

# Vietnam Antiwar Movement

Of all the lessons learned from Vietnam, one rings louder than all the rest — it is impossible to win a long, protracted war without popular support. When the war in Vietnam began, many Americans believed that defending South Vietnam from communist aggression was in the national interest. Communism was threatening free governments across the globe. Any sign of non-intervention from the United States might encourage revolutions elsewhere.

As the war dragged on, more and more Americans grew weary of mounting casualties and escalating costs. The small antiwar movement grew into an unstoppable force, pressuring American leaders to reconsider its commitment. Peace movement leaders opposed the war on moral and economic grounds. The North Vietnamese, they argued, were fighting a patriotic war to rid themselves of foreign aggressors. Innocent Vietnamese peasants were being killed in the crossfire. American planes wrought environmental damage by dropping their defoliating chemicals.

## The Draft

The draft required all males to register with their local draft boards when they turned 18. Men between the ages of 18-26 would be called into military service. The draft was another major source of resentment among college students. The age of the average American soldier serving in Vietnam was 19, seven years younger than its World War II counterpart. Students observed that young Americans were legally old enough to fight and die, but were not permitted to vote or drink alcohol. Such criticism led to the 26th Amendment, which granted suffrage to 18-year-olds.

Because draft deferments were granted to college students, the less affluent and less educated made up a disproportionate percentage of combat troops.

As Americans' doubts about the war grew, thousands of men attempted to find ways around the draft. Some men sought out sympathetic doctors to grant medical exemptions, while others joined the National Guard or Coast Guard, which often secured a deferment from service in Vietnam. One of the most common ways to avoid the draft was to receive a college deferment, by which a young man enrolled in a university could put off his military service.

Once drafted, Americans with higher levels of education were often given military office jobs. About 80% of American ground troops in Vietnam came from the lower classes (either lower class whites or minorities). Latino and African American males were assigned to combat more regularly than drafted white Americans.

Antiwar demonstrations were few at first, with active participants numbering in the low thousands when Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Events in Southeast Asia and at home caused those numbers to grow as the years passed. As the Johnson Administration escalated the commitment, the peace movement grew. Television changed many minds. Millions of Americans watched body bags leave the Asian rice paddies every night in their living rooms.

## The Tet Offensive

During the Buddhist holiday of Tet (January 30, 1968), over 80,000 Vietcong troops emerged from their tunnels and attacked nearly every major metropolitan center in South Vietnam. Surprise strikes were made at the American base at Danang, and even the seemingly impenetrable American embassy in Saigon was attacked. During the weeks that followed, the South Vietnamese army and U.S. ground forces recaptured all of the lost territory, inflicting twice as many casualties on the Vietcong as suffered by the Americans. The showdown was a military victory for the United States, but American morale suffered an insurmountable blow.

When Operation Rolling Thunder began in 1965, only 15% of the American public opposed the war effort in Vietnam. As late as January 1968, only a few weeks before Tet, only 28% of the American public labeled themselves "doves" (people who opposed the war). But by April 1968, six weeks after the Tet Offensive, "doves" outnumbered "hawks" (strong supporters of the war) 42% to 41%. Only 28% of the American people were satisfied with President Johnson's handling of the war. The Tet Offensive convinced many Americans that government statements about the war being nearly over were false. After three years of intense bombing, billions of dollars and 500,000 troops, the Vietcong proved themselves capable of attacking anywhere they chose. The message was simple: this war was *not* almost over. The end was nowhere in sight.

After Tet, General Westmoreland requested an additional 200,000 troops to put added pressure on the Vietcong. His request was denied. President Johnson knew that activating that many reserves, bringing the total American commitment to nearly three quarters of a million soldiers was not politically tenable.

## Sagging U.S. Troop Morale

Declining public support brought declining troop morale. Many soldiers questioned the wisdom of American involvement. Soldiers indulged in alcohol, marijuana, and even heroin to escape their daily horrors. Soldiers who completed their yearlong tour of duty often found hostile receptions upon returning to the states.

The North Vietnamese sensed the crumbling of American resolve. They knew that the longer the war raged, the more antiwar sentiment in America would grow. They gambled that the American people would demand troop withdrawals before the military met its objectives.



Slogans like "How Many More?," "I'm a Viet Nam Dropout" and "Ship the GI's Home Now!" graced the buttons, flags and banners of the antiwar movement.

For the next five years they pretended to negotiate with United States, making proposals they knew would be rejected. With each passing day, the number of "hawks" in America decreased. Only a small percentage of Americans objected to the war on moral grounds, but a growing majority saw the war as an effort whose price of victory was way too high.

### **Give Peace a Chance**

The late 1960s became increasingly radical as the activists felt their demands were ignored. Peaceful demonstrations turned violent. When the police arrived to arrest protesters, the crowds often retaliated. Students occupied buildings across college campuses forcing many schools to cancel classes. Roads were blocked and ROTC buildings were burned. Doves clashed with police and the National Guard in August 1968, when antiwar demonstrators flocked to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago to prevent the nomination of a pro-war candidate. Despite the growing antiwar movement, a silent majority of Americans still supported the Vietnam effort. Many admitted that involvement was a mistake, but military defeat was unthinkable.

When Richard Nixon was inaugurated in January 1969, the nation was bitterly divided over what course of action to follow next.

### **Years of Withdrawal**

President Nixon had a plan to end American involvement in Vietnam. By the time he entered the White House in 1969, he knew the American war effort was failing. Greater military power may have brought a favorable outcome, but there were no guarantees. And the American people were less and less willing to support any sort of escalation with each passing day.

Immediate American withdrawal would amount to a defeat of the noncommunist South Vietnamese allies. Nixon announced a plan later known as Vietnamization. The United States would gradually withdraw troops from Southeast Asia as American military personnel turned more and more of the fighting over to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. In theory, as the South Vietnamese became more able to defend themselves, United States soldiers could go home without a communist takeover of Saigon.

Troop withdrawals did little to placate the antiwar movement. Demonstrators wanted an immediate and complete departure. Events in Vietnam and at home gave greater strength to the protesters.

In the spring of 1970, President Nixon announced a temporary invasion of neighboring Cambodia. Although Cambodia was technically neutral, the Ho Chi Minh trail stretched through its territory. Nixon ordered the Viet Cong bases located along the trail to be bombed.

### **Kent State and My Lai Massacres**

Peace advocates were enraged. They claimed that Nixon was expanding the war, not reducing it as promised. Protests were mounted. At Kent State University, students rioted in protest. They burned down the ROTC building located on campus, and destroyed local property. The governor of Ohio sent the National Guard to maintain order. A state of high tension and confusion hung between the Guard and the students. Several soldiers fired their rifles, leading to deaths of four students and the wounding of several others. This became known as the Kent State massacre.

The following year the American public learned about the My Lai massacre. In 1968, American soldiers opened fire on several hundred women and children in the tiny hamlet of My Lai (300-500 were killed). Some of the women were gang-raped and their dead bodies were found mutilated. How could this happen? It was not unusual for Viet Cong guerilla activity to be initiated from small villages.

Further, U.S. troops were tired, scared, and confused.

At first the Lieutenant who had given the order, William L. Calley, Jr., was declared guilty of murder, but the ruling was later overturned. When the incident was made public, moral outrage swept through the antiwar movement around the globe. They cited My Lai as an example of how American soldiers were killing innocent peasants.

### **The Pentagon Papers**

In 1971, the *New York Times* published excerpts from the *Pentagon Papers*, a top-secret overview of the history of government involvement in Vietnam. A participant in the study named Daniel Ellsberg believed the American public needed to know some of the secrets, so he leaked information to the press. The *Pentagon Papers* revealed a high-level deception of the American public by the Johnson Administration.

Many statements released about the military situation in Vietnam were simply untrue, including the possibility that even the bombing of American naval boats in the Gulf of Tonkin might never have happened. A growing credibility gap between the truth and what the government said was true caused many Americans to grow even more cynical about the war.

By December 1972, Nixon decided to escalate the bombing of North Vietnamese cities, including Hanoi. He hoped this initiative would push North Vietnam to the peace table. In January 1973, a ceasefire was reached, and the remaining American combat troops were withdrawn. Nixon called the agreement "peace with honor," but he knew the South Vietnamese Army would have difficulty maintaining control.

The North soon attacked the South and in April 1975 they captured Saigon. Vietnam was united into one communist nation. Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City. Cambodia and Laos soon followed with communist regimes of their own. The United States was finally out of Vietnam. But every single one of its political objectives for the region met with failure.

In November 1973, Congress passed the War Powers Act, which stipulated that a president must inform Congress within 48 hours of sending in forces into a hostile area without a declaration of war. In addition, the troops may remain there no longer than 90 days unless Congress approves the president's actions or declares war.