The Vietnam War

An instructional module, compiled for the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and the Pennsylvania Military Museum, Boalsburg, PA.

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The Korean War marked a change in American foreign policy. Containing Communism became a primary goal. In 1954 President Dwight D. Eisenhower famously said, “You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and…the last one…will go over very quickly.” This quote was shortened into the Domino Theory. This meant preventing one country from becoming Communist because it would then spread to the surrounding nations. In a time of developing nations, this was a real problem. World War II had forced many European countries to give up their colonies. These newly established nations were vulnerable to Communist ideas. It was believed that all orders came from the Kremlin in Moscow. To Americans the Soviets were slowly extending their control across Eastern Europe and Asia. The United States needed to prevent it from spreading any farther.

Communism was a real threat that the American people feared. Before the Korean War began, Senator Joseph McCarthy had caused a red scare. In a series of 1950 speeches he stated that 205 members of the State Department were members of the Communist Party (or “reds”). The Secretary of State knew that these people were Communists, McCarthy claimed, but they were still working for the American government! McCarthy played to the fears of the American people. The Communist threat wasn’t just in foreign countries. It was at home too!

In 1955 the Soviet Union took a step towards uniting the Communist nations. West Germany had been invited to join the American alliance in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Soviet Union responded by forming their own military alliance, the Warsaw Pact. Now the two superpowers were pitted against each other through regional
alliances, in what came to be known as “the Cold War.” Both possessed the hydrogen bomb and massive nuclear weapons stores. The ability to cause destruction was real.

The number of American plans to prevent Communism increased after the Korean War. In 1954, “unfriendly” governments in Iran and Guatemala were toppled by CIA supported coups. They were replaced with American-friendly, anti-Communist dictators.

But perhaps the biggest defeat for the Americans since the loss of China to the Communists in 1949 was Cuba. In 1959, Fidel Castro created a Communist government ninety miles from the United States. He had overthrown an American-backed dictator in the process. The Communist threat had come too close to home.

Throughout the early 1960s Cuba remained a hotspot in the Cold War. In April 1961, the CIA launched an invasion to overthrow Castro at the Bay of Pigs. Ultimately it failed. But the real standoff came one year later. American spy planes discovered offensive missile platforms on Cuba. These missiles could hit targets as far north as New York City, including the coal fields of Pennsylvania. After tense negotiations, the Soviets agreed to remove the missiles. Americans removed their own missiles in Turkey. A potential breaking point had been avoided. But to this day Fidel Castro maintains a communist government in Cuba.

The other hotspot in the early 1960s was Berlin. First the border into East Germany from West Berlin was closed. Then almost overnight the Berlin Wall was constructed. It isolated West Berlin from East Berlin, as well as East Germany. The wall would stand until 1989. Its fall marked the beginning of the end of the Cold War, which by then had touched many nations, including Vietnam.
Trouble in Colonial Vietnam

On May 7, 1954, the French army surrendered to the Viet Minh forces at a tiny village known as Dien Bien Phu in northwestern Vietnam after more than 90 years of colonial occupation. The Geneva Peace Accords followed. They ended the First Indochina War, fought from 1946-1954. But it was an uneasy peace. Vietnam would be temporarily divided into pro-
Communist north and anti-Communist southern regions. The 17th Parallel marked the division. It became known as the De-militarized Zone (DMZ). Free elections throughout the country would be held in 1956 to determine the political future. To ensure fairness in the elections, all outside forces would have to exit Vietnam. The United States felt slighted in the outcome of the Geneva Accords. They refused to sign them, as did the government that represented the southern portion of Vietnam below the 17th Parallel. Immediately, the Americans began to take action, disobeying the Accords.

The Americans selected Ngo Dinh Diem to head up the government in the southern region because of his strong anti-Communist feelings. The United States felt the need to become involved in Vietnam to prevent it from becoming another “domino.” If Vietnam fell, all of Southeast Asia might fall. Even Australia would be threatened!

The Geneva Accords promised free elections in 1956. These elections would reunite the temporarily divided nation. The northern region was led by the Communist Ho Chi Minh. Diem’s government represented the southern region. However, the southern government refused to hold the elections. The United States approved their decision. Ho Chi Minh was extremely popular. He would have won the election. The United States could not allow such an event. Ho Chi Minh and his Communist allies were furious. Vietnam, now divided into two separate nations, North Vietnam and South Vietnam, would begin a twenty-year struggle for reunification.

By 1957 the old Viet Minh troops in South Vietnam had begun to reorganize. They had fought the French in the First Indochina War. They worked independently of the Communist leadership in Hanoi, the capital in North Vietnam, and began to attack Diem’s supporters. In
1958 they began receiving support from Hanoi. The term “Viet Cong” was developed in 1959. It characterized anyone in South Vietnam who opposed Diem.

In South Vietnam, the United States had stepped up its support. In 1955 Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG)-Indochina became MAAG-Vietnam and more advisors poured in. This included some to supervise troop training for the South Vietnamese army. By 1960 the number had reached one thousand. The first American troops were sent in by President John F. Kennedy in 1962 at the advisors’ request. Diem was failing as a leader against a growing Communist threat.

In 1963 unrest grew in South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese military was unable to defeat the Viet Cong, who were receiving ever-increasing support from the North. A change needed to be made. The United States supported a coup that removed Diem from power. On November 1, 1963, Ngo Dinh Diem was kidnapped and assassinated. Political turmoil resulted, with a series of coups. Not until the end of 1964 would a “stable” government be established in South Vietnam.

In the United States things had changed as well. On November 22, 1963, President Kennedy had been killed. Lyndon B. Johnson was now in control over a mysterious situation in Vietnam. Things would only get murkier in August 1964. The USS Maddox was attacked in international waters off the coast of North Vietnam. This incident in the Gulf of Tonkin has been widely controversial in the years since 1964. Reports from the sailors on board claimed attack by a varying number of North Vietnamese boats. These were usually described as torpedo boats. Both sides exchanged fire. Most accounts stated that one torpedo boat was seriously damaged. The question that arose was the exact location of the USS Maddox when it was attacked. If it had been in international waters, it had been attacked without right. However, if it was in North
Vietnamese waters it could have been viewed as provoking an attack from the Communists. Yet, regardless of the ship’s actual location, the United States was furious. The attack was viewed as a Cold War incident. The Communists had threatened the United States and it required a response.

Johnson reacted quickly. He wanted to prevent further attacks against American troops. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. It permitted Johnson to use whatever force was necessary to prevent future attacks. Simply it was a blank check to make war. The resolution was defensive in nature and was designed to protect American interests in Vietnam. It was not a way to increase American involvement in Vietnam. The goal was just to retaliate for the attack on the *USS Maddox*. The United States did not respond immediately to the attack. With the presidential elections in November, Johnson could not afford to escalate the war.

However, the attacks by the North Vietnamese into South Vietnam began to increase. They launched a major offensive in the fall of 1964. The conflict at Quang Tri in September revealed regular soldiers sent by North Vietnam. Previously the fighting against the South Vietnamese had been carried out by the Viet Cong. An attack on the American Air Force base at Bien Hoa in November was called a “Gulf of Tonkin on land.” The communists wanted to fight. Finally in early 1965, after additional attacks on American soldiers at Pleiku and Qui Nhon, Johnson approved Operation Rolling Thunder. American planes would bomb selected targets in the southern portion of North Vietnam until the attacks on South
Vietnam decreased. If the North Vietnamese did not decrease or stop their advance, the bombing raids would target locations further inside their country. It was also at this time American advisors demanded the commitment of combat troops. Previously Americans had just been advisors to train and oversee the South Vietnamese army. But now, the United States would commit to sending in the Marines to become part of the fight against the North Vietnamese.
After World War II and the Korean War, Pennsylvania’s economic boom continued, but now with government assistance. Some areas, such as Scranton, began experiencing increasing unemployment and decreasing production. Scranton had been home to the Murray Corporation, which had been converted to produce B-29 bomber wings. When World War II ended, so did production in the plant. With anthracite coal mining on the decline as well, Scranton was in trouble. The people and businesses of Scranton took matters into their own hands. They formed the Scranton Plan Corporation. Contributions from the community were given to the corporation. Among the first steps to economic revival, the Corporation purchased the Murray Corporation from the government. Then they put it back in production. Such initiative by the people of Scranton prompted the state government to take an interest.
Projects such as the one in Scranton were expensive. In 1956 the state took the first steps towards helping them out. The Industrial Development Assistance Act provided funds to communities to attract new industries. These industries would help take the place of declines in the coal, railway, and steel industries, long the economic backbone of Pennsylvania. The industries that came in remain prosperous today. They include production and distribution of chemicals, food, electrical equipment, and machinery, clay products including bricks and tiles, and mining of limestone and slate.

These new products, along with the traditional coal and steel, found a new way out of Pennsylvania in 1959. The Port of Erie was refitted with new facilities to handle oceangoing vessels. With this port, along with Philadelphia, and shipments by truck, train, and barge, consumer goods from Pennsylvania could be shipped all across the world from Canada to Europe, South America, and even Australia! The counties which saw the highest number of exports were Allegheny, Philadelphia, Erie, Montgomery, and Delaware. Imported goods included salt, pig iron, newsprint, and wood pulp.

Pennsylvania also took the initiative to preserve its heritage. Many towns had been founded in the 1700s. Steps needed to be taken to preserve historic buildings. The state General Assembly and Governor David L. Lawrence enacted the Historic District Act in 1961 that enabled municipalities and counties to designate such areas as historic districts deserving of protection from the wrecking ball. Buildings with historical value would now have to undergo an historical and architectural review before they could be altered or torn down. This ensured that future generations could enjoy Pennsylvania’s rich architectural heritage.

Pennsylvania began to see many changes in legislation because of changing social acceptances for women and minorities. During World War II many women had joined the work
force to replace men who were fighting at the front. Minorities including African Americans enjoyed work opportunities in the defense industry as well. After the war those who had gained social standing worked to retain it. In 1955 the state’s General Assembly passed the Pennsylvania Fair Employment Practices Act and established the Human Relations Commission to prevent employers from practicing discrimination in the workplace. This would prevent a person from being denied a job due to race, color, age, religion, or nationality. The early 1960s saw the Manpower Development and Training Act and Economic Opportunity Act passed. It provided training and instruction in useful skills for unemployed persons without a high level of education or good job skills.

Governor William Scranton, elected in 1962, started a new era with a decrease in unemployment, a growth in the service industry due to state encouragement, expansion in the state highway system, new programs to aid the mentally ill, the creation of the state community college system, and an increase in the sales tax to five percent.

Pennsylvania also benefited from the expansion of the federal highway system. Interstate 90, which cuts through the northwest corner of Pennsylvania, became one of the first interstates to run from coast to coast, being completed in 1960. Among the other federal highways in Pennsylvania are: Interstate 70 in 1968, Interstate 80 in 1970, Interstate 83 in 1971, and Interstate 79 in 1975.

Despite these efforts of state legislation to combat economic losses, the decline of the coal, steel and rail industries impacted the workforce to the extent that 1.58 million Commonwealth workers were unemployed by 1969. The abandoned and closed industrial sites surrounded by the communities that provided the workers became known as “the rust belt.”
news of the war in Southeast Asia competed with the bleak economic outlook for many Pennsylvanians.
On March 8, 1965, American Marines landed on South Vietnam’s shores at Da Nang. They were the first combat troops the United States had officially sent to aid in the effort against the North Vietnamese. In May of 1965 Army troops would join the Marines. The period from
1965 to 1968 was the first phase of the Vietnam War, known as Americanization. President Lyndon B. Johnson authorized a gradual troop buildup based upon the advice of his administration officials and general officers. He sent American forces into combat in small amounts. He did not want to cause chaos at home by calling for a large number all at once. Also, he did not call up the National Guard or the Reserves. He sent what he thought was necessary from the regular forces. An additional burden was that commanders on the ground were forbidden by Washington to pursue the retreating enemy into sanctuaries within neighboring Laos or Cambodia. This meant that the enemy could disengage a firefight at will and cross the border to rest and re-supply for a fight on another day.

The initial method the Marines used against the North Vietnamese was defensive. This was the enclave strategy. It was designed to guard American installations. When attacked, the Marines had to request permission to fire at the enemy. Ultimately this strategy proved ineffective. It was replaced with the widely known search and destroy technique. Ground troops now took the offensive against the North Vietnamese. How difficult and deadly the war would be was shown in the August 1965 mission called Operation Starlite in the area surrounding Da Nang. Here the Americans found the first Viet Cong booby traps and tunnels. This was not a normal enemy. They did not use traditional warfare. The two sides did not stand and fight along a designated line as they had in World War II. In Vietnam, the Americans fought an enemy that emerged from and retreated into the jungle, attacking at their leisure.

The first large scale battle between U.S. forces and North Vietnamese regulars occurred in November of 1965. A brigade of the 1st Cavalry was ordered to find and fix an enemy force that had just retreated from besieging an American outpost at Plei Me. In the Ia Drang Valley, these American forces were brought in by helicopters. They landed directly in the middle of an
advancing North Vietnamese unit, instead of on the edge as they had planned. The American troops became strung out, separated, and ultimately isolated from one another. Outnumbered, they fought off wave upon wave of advancing North Vietnamese troops. The fight ended when helicopters and airplanes came to their aid. The airpower halted the attacking North Vietnamese. The Americans were then evacuated by helicopters. Approximately 300 Americans died in the Ia Drang Valley. To avoid shocking the American people, these numbers were released gradually into the body count numbers shown on the weekly news. In these counts South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese deaths were always higher than the Americans. Armed with this statistic, the American government made it appear that we were winning the war.

Between 1965 and 1967 the search and destroy mission was the tactic used by the Americans. Vietnam was also still regarded as a Cold War situation. The election of Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky as the president and vice president of South Vietnam in 1967 encouraged the United States government. They seemed level headed, committed to South Vietnam and ready to make reforms. Still, negotiations with North Vietnam yielded little results. But General William Westmoreland, the commanding American officer in South Vietnam, felt confident enough in the American troops to proclaim light at the end of the tunnel. After all, there were fewer Viet Cong coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. More villages in South Vietnam had been pacified. The number of American troops in Vietnam was decreasing.
Ky and Thieu’s government was gaining support. However, there were warning signs of coming danger.

Beginning in the late summer of 1967, the North Vietnamese increased attacks in the northern region of South Vietnam, around Khe Sanh, Con Thien, and Dak To. They hoped to direct American concern to that area and away from the major cities. The United States would think these were isolated battles, much like Dien Bien Phu many years earlier. These towns were to be held at any cost. And Westmoreland was wrong. More troops were coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In fact there were entirely new units; the North Vietnamese army was increasing in size. All these events would come together in January 1968 during Tet, the Vietnamese New Year celebration. Tet in previous years had meant a stop in the hostilities, but not in 1968.

On January 31, 1968, many small Viet Cong teams launched an offensive all across South Vietnam. On that day and the following, the forty-four provincial capitals were targeted. The ancient capital of Hue was particularly hard hit. Hundreds of key figures from the city were kidnapped and executed. The North Vietnamese desperately wanted to hold Hue for its historical significance. They determinedly fought off the American troops, who ultimately recaptured the city. By mid-March 1968 the Tet Offensive was halted. The Americans and
South Vietnamese claimed victory because the North Vietnamese had not gained any ground or territory.

For people in the United States, Tet was devastating. For years they had been told that the South Vietnamese and the Americans were winning the war against the North Vietnamese. The Tet Offensive made such claims seem outrageous. Lyndon Johnson addressed the nation in late March of 1968. He announced Operation Rolling Thunder would end and peace negotiations with North Vietnam would be pursued. He also would not seek reelection in 1968, shocking the nation. The remainder of the Vietnam War would continue under the newly elected president, Richard Nixon.
American involvement in Vietnam began long before the Marines landed at Da Nang in 1965. In 1950, while the French were still fighting the Vietnamese, MAAG-Indochina was established. This stood for Military Assistance and Advisory Group-Indochina. It totaled 63 people, mostly advisors. Their job was to oversee training of South Vietnamese soldiers, supervise the use of American equipment, and determine the best use for American funding.

With the Geneva Peace Accords in 1954, all American military personnel were required to leave Vietnam. They left briefly. But within a few years, they returned, disregarding the
Geneva Peace Accords. The next major increase in Americans in Vietnam was with the Green Berets. Special Forces for the Army, they attempted to train the South Vietnamese in counter-insurgency tactics. The Special Forces were never utilized completely. They were pushed aside in favor of traditional troops and methods of warfare. The year 1959 marked a significant event for Americans. Dale Buis and Chester Ovnand, MAAG advisors, became the first Americans killed in Vietnam.

The decade of the 1960s began with a change in the name of MAAG-Indochina to MAAG-Vietnam. This reflected the narrowing focus of the conflict. Reports from US military officials within Vietnam came to Kennedy stating that the Communist threat was real and that help was needed. So in 1962 he sent in 8,000 troops, stating their purpose was flood relief. Even at this early point the government was not being honest with the American people. That same year MACV, Military Assistance Command Vietnam, was established. Its first use was to assist MAAG-Vietnam, but it would eventually go on to be the center of American military activities.

The Marine landing at Da Nang in 1965 marked the first official use of American troops in Vietnam. To fill the ranks, the government utilized the draft, just as it had for the Civil War, World War II, and the Korean War. Since 1948 the draft had been in place to fill vacancies in the military that volunteers did not fill. Prior to Vietnam this seemed to be a reasonable system. Young men performed service for their country and then re-entered society. But, as the conflict in Vietnam grew fiercer and the casualty lists steadily increased, discontent grew, as did resistance to the draft. The entire force was not made up of draftees. There were volunteers who willingly joined the military, as in previous wars. To ease the strain on the regular military forces, President Johnson could have called up the Army Reserves. But he chose not to. Only
after President Richard Nixon entered the White House in 1969 would the Army Reserves be called up.

Young men across the country went to great lengths to avoid the draft. Deferment could be granted for those enrolled at colleges and universities. Many methods to dodge the draft developed. Physical problems were faked to avoid service. Some 30,000 fled to Canada. Others downright refused to go. Claiming conscientious objector status kept many out of the war, including former World Heavyweight Boxer Muhammad Ali. Draft cards were burned publicly. Spots in National Guard units were coveted and there were long waiting lists for many units. Going even farther some preferred jail time rather than a year in Vietnam. Some felt that military service was inevitable. So rather than be drafted into the army, they joined the “safer” branches, the Air Force and the Navy.

The draft was revised in 1969 to a different format. Instead of selecting people throughout the year, a draft lottery was held on December 1, 1969. Not since 1942, during World War II, had there been a draft lottery. This day was nerve-wracking for young men ages 18-26. In a glass bowl there were 366 blue plastic balls. They accounted for all possible birthdays. The order in which they were drawn determined who would go to Vietnam, based on their birthday. The lower the number drawn, the greater chance one would go to Vietnam. The higher the number when one’s birthday was drawn, for instance over 250, the less likely they were to go to Vietnam.

Vietnam was a unique war in the way the men served their country. In previous wars entire units were raised stateside where they trained, served, and returned together. In Vietnam the soldiers served their time individually. They would enter a unit already engaged in Vietnam, serving with men who were at various points in their tours of duty. Draftees served their
mandatory year and were sent home. Returning home was not a pleasant experience. Anti-war protesters often gathered at the bases, shouting obscenities at the troops. Regular, enlisted soldiers were often subjected to multiple tours of duty.

Unlike World War II where the entire economy was devoted to materials production, it changed little during Vietnam. The government had already devoted a large amount of money to military funding because of the Cold War. There was no need to expand this farther. Despite this, Pennsylvania industries contributed to the war effort. Gentex Corporation in Simpson, Pennsylvania, produced helmets for the Army, Marines, Navy, and Air Force. Pennsylvanians mobilized as well. Some 340,000 men would serve in Vietnam. Of this number, 3,147 would not return home including Dunmore, PA native Carol Ann Drazba. Second Lieutenant Drazba was an army nurse assigned to the 3rd Field Hospital in Saigon. She was killed in a helicopter crash near Saigon on February 18, 1966. Lieutenant Drazba is one of 8 military and 59 civilian women killed in-country during America’s involvement in the Vietnam War.
To many people, the 1960s were a decade of change, marred unfortunately by violence. This was a marked change from the social calm and economic prosperity of the 1950s.

Among the first disruptions to occur was in civil rights. Blacks, long fighting for equality since being freed from slavery in 1865, had made gains in the 1950s. Schools were forced to desegregate by order of the Supreme Court. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery bus in 1955. In 1960 four African-America students sat down at a lunch counter marked for whites only. They were known as the Greensboro 4 and began the sit-in movement. Freedom rides began the following year. Protestors of the segregated conditions would ride buses into the South and were often met with violence and bloodshed. Perhaps the most recognizable moment was in 1963 when Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I Have A Dream” speech to a crowd of 200,000 in Washington, D.C. Civil rights were just a part of the problems Americans faced.

For many Americans what happened in 1963 was an unforgettable point in their life. On November 22, Lee Harvey Oswald shot and killed President John. F. Kennedy in Dallas. It was the Pearl Harbor and September 11th to the 60s generation. The feeling of safety and security that the 1950s had projected began to crumble for many Americans. Lyndon B. Johnson became the President of the United States.
Along with the war in Vietnam, Johnson wanted to combat problems at home. His plan became known as the Great Society. He identified poverty as a serious problem and passed the Economic Recovery Act in response. It was not designed to support people, but to give those below the poverty line an opportunity to break free. The Act included work-study programs and Upward Bound to help gifted students attend college. Johnson also passed the Food Stamp Act to provide better nutrition for needy families. But among all his legislation, the Civil Rights Act was the most historically significant. It focused specifically on job discrimination and equal access to public facilities for people of all races. Although the Civil Rights Act passed into law, facilities in the South saw no change. They were still segregated. Additional measures on Johnson’s agenda were combating pollution, relaxing immigration laws, preserving the environment with new national parks, providing quality education to students regardless of where they lived, and providing more federal funding for students of all economic backgrounds to attend college. However optimistic Johnson remained for the success of these programs, he would be seriously tested in the later years of his presidency.

The growing conflict in Vietnam and increasing social tensions would define the latter half of the 1960s. In 1965 African-American discontent spilled over in Watts, a Los Angeles ghetto. Riots broke out in numerous other cities. And despite the fact that the Vietnam War was only in its first year, there were already protestors, one-tenth of one percent of the population. On the other hand, there were numerous pro-war rallies at many universities across the nation. At this point in time seventy-five percent of Americans supported the war. Yet the government was still worried about anti-war protesters.

By 1967 concerns in Vietnam outweighed the problems with civil rights at home. People began to see and feel the realities of the war. Americans killed in action increased by 5,445 from
the previous year to a total of 11,589 causalities. People at home began to question whether the Americans were winning in South Vietnam. The body counts claimed American deaths to be less than those of the opponent, but those were only numbers. The widely acclaimed American military, far superior to that of North Vietnam, had showed no signs of victory after two years of combat. Anti-war protests began to increase in number and size. It was time to question the government’s decisions. From San Francisco to New York City, college students to Vietnam veterans, speaking out against the war became commonplace. With more rioting from African Americans and growth in militant groups demanding integration, Johnson’s policies at home and abroad were failing.

The following year, 1968, would prove a pivotal and trying time to many Americans. The North Vietnamese offensive during Tet had convinced many Americans that victory in Vietnam was not possible. Since 1968 was an election year, success at home and in Vietnam would determine Johnson’s chances of retaining the presidency. However, seeing his failure in Vietnam and the disapproval at home, he announced on March 31st that he would not seek or accept the Democratic nomination for re-election. The nation was shocked. But just four days later they would receive an even bigger shock. Martin Luther King Jr., who peacefully advocated for integration of African Americans into society, was assassinated by James Earl Ray in Memphis, Tennessee. From that point forward the nation spiraled downward into a time of violence, disarray, and confusion. Riots ensued across the country as discontent increased.

The battle for the presidency proved dangerous. The battle for the Democratic nomination in light of Johnson’s absence raced forward in a heated frenzy. The obvious choice was Vice-president Hubert Humphrey. However, he was challenged by Bobby Kennedy, brother of the late John F. Kennedy, and Eugene McCarthy. Results from the early primaries proved
inconclusive and all three men hit the campaign trail. Yet the battle drew to a grinding halt in California, when Kennedy was assassinated on June 5th. This time there was no violent response, only stunned silence. People wondered how a country as great as the United States could drop into such a state of disarray and protest.

Frustrations culminated at the August 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. Activists flocked to the city to proclaim their stance on the issues peacefully. However, their peaceful protest turned violent when the Chicago police brutally attacked the protestors. The fact that Hubert Humphrey had received the nomination meant little to many Americans. The scenes from outside were more worrisome. So when Richard Nixon, Republican presidential candidate, ran on a platform of peace with honor in Vietnam and a policy of law and order at home, he became the next President of the United States. Coincidentally, 1968 would register the highest body count for American causalities of the war – 16,589.
Since Vietnam was a guerilla war without a set fighting front for the two enemies, new ideas and fighting techniques had to be developed. They were not as revolutionary as the airplane, tank, or atomic bomb, but still had their place.

The terrain of Vietnam, most jungle, presented a challenge to Americans. The North Vietnamese could easily use the jungle for cover, both before and after an attack. This was where the widely recognized defoliant Agent Orange was used. Sprayed from planes, it killed the jungle and took away cover for the North Vietnamese. It also destroyed crops used as food
for the guerillas. Yet the long-term human suffering and ecological destruction Agent Orange produced proved far deadlier. Birth defects, nerve disorders, skin diseases, and various cancers have since been linked to Agent Orange.

The major weapons invention was the M-16. An automatic rifle capable of one single shot or a full clip of thirty rounds, it would become the standard issue rifle for the US Army. But for warfare today, the introduction of what is commonly known as the “smart” bomb was monumental. In 1968, the first laser-guided missile was developed. The Thanh Hoa Bridge, a key piece of North Vietnamese infrastructure, was seriously damaged by the use of “smart” bombs in 1973. It had been unsuccessfully attacked by unguided missiles since the start of Operation Rolling Thunder in 1964.

On the ground, cargo trucks were extremely vulnerable to enemy attack. The 8th Transportation Group converted regular cargo trucks into “death on wheels.” Outfitted with machine guns and plated with steel armor, these gun trucks made moving troops and supplies much more secure when in convoys through enemy territory. In the air the AH-1 Cobra helicopter unleashed deadly firepower. It provided covered for the other helicopters carrying troops in and out of battle zones. But, what made it the most useful in Vietnam was the fact that it could fly in all weather conditions.

The jungle canopy and tropical climate in Vietnam, with frequent rain, fog, and wind, was uncooperative for carrying out airborne reconnaissance missions. Tracking the movement of supplies and troops into South Vietnam proved extremely difficult. So the military devised a

![CH-47 Chinook delivering supplies to an artillery battery. Photo credits: Army War College.](image-url)
group of sensors to assist them. All were dropped from a variety of aircraft and helicopters. The “Acoubuoy” was designed to work in trees when its parachute got stuck on branches as it descended. A “Spikebuoy” was mounted on a metal probe that went into the ground upon impact. “Adsid” devices, air-delivered seismic intrusion detectors, were dropped along roads in Laos. Most of the sensors would be buried in the ground. Only their leaf-like antennae remained visible. Even more advanced was the “Acousid,” acoustic and seismic intrusion detector. A microphone at the base of its antenna provided more detailed information than the seismic information collected in the underground seismic monitor.

For all the practical inventions Vietnam produced, there was also the not so useful. The army attempted the use of “people sniffers.” These devices supposedly tracked enemy soldiers by urine traces on the ground.

At home, many items recognizable today were invented in the Vietnam era from 1954-1975. In terms of technologies the laser, microchip, audiocassette, compact disc, handheld calculator, computer mouse, ATM, and laser printer came into being during this time. Toys evolved from the hula hoop and Barbie Dolls in the late 1950s to the first video games and Hackey Sacks by the 1970s. Other inventions included Astroturf, nondairy creamer, non-stick pans, acrylic paint, and the post-it-note. Beverages no longer just came in glass bottles or steel cans that needed to be opened with the pointed end of a bottle opener. The “ring-tab” opener on aluminum cans was introduced in 1962 and replaced by the current day “pull-tab” in 1975.

Among inventions and innovations, Pennsylvanians continued to lead the way. Shippingport was home to the country’s first nuclear-power plant in 1957. In 1961 the Civic Arena opened in Pittsburgh with its retractable roof, making it the first large building in the country with such a feature. One year later Dr. Robert J. Morrison introduced the first contact
lens. His laboratory in Harrisburg would be the only place contact lenses were produced until 1965.

But of the many advances, one stood out above all others for Americans. On July 16, 1969, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first humans to walk on the moon. The Americans had beaten the Soviets to this feat and claimed one victory for themselves in the Cold War.
Newly elected president Richard Nixon had campaigned on a strategy of law and order in the United States and peace with honor in Vietnam. He described the 1965-1968 escalation of the war under Lyndon B. Johnson as the Americanization phase. Nixon’s goal would be Vietnamization. Gradually he would withdraw American troops, removing the manpower support the United States had been providing. In return the United States would provide funding, technology, and support for the South Vietnamese troops to continue the fight. Whether the South Vietnamese would succeed or fail would be in their own hands. Additionally, Henry
Kissinger, first Nixon’s National Security Advisor and later his Secretary of State, would attempt to negotiate peace with the North Vietnamese.

For the first year of his presidency, public opinion of Nixon’s goals in Vietnam remained strong. Nixon began talks with the Soviets and Chinese. Conflicts along the border between these two Communist superpowers were disproving the myth of monolithic communism. The domino theory lost much of its credibility from this point forward. Americans further began to question why they were fighting in Vietnam. After the enemy’s large scale Tet Offensive of 1968, Communist forces sought to avoid contact with any larger number of U.S. troops. They broke down into smaller combat groups of ten to thirty men and fought the Americans where the terrain and conditions were to their advantage. One such battle in May of 1969 highlighted an attempt by the U.S. to stop the North Vietnamese from entering South Vietnam immediately south of the DMZ. The American military made nine assaults over six days to capture what became known as Hamburger Hill to people at home. Eventually the North Vietnamese retreated back into neighboring Laos and the battle drew to a close. However, the controversy the media created about Hamburger Hill was just beginning. People wondered if Nixon was really winding the war down as he promised with this apparent expansion of American involvement. Heavy casualties had been taken by units involved in the battle and when a few days later the hill was abandoned, fierce criticism ensued. People at home began to wonder what exactly was the purpose of the war in Vietnam, as well as what its goals were.

Yet even after the criticism he drew from Hamburger Hill, Nixon refused to scale back American involvement in Vietnam. Instead, he launched bombing raids into neighboring Laos and Cambodia beginning in the spring of 1969. However, it was his actions in 1970 that caused the most violent and fatal public protest of the war. In April of that year, Nixon authorized a
ground attack into Cambodia to seek out and destroy North Vietnamese military headquarters areas. Many Americans viewed this as an escalation of the war without Congressional approval. The promises Nixon had made to limit American involvement were broken.

Some of the more outspoken protests were found on college campuses. Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) buildings and other displays of government influence on college campuses were vandalized or became focal points for protests. The situation at Kent State University in Ohio required National Guardsmen to be called in to secure government property after a weekend of rioting and marches by students that resulted in an arson fire at the ROTC building on campus. On May 4, 1970, when students taunted the guardsmen and refused to disperse when the Riot Act was read, the guardsmen lowered their rifles. An unknown person gave the order to fire and shots rang out. Four students were killed; two protestors, two innocent bystanders and nine were wounded. Across the nation the reaction to the situation at Kent State drew more outrage than the invasion into Cambodia. There were more protests and memorial marches. Tensions had reached a breaking point and it was time for action to be taken.

Congress voted that beginning in July of 1970, no more money would be provided for operations into Cambodia. This marked a monumental achievement; it was the first time since the Gulf of Tonkin incident that the president had been challenged in regard to decision making in Vietnam. Congress even took it a step farther, repealing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Nixon had been stripped of his means to make war.

In 1971, the Americans supported the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos in a desperate effort to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Ultimately it was an utter failure when they were confronted by a heavily armed North Vietnamese force that now included tanks. Meanwhile peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese had made little progress. The Communists launched a
full out offensive into South Vietnam in April of 1972. The South Vietnamese could do little to defend their country and looked to Nixon for support. He responded with the most devastating air offensive to be carried out in the entire war. This included destruction of North Vietnamese railroads, supply lines, storage facilities, industrial targets, and power plants. With such substantial force placed against them, Nixon hoped to force the North Vietnamese to negotiate a peace settlement; but in the spring of 1972, victory still seemed within reach to the North Vietnamese. However, by the fall the offensive had lost momentum. South Vietnam was left precariously intact. Additionally, the last American ground combat troops had departed in August. The situation now rested solely on the South Vietnamese.

In October of 1972, Henry Kissinger and the North Vietnamese representative, Le Duc Tho, worked out a shaky peace settlement. But it did not address the issue of who would rule in South Vietnam, a key sticking point in the negotiations. Kissinger was very interested in working out a settlement before the November presidential election. He felt confident in declaring, “Peace is at hand.” Ultimately Nixon would be reelected and hostilities would continue due to this and other disputes in the proposed peace agreement. In December he unleashed a bombing campaign not to disrupt the North Vietnamese abilities to conduct war, but to destroy their will to fight. These were known as the Christmas Bombings. Two days after Christmas, the North Vietnamese agreed to negotiate.

These negotiations produced the Paris Accords, which formally ended American military involvement in Vietnam. By the end of March 1973, the only American soldiers remaining in South Vietnam were those guarding the American embassy in Saigon. But the fighting did not cease. Throughout 1973 South Vietnam worked to successfully regain territories lost in the North Vietnamese offensive of 1972. This gave the impression that the government was strong.
But just one year later in 1974, corruption and inflation consumed the unstable government. Assistance from the United States dwindled. President Nixon had resigned when the Watergate Scandal appeared likely to lead to his impeachment. Vice President Gerald Ford was in the White House. When the North Vietnamese began to exert pressure on South Vietnam in early 1975, President Ford refused to send any aid.

The 1975 communist offensive into South Vietnam quickly engulfed vast areas of the country and by April Saigon itself was threatened. President Ford permitted the evacuation of Americans, eligible Vietnamese, and those from foreign countries in South Vietnam. On April 29, 1975, the last American helicopter departed from South Vietnam. And on May 8, 1975, the victorious North Vietnamese declared a unified Vietnam under Communist rule. Ultimately, after twenty years of American military efforts, Vietnam had been lost to the Communists.

The United States refused to acknowledge the North Vietnamese victory and a reunited Vietnam. An embargo was placed against Vietnam and Cambodia. The united Vietnam was denied admission into the United Nations in 1975 and 1976. Finally they were admitted in 1977. The American government initially blocked International Monetary Fund efforts to provide economic assistance. The trade embargo was finally lifted in 1994 and trade relations between the two former enemies began to normalize. The Vietnamese continued to work on improving their economy. Today it remains Communist, but enjoys good relations with the United States.

The legacy of the Vietnam War in the United States was tremendous. The draft was removed and to this day the American military is an all volunteer force. The defeat in Vietnam left many future presidents cautious to commit military troops to international conflicts. With victory in the Persian Gulf War many Americans felt that the ghost of Vietnam had been kicked. However, the current war in Iraq has left many wondering and drawing comparisons to Vietnam.
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