



◀ A young American soldier in Vietnam

## WITNESS HISTORY AUDIO

### American Soldiers on Patrol

The war in Vietnam was different from previous wars. There were no front lines—the enemy was everywhere. The terrain was difficult and littered with mines and booby traps. Drenched in sweat, the men waded through flooded rice paddies and along tangled paths, stopping occasionally to pick leeches out of their boots. One soldier recalled the difficulties of maneuvering in the overgrown and disorienting jungle during the war:

“You carried 50 to 70 pounds of equipment, and it was tough going, particularly in forested areas. Often you’d have to pull yourself along from one tree branch to the next, or we’d have to help each other by gripping hands. And you couldn’t see anything, so you didn’t know what was there around you.”

—Sergeant William Ehrhart,  
United States Marines

▲ Vietcong land mine used against American soldiers

# U.S. Involvement Grows

## Objectives

- Identify the factors that caused President Johnson to increase American troop strength in Vietnam.
- Assess the nature of the war in Vietnam and the difficulties faced by both sides.
- Evaluate the effects of low morale on American troops and on the home front.

## Terms and People

William Westmoreland   hawk  
napalm   dove

## NoteTaking

### Reading Skill: Identify Supporting Details

As you read, fill in the outline with details about the escalation of the American war effort.

- I. “Americanizing” the War
- A.
- 1.
  - 2.

**Why It Matters** After the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, President Johnson began to shift U.S. military efforts in Vietnam into high gear. But America’s leaders and soldiers soon found themselves stuck in a deadly quagmire with no quick victory in sight. The war began to weaken the economy, divide the American people, and erode the nation’s morale. **Section Focus Question: What were the causes and effects of America’s growing involvement in the Vietnam War?**

## “Americanizing” the War

In February 1965, President Johnson dramatically altered the U.S. role in the Vietnam War. In response to a Vietcong attack that killed American troops at Pleiku, Johnson ordered the start of Operation Rolling Thunder, the first sustained bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Johnson hoped that this new strategy of intensive bombing would convince North Vietnam to stop reinforcing the Vietcong in South Vietnam.

The bombs rained down destruction, but they failed to convince North Vietnam to make peace. As the communist forces continued to fight, the United States committed more troops to battle them on the ground. American soldiers moved beyond their adviser roles and assumed greater military responsibilities, while South Vietnamese

troops accepted a secondary, more limited role in the war. U.S. military and civilian leaders hoped that American airstrikes, along with the troops on the ground, would eventually force the communists to the peace table.

**American Assumptions and Strategies** Johnson's change in strategy in 1965 stemmed primarily from the counsel of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and General **William Westmoreland**, the American commander in South Vietnam. These two advisers believed that the United States needed to increase its military presence in Vietnam and do more of the fighting in order to win the war. Operation Rolling Thunder and increased troop commitments fulfilled this need to "Americanize" the war effort.

Beginning in March 1965, U.S. airstrikes hammered North Vietnam and Vietcong strong points in South Vietnam. Between 1965 and 1973, American pilots dropped more than 6 million tons of bombs on enemy positions—almost three times the tonnage dropped by all the combatants during World War II. In addition to conventional bombs, American pilots dropped napalm and sprayed Agent Orange. **Napalm** is a jellied gasoline which was dropped in large canisters that exploded on impact, covering large areas in flames. It clung to anything it touched and was difficult to extinguish. Agent Orange is an herbicide meant to kill plant life. Almost half of South Vietnam's forested areas were sprayed at least once, and the ecological impact was devastating. U.S. forces used it to defoliate the countryside and disrupt the enemy's food supply. Many scientists believe that Agent Orange causes cancers and other physical problems.

As airstrikes intensified, American ground troops landed in South Vietnam. On March 8, 1965, U.S. Marines arrived to defend the airbase at Da Nang. They were soon followed by other troops. The soldiers accepted a wide range of missions. Some guarded bases. Others conducted search-and-destroy missions to kill as many Vietcong guerrillas as they could. Helicopters ferried commandos to and from remote locations for quick strikes against enemy positions.

**An Elusive and Determined Enemy** Large-scale battles against Vietcong or North Vietnamese Army units were not typical of America's strategy in Vietnam. American soldiers generally fought lightly armed Vietcong guerrillas in small engagements. Ho Chi Minh's military doctrine hinged on fighting only when victory was assured, which meant never fighting on his opponents' terms. He compared his troops to a tiger, while the Americans were like an elephant. If the tiger stands still, the elephant will crush it. But if the tiger keeps moving and occasionally jumps on the elephant to take a bite out of it, the elephant will slowly bleed to death.

During the war, the Vietcong behaved like Ho's tiger. They traveled light, often carrying just a rifle and a few handfuls of rice. They dug tunnels to hide in during the day and emerged at night to ambush American patrols. They infiltrated American bases and set off explosives. They set booby traps that maimed and crippled American troops. Their strategy was to wear the American elephant down. The leaders of North Vietnam and the Vietcong remained convinced that if they could avoid losing the war, the Americans would eventually leave.

**A Costly and Frustrating War** American strategy during this stage of the war yielded limited results. U.S. bombers did disrupt North Vietnamese industry and slow the movement of supplies to the Vietcong. But when the communists did not sue for peace, American troop commitments and battlefield deaths escalated rapidly. By the end of 1965, there were 184,300 U.S. troops in Vietnam and only 636 American soldiers had died in the war. Three years later, there were more than half a million U.S. troops in Vietnam and the number of American dead had risen to more than 30,000.

### Vocabulary Builder

doctrine—(DAHK trihn) *n.* teachings

## Vietnam War, 1963–1967

Geography Interactive

For: Interactive map  
Web Code: nep-1603



### The Vietnam War Escalates

Year	Event
1961	President Kennedy sends military advisers to train South Vietnamese troops.
1963	More than 10,000 American military advisers train and fight in South Vietnam.
1964	Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passes; Number of U.S. troops doubles to more than 20,000.
1965	President Johnson authorizes bombing of North Vietnam; more than 180,000 U.S. troops are in South Vietnam.
1966–1967	Number of American soldiers in South Vietnam rises to nearly half a million.

**Map Skills** The Vietcong were resupplied with weapons, food, and fighters along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

**1. Locate:** (a) Saigon, (b) Hanoi, (c) Ho Chi Minh Trail

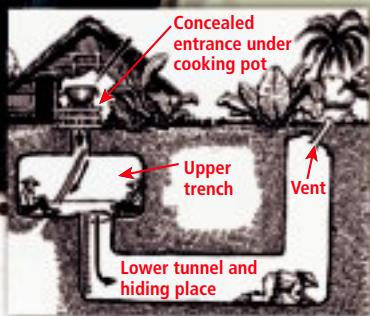
**2. Movement** Through what countries did the Vietcong travel as they moved supplies from North Vietnam to South Vietnam?

**3. Draw Conclusions** Why might a U.S. attack against the Ho Chi Minh Trail cause an international backlash against the United States?



# THE HARDSHIPS OF WAR IN VIETNAM

By 1968, the morale of American troops in Vietnam was on the wane. Units would fight to drive the Vietcong out of a village only to return weeks later to do the same job all over again. In a land where anyone could be the enemy, U.S. soldiers lived in a state of constant tension. Survival demanded remaining on the lookout for snipers, ambushes, and booby traps. The amount of rice cooking in a pot could be a clue to an impending attack. Was there just enough food for the people in view, or had others disappeared as the Americans approached? A moment of inattention could spell disaster.



▲ Vietcong guerrillas relied on large tunnel networks to hide from—and launch surprise attacks against—American forces.



Each year, the war cost more American dollars and claimed more American lives. But at the end of each year, the United States seemed no closer to success. America's mission was to help South Vietnam build a stable noncommunist nation and thereby win the "hearts and minds" of its citizens. But corruption plagued the South Vietnamese administrative structure. Outside of the major cities, the government enjoyed little real support. Although American forces won most of the larger battles, they did not achieve a successful end to the war. By 1967, the war had devolved into a stalemate. Some U.S. critics of the war compared it to a quagmire—muddy terrain that sinks underfoot and is difficult to exit.

✓ **Checkpoint** What was the strategic aim of Operation Rolling Thunder?

## Patriotism, Heroism, and Sinking Morale

For American soldiers in the field, the Vietnam War presented difficult challenges that demanded courage and patience. Unlike World War II, the Vietnam War did not emphasize territorial acquisition. The United States and its allies did not invade North Vietnam, march on Ho Chi Minh's capital of Hanoi, or attempt to destroy the communist regime. As in the Korean War, the United States was fearful of triggering both Chinese and Soviet entry into the conflict. Instead, American forces supported the survival and development of South Vietnam, which was besieged by the Vietcong and their North Vietnamese allies. In this fight, U.S. troops could never fully tell their friends from their enemies. Yet from the outset, they faced the dangers of Vietnam's battlefields with dedication and bravery.



▲ Despite the dangers they faced in combat, many American troops wrote reassuring letters to their worried families at home.

◀ A tank is used to evacuate wounded American soldiers from battle.

▲ U.S. soldiers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade exit their helicopter transports in South Vietnam.

**Danger on a New Battlefield** Although American troops won numerous battles, they could not win the war outright. The problem was that the Vietcong and North Vietnamese avoided significant engagements. Rather than expose themselves to superior American firepower, the communists fought smaller skirmishes where their small-unit abilities and their knowledge of the landscape bettered their chances for victory.

U.S. forces often had no alternative but to fight indecisive battles in the jungles, rice paddies, and mountains of Vietnam. Most of these battlefields abounded with natural cover. Clad in black pajamas, Vietcong gunmen would spring out of the dense foliage, attack with automatic rifles and grenades, and disappear back into the landscape. Much of this fighting took place at night, which reduced the effectiveness of American planes, artillery, and troop tactics.

**American Soldiers Fulfill Their Duty** Despite the trials of war, American soldiers adapted to adverse conditions in Vietnam and fought with the same intensity that U.S. forces had shown in World Wars I and II. Many fought to prevent the spread of communism. Some fought to protect villagers in South Vietnam and win their trust and respect. Others fought because their country was at war and they felt it was their duty. A medic in the First Infantry Division explained his reason for going to Vietnam:

**Primary Source** “I volunteered. . . . Ever since the American Revolution my family had people in all the different wars, and that was always the thing—when your country needs you, you go. You don’t ask a lot of questions. . . .”

—David Ross, United States Army medic

### Thinking Critically

- 1. Compare** How were communist combat tactics different from those of American troops?
- 2. Draw Conclusions** How did images such as these, shown on television news shows, affect the home front?

### History Interactive★

**For:** To learn more about the hardships of the Vietnam War  
**Web Code:** nep-1606



### Nurses in Vietnam

U.S. Army nurses Capt. Gladys E. Sepulveda, left, of Puerto Rico, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Lois Ferrari of Pittsburgh, rest on sandbags at Cam Ranh Bay in South Vietnam on July 14, 1965. They were awaiting transportation to Nha Trang where they were set to work in the 8<sup>th</sup> field hospital.

### Vocabulary Builder

**assert**—(uh SERT) *v.* to state positively; declare

Later, many did ask questions about America's involvement in the war, but overwhelmingly while they were in Vietnam, the soldiers met their duties with courage. More than 58,000 of them gave their lives for their country.


Women also displayed courage and valor. About 10,000 American military women served in Vietnam during the war. Most female military personnel were nurses. Not only did they face danger working close to the front, but they also had to cope with the emotional toll of constantly working with injured and dying soldiers and civilians.

Lynda Van Devanter volunteered to go to Vietnam and spent a year there as a nurse. Like other nurses, she confronted war and death on a daily basis. However, on one occasion she had to deliver a baby. She later recalled:

**Primary Source** “It was creation of life in the midst of all that destruction. And creation of life restored your sanity. . . . Those were the things that kept you going. That there was life coming. There was still hope.”

—Lynda Van Devanter, United States Army nurse

**Morale Declines as War Wears On** As the war lengthened, many Americans began to question U.S. involvement. The earliest soldiers in Vietnam had been volunteers, men committed to the fight against communism. But by the end of 1965, most American soldiers in Vietnam had been drafted into military service, and they were not as certain that preserving the government in South Vietnam was crucial to American interests. They sensed that many South Vietnamese people were indifferent—if not openly hostile—to their own nation. Increasingly, it seemed that Americans were dying to defend a nation whose people were unwilling to die to defend themselves.

 **Checkpoint** Why did the morale of American troops decline as the war continued?

## Doubt Grows on the Home Front

The lack of progress toward victory in Vietnam also led to doubt in the United States. When President Johnson had begun to send troops to war, Americans had expected a relatively quick victory. After all, the United States was a militarily powerful, technologically advanced country, and North Vietnam was a poor country with comparatively little technology. Over the next few years, the Johnson administration kept asserting that an American victory was close at hand. But when that did not come, many began to question the President's foreign policy.

**The War Weakens the Economy** The war strained government finances. President Johnson's Great Society plan called for enormous domestic spending to eliminate poverty, improve education and medical care, and fight racial discrimination. The costs of fighting a war on the other side of the world were just as mammoth. Although massive government spending lowered the unemployment rate, it also led to rising prices and inflation. The combination of heavy government spending, rising prices, and inflation forced Johnson to raise taxes.



Ultimately, Johnson had to cut back on his Great Society reform initiatives to help pay for the war.

**Antiwar Movement Begins to Emerge** As long as America's involvement in Vietnam had been small and relatively inexpensive, few politicians voiced serious opposition. Despite its bipartisan support for the Vietnam policies of Johnson's predecessors, after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Congress soon split over the President's escalation of the war.

Beginning in 1967, Congress—and eventually most of America—divided into two camps: hawks and doves. The mostly conservative **hawks** supported Johnson's war policy. Believing strongly in the containment of communism and the domino theory, they accepted rising troop levels, escalating costs, and increasing numbers of battlefield deaths. For the hawks, Vietnam was a crucial front in the Cold War. **Doves**, however, broke with Johnson's war policy. A diverse group of liberal politicians, pacifists, student radicals, and civil rights leaders, doves questioned the war on both moral and strategic grounds. For them, the conflict was a localized civil war, not a vital Cold War battleground.

Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, emerged as the early leader of the doves in Congress. A Democrat who had supported the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Fulbright soon came to believe that the war in Vietnam was a national civil war, not a Cold War conflict whose shots were called in Moscow or Beijing. In 1967 and 1968, Fulbright held public hearings on the war, providing a platform for critics of the conflict.

✓ **Checkpoint** What were the opposing viewpoints of hawks and doves?



### Analyzing Political Cartoons

**The Bombing Campaign** U.S. officials promised that increased bombing would bring America closer to victory.

1. Does the emotion on the person's face suggest that the plan is working? Explain.
2. Do you think the cartoonist was a hawk or a dove? Explain.

## SECTION

# 2 Assessment

### Progress Monitoring Online

For: Self-test with vocabulary practice  
Web Code: nea-1604

### Comprehension

- 1. Terms and People** For each item below, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- William Westmoreland
- napalm
- dove

**2. NoteTaking Reading Skill:**

**Identify Supporting Details** Use your outline to answer the Section Focus Question: What were the causes and effects of America's growing involvement in the Vietnam War?

### Writing About History

- 3. Quick Write: Support an Opinion With Evidence** Consider the following topic from the section: America's escalation of the war in Vietnam. Gather and present evidence from the text that supports the Americanization of the war effort.

### Critical Thinking

- 4. Evaluate Information** What military strategies did the United States employ in Vietnam? How successful were these strategies?
- 5. Summarize** What difficulties did American soldiers face in Vietnam? What effect did these difficulties have?
- 6. Contrast** How did the disagreements between hawks and doves reflect different views about war and world politics?