a Lie," Ramparts, February, 1966, pp. 23-24.

c. A major summary which restates your position, and (if you wish) a conclusion which states the lessons the U.S. should have learned from the war (about 100 words.)

Extra Credit: Comparisons with Iraq

Use your knowledge of what you learned about Vietnam and what you know about the war in Iraq to answer one or both of the following questions:

What would Sergeant Duncan and General Westmoreland most likely have to say about the Iraq war?? With whom do you agree, and why? Your answer should point to the major similarities and/or differences between the two wars.

Come to class with an essay of not fewer than 150 words to support your views and be prepared to present them, listen to those who disagree and either defend or change your opinion.