

Democrats were themselves plagued by disillusionment over the shortcomings of their reforms. In the early 1960s the lofty rhetoric of the New Frontier and the Great Society had raised people's expectations. But competition for federal largesse was keen, and the shortage of funds left many promises unfulfilled, especially after 1965 when the Vietnam War siphoned funding away from domestic programs. In 1966 the government spent \$22 billion on the Vietnam War and only \$1.2 billion on the War on Poverty. Ultimately, as Martin Luther King Jr. put it, the Great Society was "shot down on the battlefields of Vietnam."

- ▶ Why, after years of resistance, did Congress pass the great civil rights acts of 1964 and 1965?
- ▶ What were the key components of the Great Society?
- ▶ What factors limited the success of the War on Poverty?

MAP 28.6 The Vietnam War, 1968

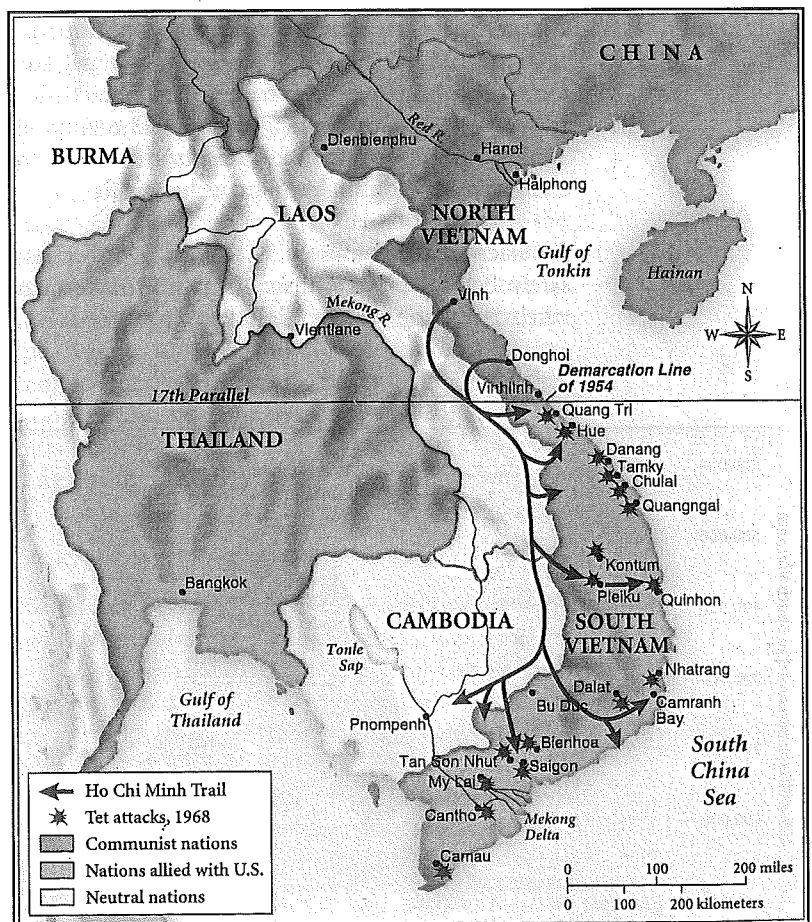
The Vietnam War was a guerrilla war, fought in skirmishes rather than set-piece battles. Despite repeated airstrikes, the United States was never able to halt the flow of North Vietnamese troops and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which wound through Laos and Cambodia. In January 1968 Vietcong forces launched the Tet offensive, a surprise attack on cities and provincial centers across South Vietnam. Although the attackers were pushed back with heavy losses, the Tet offensive revealed the futility of American efforts to suppress the Vietcong guerrillas and marked a turning point in the war.

Into the Quagmire, 1963–1968

Just as Kennedy inherited Vietnam from Eisenhower, so Lyndon Johnson inherited Vietnam from Kennedy. Only the inheritance was now more burdensome, for it became clear that only massive American intervention could prevent the collapse of South Vietnam (Map 28.6). Johnson was a subscriber, like Kennedy, to the Cold War tenets of global containment—that America's credibility was at stake in Vietnam and that the domino effect would have devastating consequences. But whereas, in Kennedy's case, second thoughts might have prevailed, that was an impossibility with Johnson. "I am not going to lose Vietnam," he vowed upon taking office. "I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went."

Escalation

Johnson was unwilling to level with the American people. For one thing, he doubted that they had the



stomach for the course he was contemplating. And he did not want to endanger his grand domestic agenda. He felt he “had no choice but to keep my foreign policy in the wings” because “the day it exploded into a major debate on the war, that day would be the beginning of the end of the Great Society.” So he ran in 1964 on the pledge that there be no escalation—no American boys fighting Vietnam’s fight—although he intended to do exactly that. And while he wanted congressional approval, perhaps even a declaration of war, Johnson needed a good excuse, which he found even before the 1964 campaign was over.

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. During the summer, while American naval forces were conducting reconnaissance missions off the North Vietnamese coast, Johnson got reports that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had fired on the destroyer *Maddox* in international waters. In the first attack, on August 2, the damage inflicted was limited to a single bullet hole; a second, on August 4, later proved to be only misread radar sightings. It didn’t matter. In a national emergency—real or imagined—the president’s call to arms is hard to resist. In the entire Congress, House and Senate, only two lone Senators voted against Johnson’s request for authorization to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” The Gulf of Tonkin resolution handed Johnson a mandate to conduct operations in Vietnam as he saw fit.

Americanizing the War. With the 1964 election safely behind him, Johnson began an American takeover of the war in Vietnam. The escalation,

which was accomplished in the early months of 1965, took two forms: deployment of American ground troops and the intensification of bombing against North Vietnam.

On March 8, 1965, the first Marines waded ashore at Da Nang, ostensibly to protect the huge American air base there. Soon they were skirmishing with the enemy. Over the next three years, the number of American troops in Vietnam grew dramatically (Figure 28.2). By 1966 more than 380,000 American soldiers were stationed in Vietnam; by 1967, 485,000; and by 1968, 536,000. The escalating demands of General William Westmoreland, the commander of U.S. forces, confirmed a fear Kennedy had expressed before his death that requesting troops was like taking a drink: “The effect wears off and you have to take another.”

In the meantime, in an operation called Rolling Thunder, Johnson unleashed a bombing campaign against North Vietnam. A special target was the Ho Chi Minh Trail, an elaborate network of trails, bridges, and shelters that stretched from North Vietnam through Cambodia and Laos into South Vietnam. By 1968 a million tons of bombs had fallen on North Vietnam, 800 tons a day for three-and-a-half years. Twice that tonnage was dropped on the jungles of South Vietnam as U.S. forces tried to flush out the Vietcong fighters.

To the surprise of American planners, the bombing had little effect on the Vietcong’s ability to wage war. The flow of troops and supplies continued unabated as the North Vietnamese quickly rebuilt roads and bridges, moved munitions plants underground, and constructed a network of tunnels and shelters. Instead of destroying North Vietnamese morale, Operation Rolling

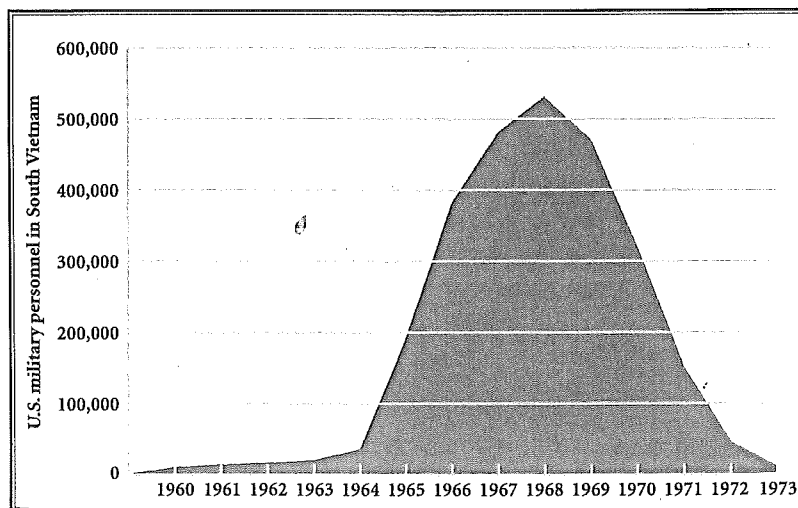


FIGURE 28.2 U.S. Troops in Vietnam, 1960–1973

This figure graphically tracks America’s involvement in Vietnam. After Lyndon Johnson decided on escalation in 1964, troop levels jumped from 23,300 to a peak of 536,000 personnel in 1968. Under Richard Nixon’s Vietnamization program, beginning in the summer of 1969, levels drastically declined; the last U.S. military forces left South Vietnam on March 29, 1973.

Thunder intensified their nationalism and hardened their will to fight.

The massive commitment of troops and air power devastated Vietnam's countryside. After one harsh but not unusual engagement, a commanding officer reported, using the logic of the time, "It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it." Besides the bombing, a defoliation campaign began to deprive guerrillas of cover, destroying crops and undercutting the economic and cultural base of Vietnamese society. (In later years defoliants such as Agent Orange were found to have highly toxic effects on humans, including the G.I.s serving in Vietnam.) In Saigon and other South Vietnamese cities, the influx of American soldiers and dollars distorted local economies, fostered corruption and prostitution, and triggered uncontrollable inflation and black-market activity.

In Washington the debate intensified about why the increased American presence was failing to turn the tide of the war. Some advisors argued that military action could accomplish little without reform in Saigon. Other critics claimed that the United States never fully committed itself to a "total victory" (see *Comparing American Voices*, "The Toll of War," pp. 880–881). Military strategy was inextricably tied to political considerations. For domestic reasons policymakers often searched for an elusive "middle ground" between all-out invasion of North Vietnam (and the possibility of war with China) and the politically unacceptable alternative of disengagement. Hoping to win a war of attrition, the Johnson administration gambled that American superiority in personnel and weaponry would ultimately triumph.

Public Opinion on Vietnam

A big part of Johnson's gamble was that he could retain the support of the American people. He had reason for confidence on that score: A broad, steady consensus had formed in earlier years favorable to Washington's conduct of the Cold War. Both Democrats and Republicans approved Johnson's escalation in Vietnam, and so did public opinion polls in 1965 and 1966. But then public opinion began to shift.

In July 1967 a Gallup poll revealed that for the first time a majority of Americans disapproved of Johnson's Vietnam policy and believed the war had reached a stalemate. Every night Americans saw on television U.S. soldiers advancing steadily and heard about staggering Vietcong "body counts," but increasingly television screens showed the carnage of war and dead and wounded Americans. Journalists

began to warn that the Johnson administration suffered from a "credibility gap." The administration, they charged, was concealing discouraging information about the war's progress. In February 1966 television coverage of hearings by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (chaired by J. William Fulbright, an outspoken critic of the war) raised further questions about the administration's policy.

The Rise of the Antiwar Movement. Out of these troubling developments an antiwar movement began to crystallize. Its core was, in addition to long-standing pacifist groups, a new generation of peace activists like SANE (the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy) that in the 1950s had protested atmospheric nuclear testing. After the escalation in 1965, they were joined by student groups, clergy, civil rights advocates, even Dr. Spock. The antiwar coalitions were soon capable of mounting mass demonstrations in Washington, bringing out 20,000 to 30,000 people at a time. Although they were a diverse lot, participants in these rallies shared a common skepticism about U.S. policy in Vietnam. They charged variously that intervention was morally wrong and antithetical to American ideals; that an independent, anti-Communist South Vietnam was unattainable; and that no American objective justified the suffering inflicted on the Vietnamese people (see *Voices from Abroad*, "Che Guevara: Vietnam and the World Freedom Struggle," p. 883).

Economic developments put Johnson even more on the defensive. The Vietnam War cost the taxpayers \$27 billion in 1967, and the deficit jumped from \$9.8 billion to \$23 billion. The cost of the war nudged the inflation rate upward. Only in the summer of 1967 did Johnson ask for a 10 percent surcharge on income taxes, an increase that Congress did not approve until 1968. By then the inflationary spiral that would plague the U.S. economy throughout the 1970s was well under way.

Student Activism

No group was more visible in these antiwar protests than college students. Many of them had been inspired by the black college students of Greensboro, North Carolina, who had sparked the wave of sit-ins that did so much to challenge segregation in the South (see Chapter 27). Galvanized by the struggle for racial justice, white students—many of whom had been raised in a privileged environment and inculcated with faith in American goodness—began to question U.S. foreign and domestic policy and middle-class conformity.



to press for bilingual education, the hiring of more Chicano teachers, and the creation of Chicano studies programs. By the 1970s dozens of such programs were offered at universities throughout the region.

The Native American Movement. American Indians also found a model in black struggles for equality. Numbering nearly 800,000 in the 1960s, they were exceedingly diverse, divided by language, tribal history, region, and degree of integration into American life. As a group, they shared a staggering unemployment rate (ten times the national average), the worst housing, the highest disease rates, and the least access to education of any group in the United States.

Since World War II, the National Congress of American Indians had lobbied for reform. In the 1960s the prevailing spirit of protest swept through Indian communities. Young militants, like their counterparts in the black civil rights movement, challenged the accommodationist approach of their elders. Proposing a new name for themselves—Native Americans—they embraced the concept of “Red Power.” Beginning in 1968 with the formation of the militant American Indian Movement (AIM), young Native Americans staged escalating protests, occupying the deserted federal penitentiary on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay and sitting-in at the headquarters of the hated Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C. In February 1973, a siege at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, the site of the infamous 1890 massacre of the Sioux, ended in a gun battle with the FBI.

Wounded Knee Revisited

In 1973 members of the American Indian Movement staged a seventy-one-day protest at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, site of the 1890 massacre of two hundred Sioux by U.S. soldiers (see Chapter 16). The takeover was sparked by the murder of a local Sioux by a group of whites but quickly expanded to include demands for basic reforms in federal Indian policy and tribal governance. © Bettmann/Corbis.

Although upsetting to many white onlookers, Native American protest did spur government action on tribal issues.

- ▶ What are the elements in the counterculture of the 1960s?
- ▶ How do you account for the Black Power movement?
- ▶ How do you explain the spillover of the black civil rights struggle into the Mexican American and Native American communities?

1968: A Year of Shocks

By 1968, a sense of crisis gripped the country. Riots in the cities, campus unrest, and a nose-thumbing counterculture seemed on the verge of tearing America apart. What crystallized the crisis was the fact that 1968 was an election year.

The Politics of Vietnam

President Johnson had gambled in 1965 on a quick victory, before the political cost of escalation at home came due. But there was no quick victory. North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces fought on, the South Vietnamese government enjoyed little popular support, and American casualties mounted. By early 1968, the death rate reached several hundred a week. Johnson and his generals kept

insisting that there was “light at the end of the tunnel.” Facts on the ground showed otherwise.

The Tet Offensive. On January 30, 1968, the Vietcong unleashed a massive, well-coordinated assault in South Vietnam. Timed to coincide with Tet, the lunar Vietnamese new year holiday, the offensive struck thirty-six of the forty-four provincial capitals and five of the six major cities, including Saigon, where Vietcong nearly overran the supposedly impregnable U.S. embassy. In strictly military terms, the Tet offensive was a failure, with very heavy Vietcong losses and the South Vietnamese government still intact. But psychologically, the effect was devastating. Television brought into American homes the shocking images—the American embassy under siege, with a pistol-wielding staff member peering warily from a window, the Saigon police chief placing a pistol to the head of a Vietcong suspect and, live on TV, executing him.

The Tet offensive made a mockery of official pronouncements that the United States was winning the war. Just before, a Gallup poll found that 56 percent of Americans considered themselves “hawks” (supporters of the war), while only 28 percent identified with the “doves” (war opponents). Three months later doves outnumbered hawks 42 to 41 percent. Without embracing the peace movement, many Americans simply concluded that the war was unwinnable (see *Reading American Pictures, “War and Its Aftermath: Images of the Vietnam Conflict, 1968 and 1982,”* p. 890).

So did a growing faction within the Democratic Party. Even before Tet, Senator Eugene J. McCarthy of Minnesota had entered the Democratic primaries as an antiwar candidate. A core of student activists “went clean for Gene” by cutting their hair and putting away their jeans. President Johnson won the early New Hampshire primary, but McCarthy received a stunning 42.2 percent of the vote. To make matters worse for the president, McCarthy’s showing propelled Senator Robert Kennedy, a far more formidable opponent, into the race.

Johnson realized that his political support was evaporating. At the end of an otherwise routine televised address on March 31, he stunned the nation by announcing that he would not seek reelection. He also called a partial halt to the bombing and vowed to devote his remaining months in office to the search for peace. On May 10, 1968, preliminary peace talks between the United States and North Vietnam opened in Paris.

Political Turmoil. Just four days after Johnson’s withdrawal from the presidential race, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. The

ensuing riots in cities across the country left forty-three people dead. Soon afterward, students protesting Columbia University’s plans for expanding into a neighboring ghetto occupied several campus buildings. The brutal response of the New York City police helped to radicalize even more students.

Then came the final tragedy of the year. On June 5, 1968, as he celebrated his victory in the California primary over Eugene McCarthy, Robert Kennedy was shot dead by a young Palestinian. Robert Kennedy’s assassination was a calamity for the Democratic Party because only he had seemed able to surmount the party’s Vietnam problem. In his brief but dramatic campaign, Kennedy had reached beyond the antiwar elements to traditional members of the New Deal coalition, including blue-collar workers, who were becoming susceptible to patriotic appeals from the right.

With Kennedy gone, the energy went out of the antiwar Democrats. McCarthy’s campaign limped along, while Senator George S. McGovern of South Dakota entered the Democratic race in an effort to keep the Kennedy forces together. Meanwhile, Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey lined up pledges from traditional Democratic constituencies—unions, urban machines, and state political organizations. Democrats found themselves on the verge of nominating not an antiwar candidate but a public figure closely associated with Johnson’s war policies.

The Siege of Chicago. At the August Democratic convention, the political divisions generated by the war consumed the party. Most of the drama occurred not in the convention hall but outside on the streets of Chicago. Thousands of protesters descended on the city. The most visible group, led by Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, a remarkable pair of troublemakers, claimed to represent the Youth International Party. To mock those inside the convention hall, these “Yippies” nominated a pig, Pigasus, for president. Their stunts, geared for maximum media exposure, diverted attention from the more serious, far more numerous activists who had come to Chicago to protest the war.

Richard J. Daley, the Democratic mayor, increasingly angry as protesters disrupted his convention, ordered the police to break up the demonstrations. Several nights of skirmishes between protesters and police culminated on the evening of the nominations. In what an official report later described as a “police riot,” police officers attacked protesters with Mace, tear gas, and clubs. As the nominating speeches proceeded, television networks broadcast films of the riot, cementing a popular impression of the Democrats as the party of disorder. Inside the hall the Democrats dispiritedly nominated Hubert