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**Did you know?**

Ho Chi Minh, the enemy of the United States in the Vietnam War, was
initially a friend. He worked with U.S. special forces in rescuing
downed American airmen and providing intelligence on Japanese
movements during the last year of World War II.

On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed national independence
for Vietnam. He began his speech with the words of the American
Declaration of Independence: “All men are created equal. The Creator
has given us certain inviolable Rights: the right to Life, the right to be
Free, and the right to achieve Happiness.”

The French refused to acknowledge Vietnamese independence and
fought a war to reconquer their former colony from 1946 to 1954. Ho
Chi Minh appealed to the U.S. for support, but the Truman and
Eisenhower administrations aided the French instead, preferring
French imperial rule to an independent, communist-led government
under Ho.

In July 1954, international peace agreements were signed in Geneva,
stipulating that Vietnam be temporarily divided for two years in order
to separate French and Viet Minh forces, and that unifying national
elections be held in July 1956.

The United States refused to sign or abide by the agreements. Instead,
the U.S. attempted to create a permanent, separate state in the south
and refused to hold unifying elections, recognizing that Ho Chi Minh
would easily win the presidency.

The new government of South Vietnam was authoritarian, repressive,
corrupt, and controlled by a foreign nation (the U.S.), all of which
sparked widespread protests and rebellion. The rebellion grew into an
insurgency war, which North Vietnam (led by Ho) began aiding in
January 1959.

The inability of the South Vietnamese government to defeat the
insurgency led to a decision by the Johnson administration to deploy
U.S. combat troops in March 1965. By 1968, over 500,000 U.S. troops were in South Vietnam.

The American War in Vietnam was primarily fought in the south and largely against the rural population. The U.S. also heavily bombed North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in order to slow the supply of arms and supplies to southern insurgents.

Between 1964 and 1973, the United States dropped 6,162,000 tons of bombs on Southeast Asia, which was 2.74 times the amount dropped in all of World War II (2,250,000 tons).[1]

American intervention in Southeast Asia resulted in the deaths of 1.5 to 3.8 million Vietnamese, 600,000 to 800,000 Cambodians, about one million Laotians, 58,220 American soldiers, and 6,500 other participants.[2]

Gallup polls asked Americans at different times, “Looking back, do you think the United States made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam?” The percentage who said “yes” increased from 24% in August 1965 to 41% in July 1967, to 58% in September 1969, to 61% in May 1971.[3]

Citizen opposition to the war in Vietnam developed into the largest antiwar movement in American history. The movement encompassed thousands of Vietnam veterans and active duty GIs as well as prominent religious leaders such as Martin Luther King.
I. Introduction

The Vietnamese people, by and large, viewed American intervention in their country in much the same way as they viewed French colonization, as an unwanted imposition of foreign control. The United States first supported French efforts to recolonize Vietnam after World War II. When the French were defeated, the U.S. imposed a new state in the southern half of the country. U.S. leaders called their handiwork “nation building.” Most Vietnamese regarded it as imperialism.

U.S. leaders approached Vietnam, not on the basis of its own history and experiences, but through the distorted lens of Cold War ideology. They claimed that a government led by Ho Chi Minh, a founding member of the Indochinese Communist Party, constituted a threat to the United States and the “Free World.” This was strange to the Vietnamese, as their revolution for independence was aimed at ending French colonialism, not unlike the American revolution against British colonialism in 1776. Indeed, the leader of the Vietnamese revolution, Ho Chi Minh, was inspired by the Declaration of Independence and hoped for U.S. aid. He was also immensely popular with the people – the George Washington of Vietnam – and would likely have been elected president had the U.S. allowed democratic national elections to take place.

U.S. actions to permanently divide the country and establish a foreign-backed government in the south provoked strong resistance. In an interview with the American historian Christian Appy, General Vo Nguyen Giap, the military architect of victories over the French and the Americans, explained why Vietnamese resistance fighters fought and prevailed:
We won the war because we would rather die than live in slavery. Our history proves this. Our deepest aspiration has always been self-determination. History is not made with “ifs,” but if American leaders had been wiser I think we could have been spared the war. In my opinion, the Vietnam War was not in the American interest. It was a big mistake. U.S. expenditures were vast, and for the Vietnamese people, casualties were enormous. The Americans inflicted insane atrocities. The My Lai massacre was just an example. Perhaps the American people know this already, but they need to be told again and understand more.

American illusions about Vietnam took on tragic proportions as the war got underway in the early 1960s. Given widespread opposition to the U.S.-backed government in the southern countryside, the target of U.S. military operations became the rural population. U.S. and South Vietnamese forces burned, bombed, strafed, and napalmed villages deemed pro-insurgent; declared whole areas “free fire zones”; sprayed toxic pesticides such as Agent Orange and Agent Blue on forests, jungles, and rice fields of villages suspected of feeding insurgents; relocated villagers to barbed wire “safe hamlets” where they could be supervised; and conducted clandestine assassinations of village leaders suspected of helping the enemy. The “war in Vietnam,” said United Nations Secretary-General U Thant in 1966, “is one of the most barbarous wars in history.”

The immense costs of the war - an estimated three million deaths in Southeast Asia - are magnified by the fact that the war was utterly unnecessary. Vietnam posed no security threat to the United States or to its allies. The U.S. did not act in self-defense, the only legitimate basis for war in international law apart from UN-approved collective security actions. The historian Fredrik Logevall has written extensively about missed opportunities for peace in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. The international community, including France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, China, India, and Japan, all pushed for a negotiated settlement. The United States was largely isolated in seeking a military “solution” in Vietnam.
At the heart of American misconceptions was the belief that the U.S. was fighting for a good and noble purpose – to “save” Vietnam from the evil communists. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. challenged this Cold War belief in his “Beyond Vietnam” speech in April 1967. He called on Americans “to admit we have been wrong from the beginning of our adventure in Vietnam, that we have been detrimental to the life of the Vietnamese people.” He advised that every citizen “of humane convictions must decide on the protest that best suits his [or her] convictions, but we must all protest.”

Many Americans did so, to their credit, agitating and organizing for “a halt to this tragic war.” Their story is given prominence in this historical account.

Had the U.S. won the Vietnam War, the moral calculus would be the same: it would still be an unnecessary and unjust war. By way of contrast, the U.S. won its colonial war in the Philippines at the turn of the 20th century, but that “success” hardly gives the war moral legitimacy.

The general consensus among American historians is that the American War in Vietnam was a “mistake,” although interpretations differ as to what exactly this means. This essay takes the view that the ‘mistake” was a product of U.S. global ambitions and misperceptions that developed in the aftermath of World War II and were compounded over time. It probes deeply into the origins and nature of the war, making it a long article for a website (about 70,000 words), with about one-third devoted to the antiwar movement at home (Part IV). A half-century of excellent scholarship on the Vietnam War is drawn together and frequently cited in this essay.
II. Origins of U.S. involvement in Vietnam

The Vietnamese people have a long history of resistance to foreign rule. Before the French arrived in the 17th century, the traditional adversary had been Chinese kingdoms. Vietnamese tradition reveres the Trưng sisters who gave their lives in 43 AD in the first resistance movement against Chinese domination. French Catholic missionaries first arrived around 1620. Their efforts to convert the population and gain political influence led to periodic persecution and banishment, which in turn served as pretexts for French military intervention.

By the mid-19th century, France was ready to build an empire in Southeast Asia. With superior weapons, French forces attacked the port city of Danang in 1858, seized Saigon the following year, and secured control over the whole of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia by 1884. They divided Vietnam into three parts (Cochin China, Annam, Tonkin) and renamed their colonial acquisitions French Indochina. The French exploited Vietnam for rice and rubber, formed an alliance with the Vietnamese royalty to rule more effectively, and suppressed resistance movements. Amid the foreign takeover, Vietnamese life remained rooted in the extended family, village life, reverence for the land, and Confucian and Buddhist beliefs and practices, in the main. The population grew from about 10 million in 1884 to 24 million in 1945, when the Vietnamese began their thirty-
year struggle for national independence.

Like the British, the French rationalized their imperial control over Asian and African peoples as a “civilizing mission,” a benevolent project to uplift the supposedly inferior races and cultures. One of the ironies of this mission was that many of the colonials who embraced Western ideas of political freedom and independence became leaders of anti-imperialist movements seeking to overthrow the colonial regimes. Such was the case with Nguyen Sinh Cung, who later changed his name to Ho Chi Minh, or “he who enlightens.” Ho was born in a small village in central Vietnam in 1890, attended a prestigious Franco-Vietnamese academy in the city of Hue, and became the foremost leader of the Vietnamese national independence movement.

Ho made his first appearance on the world stage at the Versailles peace conference in 1919, following World War I. Wearing a borrowed suit and using the pseudonym Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot), Ho presented a letter to the leaders of the victorious nations respectfully asking for recognition of the rights of the Vietnamese people. These rights included equal justice in the courts; freedoms of the press, speech, assembly, education, and travel; and the “replacement of the [colonial] regime of arbitrary decrees by a regime of law.”[10] U.S. President Woodrow Wilson had previously indicated his support for the principle of self-determination, telling Congress on February 11, 1918:

National aspirations must be respected; peoples may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent. “Self-determination” is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of actions which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril.[11]

Yet the victorious allies neither accepted Ho’s letter nor endorsed the principle of national self-determination for colonized peoples outside Europe. Instead, France and Great Britain expanded their empires in the Middle East. Ho’s efforts nevertheless made him famous in Vietnam.
In the aftermath of the Versailles Conference, Ho turned to socialist writings for inspiration, and to socialist and communist parties for support. Living in Paris, he read Vladimir Lenin’s “Thesis on the National and Colonial Questions” and came to the conclusion that “only Socialism and Communism can liberate the oppressed nations.” In 1920, Ho became a founding member of the French Communist Party. In the summer of that year, the Second Congress of the Communist International met in Petrograd and Moscow, and declared its support for anti-colonial revolutions, offering revolutionaries space for headquarters and limited funding. In 1930, Ho became a founding member of the Indochinese Communist Party.

For Ho and many other colonial subjects, the socialist-communist ideal was attractive not only because it condemned imperialism but also because it heralded a more just economic and social order. The French had long exploited Vietnamese workers in factories, mines, and farms, maintaining a system of land tenure that left much of the rural population in misery. “By the 1920s and 1930s,” notes the historian Ngo Vinh Long, “over half of the peasants in Tonkin and Annam were completely landless, and about 90 percent of those who owned any land owned next to nothing.... French statistics show that in Cochin China some 80 percent of the paddies were worked by tenants and sharecroppers,” where the landlords typically took half the produce. The net effect of this system was that many peasants went hungry for months, eating perhaps only one meal a day.

The Vietnamese Community Party platform, approved on February 18, 1930, spoke to this economic injustice as well as to the desire for national independence. Its first three goals were to “overthrow French imperialism,” “make Indochina completely independent,” and “establish a worker-peasant and soldier government.” The next seven called for the redistribution of land to poor peasants, the transfer of “banks and other enterprises belonging to the imperialists” to the worker-peasant government, the abolition of “unjust taxes,” and the establishment of an “eight-hour working day,”
universal education, and “equality between man and woman.”[14]

During the early 1930s, the party formed a united front with non-communist groups in opposing French rule, initiating strikes and taking over provincial administrations. The French suppressed the rebellion, killing and imprisoning many rebels and their supporters. So many were imprisoned, according to the historian David G. Marr, that the jails became “universities of revolutionary theory and practice,” building a foundation for the next phase of the struggle.[15] The non-communist parties dissipated, leaving Ho Chi Minh’s communist party as the leading anti-imperialist organization.

With the outbreak of World War II, a new oppressor arrived in Vietnam. In September 1940, the Japanese took control of French Indochina through an agreement with the French that gave them ultimate power while leaving local matters in French hands. Ho Chi Minh responded by organizing underground nationalist groups into the Vietnamese Independence League, or Viet Minh, in May 1941. The goal was to rid the country of both the Japanese and the French. During the war, the Viet Minh operated a clandestine army and initiated a land redistribution program. In 1944-45, a combination of droughts, floods, war conditions, and Japanese policies produced a catastrophic famine that took the lives of one to two million Vietnamese. The Japanese continued to stockpile rice for their troops and for export to Japan even as the Vietnamese starved to death. The Viet Minh attacked the storehouses and distributed the confiscated rice, gaining them widespread popular support. Access to food and land remained the paramount issues in Vietnam long after the war.[16]
During the last months of the war, the Viet Minh formed an alliance with American forces against the Japanese. U.S. agents from the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), relied on Viet Minh networks for intelligence information and for assistance in rescuing downed American airmen. OSS officer Major Archimedes Patti was in charge of training some 400 Viet Minh soldiers in the use of American weapons. He was impressed with their courage and tenacity as well as with Ho Chi Minh’s leadership qualities. The OSS appointed Ho “Agent 19” and gave him a gift of six revolvers. Ho appreciated the gift, but America’s friendship was far more important. He hoped it would help him secure Vietnamese national independence after the war.\textsuperscript{[17]}

The idea that the U.S. would support a communist-led national independence movement after the war was not so far-fetched in 1945 as it would seem later. The U.S. and the Soviet Union were allies during the war, both rejoicing at the defeat of Nazi Germany. The U.S. itself had undergone a major transformation, legislating working class protections and social welfare programs during the Great Depression, creating a mixed (capitalist-social welfare) economy. Most importantly, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had issued a joint statement in August 1941 (the Atlantic Charter) that guaranteed the right of self-
Churchill later backed off from the pledge, insisting that it should not apply to British colonies. Roosevelt called for an international trusteeship system and gained the support of Joseph Stalin for this idea at the wartime conference in Tehran in November 1943. Roosevelt told to the Soviet leader “that after 100 years of French rule in Indochina, the inhabitants were worse off than before.”

Roosevelt died in April 1945, the very month that delegates from fifty nations met in San Francisco to create the Charter of the United Nations. The charter encouraged “respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all,” but at the behest of Great Britain and France, allowed the colonial powers to keep their possessions if they wished. Still, Ho Chi Minh had grounds for hope. Nationalism was rising across the colonial world, the imperial European powers had been weakened by the war, and world opinion was turning against the very idea of imperialism and the racism and aggression it implied. During the thirty-year period following World War II, virtually all European colonies gained their independence.

Vietnamese independence and the First Indochina War

On August 15, 1945, news of the Japanese surrender reached Vietnam along with word that Chinese troops would supervise the surrender in the north, and British troops in the South. A few days later, having made certain the Japanese would not interfere, the Viet Minh called for mass rallies in Hanoi and later in Hue and Saigon. Thousands of peasants poured into the cities from the countryside, demonstrating their support for the Viet Minh in huge rallies. On August 30, Emperor Bao Dai, who had served the French and then the Japanese (and would live to serve the French once more), presented the imperial seal and sword, symbols of Vietnamese sovereignty, to representatives of the Viet Minh and voluntarily abdicated the throne.
On September 2, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed national independence, inaugurating the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Facing a crowd of half a million people in the main square of Hanoi, Ho began with the words of the American Declaration of Independence. “All men are created equal. The Creator has given us certain inviolable Rights: the right to Life, the right to be Free, and the right to achieve Happiness.” At this point he paused, looked out over the crowd, and asked, “Do you hear me distinctly, fellow countrymen?” The crowd gave a great cheer. Ho named his source and explained its meaning: “These immortal words are taken from the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In a larger sense this means that all the people on earth are born equal, all the people have the right to live, to be happy, to be free.” Ho then read an indictment of French crimes, listing them one by one, and ended with a call for national unity and assurance of international support:

The whole Vietnamese people, animated by a common purpose, are determined to fight to the bitter end against any attempt by the French colonialists to reconquer their country. We are convinced that the Allied nations which at Tehran and San Francisco have acknowledged the principle of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam….Vietnam has the right to be a free and independent country – and in fact is so already."
The issue was hardly settled. None of the great powers officially recognized the government of Ho Chi Minh and the French were intent on restoring their empire in Southeast Asia. In late September 1945, with the support of British administrators in southern Vietnam, French troops engineered a coup d’état in Saigon, forcing the Viet Minh to flee the city and regroup in the countryside or retreat to the north. More French troops soon arrived, 13,000 of whom were transported by a dozen U.S. Merchant Marine ships. In the first American protest against U.S. policy in Vietnam, some American sailors wrote letters to members of Congress and newspaper editors objecting to their mission. On November 2, the crew of the Winchester Victory sent a cablegram to President Harry Truman criticizing the use of “this and other American vessels for carrying foreign combat troops to foreign soil for the purpose of engaging in hostilities to further the
imperialist policies of foreign
governments when there are
American soldiers waiting to
come home.”[21]

In the north, Ho Chi Minh’s new government retained control but faced continuing famine and another foreign menace: 180,000 Chinese Nationalist troops who treated Vietnam as conquered territory, looting with impunity. The DRV addressed the famine through careful rationing and a mass campaign for planting food crops. By March 1946, the famine had ended – a stunning achievement. The DRV also initiated industrial development, labor and taxation reforms, and literacy programs. “Within six months of taking power,” writes the historian Marilyn Young, “under their own government and without assistance from any foreign country, the people of North and Central Vietnam were free of famine and colonial taxation, and on the way to universal literacy.”[22]

In order to get rid of the Chinese troops, Ho made an unusual deal with French negotiator Jean Sainteny to allow 15,000 French troops to replace the Chinese in the north. The agreement, signed on March 6, promised that the French government would recognize the Vietnamese Republic as a Free State within the Indochinese Federation of the French Union, and that all French troops would be removed from Vietnam, north and south, by 1952.[23] Some of Ho’s comrades questioned the wisdom of allowing French troops to reoccupy the north. Ho reportedly responded:

Don’t you remember your history? The last time the Chinese came, they stayed a thousand years. The French are foreigners. They are weak. Colonialism is dying. The white man is finished in Asia. But if the Chinese stay now, they will never go. As for me, I prefer to sniff French dung for five years than eat Chinese dung for the rest of my life.[24]

Ho spent the summer in Paris trying to lock in the agreement, but the French government was purposely evasive, as it was conspiring to undermine Vietnamese independence. Ho was nevertheless well received in the French media. A French
reporter who met him noted his “engaging manner and extraordinary gift for making contact,” which “at once brought a warm and direct exchange of views and gave a startlingly fresh ring to commonplace words.”[25] Ho returned to Vietnam in October and appealed to the Vietnamese people for patience. The French, however, showed their hand on November 22, 1946. Using a dispute over control of customs in Haiphong as a pretext, French warships bombarded the unprotected port city, killing at least 6,000 and wounding some 25,000. On December 19, Ho issued a call for “nationwide resistance”:

For the sake of peace, we have made concessions. But the more conciliatory we are, the more aggressive the French colonists become. They are determined to reconquer our country. No! We would rather sacrifice everything. We are determined not to lose our country and not be enslaved. Dear compatriots, we must rise up. Male and female, old and young, regardless of religion, political party, ethnicity, all Vietnamese must rise up to fight French colonialism and to save the fatherland.[26]

The First Indochina War had begun. It pitted a combined French force of 348,000 – 80,000 French soldiers, 20,000 Foreign Legionnaires, 48,000 North Africans, and 200,000 Vietnamese working for the French – against some 350,000 Viet Minh troops, with a supporting cast of millions under the leadership of President Ho Chi Minh, General Vo Nguyen Giap, and the DRV government.

What was the U.S. role in the First Indochina War?
U.S. leaders generally viewed developments in the region through French eyes. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States maintained official neutrality but quietly supported the French. American policy was succinctly expressed in an October 5, 1945, telegram from Dean Acheson, then Acting Secretary of State, to the American chargé d’affaires in China: “US has no thought of opposing the reestablishment of French control in Indochina and no official statement by [the] US Government has questioned even by implication French sovereignty over Indochina.” Of course, the cable continued, “the willingness of the US to see French control reestablished assumes that [the] French claim to have the support of the population of Indochina is borne out by future events.”[27]

Acheson thus offered support for the re-imposition of French control over Vietnam but cautioned that the French should strive to gain the support of the people. It was a contradictory formula, as the vast majority of Vietnamese had no desire to live under French rule. Yet it allowed the Truman administration to rationalize its support for French imperialism as something other than imperialism. In deference to American sensibilities, the French made a symbolic gesture to “Vietnamese independence” by appointing former emperor Bao Dai as “head
of state” in March 1949.

Ho Chi Minh appealed to President Truman for support in a series of six letters in 1945 and 1946. All of them went unanswered. In his letter of February 16, 1946, Ho reminded Truman that it was the Viet Minh, not the French, who had fought the Japanese in Indochina; that all the wartime conferences promised independence to subject peoples; that Vietnam wanted no more than the United States had “graciously granted” the Philippines (the U.S. granted independence to the Philippines in 1946, after 48 years of colonial control); and that in the five months his government had been in office, peace and order had prevailed. Finally, Ho made the larger point that French “aggression on a peace-loving people is a direct menace to world security. It implies the complicity, or at least the connivance of the Great Democracies.” He called on both the United States and the newly formed United Nations to stop the “unjust war” of the French against the Vietnamese people. On February 28, 1946, Ho sent an urgent telegram. As the “French population and troops are making active preparations for a coup de main in Hanoi and for military aggression,” he wrote, “I therefore most earnestly appeal to you personally and to the American people to interfere urgently in support of our independence and help making the negotiations more in keeping with the principles of the Atlantic and San Francisco [United Nations] charters.”

In hindsight, Truman’s failure to respond to Ho’s entreaties was a tragic error. The Viet Minh were not beholden to the Soviet Union, and the Viet Minh’s egalitarian economic program posed no threat to the United States. Had Truman offered aid to Ho’s independent government, the French would likely have been deterred from re-imposing their control, which means that there would have been no First Indochina War, no U.S. involvement in that war, and no subsequent American War in Vietnam.
As it was, the U.S. actively supported France’s attempt to recolonize Vietnam, in part to secure French participation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Immediately after the war broke out, the U.S. sent material aid to the French forces and established a $160 million credit line in late 1946. The Truman administration elided the fact that it was supporting French colonization by claiming that the DRV and the Viet Minh were not truly nationalist but rather a false front acting on behalf of the Soviet Union. This spurious rationale was quickly picked up by French leaders, who claimed that their war in Vietnam was not a contest between colonials and imperialists but a global struggle between “communism” and the “free world.” According to this reading, the French were defending self-determination in Vietnam while the Viet Minh and DRV were thwarting it, being agents of the Soviet Union. For the French, the new rationale served to replace its outdated “civilizing mission” as well as to secure aid from the United States. According to the American scholars George M. Kahin and John W. Lewis:

In accordance with these new American priorities, France’s position on Vietnam was now described in terms of the Free World’s stand against communist expansionism, and Washington ceased to perceive the war in Vietnam as primarily a local colonial conflict. Now linked to the Cold War, Vietnam was regarded as an area of strategic importance to the United States. [29]
There were people in the U.S. State Department, such as Abbot Low Moffat, head of the Division of Southeast Asia, who understood the intense nationalism of the Vietnamese people and could see through the imperial fictions, but their views were subordinate to those of higher authorities, particularly Secretary of State Acheson and President Truman. Acheson was of the view that all communist movements, political parties, leaders, and liberation armies were part of a global conspiracy directed by Moscow. Although his own department found no evidence of Moscow's controlling hand in Vietnam (after three years of searching), Acheson claimed a collusion by virtue of both adhering to “Commie Doctrine.” Moffat traveled to Hanoi and met with Ho in December 1946. He reported to Acheson that Ho might be a communist, but he was first and foremost a nationalist seeking to establish an independent national state. Moffat maintained that “the majority of natives stoutly maintain that Ho Chi Minh is the man, and the only one, who represents them and they will oppose the putting forward of any other candidate as the creation of but another puppet.”[30] His message fell on deaf ears.

President Truman outlined his worldview in a speech to Congress on March 12, 1947, which became known as the Truman Doctrine. “At the present moment in world history," he said, “nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life.” One way is “based on the will of the majority” and “distinguished by free institutions.” The other is “based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority” and
relies on “terror and oppression.” The role of the United States, he asserted, should be “to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”

Applied to the real world, this directive should have compelled the U.S. to support Ho Chi Minh’s national independence movement in Vietnam. The Viet Minh, after all, were resisting “attempted subjugation” by an armed minority (the French) that was imposing its will upon the majority (the Vietnamese people). Yet Truman simply omitted from his abstract moral paradigm the great struggles against European imperialism underway in Asia. He wanted to rouse the American public and Congress against Washington’s new rival, the Soviet Union, and did not want to complicate this with the fact that America’s best friends, Great Britain and France, were the major source of foreign oppression across Asia and Africa. Soviet oppression, in contrast, was limited to Eastern Europe and its own people. This telling omission had far-reaching policy implications in the years to come, as U.S. leaders misread national liberation movements as part of a Soviet conspiracy to take over the world. Guided by this faulty blueprint, Truman and subsequent U.S. leaders often sided with the oppressors, as was the case in Vietnam, even as they claimed to be protecting the “free world.”
The anti-communist mission also masked America’s own pretensions to world power. In February 1941, magazine publisher Henry Luce wrote that Americans should “accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation of the world and in consequence to assert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such means as we see fit.” While the victorious Allies of World War II had a responsibility to establish governments in nations they had liberated, American ambitions went well beyond this. Impelled by an inflated sense of mission and sensing an opportunity to expand U.S. influence, economic interests, and control, U.S. leaders began to think and act like leaders of a global empire. Already in control of Japan and southern Korea, they sought to establish a string of military and naval bases from Japan to the Philippines, to Thailand, and to integrate the whole region into a capitalist-oriented economy centered around a rebuilt Japan. Whether China could be brought into this U.S. sphere of influence was the big question. The U.S. aided Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist Army in the Chinese civil war, but Mao Zedong’s communist-led faction proved stronger. Following Mao’s victory in October 1949, Republican leaders criticized the Truman administration for “losing China,” as if China was America’s to lose.

Vietnam was conceptualized within this geopolitical framework. President Truman did not want to “lose Vietnam.” In February 1950, five months before the Korean War broke out, the Truman administration substantially increased U.S. aid to the French in Vietnam. Over the next four years, U.S. aid rose from $150 million annually to over $1 billion. By 1954, U.S. aid constituted 80 percent of France’s war expenditures and the U.S. had more than 300 advisers in Vietnam.

In April 1950, the U.S. State Department’s Policy Planning Staff issued a secret U.S. National Security Council Paper, NSC-68, which presumed that the Soviet Union was “animated by a new fanatic faith” antithetical to that of the United States, and intended “to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world.” U.S. officials viewed the Viet Minh’s quest for independence as part of this alleged Soviet plot to take over the world, misperceiving the nature of the Vietnamese anticolonial struggle and acting on their own fears.
President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961) was no less committed to a French victory in Vietnam than his predecessor. In August 1953, he told a governors’ conference that a communist victory in Vietnam “would be of a most terrible significance to the United States of America, our security, our power and ability to get certain things we need from the riches of the Indonesia territory and from Southeast Asia.” The U.S., he said, could not afford to “lose Indochina.” The idea that a French defeat in Vietnam would lead to communist domination across Southeast Asia, imperiling U.S. access to resources, became known as the “domino theory.” It was repeated with variations by subsequent U.S. presidents as the reason why the U.S. must intervene in Vietnam.

The domino theory drew its lesson from the Munich conference of 1938, when British officials tried to contain German territorial ambitions with a treaty of nonaggression. The treaty quickly proved worthless as Adolf Hitler’s troops marched into Czechoslovakia and Poland. The lesson of history drawn by many U.S. leaders was that only force could stop an aggressive regime, that diplomacy was largely useless. The key to applying this presumed lesson was to brand one’s rival a Hitlerian threat, as the U.S. did to the Soviet Union and “communists” in general after World War II. U.S. intervention in Vietnam was thus justified as a necessary “defense” against the evil designs of the Soviet Union and its communist agents.

Critics of the Cold War rejected this fearful scenario of falling dominoes. The editors of the *Christian Century*, for example, argued that dialogue and negotiation with
communist states and leaders were both possible and preferable, and that the U.S. underwriting of French rule in Indochina only deepened “the conviction of millions in Asia that our interest is in keeping the old imperialist order going as long as that can possibly be done.”[38] Political scientist Hans Morgenthau furthermore argued that a communist-led Vietnam did not threaten the West and could actually be a de facto ally, similar to communist-led Yugoslavia in Europe. Yugoslavian leader Josip Tito had broken with the Soviet Union after World War II and become a recipient of U.S. aid in 1949. Moreover, Vietnam would likely be a bulwark against potential Chinese expansion, given its long history of resistance to Chinese domination.[39] Such realistic assessments did not convince U.S. leaders. The mission to save the world from communism both flattered the American public and provided U.S. officials with an all-encompassing rationale for extending U.S. power abroad. Hence its utility over the course of many administrations, both Democrat and Republican.

The First Indochina War ended with the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954. On a flat valley surrounded by high hills close to the Laos border, General Henri Navarre positioned twelve well-supplied French battalions, about 13,000 troops, and dared the Viet Minh to attack. The Viet Minh first employed some 200,000 peasants to drag heavy artillery pieces through fifty miles of jungle, then reassembled the guns at superior positions surrounding the French. Led by General Giap, the Viet Minh attacked on March 13 and continued to bombard the trapped French forces for fifty-five days. Two American pilots were killed when their cargo plane was hit by ground fire.
During the siege, Paris urgently appealed to Washington for U.S. warplanes to bomb Viet Minh positions. President Eisenhower was prepared to militarily intervene, but lack of international and domestic support persuaded him otherwise. British leader Winston Churchill, who had warned in 1946 of an “iron curtain” being drawn across Europe, now advised the American president to let the French colony go, recognizing that historical conditions had changed (the British reluctantly gave up India, the crown of the empire, in 1947).

In the U.S., Vice-President Richard Nixon tested the waters by suggesting on April 18, 1954, that the U.S. might have to intervene. The following day, Democratic Senator Ed Johnson of Colorado declared on the Senate floor, “I am against sending American GI’s into the mud and muck of Indochina on a blood-letting spree to perpetuate colonialism and white man’s exploitation in Asia.” Thousands of letters and telegrams opposing U.S. intervention arrived at the White House. According to Senator Ernest Gruening of Alaska, “The mood of the country on April 20, 1954, was clearly against a military involvement in a land war in Southeast Asia.”

On May 7, 1954, the French command surrendered. Giap later reflected that the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu validated a “great historic truth, that a colonized and
weak people, once it has risen up and is united in the struggle and determined to fight for its independence and peace, has the full power to defeat the strong aggressive army of an imperialist country.” The lesson was not lost on other colonized peoples around the world. Nor would the Vietnamese forget this lesson in the next unexpected phase of the struggle.

The Geneva Agreements of 1954

In Geneva, Switzerland, an international conference chaired by Great Britain and the Soviet Union was already underway when word was received on May 8, 1954, that the French had surrendered at Dien Bien Phu. Nine delegations began deliberating on the future of Vietnam. The delegations represented France, Great Britain, the United States, China, the Soviet Union, Cambodia, Laos, the Viet Minh (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) led by Ho Chi Minh, and the client regime of France (State of Vietnam) led by Bao Dai.

After two and a half months of intensive bargaining, a set of agreements was finalized on July 21. The agreements called for a temporary division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel in order to allow Viet Minh forces to withdraw to the north, and French forces to withdraw to the south. National elections, north and south, were scheduled for July 1956, after which Vietnam would have one government ruling the whole country. During the two-year interim, the Geneva Agreements expressly prohibited the introduction of additional military personnel, foreign arms, and
foreign military bases throughout Vietnam. The final declaration emphasized that the “military demarcation line is provisional and should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary.” The Viet Minh, having won the war, made a significant compromise in delaying its assumption of power. It did so at the behest of the Chinese and Soviet delegations, both of which were interested in reducing Cold War tensions with the United States.

The Geneva Agreements were signed by all of the parties except two, the U.S. and the Bao Dai delegations. U.S. Undersecretary of State Bedell Smith issued a unilateral statement declaring that the U.S. would “refrain from the threat or use of force to disturb them,” which in practice meant that the U.S. would find a way around them through surreptitious means. According to the Pentagon Papers, the Eisenhower administration considered the outcome of the conference “a disaster for the free world,” as the agreements supposedly gave the Viet Minh and Chinese a “new base for exploitation of Southeast Asia” and “enhanced Peking’s prestige to Washington’s dismay and detriment.” This hostile American view misread the actual effect of the conference on the Chinese. The Pentagon’s historians note that “once the conference ended, Peking declared that the conference had proved that negotiations could resolve such other East-West problems as a final Korea settlement, arms control, nuclear weapons proliferation, German unification, and European security.”
The Eisenhower administration proceeded to violate all of the Geneva Agreements, militarizing South Vietnam, establishing it as a *permanent* state, and refusing to hold unifying elections planned for 1956. Jean Chauvel, head of the French delegation at Geneva, perceptively analyzed the United States position:

> The Americans can only accept the Geneva agreements provisionally. . . . As far as they are concerned, the general elections must be prevented by means of any excuse whatsoever. The only purpose of the Geneva agreements, as they see them, is to provide a cover for the political, economic, and military preparations for the conquest. ”[^45]

The sabotage began even before the Geneva Conference opened on April 26, 1954. The U.S. National Security Council (NSC) approved a Defense Department recommendation urging the administration to “exploit every available means to make more difficult control by the Viet Minh of North Vietnam.” CIA teams soon began destroying key installations that were to be turned over to the Viet Minh. By June 1, 1954, Colonel Edward Lansdale of the CIA had arrived in Saigon to direct “paramilitary operations against the enemy and to wage political-psychological warfare,” according to the *Pentagon Papers*. As CIA agent Ralph McGehee later testified before a Senate panel, “The disastrous Vietnam War began as a CIA covert operation.”[^46]
On the diplomatic front, the Eisenhower administration moved to undermine the Geneva Agreements by forming a new alliance that would secure the envisioned new state of South Vietnam. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), founded in Manila on September 8, 1954, extended a “mantle of protection” over the so-called “free territory under the jurisdiction of the State of Vietnam,” meaning South Vietnam. In effect, South Vietnam would be treated as a sovereign nation, in direct violation of the Geneva Agreements. The treaty called for consultation of the members in the case of subversion or aggression, but allowed any member to respond immediately and on its own. The U.S. took full advantage of this last clause to independently arm its new client-state. Thai historian Thak Chaloemtiarana notes that, unlike NATO in Europe, SEATO “was unabashedly an American-dominated group, established primarily to support United States policy in Indochina. The United States was convinced that, through SEATO, it could, to a certain extent, justify any intervention against the spread of communist influence in Indochina.”

The U.S. also took advantage of a stipulation in the Geneva Agreements that allowed civilians to travel north or south as they wished for a period of 300 days, ending on May 18, 1955. The CIA conducted a covert propaganda campaign aimed at convincing the Catholic minority in the north that they would face harsh repression under the Hanoi government. Codenamed “Operation Passage to Freedom,” the agency spread fear of Viet Minh rule, published astrological predictions of doom, and urged Catholics to follow the Virgin Mary south. There was a real basis for the fear, although there was no government vendetta against Catholics. In December 1953, the Hanoi government implemented an extensive land reform program that resulted in excessive violence. An estimated 13,500 landlords
and “reactionaries” (French supporters) were executed by either villagers or officials. In August 1956, Ho Chi Minh acknowledged the errors and committed his government to a “correction campaign.” Some 800,000 migrants made the journey south between August 1954 and May 1955, with U.S. Navy ships transporting more than one-third of them. The refugee crisis served U.S. goals by creating a loyal constituency for the new, U.S.-backed government in the south, reinforcing America’s Cold War self-image as savior of peoples oppressed by communism, and subtly assuming the right to intervene in Vietnam on behalf of humanity.

America’s “civilizing mission” was driven home by a Navy physician, Tom Dooley, who participated in Operation Passage to Freedom. His best-selling book, Deliver Us From Evil (1956), contained hair-raising stories of atrocities allegedly committed by communists. The book, which was serialized in Reader’s Digest, helped to convince millions of Americans that the U.S. role in Vietnam was as benevolent as it was protective. Dooley’s friend and co-worker, Daniel Redmond, who shared his anti-communism, called the book a “piece of shit,” full of “inaccuracies,” in a later interview with Christian Appy. “Tom was given to exaggeration and to me it was symbolized by a picture in that book of a
young Vietnamese guy on the street in Haiphong who was very deformed. The caption said he was the victim of Ho Chi Minh’s torturers. I used to see that guy every day. He was no more a victim of Communist torture than I was. He was a simple beggar who probably was born that way. Never once did he ever hint that the Viet Minh had tortured him.” The book nonetheless served to reinforce Cold War stereotypes.[49]

The creation of South Vietnam

Having failed to restore French rule in Vietnam, the Eisenhower administration committed the U.S. to the formation of a separate, non-communist nation in the south. To lead the new government, the administration chose Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic and anti-communist with nationalist credentials. Born in 1901, Diem attended the French-run School of Public Administration and Law in Hanoi and was appointed governor of the southern province of Binh Thuan in 1929, where he helped suppress communist agitation. He served briefly as interior minister under Emperor Bao Dai but resigned in 1933 after his proposals for political reform were rejected. For the next ten years, he lived as a private citizen in Hue. During the First Indochina War, Diem organized a Third Force movement of non-communist Vietnamese nationalists. He refused a position in Ho Chi Minh’s cabinet after the August 1946 revolution because Viet Minh cadres had killed one of his brothers. Harassed by the Viet Minh thereafter, he left the country in 1950 and lived in the United States for the next four years, making influential contacts and building support for his return. In early 1954, Emperor Bao Dai offered Diem the position of Prime Minister. Diem returned to Vietnam in June, just before the Geneva Agreements were signed.
The new Diem government quickly became a family dynasty. The Nhu family was woven entirely into the regime’s fabric. Diem’s sister-in-law, Madame Nhu, was presidential hostess for the regime, a member of the National Assembly, and head of the Women’s Solidarity Movement. Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, was his right hand man and adviser and reputed to be the power behind the Diem presidency.

Another brother, Ngo Dinh Can, was virtual ruler of the Annam region. A third brother, Ngo Dinh Thuc, the Catholic Archbishop of Hue, was also a presidential adviser. A fourth brother, Ngo Dinh Luyen, became an ambassador. Three family members served in the first cabinet and two in-laws held key positions as Secretary of State and Assistant Secretary for National Defense.

Madame Nhu’s father was “the American’s trusted man in Saigon” and Ambassador to Washington until August 1963, when he resigned over the regime’s treatment of the Buddhists.

Diem himself trusted only personal acquaintances for high office, once having remarked, “Society... functions through personal relations among men at the top.” He advocated a vague political philosophy called “personalism” as a counterpoint to Marxism and claimed that “respect for human dignity” guided his administration.\[100\]
U.S. planners hoped to turn Diem into a popular democratic leader, but few Vietnamese supported a permanent division of their country, and the Diem government proved corrupt and repressive in any case. The U.S. could install a new government, but it could not create a new “South Vietnamese” national identity. Family relations typically extended north and south. Moreover, in the south as well as the north, most regarded the communist-led Viet Minh as great patriots, having fought and sacrificed to end French rule. Ho Chi Minh was, in effect, the George Washington of Vietnam.

U.S. officials were well aware of Ho Chi Minh’s popularity. The CIA estimated that “if the scheduled national elections are held in July 1956, and if the Viet Minh does not prejudice its political prospects, the Viet Minh will almost certainly win.” President Eisenhower wrote in his memoir, “I have never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indo-Chinese affairs who did not agree that had elections been held as of the time of the fighting, possibly 80 percent of the population would have voted for the Communist Ho Chi Minh as their leader rather than Chief of State Bao Dai.” This was never said publicly, of course, as it would expose the absurdity of the claim that the U.S. was upholding freedom and democracy in South Vietnam.
During the post-Geneva period, the United States propped up its client state with massive economic and military aid. From 1954 to 1956, the Diem government received half a billion dollars, more than 60 percent for military purposes. In February 1955, American advisers began arriving to train South Vietnamese army troops. Out of $260 million in U.S. aid received in 1957 and 1958, $200 million went to the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). All of this directly violated the Geneva Agreements.

With U.S. backing, the Diem government proceeded to centralize power in its hands and repress or buy off political rivals. U.S. internal memoranda – not shared with the American people – indicated that U.S. leaders were well aware of popular antagonism toward the Diem government. A U.S. intelligence report in mid-1955 speculated that “the over-accumulation of grievances among various groups and individuals may lead to the development of a nationalist opposition movement.” An opposition movement did indeed arise, often led by former Viet Minh cadre whose allegiance remained with Ho Chi Minh. Another U.S. intelligence report in October 1955 noted that the “most significant articulate political sentiment of the bulk of the population was an antipathy for the French combined with a personal regard for Ho Chi Minh as the symbol of Vietnamese nationalism.”
Diem attempted to legitimate his rule by holding a referendum in South Vietnam on October 23, 1955. The electorate could vote up or down on a proposition to “recognize Ngo Dinh Diem as the Chief of State of Vietnam with the mission of installing a democratic regime.” To ensure his approval, Diem banned anti-Diem demonstrations and fraudulently counted the ballots. The proposition was reportedly approved by 98.2 percent of the population. Donald Lancaster, a senior political officer at the British Embassy in Saigon, observed, “The campaign was conducted with such cynical disregard for decency and democratic principles that even the Viet Minh professed to be shocked.”

The Eisenhower administration nevertheless endorsed Diem’s “election” and pledged renewed U.S. aid. On October 26, Diem officially proclaimed the existence of the Republic of Vietnam and declared himself president.

Diem cast his referendum ballot, Oct. 23, 1955

Diem’s ascension to the presidency was followed by elections for National Assembly on March 4, 1956. U.S. foreign policy expert Hans Morgenthau, after visiting Vietnam in early 1956, noted that nine of the eleven opposition parties dared not operate openly. “Freedom of the press does not exist,” he said, and “nobody knows how many people are shot every day by the armed forces of the regime and under what circumstances.” In anticipation of the elections, Diem initiated a “Denounce the Communists” campaign, a propaganda and police offensive aimed at exposing and imprisoning former Viet Minh cadre and their supporters. The United States actively supported this campaign through a CIA-backed Michigan State University program that trained, equipped, and financed Diem’s civil militia and police force.

According to Joseph Buttinger, a former Diem adviser who became disillusioned with the regime, between 20,000 and 30,000 former Viet Minh cadre were put into prison camps. There “can be no doubt,” he wrote, “that innumerable crimes and absolutely senseless acts of suppression against both real and suspected Communists were
committed.” The historian Gabriel Kolko estimates that the Diem regime killed 12,000 suspected communists and political opponents between 1955 and 1957, and imprisoned another 40,000 by the end of 1958. The Pentagon Papers report that the Diem government’s repression “thoroughly terrified the ... peasants, and detracted significantly from the regime’s popularity.” Ngo Vinh Long, who later became a professor of history at the University of Maine, testified in 2005 that as a teenager he had worked undercover for the Diem government, posing as a “public health specialist” in malaria eradication in order to access people’s homes and search for information on their political affiliations. Once identified, their homes were raided and many were sent to prison to face torture and possible execution.

Jeffrey Race, a former U.S. army adviser in South Vietnam who had access to U.S. and Saigon intelligence files and spoke Vietnamese, described the National Assembly elections as “very dishonest.” Diem personnel once again “went around . . . and stuffed the ballot boxes. If the results didn’t come out they were adjusted at district headquarters.” The results nevertheless looked impressive on paper: five political parties along with eleven pro-government independents gained seats. With his government established, Diem withdrew South Vietnam from the French Union, thereby completing the transition from French to American control.

Having created the formal structures of democracy at the state level, Diem set out to undermine real democracy at the local level. In 1956, he abolished village elections for municipal councils, fearing that a large number of Viet Minh would win office. The elected officials were replaced by Saigon appointees. This was a devastating change to many Vietnamese, as it ended some 500 years of traditional administrative authority of villages, which even under the French had enjoyed autonomy in most local civil matters, such as disputes, taxation, and managing public funds.

The month of July 1956 passed without national unification elections. Diem justified his refusal to hold them by asserting that there could be no free elections in the north and therefore he was under no obligation to hold them in the south. In reality, Ho Chi Minh and the DRV were eager to hold elections and appealed to the Diem government for consultation on the matter for four years. According to the Pentagon Papers, on six occasions between May 1956 and July 1960, the government of North Vietnam asked for pre-election consultations, offering to negotiate on the basis of “free general
Each time the Diem government rejected the offer, having chosen not to carry out the heart of the Geneva Agreements. The journalist and historian Jean Lacouture explained that the Diem regime believed that national unification elections “could benefit only the North” and thus “made every effort to prevent any development in that direction, to discourage any such attempt, and to repress all conceivable initiative that could lead to reunification.”

**Repression and revolution in South Vietnam**

With the backing of the powerful and wealthy United States, Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, further consolidated their control over South Vietnam using a combination of patronage and repression. The brothers violently repressed the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects and the Binh Xuyen, a Mafia-type group, after these groups formed a “United Front of National Forces” and called for Diem’s ouster in March 1955. The Diem regime harassed newspapers critical of government policies and shut down Saigon’s largest paper in March 1958. Opposition candidates risked arrest for trying to form unauthorized parties. By 1959, “all political opposition activity had come to a halt,” according the *Pentagon Papers*. “Diem’s policies virtually assured that political challenges to him would be extra-legal. Ultimately these emerged . . . from the armed forces, the religious sects, and the armed peasantry.” U.S. officials were somewhat uneasy with Diem’s ruthlessness but never ceased supporting him.
One of the underlying causes of popular resistance to the government was its land transfer program, which effectively reversed the land redistribution achieved by the Viet Minh by not recognizing titles conferred by Viet Minh authorities. Government agents were furthermore perceived as corrupt and unconcerned with the well-being of the people. The Pentagon Papers describe the results of Diem’s land reform policies:

Diem’s reform package compared unfavorably even in theory with what the Viet Minh had done [in the south].... By 1959, [it] was virtually inoperative. As of 1960, 45% of the land remained concentrated in the hands of 2% of landowners and 15% of the landlords owned 75% of all the land. Those relatively few farmers who did benefit from the program were most often than not northerners, refugees, Catholics ... so that land reform added to the aura of favoritism which deepened peasant alienation.... Tensions were further aggravated by rumors of corruption, and the widespread allegation that the Diem family itself had become enriched through manipulation of land transfers.⁶²

The Viet Minh cadre and villagers who lost their land fought back by assassinating some Saigon-appointed officials and intimidating others, leading many to sleep outside their village for safety. Diem responded by dispatching his security forces to search, interrogate, and raid disobedient villages, resulting in arrests, torture, and imprisonment. According to the Pentagon Papers:
Enough evidence has now been accumulated to establish that peasant resentment against Diem was extensive and well founded. Moreover, it is clear that the dislike of the Diem government was coupled with resentment toward Americans. For many peasants, the War of Resistance against French-Bao Dai rule never ended; France was merely replaced by the U.S., Bao Dai’s mantle was transferred to . . . Diem. [63]

To enhance his powers of repression, Diem promulgated Law 10/59 on May 6, 1959, which established the death penalty for any person aiding insurrection. It also declared more than one dozen organizations illegal, including the “Association of Buddhists for National Salvation,” the “Peace Movement,” and the “Liberation Front.” Diem labeled his opponents “Viet Cong” (communists), regardless of the fact that they included people of all persuasions, not the least those who believed in democracy and human rights.

ARVN Training in counterinsurgency

In the United States, analysts and reporters who paid attention were aware of the repression in South Vietnam. William Henderson, assistant director of the Council on Foreign Relations, wrote in the January 1957 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, “South Vietnam is today a quasi-police state characterized by arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, strict censorship of the press and the absence of an effective political opposition…. All the techniques of political and psychological warfare, as well as the pacification campaigns
involving extensive military operations have been brought to bear
against the underground.”[65] David Hotham, correspondent for
the London Times in 1955-1957, observed:

The West is backing, with its eyes open ... a reactionary police state. . . . The
Asians are intelligent people, and well able to contrast the declaration of principles
of . . . the United States, with the facts of the regime under which they live. No
intelligent Vietnamese can fail to be cynical when he hears American professors
lecturing of political freedom in one province, while Diem’s army and police are
imprisoning thousands of suspected Communists without trial in another.[66]

Most of the American public, however, knew little about the repression taking place in
South Vietnam. This was due in large part to the “public diplomacy” efforts of the
Eisenhower administration and the American Friends of Vietnam, an influential
organization known as the “Vietnam Lobby.” Both organized public relations
campaigns that hailed the “miracle of democracy” in South Vietnam. Senator John F.
Kennedy of Massachusetts, for example, remarked at a symposium in Washington
sponsored by the American Friends of Vietnam in June 1956, that South Vietnam was
the “cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia” and a “test of American
responsibility and determination in Asia.”
When Diem visited the United States in May 1957, President Eisenhower praised him as the “miracle man of Asia” and applauded the “remarkable achievements” of South Vietnam since 1954. The media generally followed the president’s lead in lavishing praise on the South Vietnamese leader, although Newsweek speculated on Diem’s replacement, recognizing his inability to establish a stable government.  

The deeper truth was that the U.S. had created an illegal and authoritarian state in South Vietnam, contravening international agreements and democratic principles. Many Americans could not fathom this raw contradiction to stated principles and, knowing little about Vietnam, were inclined to believe administration propaganda. Yet Vietnam was not a unique case. The Eisenhower administration covertly aided the overthrow of democratically elected governments in Iran (1953) and Guatemala (1954), replacing both with ruthless, repressive leaders (Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in Iran and Col. Carlos Castillo Armas in Guatemala). The administration officially denied any involvement in these clandestine overthrows, thus relieving it of having to explain its unprincipled actions. In the case of South Vietnam, however, where U.S. involvement was more overt, officials attempted to whitewash Diem’s repression by overlaying it with an ideological Cold War framework that grafted America’s noble self-image onto South Vietnam, irrespective of the reality on the ground. Diem, the Shah of Iran (who ruled for 26 years), and other autocrats were deemed part of the “Free World” simply because they were allies of the United
States. [68]

North Vietnam aids the southern insurgency

Prior to 1959, the Hanoi government had been reluctant to help the rebels in the south, partly out of hope that unifying elections might still be held, and partly out of fear that it would provoke further U.S. intervention. A party directive on revolutionary strategy in the south in 1956 ordered party members to carry out peaceful political struggle in support of the Geneva Agreements and to avoid precipitating an armed conflict. It called for the replacement of the Diem government with a “democratic alliance’ that included conservative political parties who were amenable to normal relations with the north. The first objective of the party was peaceful co-existence; reunification could be postponed “for as long as ten years.” In the south, however, insurgents were being systematically murdered and imprisoned by Diem’s security forces, thus impelling militant self-defense. The southern rebels felt compelled to take stronger action, not only to protect themselves but also to retain the support of peasants who were becoming increasingly militant in the face of growing attacks by the Diem regime. As one peasant said, “If you do not enter the struggle we will turn away from you.”[69]

By 1959, the DRV could wait no longer. In January, Hanoi approved the use of armed force in the south along with the establishment of base camps in the Central highlands and the return of southern soldiers who had settled in the north during the 300-day migration period that followed the signing of the Geneva Agreements. About 4,500 soldiers returned to the south in 1959 and 1960. These actions had an appreciable effect on the guerrilla struggle in the south. Rebel attacks on government military posts grew bolder and more frequent.[70]
The Diem government responded by accelerating the arrest of suspected rebels and their supporters, including those who accepted land distributed by the Viet Minh. The government also initiated the Rural Community Development Program, a “pacification” program designed to resettle villagers into “safe” Agrovilles, thus enabling the government to maintain surveillance over villages. The program incited more resistance than the land transfer program, as it forced peasants to abandon their homes, cultivated fields, and ancestral graves in exchange for inadequate housing and plots in the Agrovilles.

In Saigon, meanwhile, eighteen prominent South Vietnamese leaders, including ten former cabinet ministers, met at the Caravelle Hotel in April 1960. They issued a respectful but devastating criticism of Diem in a public letter known as the Caravelle Manifesto. The letter stated that they could not “remain indifferent to the realities of life in our country”:

> Continuous arrests fill the jails and prisons to the rafters, as at this precise moment, public opinion and the press are reduced to silence.... Political parties and religious sects have been eliminated.... Today the people want freedom. You should, Mr. President, liberalize the regime, promote democracy, guarantee minimum civil rights, recognize the opposition so as to permit the citizens to express themselves without fear, thus removing grievances and resentments.[71]

Unlike other protests in South Vietnam, the Caravelle Manifesto was widely publicized in the U.S. press. Embarrassed by the letter, Washington officials instructed U.S. Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow to urge Diem to open the political process to just the sort of people who signed the Caravelle Manifesto. Durbrow suggested this to Diem and also encouraged him to give radio “fireside chats” to explain to the people the
ways of his government, as if Diem were Franklin D. Roosevelt offering New Deal programs. Diem was intransigent. He harassed and arrested the signers, and published false information about them in order to ruin their reputations.

Unable to correct Diem’s political deficiencies – short of removing him from power – U.S. officials focused on improving military security in South Vietnam. At a meeting in Okinawa in April 1960, a decision was made to beef up the ARVN with weapons and advisers. The following month, three American Special Forces teams arrived in Vietnam to train and assist Vietnamese Special Forces in counterinsurgency warfare, the goal being to establish effective control over the population through military and administrative means.

Hanoi responded in kind. In September, the Central Committee Directorate for the South called for the creation of a political and military organization that would “liberate the south” and replace the Diem government. On December 20, 1960, at a secret base near Saigon, the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, or National Liberation Front (NLF), was launched. Like the Viet Minh organization nineteen years earlier, the NLF combined political, military, and economic goals. Its political and military goals included the establishment of peaceful relations between the “two zones [north and south] pending the peaceful reunification of the fatherland,” a neutral foreign policy, and the departure of American military
advisers, their bases, and their “enslaving and depraved U.S.-style culture.” Its economic goals included higher wages for civil servants, the promotion of domestic industry over foreign imports, rent reduction and land redistribution, and equality between men and women and among national minorities. [72]

The NLF galvanized opposition to the Diem government across the south. By October 1961, South Vietnamese troops and officials could not drive more than a few kilometers out of any given provincial capital without running into sniper fire. In one month alone, to the disgust of U.S. General Samuel T. Williams, the Saigon army lost over one thousand weapons. Still, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, 150,000 strong, looked good on the parade ground. Wearing American uniforms, helmets, and packs, and carrying the latest in American military hardware, the ARVN impressed many U.S. visitors. U.S. dollars continued to pour into South Vietnam, enabling Diem to maintain the loyalty of the army and its commanders.

Expansion of U.S. involvement in Vietnam under Kennedy

President John F. Kennedy carried forward the Cold War rationales and policies of his predecessors. In his Inaugural Address in January 1961, he called on Americans to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.” [73] South Vietnam was deemed a test case for the “success of liberty.” During his thirty-four months in office, Kennedy increased the number of U.S. military “advisers” from roughly 1,000 to over 16,000, sent
President John F. Kennedy

more lethal weaponry to the ARVN, initiated more covert missions against North Vietnam, created a new U.S. military command center in Saigon, and loosened the rules of engagement for U.S. military personnel. One hundred and twenty Americans were killed in action between 1961 and 1963.\textsuperscript{[74]}

Numerous international leaders sought to convince Kennedy that there was no “military solution” in Vietnam, that only a negotiated agreement could establish political stability and head off a larger war. Jawaharlal Nehru, prime minister of India, warned Kennedy that any dispatch of U.S. troops to support the Diem regime would generate more popular opposition, as U.S. troops would be viewed as foreign interlopers. Such advice often came with proposals for a return to the Geneva Conference Agreements, which meant accepting a unified Vietnam under a single government that allowed for communist participation, if not leadership. Kennedy was resolutely opposed to this diplomatic solution.

French President Charles de Gaulle implored Kennedy to learn from France’s mistakes and give up American imperial pretensions, arguing that the “neutralization” of Vietnam was in United States’ interest. Kennedy insisted that the U.S. was not engaged in imperialism but was defending South Vietnam from “communist
domination.” The latter view was made official in National Security Action Memorandum 52, which Kennedy signed in May 1961. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson was even more adamant that South Vietnam must not “fall” to the communists. On a visit to Saigon in May 1961, he hailed Diem as the “Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia,” and on his return to Washington, advised Kennedy to allay his “paralyzing fear” that U.S. troops might have to fight in Vietnam.^[75]

According to U.S. intelligence reports in mid-1961, the NLF had 16,000 fighters, controlled large areas of the countryside, and was widely supported by the rural population. Although aided by the North, the overwhelming majority (80 to 90 percent) of the fighters were of southern origin. In October, Kennedy sent his personal military adviser, General Maxwell Taylor, to assess the situation. Within a week, he cabled an urgent “eyes only” message to the president recommending the immediate dispatch of American troops to establish a “military presence capable of showing to Southeast Asia the seriousness of U.S. intent to resist a Communist take-over.” Specifically, he recommended that 8,000 U.S. troops be sent, disguised as a “flood
control team.  

The issue was discussed at an NSC meeting in mid-November 1961. The Joint Chiefs of Staff seconded Taylor’s recommendation for troops. Kennedy hesitated, wondering aloud why 200,000 ARVN troops could not defeat 16,000 guerrillas. His caution was reinforced by Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles, who warned that the deployment of U.S. ground forces would lead to “a full-blown war of unpredictable dimensions.” The best solution, Bowles argued, was neutralization of the whole Indochina region by way of a negotiated settlement.  

Kennedy’s top advisers – Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy – strongly disagreed with the idea of a negotiated settlement. The discussion narrowed to how and when to increase the fighting capacity of the ARVN. In the end, Kennedy approved the addition of 8,000 military “advisers,” the deployment of two fully armed helicopter companies, the training of South Vietnamese combat pilots, and the creation of the U.S. Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (MACV) to coordinate U.S. and ARVN military operations.
These additions enabled the ARVN to win some battles in the spring of 1962. Yet the added firepower also increased the severity of attacks on villages suspected of supporting the NLF, which were many. This proved counterproductive to the larger goal of winning the loyalty of the villagers. “Everywhere [Diem’s] Army came,” one peasant remarked, “they made more friends for the V.C. [Viet Cong, or communists].” The use of armed U.S. helicopters and warplanes only increased the misery.

David Marr, a young marine intelligence officer who was one of 550 Marines in the first Marine helicopter squadron, wrote of his experiences in the summer of 1962. On one assignment, he accompanied a division-sized ARVN unit on a search-and-destroy
operation that employed helicopters, fighter bombers, and armored personnel carriers. The operation left behind, in his words, “smoking villages, plowed-up rice fields, and several hundred dead citizens,” after which “NLF battalions resumed their operations with more success and public support than before.” His commanding officer, Marr observed, “cared not a wink about the political ‘infrastructure,’ the relationship of the ‘insurgents’ to the local population, or the social program and essential motivations of the NLF.”[79]

The obtuseness of U.S. military officers in the field was compounded by Washington officials who counted these atrocities as victories; and held that with enough such victories, South Vietnam would become a secure state. At a strategy conference in Honolulu in July 1962, McNamara “was told and believed that there had been ‘tremendous progress’ in the previous six months,” according to the Pentagon Papers.[80] A brief period of optimism followed in which McNamara envisioned an end to the insurgency by December 1965. Such predictions enticed President Kennedy to believe that the “military solution” could work in South Vietnam.

The U.S. and Diem governments sought to undermine popular support for the NLF by instituting the Strategic Hamlet program, an updated “pacification” effort aided by British counterinsurgency expert Robert Thompson, who conducted a “pacification” program in Malaya. Once again, villagers were forced to leave their homes, villages, fields, and ancestors’ graves in order to settle in “safe” areas under ARVN surveillance. Many villagers regarded the program as punishment for either supporting

Suspected NLF collaborator captured by ARVN troops, 1962
the NLF or being insufficiently loyal to the Diem regime. In March 1962, a pilot project, “Operation Sunrise,” was initiated in the district of Ben Cat, just north of Saigon. As this was an NLF stronghold, the 5th ARVN Division first cleared the area then rounded up the population and moved them at gunpoint to their new “home,” located far from the nearest market to ensure hardship. Initially viewed as a success, by August the NLF had taken over the whole settlement.

As with Diem’s previous “pacification” program, the net result was more resentment against the U.S. and GVN. According to the *Pentagon Papers*, “The long history of these efforts was marked by consistency in results as well as in techniques: all failed dismally because they ran into resentment if not active resistance on the part of the peasants at whose control and safety, then loyalty, they were aimed.”

The South Vietnamese military held great military advantage over the NLF in firepower and totally dominated the air (with U.S. warplanes), but it was unable to hold territory. As soon as ARVN troops moved on, the NLF and its supporters moved back in. The NLF organized “combat villages” that would supply its soldiers with food, information, medical care, and temporary safety. Being outgunned and outmanned, NLF fighters typically faded into the environment when large ARVN units appeared. They chose their battles carefully. In the summer of 1962, the NLF received its first aid from China, delivered through Hanoi – 90,000 guns of various types. The aid continued through the war but paled in comparison to the aid delivered by the U.S. to South Vietnamese forces; nor did Chinese troops fight in the war.

Frustrated by the lack of progress in the counterinsurgency war, U.S. tactics grew harsher. Some NLF-controlled areas in the Central Highlands were declared “free-fire” zones, wherein South Vietnamese pilots flying U.S. warplanes indiscriminately dropped bombs, napalm, and herbicides on “enemy” villages. In February 1963, Kennedy
advisers Roger Hilsman and Michael Forrestal reported to the president that it was difficult to know “how many of the 20,000 ‘Viet Cong’ killed last year were only innocent, or at least persuadable villagers.”[83] The brutal military policies nonetheless continued, thoroughly undermining other efforts to win the “hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese people.

The problem with the “military solution,” at root, was that the loyalty to the South Vietnamese government could not be won by force. U.S. leaders described their mission as “nation-building,” but the tools used were increasingly those of death and destruction, with “success” measured in body counts. That the government of South Vietnam was illegally created, propped up by a foreign power, and abusive toward its own people were further causes for alienation and rebellion.

Lack of loyalty to the Diem government was more subtly apparent in the unwillingness of ARVN soldiers to fight. They were supposed to fight to the death for the government of South Vietnam (GVN), in a Washington-scripted play that divided the Vietnamese people into “good” non-communists and “evil” communists. Yet most had no cause for animosity toward the communist-led NLF and only wanted to survive and be paid. Hence when called to action, the results were often disappointing to U.S. military advisers. A case in point was the battle of Ap Bac on January 2, 1963, in which 350 lightly armed guerrillas routed a larger force of 2,000 ARVN soldiers.
equipped with Colt AR-15 rifles and light-weight jungle radios, and backed by aircraft and armored vehicles. The ARVN had one of the highest desertion rates in the history of modern warfare. Sixty-five percent of ARVN soldiers were forcibly conscripted, and many ARVN officers were patronage appointees who served the French and used their positions for personal gain.\[84\]

Diem’s repression reached a new low in the spring of 1963. On May 8, the 2,527th birthday of the Buddha, the GVN decided to enforce a law banning the display of any flag other than the national flag. It was clearly selective enforcement as Vatican flags blanketed the city of Hue where Diem’s brother, Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc, resided. As the Buddhist celebrated with their flags, June 11, 1963. Buddhist monk Quang Duc burned himself in protest against the Diem regime’s repression (AP photo by Malcolm Browne)
Diem's troops opened fire, killing nine people. Two days later, ten thousand Buddhists marched in protest. Diem responded by jailing leading Buddhist monks and placing armed guards around pagodas. On the morning of June 11, a sixty-six-year old Buddhist monk, Quang Duc, sat in the middle of a busy Saigon intersection and assumed a lotus posture. As other monks chanted nearby, two helpers doused the seated monk with gasoline. Quang Duc then lit a match and set himself on fire, sitting motionless and silent as the flames consumed him. The press had been alerted beforehand and photographs were taken. They appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the world the following
Americans reacted with shock and confusion. There had been occasional news coverage in the mainstream press about Diem’s repression since the Caravelle Manifesto of April 1960, but other foreign policy issues had absorbed public attention, particularly the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. The self-immolation of a religious monk demonstrated just how hated the Ngo Dinh family was in South Vietnam. Diem’s sister-in-law, Madame Nhu, further riled the majority Buddhist nation by derisively referring to the monk’s sacrifice as “a barbecue.” Kennedy administration officials worried about Diem’s negative image in America and strongly advised Diem to ease up on the Buddhists. At the same time, they began discussing possible replacements for Diem. The latter discussion reached a turning point in August 1963, when Diem sent his elite, U.S.-trained forces to raid pagodas throughout the country and arrest more monks.

At a National Security Council meeting on August 31, the main topic of discussion was how to sustain a positive public view of the American project in South Vietnam now that the illusions surrounding “the miracle man of Asia” had been exposed. Paul Kattenburg, a State Department specialist on Vietnam who had just returned from Saigon, sat in disbelief as he listened to the conversation. “It was appalling to watch,” he later reflected:

They didn’t know Vietnam. They didn’t know the past. They had forgotten the history. They simply
didn’t understand the identification of nationalism and Communism, and the more this meeting went on, the more I sat there and I thought, “God, we’re walking into a major disaster.”

When asked to speak at the meeting, Kattenburg predicted that “we are going to be thrown out of the country in six months,” hence “it would be better for us to make the decision to get out honorably.”[85] All the major players – McNamara, Rusk (Kattenburg’s boss), Taylor, and Vice President Johnson – strongly disagreed. What was needed, they argued, was not a change in America’s course but a change in South Vietnam’s leadership; and indeed the change was already underway. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge had been meeting in secret with generals contemplating Diem’s overthrow.

“We are launched,” wrote Ambassador Lodge in a memo to Kennedy on the evening of August 29, “on a course from which there is no respectable turning back: the overthrow of the Diem government.” The following day, President Kennedy sent an “eyes only” cable to Lodge giving his presidential approval for Diem’s ouster. [86] The first attempt did not succeed, but another did on November 1, 1963. Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, were assassinated the next day. The U.S. did not do the dirty work, only guarantee to the plotting generals that the bountiful U.S. aid would continue after Diem was gone.

Missed opportunities for peace
In hindsight, the opportunity to change course in Vietnam was at hand in August 1963, perhaps more than at any time since 1954. Three developments pushed in the direction of a negotiated settlement.

One was a movement toward détente in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. This near-miss of nuclear war had a sobering effect on both U.S. and Soviet leaders, prompting them to sign a Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty on August 5, 1963, which banned above-ground nuclear weapons tests. Kennedy also spoke to the larger issue of world peace in an address at American University on June 10, 1963. Sounding like one of the peace advocates who lobbied for the treaty, he declared that “total war” makes no sense in the nuclear age, that it was time to “re-examine our attitude toward the Soviet Union,” and that Americans should not “see conflict as inevitable, accommodations as impossible and communication as nothing more than an exchange of threats.”[87]
A second development was the opening of a backdoor dialogue between Diem’s brother, Nhu, and representatives of the NLF and DRV concerning the possibility of a reunited Vietnam. While this dialogue fell into the same category as reconciliation between the U.S. and Soviet Union, it was not perceived as such by the Kennedy administration, which moved quickly to squelch it. Nhu began talking with communist representatives in July 1963 about a possible accommodation that would allow him and his brother to remain in power while a lengthy unification of Vietnam proceeded. Hanoi and the NLF were willing to accept this delay if it meant ridding their country of foreign troops. President Kennedy, however, was committed to maintaining a separate, noncommunist South Vietnam. This meant not only staying the course in Washington, but also preventing the Vietnamese from working out a peace agreement among themselves. According to the diplomatic historian Fredrik Logevall:

The coup against Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963 happened in part because Kennedy administration officials feared that Diem might opt for an end to the war through an agreement with the enemy. Reports that the successor government led by Duong Van Minh might have similar intentions caused Washington to become disenchanted with it as well. [88]
A third development was the signing of an international peace treaty ending the civil war in Laos in July 1962. The agreement was welcomed across the world as a step toward reducing Cold War tensions. Along with de Gaulle, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan helped to convince Kennedy that a negotiated solution in Laos was the most realistic option and would not hurt U.S. interests in the region. After conferring with Kennedy in March 1961, Macmillan wrote to de Gaulle: “I think that the President really accepts the necessity for a political solution if we can get one.” It took thirteen months of negotiations, but in the end, an agreement was signed by fourteen nations, including the belligerent parties in Laos and the governments of South Vietnam, North Vietnam, the United States, Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and China. Laos became a “neutral and independent” nation led by a coalition government under prime minister Souvanna Phouma, with power shared with the communist-led Pathet Lao. As the U.S. had been
supporting anticommunist guerrillas in Laos since the late 1950s, approval of the treaty marked a significant change of policy.\[89\]

International leaders viewed the Laotian agreement as a model for ending the conflict in Vietnam. De Gaulle worked behind the scenes for two years to convince President Kennedy to accept a neutral, unified Vietnam, but to no avail. On August 29, 1963, sensing that the U.S. was approaching a turning point, de Gaulle went public. He issued a statement expressing his sympathy for “the Vietnamese people” and the hope that Vietnam would enjoy “unity” and “independence from foreign influences.” Without mentioning the United States, he challenged the legitimacy of a separate nation in the south maintained by a foreign power, and offered to mediate a peace agreement. Ho Chi Minh’s government readily accepted de Gaulle’s offer, but the Diem government and the U.S. flatly refused.\[90\]

That the Vietnamese patriots who fought the French in the First Indochina War would accept de Gaulle as mediator was another irony of history. With France no longer threatening to dominate Vietnam, French cultural, economic, and political ties took on a more benevolent quality. There were French people in Vietnam, Vietnamese people in France, and biracial children in both places; thousands of Vietnamese children attended French schools; the Vietnamese educated class spoke French; France was the top importer of Vietnamese goods; and the French government maintained official contacts in both South and North Vietnam.

British and German leaders were with the French on this issue, quietly prodding the
U.S. toward a diplomatic settlement. T. J. Everard of the British Foreign Office stated the de Gaulle approach “might prove the only way out.” He judged that an independent, communist-led Vietnam would be like communist-led Yugoslavia, no threat and perhaps an asset to the West. The American journalist Walter Lippmann warned of the alternative: “If there is no settlement such as Gen. de Gaulle proposes, then a protracted and indecisive war of attrition is all that is left.”

The Kennedy administration had not yet crossed that bridge. It had significantly increased American firepower and the number of military advisers in Vietnam, but it had also resisted Pentagon requests for ground troops. In early October 1963, Kennedy authorized the withdrawal of 1,000 military personnel from Vietnam, slated for 1964, but this was contingent on the ARVN successfully prosecuting the counterinsurgency war against the NLF. In the aftermath of Kennedy’s assassination on November 22, 1963, historians have speculated as to whether Kennedy would have taken the nation to war. The “best evidence,” according to Fredrik Logevall, indicates “that John F. Kennedy in 1963 contemplated no major alteration of American Vietnam policy in the near term.”

Kennedy had spoken eloquently in his June 1963 speech of the need for “peace because of the new face of war,” meaning nuclear war, but he had not moved an inch toward peace in Vietnam, where the counterinsurgency war continued to build.

The illusory threat

America’s deepening military involvement in Vietnam was prompted in large part by an interconnected set of illusory Cold War assumptions and beliefs:

Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy all claimed that U.S. intervention in Vietnam was necessary in order to save Vietnam from “communist domination.” In reality, a majority of Vietnamese, north and south, supported the communist-led Viet Minh and its leader Ho Chi Minh. Moreover, the U.S., as an outsider, had no right whatsoever to determine how Vietnam should be governed. Rather than protect the people, the U.S. imposed a puppet state in the southern half and protected it with force of arms. Eisenhower prevented unification elections and Kennedy prevented South Vietnamese leaders from exploring negotiations toward unification.

The trio of presidents also maintained that U.S. involvement in Vietnam was part of a global mission to save the world from communism. Yet most international leaders
believed that the U.S. was making the world more dangerous by its actions in Vietnam. Rather than protect the world, the U.S. had acted as a rogue nation in undermining the Geneva Agreements of 1954, establishing an illegal client state in the south and arming it to the teeth. Most international leaders urged the U.S. to negotiate a peace settlement along the lines of the Geneva Agreements, fearing a wider war. They were encouraged when the U.S. signed the Laos peace accords and hoped for a similar solution in Vietnam, but Kennedy rejected this sensible course. U.S. officials often spoke of the need to maintain American “credibility,” meaning America’s prestige and reputation as a global power. Implicit in this concept was the message that the U.S. must never appear “weak” or “soft,” lest rivals take advantage. The concept reflected an empire mentality which held that the U.S. should be the dominant power in the world and that any diminution of American power constituted a loss; hence, the imperial fear of “losing” China, Cuba, or Vietnam. U.S. leaders used the euphemism of “credibility” to justify to the American people virtually any militant policy they wanted to pursue, obfuscating the difference between global hegemony and national security.

U.S. Cold War policies were underpinned by a core belief in America’s essential goodness and its inherent good will toward other peoples. This belief could withstand an inordinate amount of evidence to the contrary. U.S. leaders proclaimed their intent to “support free peoples” (Truman) and ensure “the success of liberty” (Kennedy), but in practice destabilized governments deemed unfriendly, including some democratic ones, and supported a host of repressive regimes, including that of South Vietnam. Americans were led to believe that the abuses of the Soviet Union somehow proved America’s good intentions, but this proved nothing at all about U.S. policies; only that there could be two bullies on the block.

These assumptions and beliefs served to justify and propel U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Once accepted as ideological truths, they acted as blinders, shutting out contrary evidence and views, and narrowing the debate to instrumental objectives. Had Americans been willing and able to unpack these ideological wrappings and examine Vietnam on its own terms, the slaughter in Southeast Asia might have been avoided.[93]

Lyndon Johnson and the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution
President Lyndon Johnson continued the trend toward Americanizing the war in Vietnam. On his third day in office, he told Ambassador Lodge, “I will not lose in Vietnam.” Johnson relied on Kennedy’s top advisers, which he kept, to tell him how to win the war. On November 26, 1963, he signed National Security Action Memorandum 273, which reaffirmed that the U.S. would assist the South Vietnamese to “win their contest against the externally directed and supported Communist conspiracy.”

During the summer of 1963, the NLF had scaled back its operations in an attempt to encourage a negotiated settlement. When nothing came of this, the NLF renewed its offensive. On December 18, Secretary of Defense McNamara arrived in Saigon and was apprised of the situation: the enemy controlled most of the countryside; the “strategic hamlets” were in NLF hands or in ruins; and NLF forces were moving dangerously close to Saigon. Ambassador Lodge reported, “The only progress made in Long An province [just south of Saigon] during the month of November 1963 has been by the Communist Viet Cong.”

Even more worrisome to U.S. officials was the fact that much of the population in South Vietnam supported “neutralization” along the lines suggested by de Gaulle, and that the new Military Revolutionary Council in charge – made up of twelve generals headed by General Duong Van Minh – had indicated a willingness to listen to de Gaulle’s proposals. President Johnson, upon hearing of this, wrote a letter to General Minh on December 31, 1963, making it clear that the neutralization of South Vietnam
was “unacceptable” because it “would only be another name for a Communist take-over.”[96]

General Minh was in a bind. If he did the bidding of the American president, he would be resented by the population and the rebellion would grow. If he moved toward a peace settlement and ameliorated some of the suffering caused by U.S.-backed policies, he would lose the support of his American backers. Minh tested the latter option. In a meeting with Ambassador Lodge on January 10, 1964, he spoke of the “extreme undesirability of Americans going into districts and villages,” as this would give “a colonial flavor to the whole pacification effort.” He recommended replacing the Strategic Hamlet program with a rural welfare program that would permit peasants to remain in their villages under their own elected leaders. He also stated his opposition to the bombing of North Vietnam, arguing that it would hurt innocent people and alienate popular opinion in the south.[97] People in the south, after all, had relatives in the north.

With behind-the-scenes support from the U.S., General Minh was ousted on January 29 in a bloodless coup d’état led by General Nguyen Khanh, the most pro-American officer in the junta. There would be no more talk of peace negotiations or easing up on the NLF-linked villages. The Saigon government would henceforth strictly follow the American president’s lead. McNamara, returning from a visit to Saigon in early March 1964, reported that Khanh would do very well. He would allow U.S. advisers to participate at all levels of civilian and military agencies, and he would consult with Ambassador Lodge before making appointments to his cabinet. Gen. Khanh headed the military junta from January 1964 until February 1965.
To regain the initiative on the war front, President Johnson signed off on Operational Plan 34-A on January 19, 1964. The plan called for graduated pressure on North Vietnam, proceeding in stages from surveillance and small hit-and-run raids by South Vietnamese commandos, then in operation, to more destructive “airborne and seaborne raids on important military and civilian installations” such as bridges, railways, and coastal fortifications, then to large-scale “aerial attacks conducted against critical DRV installations or facilities, industrial and/or military,” designed to destroy North Vietnam’s infrastructure and incapacitate its economy. This secret plan, now declassified, amounted to a declaration of war against North Vietnam. Although U.S. officials were well aware that the insurgency in the south was largely sustained by the rural population rather than by Hanoi, they reasoned that increased pressure on North Vietnam could reduce the flow of weapons and supplies to the NLF and, in any case, punish the DRV for supporting the NLF.
The DRV, for its part, described the insurgency as a “national war,” a continuation of the struggle for national independence that began in 1945. President Ho Chi Minh and Prime Minister Pham Van Dong were willing to make limited concessions in the interest of peace, but they would not allow their country to be permanently divided. On February 11, 1964, the two leaders met with French officials in Hanoi and indicated their support for de Gaulle’s mediation efforts. Pham Van Dong summarized his government’s position: “We don’t want Americans in the South, but we are in no hurry, and we know how to wait. When the time comes, we will talk around a table. The reunification of the country presupposes a single government, but we will respect the interests of the South, sincerely, without any pressure.”

In the south, meanwhile, the NLF attempted to broaden its appeal by organizing the Self-Determination movement, which advocated the “neutralization” of Vietnam and popularized de Gaulle’s proposal for a negotiated end to the conflict. The movement’s manifesto, “America for Americans, South Vietnam for South Vietnamese,” sought to prevent a full-scale American intervention and all-out war.

Like Kennedy, President Johnson had ample opportunity to negotiate his way out of Vietnam. In addition to French mediation efforts, United Nations Secretary-General U Thant of Burma initiated a separate initiative in early 1964 toward the same end.

America’s most important allies continued to counsel U.S. leaders that there was no military “solution” to the Vietnam conflict, that negotiations were the only way out. But Johnson was dead set against any negotiations that did not recognize a separate South Vietnam under a noncommunist government. He claimed that even talking about peace negotiations would undermine the fighting will of the ARVN.
U.S. officials such as Secretary of State Dean Rusk wanted Americans to believe that the fidelity of U.S. alliances required the U.S. to stay the course in Vietnam, but the reality was far different. America’s NATO allies advised U.S. officials to work toward a negotiated settlement and more urgently warned them not to send combat troops to Vietnam. At a NATO meeting at The Hague in May 1964, Secretary of Defense McNamara pressed members to contribute to the American war effort in Vietnam, but not one agreed to send troops. The German government in Bonn would not even send a medical unit. America’s best ally, Great Britain, had quietly been voicing its opposition to an expansion of the war since mid-1963. A study by the British Joint Intelligence Committee in February 1964 concluded that a U.S. attack on North Vietnam would not significantly affect the insurgency in South Vietnam, but it would bring increased Chinese and Soviet assistance to the DRV, generate widespread condemnation of the United States in the international community, and increase the likelihood of a major war. The governments of India, Pakistan, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Japan all favored neutralization and negotiation proposals; only Australia, Taiwan, and South Korea endorsed the American-backed counterinsurgency war. The idea that the U.S. was protecting Southeast Asia from falling like dominoes to the communists was hardly credible.

In early March 1964, McNamara returned from another visit to South Vietnam and told his colleagues that the military situation in South Vietnam was “unquestionably … growing worse.” Close to one-half of potential inductees – young South Vietnamese men – were avoiding service in the ARVN and the rate of desertion of ARVN soldiers had climbed to 11,000 per month. The NLF, moreover, was increasingly armed with weapons from the United States, whether through capture or sale by corrupt officials. At a news conference on March 7, Johnson pledged to send as much U.S. aid to Saigon as needed to win the war. He and the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon were eager to implement the next stages of Operations Plan 34-A, but he hesitated to take any action that might hurt his election prospects in November. Hence he held back from authorizing the bombing of North Vietnam and committing U.S. combat troops.
The war in Vietnam had by this time become a controversial issue in the United States. On March 4, Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon gave a passionate speech on the Senate floor denouncing U.S. policy in Vietnam. The United States, he declared, “should never have gone in” and should “get out” now. Unless the administration changed course, he warned, Americans would soon see “casualty lists of American boys in South Vietnam.” Morse outlined in detail his belief that the U.S. had violated international law, usurped the role of the United Nations, and defied the U.S. Constitution. On March 10, Senator Ernest Gruening of Alaska said that there was no justification “for murdering a single American boy in South Vietnam” and that someday it would be “denounced as a crime.”

On April 1, CBS television aired a documentary, “Vietnam: The Deadly Decision.” The film passed lightly over the history of Vietnam and assured viewers of America’s good intentions but nonetheless revealed how routine violence employed by the ARVN and its American advisers was turning the population against the government. Correspondent Peter Kalischer told viewers, “I’ve been witness to too many times when ... in trying to kill a handful Viet Cong in a village ... we’ve made at least a hundred [Viet Cong] recruits by indiscriminate bombing or strafing.” He added, “Cold-bloodedly, we really don’t care what happens here providing the Communists don’t get it [Vietnam] and with it Southeast Asia.”

The American public appeared to have mixed feelings about the war; on the one hand, not wanting communism to prevail in Asia; and on the other, not wanting to put U.S. troops in harm’s way. The latter sentiment was stronger in 1964. Vietnam was 10,000 miles away and posed no threat to the United States, except what could be conjured up by ideological association with the Soviet Union and China. The memory of the inconclusive Korean War, which resulted in over 36,000 American deaths, was foremost on people’s minds. It was not something they wanted to repeat. President
Johnson, if he were to send U.S. troops to Vietnam, would have to devise a clever strategy to convince Americans that U.S. national security was at stake; or short of that, to engineer a crisis that would “compel” him to send troops. Once U.S. troops were involved, he could rely on patriotic, “rally ‘round the flag” sentiments to deflect criticism, at least for a while. If the troops succeeded in routing the insurgents in a relatively short period with few casualties, he would be known as the president who “saved” Vietnam. As he told Ambassador Lodge in late December 1963, “If we can have a victory in Vietnam there will be praise enough for all of us.”

In June 1964, Johnson prepared the ground for domestic approval of his war plans by developing a congressional resolution that would authorize the president to do “whatever is necessary with respect to Vietnam,” and by initiating a “public diplomacy” campaign designed to sway public opinion toward the administration’s position. The congressional resolution was drafted by an interagency group and discussed at a top-level meeting on June 15. It was decided that the resolution should be introduced when events were most propitious for its passage. The domestic propaganda campaign was initiated under National Security Action Memorandum 308, signed by the president on June 22. The secret memorandum authorized “Robert J. Manning, Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, to generate and to coordinate a broad program to bring to the American people a complete and accurate picture of the United States involvement in Southeast Asia, and to show why this involvement is essential.” So began the government’s national teach-in to convince people that an expansion of the war in Vietnam was essential to the security of the United States and the world.
The engineered crisis took place on August 2, 1964. In the wake of a series of covert raids by South Vietnamese commandos against North Vietnamese coastal targets in the Gulf of Tonkin, three North Vietnamese patrol boats approached the U.S. destroyer Maddox in international waters. U.S. Navy Lt. Commander Pat Paterson tells the story of what happened:

Weather conditions were clear, and seas were calm. At 1440, the destroyer detected three North Vietnamese patrol boats approaching her position from the west. Aware of North Vietnamese intent from the earlier SIGINT [signals intelligence] message, Captain Herrick ordered gun crews to open fire if the fast-approaching trio closed to within 10,000 yards of the destroyer, and at about 1505 three 5-inch shots were fired across the bow of the closest boat. In return, the lead vessel launched a torpedo and veered away. A second boat then launched two “fish” but was hit by gunfire from the destroyer. Re-engaging, the first PT boat
launched a second torpedo and opened fire with her 14.5-mm guns, but Maddox shell fire heavily damaged the vessel. ⁹⁶

Whether or not Captain Herrick knew about the South Vietnamese commando raids, the administration knew very well that the North Vietnamese attack on the Maddox was provoked by these raids. At a National Security Council meeting in which the events of August 2 were reviewed, CIA director John McCone explained that the North Vietnamese “are reacting defensively to our attacks on the off-shore islands. They are responding out of pride and on the basis of defense considerations.”⁹⁷ That understanding was never shared with the public. The U.S. had thrown the first punch and North Vietnam had punched back, without effect; but the public was led to believe that North Vietnam had attacked the strongest nation on earth without provocation.

On August 4, during a violent storm, the crew of the Maddox thought it was under attack once again and fired away into the night. This turned out to be an error, a misreading of sonar instruments, as confirmed by Navy pilot James Stockdale, commanding officer of the VF-51 fighter squadron. It was nevertheless added to Johnson’s congressional resolution in order to make a stronger case. The resolution stated that the United States had been “repeatedly attacked” as “part of a deliberate and systematic campaign of aggression that the Communist regime in North Vietnam has been waging against its neighbors,” and that United States “desires only that
these people should be left in peace to work out their own destinies.”

Johnson’s deception was nearly undermined by his vice-presidential running mate, Hubert Humphrey. On August 4, Johnson complained angrily to his friend and campaign adviser, James Rowe, that Humphrey had been telling the truth about the Gulf of Tonkin incident to the media, jeopardizing the administration’s claim that the attack on the Maddox was unprovoked. Johnson’s outburst was recorded on the White House taping system:

This boy, our friend Hubert, is just destroying himself with his big mouth. He just can’t stop it.... Yesterday morning he went on the TV and just blabbed everything he heard in a briefing, just like it was his personal knowledge, and almost wanted to claim credit for it. They [the reporters] said, for instance, how would you account for these PT boat attacks on our destroyers when we are innocently out there in the Gulf sixty miles from shore. Humphrey said, well, we have been carrying on some operations in that area, and we’ve been having some covert operations where we have been going in and knocking out roads and petroleum things, and so forth. And that’s exactly what we have been doing. But the damned fool just ought to keep his ... big mouth shut on foreign affairs, at least until the elections are over.

The administration rushed the resolution to Congress the following day, August 5, before any investigation of Humphrey’s allegations could be investigated and substantiated.Introduced under the title, “Joint Resolution to promote the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia,” the resolution mixed a deceptive version of events in the Gulf of Tonkin with illusory claims of protecting the people of Southeast Asia, as prelude to authorizing “the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” This was an open-ended declaration of war, but few members of Congress realized it at the time.

During a closed-door joint session of the House Armed Services and Senate Foreign
Relations committees on August 6, McNamara testified that the attacks on the Maddox were “unprovoked.” Sen. Morse challenged him: “I think we are kidding the world if you try to give the impression that when the South Vietnamese naval boats bombarded two islands a short distance off the coast of North Vietnam, we were not implicated.” He added, “We knew those boats were going up there, and that naval action was a clear act of aggression against the territory of North Vietnam.” McNamara feigned innocence of any knowledge or encouragement of the “South Vietnamese actions, if there were any.”

Senator Gaylord Nelson, Democrat of Wisconsin, cautiously suggested an amendment that would limit the U.S. response to the “provision of aid, training assistance and military advice” to the South Vietnamese government, but he was talked out of it by Senator J. William Fulbright, Democrat of Arkansas and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who assured Nelson that Congress was “just backing the President on his Tonkin response, not giving him a blank check for war.” In fact, the resolution was a blank check for war and, later, Fulbright bitterly regretted his role in passing it. “I don’t normally assume a president lies to you,” he wrote.

The House passed the resolution by a resounding 416-0 vote. In the Senate, the vote was 88-2, with only Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening opposing it. Senator Morse was prophetic in his comments. The United States, he said, “can’t win in Asia. So I am not going to go along with this kind of a program, in South Vietnam, at least with my vote, that in my judgment is going to kill needlessly untold numbers of American boys, and for nothing.”

Johnson takes the nation to war
With the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution enacted, Johnson had the power to expand the war as he saw fit. His strategy was to increase it in stages, allowing the DRV and NLF to capitulate to U.S. demands at any pause. If they did not, the U.S. would increase the punishment. That fall, Johnson expanded the war in the south without fanfare, increasing U.S. bombing runs, building and expanding air bases, dispatching three additional regiments (about 4,500 soldiers), lifting restrictions on the use of cluster bombs and white phosphorus.
(napalm was already in use), and expanding the area of “free-fire zones” to encompass larger sections of the countryside, including heavily populated areas. It was still not enough. On October 31, 1964, the NLF used captured American mortars to attack the U.S. air base at Bien Hoa, destroying five B-57 bombers and badly damaging thirteen more; four Americans were killed and thirty wounded.

During the fall election campaign, Johnson portrayed himself as sufficiently tough on the communists in Vietnam but not so reckless as to get the U.S. involved in another Asian land war. He depicted his opponent, Senator Barry Goldwater, as a warmonger. Johnson pledged to the American people, “We are not about to send American boys 9 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.” Buoyed by his liberal social welfare programs and popular image as the “peace candidate,” Johnson won the election with a greater percentage of the vote (61%) than any previous American president.
The “peace candidate,” in fact, had a real opportunity to resolve the conflict through diplomatic negotiations in late 1964. Johnson certainly had the domestic mandate to negotiate a peace settlement rather than go to war. In Vietnam, a majority in the south wanted “neutralization” and an end to the war. A CIA intelligence report on September 8, 1964, noted (with alarm) that “the events of the past nine months have inevitably increased sentiments of war weariness and frustration, and probably caused ‘neutralism’ (i.e., an end to the constant struggle) to appear increasingly attractive to many.” In the north, the DRV continued to press for a revival of the Geneva Agreements, hoping to avoid war with the United States. Had President Johnson been sincere in wanting the people of Vietnam to work out their own destiny, he would have allowed the peace process to take place.

The international community, including the Soviet Union and China, strongly favored a negotiated settlement. As Logevall notes, “the United States was largely isolated on the Vietnam issue by the end of 1964.” Foreign policy adviser George Ball warned Johnson in a lengthy memo in October 1964 that all the military options being considered carried unacceptable risks and that the most realistic course was to seek a political solution and withdraw U.S. forces. Contrary to Secretary Rusk’s assertions that the U.S. must win in Vietnam in order to maintain the “credibility” of its alliances, Ball argued that European nations would “applaud a move on our part to cut our losses,” and that Japan, so far as could be determined, also favored a political solution. As for “less-developed countries,” Ball judged that the U.S. would earn outright praise if it appeared that “we were responding to the wish of the South Vietnamese people to bring a halt to the war.”
Yet Lyndon Johnson chose war. In the aftermath of his election, he waited only for the right moment to bomb North Vietnam and to deploy large numbers of U.S. combat troops in the south, judging that such actions must be seen as defensive. The moment came on February 7, 1965, when NLF soldiers attacked Camp Holloway, a small airbase near the city of Pleiku, killing nine Americans and wounding 126, and destroying ten aircraft. Johnson immediately initiated a bombing attack on four pre-selected targets in North Vietnam (Operation Flaming Dart), carried out by 132 U.S. and 22 South Vietnamese planes. A few days later, on February 13, he approved a sustained bombing campaign (Operation Rolling Thunder) against North Vietnam. China, meanwhile, declared on February 15 that it would enter the war if the United States invaded North Vietnam.
The U.S. State Department produced a White Paper on February 17, prepared months in advance, that justified the bombing in broader terms of “North Vietnamese aggression.” The authors claimed that South Vietnam was “fighting for its life against a brutal campaign of terror and armed attack inspired, directed, supplied, and controlled by the Communist regime in Hanoi.” The astute journalist, I. F. Stone, analyzed the White Paper in detail in his weekly newsletter. “For four years after Geneva,” Stone concluded, “both North Vietnam and China followed the ‘peaceful coexistence’ policy while the U.S. turned South Vietnam into a military base and a military dictatorship. It is in this story that the White House Paper does not tell, and the popular discontent it does not mention, that the rebellion and the aid from the North had their origins.”

Also not mentioned was the fact that U.S. forces had been engaged in bombing and napalm attacks in the region around Pleiku, and that some of these had originated from the U.S. airfield there. The attack on the U.S. air base by NLF and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces was part of a wider counteroffensive against the growing American presence. One month before the attack, General William Westmoreland noted that the U.S. had in South Vietnam a total of “16 important airfields, 9 communications facilities, one large POL [petroleum, oil, lubricants] storage area, and 289 separate installations where U.S. personnel work or live,” and that “any one of these is conceivably vulnerable to a VC [Viet Cong] attack in the form of mortar fire or sabotage.” General Westmoreland assumed command of U.S. forces in Vietnam in mid-1964 and retained that position for nearly four years.

A Louis Harris Poll in late February 1965 reported that 83 percent of Americans supported the bombing of North Vietnam in the wake of the Pleiku attack, but also that 75 percent favored asking for negotiations to end the war. Most Americans, in other words, supported the president’s immediate response but worried that the U.S. was moving headlong into another Asian land war (the Korea syndrome). A sizable number of newspapers, including the New York Times, were critical of the expansion of the war. On Capitol Hill, senators began a lengthy debate on Vietnam on February 17.
Some Senate Democrats, led by Frank Church of Idaho, called for a negotiated settlement leading to a neutral Indochina, while the Republican leadership issued a joint Senate-House resolution stating “there can be no negotiations.” The president was clearly with the Republicans on this issue, although he continually presented himself as seeking a diplomatic solution.¹²⁰

In fact, Johnson rejected a plethora of diplomatic initiatives during the month of February 1965. Appeals were made by Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, Pakistani leader Mohammad Ayub Khan, Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato, Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson, and French foreign minister Maurice Couve de Murville. British Prime Minister Harold Wilson issued a statement on February 8 backing U.S. air strikes against North Vietnam but also instructed his ambassador in Washington, Lord Harlech, to meet with administration officials and request a new Geneva conference. In Rome, Pope Paul VI called for a negotiated settlement to the war sponsored and guaranteed by the United Nations. On February 24, UN Secretary-General U Thant, having tried and failed to broker a peace agreement, appealed directly to the American people, suggesting that the Johnson administration had not been fully candid about its war plans and operations:

> I am sure the great American people, if only they knew the true facts and background to the developments in South Vietnam, will agree with me that further bloodshed is unnecessary. And that the political and diplomatic methods of discussions and negotiations alone can create conditions which will enable the United States to withdraw gracefully from that part of the world. As you know, in times of war and hostilities, the first casualty is truth.¹²¹

Truth was not only the first casualty of war, as the Greek dramatist Aeschylus said 2,500 years ago, it was also a continuing casualty of American war plans and
operations. President Johnson and his advisers engaged in numerous and elaborate deceptions in order to keep American public opinion on their side, or at least sufficiently confused so as to not interfere with their war plans. Johnson's deceptions included misrepresenting the nature of the guerrilla war in South Vietnam, the extent of U.S. military operations in South Vietnam, covert operations against North Vietnam, the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and U.S. peace proposals (which amounted to ultimatums). Added to these were continuing deceptions fostered by previous administrations concerning the Geneva Agreements, the nature of the South Vietnamese government, and the origins of the war.

To some degree, Johnson administration officials also deceived themselves, predicting that massive bombing of the north and the introduction of U.S. combat troops in the south would boost the morale of the ARVN, increase GVN stability, and buoy American "credibility." Yet this “stepped-up American military effort,” writes Logevall:

could not rectify the fundamental problem, the unwillingness of the mass of southerners to fight for the regime. If anything, a larger American presence in the South would exacerbate the problem by making the regime seem more like a puppet than ever before.... Among Asians generally, sympathy for the Vietcong and its North Vietnamese allies would increase as they took on a very big, very white, western power, in the same way that the Vietminh before them had taken on the French.[322]

Various officials within the Johnson administration (in addition to George Ball) had expressed serious misgivings about the prospect of “success” in Vietnam during the preceding year. One was Willard Matthias, an analyst with the CIA’s Office of National Estimates, who described the political and military situation in South Vietnam in June 1964 as so unstable that the administration should consider “some kind of negotiated settlement” to end the conflict. “The guerrilla war in South Vietnam is in its fifth year and no end appears in sight,” Mathias wrote. There is “serious doubt that victory can be won.” Even with massive U.S. assistance to South Vietnam, he estimated that the best that can be hoped for is a “prolonged stalemate.” On February 22, 1965, Ambassador Maxwell Taylor (who had temporarily replaced Lodge in Saigon) warned in a cable to the State Department that once U.S. forces are deployed, “it will be very
difficult to hold the line.” He predicted that U.S. soldiers on patrol would be unable to “distinguish between a VC and a friendly Vietnamese farmer,” and that the Vietnamese people would not welcome Americans soldiers. “I am convinced,” he concluded, “that we should adhere to our past policy of keeping ground forces out of direct counter-insurgency role.”[123]

What did President Johnson and his top advisers make of these warnings? Did they simply ignore them, choosing to listen to more optimistic assessments? Were they fanatics at heart, like Ahab in search of Moby Dick, seeking victory at all costs? According to insightful insiders such as James C. Thomson and analysts such as George McTurnan Kahin, Johnson and his top tier of advisers vacillated between wishful thinking that the next action would bring the desired results and fear of humiliation for both the nation and themselves as architects of the Vietnam policy. They did not want to be accused of “losing Vietnam.” Thomson, a specialist in East Asian Affairs in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, noted “the banishment of experts, internal doubters and dissenters” in Johnson’s decision-making circle and their replacement with “‘can-do guys,’ loyal and energetic fixers unsoured by expertise.” Ideologically rigid in their view of the “enemy” and unwilling to understand Vietnam within its own experience and history, administration officials operated under the militaristic assumption “that Vietnam posed a fundamental test of American’s national will.” Most of all, U.S. officials had little concern for the people of Vietnam, notwithstanding public pronouncements to the contrary. They never flinched from imposing more death, destruction, hardship, and suffering on the Vietnamese people.[124]

Administration thinking can best be described as an empire mentality. U.S. officials thought in terms of great power geopolitics and U.S. hegemony. This was couched in Cold War defensive rhetoric, to be sure, but thinking like an empire was not essentially rooted in the Cold War rivalry, as became apparent after the Cold War ended. From the vantage point of advancing U.S. global hegemony, a “prolonged stalemate” was certainly not a desirable outcome, but it was acceptable if the NLF and Hanoi
government were sufficiently punished for challenging U.S. power and prerogatives. Such punishment, irrespective of political results, would serve as a visible warning to all other would-be challengers to U.S. designs. That millions of people in Southeast Asia might die in order to prove American “resolve” and maintain American “credibility” was deemed unfortunate but not important in the larger scheme of things.

It was also possible that the U.S. would achieve its goals in South Vietnam. Judging by other U.S. policies, superior power coupled with convincing propaganda usually came out on top. Such was the case with the Dominican Republic in the spring of 1965. U.S. military forces invaded the country in order to secure a rightist military junta that had ousted the democratically elected government of Juan Bosch. The American people were told that the 20,000 U.S. troops dispatched were sent to save American lives and prevent a communist takeover. Daniel Ellsberg, a Pentagon analyst who was privy to the inside story, reflected, “We were 100 percent lying about what we were doing in the Dominican Republic.” The Dominican Republic, said Ellsberg, was “one of the few communist-free environments in the whole world.”

The Johnson administration got away with its lies and Washington added the country to its list of client-states. As in Vietnam, internal developments in the Dominican Republic were touted as a threat to the United States, when in fact there was no threat whatsoever, only a desire on the part of U.S. leaders to establish another pro-U.S. regime.
On February 26, 1965, President Johnson quietly approved a request from General William Westmoreland for two combat battalions of marines. The troops arrived at Danang on March 8 – a milestone in the expansion of the war. The Americanization of the Vietnam War proceeded rapidly thereafter. In April, Johnson authorized U.S. military personnel to engage in offensive operations within 50 miles of their base area. By mid-May, the number of American military personnel in Vietnam had risen to 47,000. In July, at the request of General Westmoreland, an additional 50,000 troops were sent, and authorization was given for U.S. soldiers to engage in aggressive search-and-destroy missions. Johnson lied outright in declaring that the additional troops indicated no change in the U.S. policy of relying on the South Vietnamese to win the war. By the end of 1965, there were 184,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam; by the end of 1966, 385,000; and by the end of Johnson’s presidency, 536,000.\footnote{126}

Despite the added troops and firepower, the underlying political dynamics of the war remained the same. The Saigon government was detested by most of the people, and no amount of U.S. troops in the country could change that fact. A report by the CIA Office of National Intelligence.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{U.S._Marines_arrived_at_Danang_March_8_1965}
\caption{U.S. Marines arrived at Danang, March 8, 1965}
\end{figure}
Estimates on March 2, 1965, warned of the “danger that U.S. troop commitment will lead more South Vietnamese to accept the Communist line that U.S. colonialism is replacing French,” and thus “turn increasing numbers of Vietnamese toward support of the Viet Cong effort to oust the U.S.”[127]

That unheeded warning proved correct. What the U.S. offered, in reality, was a puppet state run by a foreign country that had divided the land of Vietnam into two, and was now intent on dividing the people into violently antagonistic factions of communists (enemies) and anti-communists (friends). Ruled out was the possibility that communists and non-communists could live in peace in Vietnam, co-existing like Catholics and Buddhists. Ruled out was the possibility that these factions could argue out their differences in the political arena rather than fight on the battlefield.

The inability of U.S. officials to imagine this peaceful political *modus vivendi* reflected in part the experience of the United States, which had outlawed the Communist Party
of the United States as a threat to national security, in contrast to the inclusive examples of France, Italy, India, and other countries where communist, socialist, and capitalist-oriented parties competed in democratic elections. America's Cold War ideological blinders precluded such a reasonable outcome. Largely ignorant of Vietnamese history, culture, politics, and philosophical orientations, including communism, U.S. political and military leaders focused almost exclusively on winning the war from 1965 on.

III. The American War in Vietnam – conduct and costs

The American War in Vietnam has been variously marked as beginning in 1962 (MACV established), August 1964 (Gulf of Tonkin Resolution), March 1965 (introduction of first U.S. combat battalions), and July 1965 (major commitment of U.S. combat forces), each date signifying a new escalation. The Pentagon has chosen the year 1962 to commemorate its 50th anniversary of the war, which is slated to last for thirteen years.[128] Here, reference to the war will be the eight-year period from March 1965 to March 1973, when U.S. combat troops were officially engaged. In Vietnam, the war was called the “American War,” as distinct from the earlier “French War.” It could also be named the American War in Southeast Asia (or Indochina), as it extended into Laos and Cambodia, with U.S. bombing missions in Cambodia lasting until August 1973.

[Separate link here to “Associated Wars in Laos and Cambodia”]
Taking a longer view, the American attempt to create and protect a separate, noncommunist state in southern Vietnam went through four phases over the course of twenty-one years.

The first (1954-1965) involved the formation of South Vietnam in the aftermath of the Geneva Convention and U.S. attempts to maintain it with subsidies and military advisers.

Phase two (1965-69) began with the South Vietnamese government on the brink of collapse. U.S. combat troops were introduced in March 1965 and troop levels rose steadily until April 1969, reaching a peak of 545,000.

The third phase (1969-1973) was catalyzed in part by the Tet Offensive (a coordinated NLF-NVA attack on South Vietnam’s cities in early 1968), which convinced many Americans that there was “no light at the end of the tunnel,” and in part by rising domestic opposition to the war. U.S. troops were gradually withdrawn while efforts to win the war continued by building up South Vietnamese forces and increasing the air war in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (and North Vietnam in 1972).

Following the withdrawal of all U.S. troops in March 1973, a fourth phase (1973-1975)
began in which the U.S. supported its ally in Saigon which fought the NLF-NVA for two more years.

On January 27, 1973, with 58,000 Americans having died in Vietnam and nearly three-quarters of the American public favoring a complete withdrawal, a peace treaty was signed in Paris that called for all U.S. military personnel to be withdrawn within sixty days of the signing. Article One stated that the “United States and all other countries respect the independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of Vietnam as recognized by the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Vietnam.” Article Seven added that foreign countries “shall put an end to all military activities in Cambodia and Laos.” In order to resolve the war between the government of South Vietnam (GVN) and the National Liberation Front (NLF), Article Twelve stated that “the two South Vietnamese parties” shall form a National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord which will establish procedures for “free and democratic general elections” through unanimous agreement of the parties.[129] South Vietnam President Nguyen Van Thieu adamantly refused to hold such elections and thus the war continued after the departure of U.S. troops. The post-American War (fourth) phase entailed two more years of fighting before the GVN finally surrendered on April 30, 1975.

Had the U.S. respected the Geneva Agreements when they were signed in 1954, the same outcome would have resulted without war, saving the lives of millions of people.

The American War in Vietnam was mainly fought in the South. The U.S. bombed North Vietnam heavily but did not send in U.S. troops, as this would likely have triggered Chinese intervention and a wider war, as noted in a CIA estimate in July 1965. Moreover, writes the international relations scholar John W. Garver, “A Sino-American war fought on the Southeast Asian peninsula would probably have facilitated the growth of communist power in Thailand, Burma, the Philippines, and Malaysia. China would have spared no efforts to outflank the United States by

Mao Tse Tung and Ho Chi Minh formed a temporary alliance
supporting insurgencies elsewhere in Southeast Asia.\footnote{130}

The “success” of the war in South Vietnam hinged on the ability of Americans to do what the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) had been unable to do for ten years – assert control over the villages and rural areas in South Vietnam. It also required that the U.S. find a way to stabilize the government, presumably with some measure of public support, lest the U.S. remain permanently as an imperial power. Neither objective was accomplished. To be clear, the U.S. government did not send troops to South Vietnam to protect the Vietnamese people, but rather to protect its own political creation, the GVN.

With the introduction of U.S. combat troops, efforts to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people were eclipsed by intensified efforts to win the counterinsurgency war. Given the widespread animosity toward the GVN, if not outright support for the NLF, the American War quickly turned into a war against the rural population. The targets included not only the communist-led NLF but also any person or village that offered support to NLF cadre or failed to expel them from their villages. The idea that Americans could distinguish between communists and non-communists, and between civilians and guerrillas, in a foreign world of thatched huts, straw mats, and wooden
plows was predictably illusory, with debilitating consequences. The war against the rural population entailed harsh relocation ("pacification") programs, a clandestine assassination program against village leaders suspected of helping the NLF (Operation Phoenix), the burning of villages deemed pro-NLF, the bombing and strafing of whole regions decreed as free-fire zones, and the spraying of poisons such as Agent Orange on millions of acres of forests and cultivated fields.

Unable to hold territory without a massive military presence, the measure of American success became the "body count" – how many of the "enemy" were killed. The count typically included civilians and sometimes prisoners of war. There was great pressure from the top to produce a high body count in order to "prove" that the U.S. was winning the war. According to the historian George C. Herring:

In a war without front lines and territorial objectives, the "body count" became the index of progress.... It was impossible to distinguish between Vietcong and noncombatants, and in the heat of battle American "statisticians" made little effort.... Throughout the chain of command there was heavy pressure to produce favorable figures, and padding occurred at each level until by the time the numbers reached Washington they bore little resemblance to reality.... Largely on the basis of these figures, the American military command argued that the United States was "winning" the war. [121]

Other misconceptions attending U.S. policymaking lay beyond the realm of military
strategy, one being that the U.S. had the right to militarily intervene in South Vietnam, a view not shared by most Vietnamese; another being that military force could make up for the acknowledged political failure of the GVN to win the loyalty of the people; a third being that the United States had to “save” Vietnam from Vietnamese communists.

Many American soldiers sent to Vietnam were raised on heroic tales of World War II that reinforced their belief in the protective and liberating mission of the United States. The U.S.-Vietnam War, however, more closely resembled the U.S.-Filipino War. In the Philippines, as in Vietnam, U.S. soldiers engaged a population that overwhelmingly supported the guerrillas, and as a consequence, turned on the population, burning towns, torturing civilians for information, relocating villagers to “reconcentration” camps, and destroying food supplies in surrounding areas in order to deprive the guerrillas of sustenance. Some 220,000 Filipinos died as a result of that war. Although there was significant domestic opposition to the U.S.-Filipino War, little was learned or even remembered in the United States from that experience.

The death, destruction, and misery resulting from the U.S.-Vietnam War were much greater, due in large part to the panoply of advanced weaponry employed by the United States. The U.S. let loose the massive firepower of an advanced industrialized country on a poor, peasant society that posed no threat to its national security. The adage “Better Dead than Red,” understood symbolically in the United States, was applied literally in Vietnam: the Vietnamese people who wanted or accepted a communist-led
government should be killed. NLF cadre were described as “communists” rather than Vietnamese, as if they were foreign agents. Villages that supported the NLF were said to be “infested areas” that needed to be “cleaned out.” To force the villagers to swear loyalty to the GVN was to “sanitize the area.” The lack of empathy for the Vietnamese people as a whole was indicated by the systematic poisoning of five million acres, included planted fields of rice that might feed NLF cadre.\textsuperscript{133}

U.S. soldiers sometimes referred to Vietnam as “Indian country,” a place beyond the pale of civilization where savage wars took place. At a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing in 1965, General Maxwell Taylor joked that is was “hard to plant the corn outside the stockade when the Indians are still around. We have to get the Indians farther away in many of the provinces to make good progress.”\textsuperscript{134} The analogy to the earlier “Red threat” was appropriate in certain ways. The assumption that the U.S. had the right to take over Indian lands, exercise control over Native American tribes, and suppress any resistance had parallels in the way the U.S. assumed the right to take over South Vietnam, exercise control over the GVN, and suppress the NLF. The U.S. Army honed its skills in counterinsurgency warfare by fighting numerous “Indian wars” and the American public became habituated to the idea that U.S. military forces were advancing civilization and democratic institutions irrespective of the devastation wrought on other cultures. Continental empire-building in the 19th
century furthermore whetted the appetite of American imperialists for global empire-building in the 20th century. The enemies of American “progress and civilization” shifted from Red Indians to Red Communists.

American conduct in the Vietnam War was indeed savage in its effects. While purporting to save Vietnam, the U. S. military forces wreaked havoc on a population that did not want the Americans there. As George Herring writes:

The massive bombing and artillery fire disrupted the agriculture upon which the South Vietnamese economy depended, produced huge numbers of civilian casualties, and drove millions of noncombatants into hastily constructed refugee camps or into the already overcrowded cities. American military operations further undermined the social fabric of an already fragile nation and alienated the people from a government which never had a firm base of popular support. “It was as if we were trying to build a house with a bulldozer and wrecking crane,” one American official later observed.
American soldiers were both victims and perpetrators in the Vietnam War. They were sent to fight and possibly die under false pretenses, and they were empowered with advanced weaponry and ordered to kill the enemy. Sixty-one percent of the 58,200 Americans who died in the war were twenty-one years of age or younger. In successive waves of one-year terms of duty, some 2,600,000 American military personnel made their way to South Vietnam, most believing they were serving their country though they knew little about Vietnam and its history, including their own nation’s imperial moves to divide the country. Between 7,500 and 11,000 American women served in Vietnam, the majority being nurses. In living out the fiction that the U.S. was “saving” South Vietnam, many soldiers became disillusioned and cynical. Some became opponents of the war, joining the GI antiwar movement. Most returned scarred from the war, psychologically or physically. “The grunts and GIs who fought the war,” writes David Cortright, a Vietnam era veteran, “were victims of a hopelessly misguided policy.”

America’s client state
Nguyen Van Thieu became president of South Vietnam in 1967. America’s ally, the GVN, garnered little loyalty from the people during its two decades of existence. It remained from beginning to end, an authoritarian, repressive, and corrupt client-state of the United States. It was also constantly in turmoil. On February 19, 1965, General Nguyen Khanh was ousted in a coup d’état, tacitly approved by U.S. Ambassador Maxwell Taylor and General William Westmoreland. Khanh left the country and power was transferred to a triumvirate of generals, Nguyen Cao Ky, Nguyen Chanh Thi, and Nguyen Van Thieu. To please the U.S., the new government pledged on March 1 not to negotiate with the enemy. Thi was soon banished to the U.S., while Ky and Thieu became the key leaders for the remainder of South Vietnam’s existence. Ky was born in Hanoi and had been trained as a pilot by the French in Algeria. He was described by Ambassador Taylor as having all the qualities of a successful juvenile gang leader. Thieu, also northern-born, had fought with the French against the Viet Minh, graduated from the United States Command and General Staff College in 1957, and became president of South Vietnam in 1967. Thieu’s top power broker, General Dang Van Quang, was heavily involved in the narcotics trade, controlling the Vietnamese Navy.
which harbored an elaborate smuggling organization.\textsuperscript{[337]}

In March 1966, protest demonstrations led by Buddhists broke out in Saigon, Danang, Hue, and other cities. Their main demand was a return to civilian government, which they believed would be amenable to a negotiated end to the war. On April 4, General Ky announced that Danang was an “enemy-held city” and threatened to “liberate” it from the “communists.” He ordered an attack on Danang pagodas, which killed some one hundred civilians and wounded more. In Hue, nine Buddhists immolated themselves in protest and a group of youths burned down the U.S. consulate on May 31. Eight days later, GVN troops invaded and took over the city. Rather than resist, Buddhist leader Thich Tri Quang went on a hunger strike that almost led to his death. Elections were held in September 1967 under repressive conditions and
Thieu and Ky were respectively elected president and vice-president. Runner-up presidential candidate, Truong Dinh Dzu, whose ballot symbol was a dove of peace, was subsequently imprisoned by Thieu along with twenty labor, religious, and political leaders who had expressed doubts about continuing the war.\(^{[138]}\)

War and authoritarianism, as such, went hand in hand in South Vietnam, despite a façade of democratic procedures.

The idea of every U.S. president, from Dwight Eisenhower to Richard Nixon, was that the South Vietnamese Army should carry the main burden of defeating the insurgency. Yet many ARVN soldiers held no animosity toward their fellow countrymen, communist or not, and viewed the counterinsurgency war as America’s rather than their own. It is therefore not surprising that, as U.S. troop levels
increased, ARVN military activities declined. The U.S. command was highly critical of this “inefficiency” and lack of “integrity,” but it was not laziness, cowardice, or inferiority that made the ARVN less-than-willing soldiers. Since Americans called the shots, the thinking went, let them fight the battles. The “need” for American troops was directly related to the unwillingness of Vietnamese men in the south to fight for the American cause.

One American soldier, Jeff Drake, who did two Army tours in Vietnam between July 1970 and February 1972, was incensed to find that “many ARVNs did not want to have anything to do with fighting the Viet Cong.” He resented this for many years after returning home. In time, however, after reading about the history of Vietnam, he came to a different view. He had been “incorrect,” he wrote, in his belief:

that the South Vietnamese people had asked us to help them win the war. This request had not come from the South Vietnamese people, it had come from the South Vietnamese government, whose existence was due solely to American support and interests. The ARVNs, many under the age of 17, had no choice in fighting and were often sympathetic to the cause of the Viet Cong. Knowing the truth, I now feel little resentment towards the ARVNs I saw who were unwilling to fight, only sympathy. We, Americans and ARVNs, were all unwitting cogs in the
For the Vietnamese, the war front was their home front. Tran Thi Gung, a southerner who joined the NLF in 1963 at the age of seventeen, after her father had been killed by the Diem government, told the historian Christian Appy in an interview some forty-five years later:

Whenever anyone asks me about the suffering of the war, I have a terrible nightmare that very night in which I relive these experiences. I miss my comrades very much and often see them again in my dreams. But I never felt guilty about the killing I did. It was war. Wouldn’t you shoot me if you saw me holding a weapon and pointing it at you? I think it was justified. But if I went to America and killed people there, I would feel very sorry and guilty. Since the Americans came to my country, I don’t feel guilty.

The first mistake of U.S. leaders was to label the communist-led patriots of Vietnam “enemies” of the United States, despite the fact that they posed no threat to U.S. national security and held no animosity toward Americans before the United States intervened in 1954. With the onset of the American War in 1965, the masses who regarded Ho Chi Minh as their liberator and national hero were deemed “fellow travelers” of the resistance and treated accordingly.
“Pacification”

The U.S. and GVN instituted a succession of “pacification” programs in an attempt to secure the countryside, separate guerrillas from civilians, and create a base of popular support in villages. Beginning with the Rural Community Development program in the late 1950s, there followed the Strategic Hamlet program in 1962, the Hop Tac (Cooperation) program in mid-1964, the Ap Doi Mai (New Life Hamlet) program, the Ap Tan Sin (Secure Hamlet) program, the “Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support” program in May 1967, and the Accelerated Pacification Campaign in 1969-70. According to the Pentagon Papers, “By the summer of 1967, pacification had become a major ingredient of American strategy in Vietnam, growing steadily in importance and the amount of resources devoted to it. The U.S. Mission in Vietnam had been reorganized three times in 15 months and each reorganization had been designed primarily to improve the management of the pacification effort and raise its priority within the overall effort.”

All of these programs floundered because of the forceful methods employed against villagers, essentially treating them as suspects if not insurgents. Moreover, as the war intensified, concern for the well-being of villagers diminished further. Official propaganda for the New Life Hamlet program listed eleven goals, including improvements in health and education and land reform, but the only one that really mattered to U.S. planners was the first: “eradicate underground communists.”
General Westmoreland made a momentous change in U.S. policy when he declared at a press conference in December 1965 that villagers would no longer be allowed to stay neutral. They would have to ally with the GVN and U.S. or be moved out and see their villages destroyed. As the general put it, the villager “will have to choose if he stays alive.” One reporter asked, “Doesn’t that give the villager only the choice of becoming a refugee?” Westmoreland replied, “I expect a tremendous increase in the number of refugees.” His expectation proved tragically correct. About one in four South Vietnamese became a refugee between 1965 and 1969. The American rhetoric of pacification, rural reconstruction, and self-determination became Orwellian terms that meant the opposite – coercion, destruction, and confinement.

R. Michael Pearce, a researcher for RAND Corporation, carried out studies for MACV on the effects of the pacification program in the village of Duc Lap in the Central Highlands. He found that by April 1966, after two years of four different pacification programs, the villagers’ attitude towards the government of South Vietnam appeared to be “worse than it was before pacification began.” He recorded that a village elder
had told him that every family “has someone in the insurgent ranks. If one does not, then perhaps his wife, or her husband, or a neighbor has a relative fighting for the National Liberation Front. They have not seen the government people who have been truthful to them.”

In contrast to the ARVN, the NLF maintained a code of conduct that respected villagers, their property, and their deep spiritual ties to the land. Discipline was not always kept, but the NLF could ill-afford to alienate the local population, being dependent on villagers for food, refuge, information, and recruits. In the NLF operational manual, “Twelve Points of Discipline for the People’s Liberation Army,” eight of twelve instructions concerned the conduct of the soldiers toward the civilian population. NLF recruiters in villages typically used familiar terms such as “brother” and “uncle” to address the peasants. Often, they would dialogue with ARVN troops in the vicinity, whether to persuade them to desert and join the NLF or to prevent them from conducting sweeps in the villages.

Lt. Col. John Paul Vann, who retired from the Army in mid-1963 and returned to Vietnam in 1965 to become the provincial pacification director for the Agency for International Development, overseeing twelve provinces, believed that pacification programs could work. He thus protested to his superiors “the indiscriminate bombing and shelling of the countryside which the U.S. high command was conducting to try to deprive the Vietnamese Communists of their population base,” as
such assaults were undermining his attempts to win the loyalty of the villagers. According to Vann’s biographer, Neil Sheehan, “Large sections of the peasantry were driven into slums in the cities and into refugee camps near the district capitals and larger towns.”

Also problematic for Vann was the collaboration taking place between ARVN regular troops and NLF cadre. Just outside the district town of Cu Chu, for example, Vann learned that an NLF entertainment troupe had given a performance across the street from ARVN quarters. When the ARVN soldiers refused their lieutenant’s order to attack, the lieutenant went off and got drunk with the district chief. U.S. commanders characterized such behavior as cowardice, but in fact, such local ceasefires reflected deeper ties among the “combatants” as well as aspirations for political reconciliation which must eventually occur. Vann, himself, thought the actions “ridiculous” and recommended that the U.S. “take over the command of this operation lock, stock, and barrel – but maintaining Vietnamese front men.”

The Phoenix program
Accompanying “pacification” programs were clandestine operations designed to find and eliminate NLF cadre. During the 1950s, the Diem regime’s police and military intelligence units hunted down those suspected of supporting the insurgency. American “advisers” assisted the hunt by establishing an identity card system and aiding in the creation of computerized lists of subversives to be rounded up and frequently tortured. In 1965, The CIA launched its Counter Terror program, described by one analyst as an attempt to use “techniques of terror - assassination, abuses, kidnappings and intimidation – against the Viet Cong leadership.” According to the historian Alfred W. McCoy:

The program expanded in 1967, when the CIA established a centralized pacification bureaucracy, the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS), that drew all the scattered counterinsurgency operations into a covert assassination campaign later named the “Phoenix program.” With limitless funding and unrestrained powers, Phoenix represented an application of the most advanced U.S. information technologies to the task of destroying the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) in the villages. In July 1968, President Thieu formally established the Phoenix program, or Phung Hoang in Vietnamese, named after a mythical Asian bird. A centralized data bank was developed that identified alleged communist leaders for interrogation or elimination. CIA program director William Colby later testified to a congressional committee, “The idea of identifying the local apparatus was designed to - well, you go out and get them
to surrender, or you capture or you shoot them.” American officers and agents were assigned to Provisional Reconnaissance Units across the country, directing South Vietnamese operatives.

The program was modeled after counterinsurgency programs targeting the Hukbalahap in the Philippines and the Communist Party in Indonesia, in which abuses of human rights were legion. It was run by the CIA under the aegis of the United States Agency for International Development’s Office of Public Safety at a cost of between $7 million and $15 million a year, with additional funds raised through illicit off-the-books means, including drug profits.

The Phoenix program was shaped to a significant degree by Robert “Blowtorch” Komer, head of CORDS. With a PhD from Harvard business school, Komer embodied the cold managerial ethos of the Pentagon’s Whiz Kids under Robert S. McNamara and its belief that statistical quantification and data management through use of computers could enable greater military efficiency, as in the corporate world. Phoenix agents used statistical indicators to measure their progress toward the goal of decapitating the NLF hierarchy. Type-written reports shipped to Saigon via courier were collated on IBM computers which churned out mass volumes of data on enemy killed, captured, or “neutralized.”

Those who were apprehended, however, were rarely NLF leaders. Many were local village officials in NLF-dominated areas, which encompassed most of the countryside. Congressman Ogden Reid, Republican of New York, after returning from a fact-finding mission, criticized the killing of civilian leaders, lamenting, “If the Union had had a Phoenix program during the civil war, among the targets were likely to have been Jefferson Davis, or the mayor of Macon, Georgia.” One Pentagon study of Phoenix operations in 1970-71 found that only three percent of those “killed, captured, or rallied [defected] were full or probationary party members above the district level.” Political scientists Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew A. Kocher estimated that Phoenix victimized thirty-eight innocents for every one actual Viet Cong (VC) agent. NLF leaders were often able to evade capture by having access to safe houses and the
The Phoenix program nevertheless caused much disruption in village administration. In 1969 alone, according to official figures, 19,534 people were “neutralized.” That number included 8,515 captured, 6,187 killed, and 4,832 who defected (if indeed they were NLF cadre). The total number of “neutralizations” over four and a half years (1968 through mid-1972) was 81,740, according to the U.S. Army Center of Military History, including 22,013 rallied, 33,358 captured, and 26,369 killed. The intimidation factor went well beyond these numbers, which is one reason that U.S. and South Vietnamese administrators regarded the program as a “success,” irrespective of civilians caught in the net.

Operation Phoenix sought to separate the rural population from the NLF through intimidation and terror. Phoenix agents utilized psychological warfare techniques such as posting “Wanted” posters and blacklists, spreading disinformation and superstitions, and even stringing up corpses on hooks for maximum terror effect. The CIA instructed its protégés in sophisticated interrogation techniques designed to emphasize the prisoner’s helplessness and dependence on his captor, using lie detectors, Page-Russell electroshock machines, and other gadgets. These methods led to wide-scale torture. K. Barton Osborn, a U.S. Army intelligence officer, testified before a Congressional subcommittee in July 1971 what he had witnessed: “The use of the insertion of the 6-inch dowel into the canal of one my detainee’s ears and the tapping through the brain until he died. The starving to death [in a cage] of a Vietnamese woman who was suspected of being a part of the local political education cadre in one of the local villages . . . the use of electronic gear such as sealed telephones attached to [men’s and
women’s genitals] to shock them into submission.” Medical experimentation was also undertaken under the direction of the CIA’s Faustian doctor, Sidney Gottlieb, at the Bien Hoa mental hospital. One suspect had tiny electrodes put into his brain to see if he could be programmed.\[156\] Some Phoenix agents used their positions for revenge and extortion, threatening to kill people and count them as VC if they did not pay huge sums. Atrocities were committed by “VC avenger units” prone to rape, pillage and body mutilation.\[157\] U.S. adviser Charles N. Phillips lamented that there was a large number of “phantom kills” which hampered good statistics. There were also “flagrant” cases of report padding, most egregiously in Long An province where CIA operative Evan Parker Jr. noted “the numbers just don’t add up.” Dead bodies were being identified as VC, rightly or wrongly, in the attempt to reach an unrealistic quota. Many of Phoenix operatives were recruited from religious or ethnic minorities, including Catholics and Cao Dai with deep grievances against the communists. Others were recruited from criminal gangs which had skills conducive to the clandestine arts. Some of these units set up incentive plans: If they killed a certain number of “Commies,” they got a certain number of years knocked off their prison terms.\[158\] One American adviser, David Donovan, likened himself to a warrior-king, who at twenty-three had unprecedented power in his ability to imprison people in his district, direct development funds, and order executions. He and his colleagues were equipped with bundles of cash and James Bond type gadgetry developed by the CIA’s technical services division. Among the gadgets were radio transmission devices designed to look like household utensils and camouflaged rocks that contained hidden messages inside along with silencer pistols used in assassinations. The program’s technological sophistication notwithstanding, few American Phoenix operatives could speak Vietnamese and thus could not properly communicate with the local population, inhibiting their ability to do background checks or proper investigations to verify information they obtained on the Viet Cong infrastructure.\[159\]
The intimidating effects of the Phoenix interrogation program were compounded by the mass arrest of political prisoners, of which there were at least 100,000 at the peak of the fighting. Under the army’s small wars doctrine, effective prison management was seen as crucial to counter-insurgency as it provided a symbol of government authority and means of winning political converts through reeducation. The State Department consequently spent $6.5 million between 1967 and 1972 for the maintenance and renovation of the forty-two major prisons run by the government of South Vietnam, and built three additional facilities and a juvenile reformatory. The U.S. provided generators and handcuffs, built special isolation cells for hard-core “Vietcong,” and oversaw the construction of over thirty state-of-the-art detention centers (Provincial Interrogation Centers).[160] Many of the supplies, however, were resold on the black-market by local authorities, usually cronies of Vietnamese Generals Ky or Thieu, or kept until wardens paid a bribe.

Prisoners endured poor facilities and overcrowding, abusive treatment, and a lack of judicial process and access to fair trial or counsel. Some of the worst abuses took place at the infamous Con Son prison, located on an archipelago 180 kilometers off the southern Vietnamese coast, where inmates reported being worked nearly to death in the fields, severely beaten by trustees, and left on the verge of starvation. In 1970, Don Luce, an International Voluntary Service employee, veered away from a scripted congressional tour to discover detainees crammed into six-foot windowless pits, or “Tiger Cages,” where they were forced to subsist on three handfuls of milled white rice and three swallows of water per day, and had lime thrown in their faces, causing lung disease and tuberculosis. Office of Public Safety director Frank Walton, a former Los Angeles Police Department deputy chief, signed off on a report stating that non-cooperative prisoners, whom he referred to as “reds who keep preaching the commie line,” were “isolated in their cells for months” and “bolted to the floor or handcuffed to leg-irons.” The result was wide-scale paralysis among the prisoners, as Dr. John
Champlin of the Air Force testified before Congress in September 1973, the cause being “severe nutritional deficiencies coupled with prolonged immobilization.”

In the wake of news revelations of the My Lai massacre in November 1969, the press and Congress were more apt to critically assess U.S. war operations. According to Phoenix operative Col. Andrew R. Finlayson, “General Creighton Abrams, the MACV commander, had become concerned about perceived abuses in the Phoenix program and the effect allegations of abuse were having on support of the war in the United States.” Hence, he issued orders in November that prohibited U.S. Phoenix operatives from directly participating in field operations and officially changed their status from “commander” to “adviser” of Provisional Reconnaissance Units. U.S. officials nonetheless wanted the program to continue, as they regarded it as effective in liquidating the Viet Cong Infrastructure.

On February 17, 1970, the Washington Post ran a story titled “U.S. Aides in Vietnam Scorn Phoenix Project.” In April 1971, Rep. Jerome Waldie, Republican of California, provided a well-documented exposé of the Phoenix program’s abuses. On July 19, 1971, Phoenix program director William Colby testified before a Congressional subcommittee. He was asked by Rep. Ogden Reid, “Can you state categorically that Phoenix has never perpetrated the premeditated killing of a civilian in a noncombat situation?” Colby replied, “No, I could not say that, but I do not think it happens often…. Individual members of it, subordinate people in it, may have done it. But as a program, it is not designed to do that.” Colby thus deflected his responsibility for civilian assassinations to lower-level employees (as was done in the Philippines and Indonesia). He nevertheless acknowledged that 20,587 suspects had been killed under his tenure. The
following day, K. Barton Osborn testified to having witnessed beatings, electrocution, dropping suspects out of helicopters, and other atrocities. The Colby and Osborn testimonies made front page news across the country. \[163\]

The CIA phased out its part of the Phoenix program in 1972, turning control over to the South Vietnamese. Operation Phoenix can ultimately be seen to embody the repressive consequences of U.S. intervention in Indochina and its connection to a deterioration of the human rights climate. The Phoenix concept grew out of a larger web of clandestine policing operations which aimed to root out leftist and revolutionary movements said to threaten U.S. interests. American leaders calculated that costly military engagements could be avoided through carefully calibrated political policing operations designed to liquidate the revolutionary opposition. The U.S. did not achieve this goal, despite causing much misery, due mainly to deep-rooted popular support for the revolutionary movement.

Search and destroy: the ground war

On Labor Day weekend in 1970, over 200 Vietnam veterans staged a mock “search and destroy” mission, “clearing” the road of “enemy forces” from Morristown, New Jersey to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania (following George Washington’s route of 1777-78). The veterans, with 110 purple heart medals between them, had enlisted the help of the Philadelphia Guerrilla Theater Company, which planted actors in towns along the route to play-act being shot, abused, or taken prisoner by the “infantry company” armed with toy rifles. The newly formed Vietnam Veterans Against the War chose the theme of “search and destroy” because it was one of the core military tactics of the war in which they had fought, and exemplified the destructiveness of the U.S. mission in Vietnam. \[164\]
Search and destroy operations were initiated in 1964 and widely employed through 1968. The brainchild of Generals William DePuy and William Westmoreland, these operations were aimed at flushing out enemy troops hidden in the countryside, pinning them down, and calling in heavy artillery and airpower to annihilate them – thus “find, fix, and finish.” By June 1967, U. S. battalions were spending 86 per cent of their time on these missions.\cite{165}

The operations were part of an overall strategy of attrition advocated by Westmoreland. Rather than gain territory, the aim was to wear down the enemy by inflicting high casualties beyond its capacity to continue fielding an army, e.g., killing more than could be replaced. However, the strong nationalist consciousness in the countryside and cities of both the South and the North meant that there were ample replacements available to the Vietnamese resistance forces. Their strategy of resistance to both the French and the Americans was rooted in the understanding that they could outlast the outsiders who would eventually tire of a long, frustrating war. In the end, it was the United States that could not afford the casualties. Guerrilla ambushes, sniper fire, and landmines took their toll. “As many as one-fourth of the total U.S. casualties came from mines and booby traps,” writes George Herring, “an omnipresent reality that was both terrifying and demoralizing.”\cite{166}
There were several strategic and tactical problems with search and destroy. Initiative was left to the NLF and NVA, which could choose when and where to engage. The Pentagon Papers note that the NLF surprised U.S. troops more than 78% of the time. The hunters thus became the hunted. Secondly, search and destroy operations put U.S. soldiers in the lead at risk of “friendly fire” as bombs and heavy artillery exploded all around them or if someone got the coordinates of enemy positions wrong. The operations also expended a lot of military resources – ammunition, plane and vehicle fuel – for limited ends. Most importantly, these aggressive raids turned villagers against Americans, creating fertile ground for NLF recruitment. U.S. troops could win battles only to lose the war.

Moral concerns went deeper. Search and destroy missions resulted in significant civilian casualties. To be sure, there were “rules of engagement” that prohibited the killing or abuse of civilians, but these were typically overwritten by the exigencies of guerrilla warfare. Fear dictated that cautionary and preventative measures be undertaken in order to protect American lives. Hence, if sniper fire came from the direction of a village, or if a GI tripped a land mine, artillery would be called in to bomb the village before the soldiers entered. Often, when alien American soldiers entered a village, they would call out in broken Vietnamese for everyone to come out of their huts and underground shelters (built for protection against American bombs). Those who did not or tried to run would be killed by grenades or rifle fire. The American assumption in these SWAT operations was “guilty unless proven innocent.”

Americans at home caught a glimpse of such operations on August 5, 1965, when CBS war correspondent Morley Safer reported on a search and destroy mission in the village of Cam Ne. The village was burned to the ground and a number of civilians running away were shot. Safer commented that, at most, there had been one sniper, while two or
three Marines were hit by “friendly fire” (shooting each other):

The day’s operation burned down 150 houses, wounded three women, killed one baby, wounded one marine and netted these four prisoners. Four old men who could not answer questions put to them in English. Four old men who had no idea what an I.D. card was. Today’s operation is the frustration of Vietnam in miniature. There is little doubt that American firepower can win a military victory here. But to a Vietnamese peasant whose home means a lifetime of backbreaking labor, it will take more than presidential promises to convince him that we are on his side.\footnote{168}

The ground war employed substantial air power. Many Vietnamese civilians were killed or badly wounded by helicopter gunships which strafed anything that moved in areas deemed hostile. Louis Jankowski, district senior adviser of Tra Cu District in the Vinh Binh Province in 1968, characterized gunship operations as a “form of nonselective terrorism” that attacked houses, sampans and bunkers, often without any knowledge or concern about who was inside. Many people were killed simply for the “sin of running,” as historian David Hunt termed it.\footnote{169} David Bressem, who flew with a reconnaissance unit to “find the enemy,” testified before a congressional committee in 1971:

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\textbf{Life magazine focused on the death of one U.S. airman in its April 16, 1965 issue}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Anyone taking evasive action could be fired upon. Evasive action was never
explained to me. It normally entailed someone running or trying to evade a helicopter or any fire.... There is one incident I recall where we flew over a large rice paddy, and there were some people working in the rice paddy, maybe a dozen or fifteen individuals, and we passed a couple of times low over their heads and they didn’t take any action; they were obviously nervous, but they didn’t try to hide or anything. So we then hovered a few feet off the ground among them with the two helicopters, turned on the police sirens and when they heard the police sirens, they started to disperse and we opened up on them and just shot them all down.[170]

Among the factors contributing to the killing of civilians were the bureaucratic labeling of whole districts as NLF territory and thus free-fire zones; a “body count” reward system that identified civilians killed as communist guerrillas; lack of official accountability such that the generals did not want to know about, report, or investigate civilian casualties; psychological factors including revenge, sadism, racism, and boredom, any of which might impel a soldier to slay or rape civilians; a military culture that encouraged racist views of Asians and Vietnamese, commonly referred to as “gooks”; and the massive firepower readily available to U.S. soldiers that killed indiscriminately.

Dropped into war zones, without knowledge of the Vietnamese language and with little, if any, understanding of local culture, U.S. soldiers had problems distinguishing enemy from neutral from friend. They often became frustrated when making no contact with enemy soldiers for long periods, then seemingly out of the blue were interrupted by violent surprise attacks. Daily treks...
through insect-filled jungles in the heat and humidity also took a toll on GI nerves. In numerous documented cases, their frustrations were taken out on civilians. The approved routine of burning of huts, destruction of villages, and terrorizing of residents could and did lead to unauthorized sexual assaults, random shootings, and even massacres such as that in My Lai. Heonik Kwon lists thirteen large-scale massacres, including some by South Korean troops; Nick Turse, in *Kill Anything That Moves*, documents more. Even in villages with decent relations with local U.S. forces, other mobile U.S. forces were known to violently intervene.\(^{[171]}\)

With no territorial gains to measure “progress” in the war, the measure of success became the notorious “body count.” Officers maintained body-count promotion box scores, drew up kill-boards, and discouraged the taking of prisoners. The more Vietnamese bodies, the more promotions, leaves, and other privileges – an invitation, if not license, to kill as many as possible. For many American soldiers, all Vietnamese were felt to be the enemy; civilian bodies were routinely identified as Viet Cong, or NLF.
Such practices violated important tenets of international law, including the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention on the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. The moral and legal issues hardly concerned American military leadership, but they ate away at the conscience of many “grunts” and raised questions for an American public increasingly disenchanted with the war.

One such GI, Tom Glen, who served with an American mortar platoon, expressed his moral concerns in a letter to General Creighton Abrams, the commander of all U.S. forces in Vietnam, in the fall of 1968. “The average GI’s attitude toward and treatment of the Vietnamese people all too often is a complete denial of all our country is attempting to accomplish in the realm of human relations,” he wrote.

Far beyond merely dismissing the Vietnamese as “slopes” or “gooks,” in both deed and thought, too many American soldiers seem to discount their very humanity; and with this attitude inflict upon the Vietnamese citizenry humiliations, both psychological and physical, that can have only a debilitating effect upon efforts to unify the people in loyalty to the Saigon government, particularly when
such acts are carried out at unit levels and thereby acquire the aspect of sanctioned policy.

Glen noted that some American troops “for mere pleasure, fire indiscriminately into Vietnamese homes and, without provocation or justification, shoot at the people themselves,” and that “severe beatings and torture at knife point are usual means of questioning captives.” He ended by asking General Abrams to implement the codes of the Geneva Conventions. Abrams passed Glen’s letter on to Major Colin Powell (future Secretary of State), who never interviewed Glen and dismissed the allegations as overly broad and without documentation.[172]

Ia Drang Valley, Khe Sanh, and the Tet Offensive

The first major battle between U.S. and North Vietnamese forces took place in Ia Drang Valley in mid-November 1965. The U.S. First Calvary Division, venturing deep into the Central Highlands, found itself surrounded by NLF-NVA forces. In the ensuing four-day combat, one out of every four American soldiers was killed or wounded. Up to that point, 1,100 Americans had been killed. The Ia Drang mission added 234 more. The U.S. command claimed victory, as an estimated 3,500 NLF-NVA soldiers were reportedly
killed. Two weeks later, however, Secretary of Defense McNamara sent a top-secret memo to President Johnson predicting that, just “to hold our present geographical positions,” the U.S. would need the “addition of 28 U.S. battalions,” or about 200,000 troops. McNamara’s early optimism never returned after the Ia Drang Valley battle. [173]

The NLF and NVA went on the offensive in early 1968. On January 21, they attacked the U.S. Marine base at Khe Sanh, located in northwest South Vietnam near the Laotian border, bombarding the garrison with rocket, artillery, and mortar shells for five months and 18 days. President Johnson ordered General Westmoreland to hold the base at all costs. U.S. forces conducted a massive aerial bombardment of the hills surrounding the base, dropping an average of 1,300 tons of bombs every day through mid-April. The U.S. command declared the defense of the base a success, but General Creighton Abrams, who replaced Westmoreland as the top commander on June 10, issued orders to evacuate and destroy the base. This was the first time that the U.S. had abandoned a major combat base. NLF-NVA forces took control of the area on July 9 and declared victory. Regardless of who “won,” the battle effectively diverted American attention from the steady build-up of NLF-NVA forces in other southern areas, which burst forth in the Tet Offensive ten days after the Khe Sanh battle began. [174]
The Tet Offensive, named after the Tet holiday celebrating the lunar new year, was a major turning point in the war. On January 31, 1968, approximately 84,000 NLF-NVA fighters attacked South Vietnam’s major cities and some 100 other targets, putting the U.S. and GVN on the defensive for the first time. In Saigon, the presidential palace, airport, ARVN headquarters, and U.S. Embassy grounds came under fire. It took ten U.S. battalions to restore “security” in the Saigon area. The city of Hue remained in NLF-NVA hands for twenty-six days. Prior to this offensive, Americans had been led to believe that the U.S. and GVN were winning the war or at least making “progress.” General Westmoreland was quoted in *Time* (November 27, 1967) as saying, “I have never been more encouraged in my four years in Vietnam.” Although NLF-NVA forces were driven out of the cities and suffered grievous losses, they succeeded in demonstrating to the American people that they would never give up.
In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, many Americans became convinced that there was “no light at the end of the tunnel,” as Senator Robert Kennedy said on the Senate floor on March 7. Johnson’s advisers, including newly appointed Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, came to the same conclusion at a White House meeting in late March. The consensus, according to one participant, was that “there are no military conclusions of this war – or any military end in the near future.” Johnson resisted that conclusion. On March 18, speaking to the National Farmers Union in Minnesota, he called for a “total national effort to win the war.” Yet Clifford persisted in convincing Johnson that neither the public nor Congress would support further expansion of the war. Johnson relented. On March 31, in a televised speech to the nation, he declared that “the South Vietnamese themselves” must carry the “main burden of preserving their freedom,” signaling that the United States would pull back (but not out). Largely due to Congressional opposition, Johnson rejected a request from the Joint Chiefs of Staff for 206,000 additional troops, approving only 24,500. This capped the Vietnam commitment at 549,500, after which a new era of fighting began with diminishing numbers of U.S. troops.

The Tet Offensive was immediately followed by a massive U.S.-GVN counteroffensive that produced much collateral damage. The Saigon government reported 14,300 civilians killed, 24,000 wounded, 627,000 made homeless across South Vietnam. John Paul Vann, chief of the pacification effort in the provinces surrounding Saigon, thought the operation excessive in his region. “I estimate 15,000
houses destroyed,” he wrote, “about 99 percent of this has been the result of over-reaction on the part of US and Vietnamese units.” The U.S. also bombed the majestic city of Hue, leaving over 100,000 people homeless. The photojournalist Philip Jones Griffiths wrote that thousands of civilians “were killed by the most hysterical use of American firepower ever seen.”

In retaking the provincial capital of Ben Tre, an unnamed U.S. major was famously quoted by correspondent Peter Arnett on February 7, “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it,” rationalizing the decision by allied commanders to bomb and shell the town regardless of civilian casualties. For many, this one sentence captured the absurdity of the whole American mission: the United States had to destroy Vietnam in order to save it.

The Hue massacre controversy
Following the U.S.-GVN recapture of Hue, shallow mass graves were discovered in and around the city. Many of the bodies had their hands bound, indicating execution. Free-lance journalist Len Ackland estimated the number at 300 to 400. U.S. officials estimated 2,800 to 5,700. Later Vietnamese accounts and memoirs verified that NLF and perhaps NVA soldiers killed prisoners, whether because they were “reactionaries” or during a panicked retreat under U.S. bombardment, but not in the numbers alleged by U.S. officials. According to the political scientist Gareth Porter:

There is evidence of several hundred political executions carried out by the Communists toward the end of the occupation in Hue.... But that the more than 2,800 bodies found in and around Hue after Tet were victims of Communist executions is supported only by official assertions. In the bloody fighting to recapture Hue, in which half the homes were destroyed, thousands – civilians and Vietcong troops – were killed and buried in mass graves.\[180\]
According to Marilyn Young, “in the last days of the NLF occupation of Hue, teams of Saigon government assassins fanned out through the city with their own list of targets, underground NLF supporters who had revealed themselves in the course of occupying the city.” The historian Stanley Karnow similarly writes, “Clandestine South Vietnamese teams slipped into Hue after the Communist occupation to assassinate suspected enemy collaborators; they threw many of the bodies into common graves with the Vietcong’s victims.”[181]

The story that was heard in the U.S., however, was that of Douglas Pike, an employee of the U.S. Information Agency, who blamed the civilian deaths entirely on the insurgents and warned that more massacres could be expected should South Vietnam fall to the communists. His story was spread by U.S. agencies and the American Friends of Vietnam, which issued a pamphlet in June 1969 warning that the “massacres at Hue ... were only the most outrageous in a long history of such Communist atrocities.” Excerpts of Pike’s story also appeared in Reader’s Digest (September 1970) in part to counter revelations of American atrocities at My Lai.[182]

Writing forty years later, the American military historian James Willbanks concludes:

Regardless of the actual circumstances of the civilian deaths in Hue, U.S. and South Vietnamese authorities trumpeted the killings as an object lesson in Communist immorality and a foretaste of the atrocities ahead – should the Communists triumph in South Vietnam. We may never know what really happened at Hue, but it is clear that mass executions did occur and that reports of the massacre there had a significant impact on South Vietnamese and American attitudes for many years after the Tet Offensive.[183]

My Lai and other atrocities
The American massacre of civilians at My Lai on March 16, 1968, was part of the U.S. counteroffensive following Tet. The area in which the My Lai village was located was labeled “Pinkville” and a U.S. unit known as Charlie company - led by Captain Ernest Medina, with 2nd Lt. William Calley commanding the First Platoon - treated it as a free-fire zone, killing some 500 unarmed men, women, children, and infants. A number of women were raped as well. Not all soldiers participated in the murders; one broke down and cried; another shot animals instead. Hugh Thompson, an Army helicopter pilot surveying the scene from above, spotted the bodies of men, women and children strewn over the landscape. Realizing that a massacre was taking place, he landed his chopper and rescued ten civilians while ordering his crew chief to shoot any American soldiers who opened fire on the civilians. On the same day, another U.S. unit, Bravo company, murdered some 90 civilians in the village of My Khe, two kilometers to the east. These massacres were not acknowledged by military authorities at the time. The task force commander overseeing operations wrote in his after-action report that the day’s maneuvers were “well planned, well-executed, and successful.”

Ron Ridenhour, a 22-year-old soldier, heard about the My Lai massacre and took the courageous step of gathering testimony
from multiple witnesses. After completing his tour of duty in April 1969, he wrote letters to the Pentagon, the White House, and twenty-four members of Congress describing the atrocities of which he had been told. The following month, the government’s Office of Inspector General requested records of the day from Major Colin Powell’s office at division headquarters in Chu Lai. Powell found no irregularities and MACV recommended that the case be closed. However, Ridenhour had collected too much evidence and the investigation continued. In the end, fourteen soldiers were charged with murder but only Lt. Calley was convicted.\[185\]

The American public did not learn about the My Lai massacre until one and a half years after it occurred. On November 12, 1969, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh broke the My Lai story in the U.S. press. This was followed by publication of Army photographer Ron Haeberle’s photographs in the Cleveland Plain Dealer on November 20, its front page filled with a shocking scene of slaughtered women and babies on a country road. Life magazine picked up the story and published more photographs in “The Massacre at My Lai” in its December 5th issue. Haeberle testified that he personally saw about thirty different American soldiers kill about 100 civilians, but he destroyed photographs of these killings, keeping only the end results. Mike Wallace of CBS television followed up the story with an interview of Private Paul Meadlo, aired on November 25, 1969. Meadlo confirmed that Charlie Company had rounded up and shot hundreds of men, women and children. “And babies?” asked Wallace. “And babies,” replied Meadlo.\[186\]

The My Lai story shocked Americans, but it was not the first of its kind. In August 1969, Esquire published Normand Poirier’s “An American Atrocity,” which recounted the 1966 rampage of U.S. Marines through the village of Xuan Ngoc, including the gang-rape of an 18-year-old girl and the slaughter of her family. In October 1969, the New Yorker published Daniel Lang’s “Casualties of War,” which told of the kidnapping,
gang-rape, and murder of a peasant women by four U.S. Army soldiers in 1966. The My Lai massacre, however, surpassed these atrocities in scale and wickedness. It seemed to confirm the judgment of Protestant theologian Robert McCaffee Brown that the American war in Vietnam was “evil, vicious and morally intolerable,” as he wrote in Look magazine (October 1967), and aroused concern that American soldiers themselves were losing all sense of morality.\footnote{187} Most assuredly, it indicated a complete breakdown of the “rules of engagement,” as officers had ordered the murder of civilians and higher-up officers had covered up the whole affair.

In the aftermath of My Lai, moreatrocity stories came to light, many told by GIs and veterans themselves. To limit the damage, the Pentagon assembled a secret Vietnam War Crimes Working Group that gathered more than 300 criminal investigation reports, testimonies, and allegations of atrocities, including massacres, murders, rapes, torture, assaults, mutilations, and the execution of prisoners. The purpose of the working group was not to administer justice but to bury the evidence in top-secret classification. The Pentagon framed My Lai as an “isolated incident,” the product of a few “bad apples,” and kept the lid on information and reports regarding other atrocities, including the massacre at My Khe that same day. It refused to investigate many of the allegations by GIs and vets in the interest of keeping the extent of atrocities under wraps. This went beyond public image making, as the generals themselves could be charged with war crimes under international law (in the tradition of the Nuremberg Trials) should a consistent pattern of atrocities and cover-ups be proven.\footnote{188}
Massacres were also carried out by South Korean expeditionary forces in Vietnam, serving at the behest of the United States. U.S. news reports in 1965 and 1966 described the South Korean troops as “fierce” and “effective,” which, in practice, meant brutal and insensitive. In 1973, two Vietnamese speaking Quakers, Diane and Michael Jones, carried out a study which found that South Korean troops had committed twelve separate massacres of 100 or more civilians, and dozens of smaller massacres and murders.\(^{[189]}\)

In April 2000, Associated Press (AP) writer Paul Alexander reported on a 1989 grave marker in the village of Binh An which read: “Deeply carve the hatred against the American aggressors. Here on Feb. 2, 1966, South Korean mercenaries, under the command of American imperialists, massacred 380 people.” Ho Thi Cham remembered the killings well as she, her husband, and two neighbors had buried the rotting remains of their neighbors. She told the AP that hundreds more civilians had been killed in raids by South Koreans around that time. Provincial officials estimated that the South Koreans killed 1,003 civilians in Binh An alone, whose population in 1966 was roughly 6,000. Another village attacked was twelve miles from My Lai. South Korean General Chae Myong-shin, commander-in-chief of the South Korean troops in Vietnam in 1965-69, told the AP, “It was extremely difficult, or virtually impossible, to tell apart civilians and guerillas.” Three decades later, in 1998, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung came to Vietnam for the annual summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and expressed regret for his country’s role in the war.\(^{[190]}\)
On March 29, 1971, Lt. William Calley was convicted on charges of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment. Hawkish patriots immediately forged a common front of denial. Governor Jimmy Carter proclaimed “American Fighting Man’s Day” and encouraged his fellow Georgians to drive with their headlights on during daylight hours for one week to show their support for Calley. State legislatures in New Jersey, Arkansas, Kansas, Texas, and South Carolina passed motions officially requesting clemency for Calley. Alabama Governor George Wallace named Calley an honorary Lt. Colonel in the Alabama National Guard. According to the New York Times, “In the days immediately following his conviction, there were public demonstrations on his behalf, and a song about him became a hit record.” President Nixon used the surge of patriotic support for Calley to counteract the strength of the antiwar movement. Three days after Calley’s conviction, Nixon ordered him transferred from prison to house arrest at Fort Benning while his appeal was heard. Calley ultimately served three and a half years of house arrest before being released in September 1974. [191]

Forty years after the My Lai massacre, Calley apologized for his actions, telling members of a local Kiwanis Club in Columbus, Georgia, “There is not a day that goes by that I do not feel remorse for what happened that day in My Lai…. I feel remorse for the Vietnamese who were killed, for their families, for the American soldiers involved and their families. I am very sorry.”[192]

Downsizing the ground war

The term “search and destroy” was officially scrapped in April 1968, having become associated with a failed military policy as well as atrocities. General Creighton Abrams, Westmoreland’s replacement, introduced the concept of “clear and hold.” The idea was to secure government-controlled areas while replacing ground searches with more intense bombing of suspected guerrilla sanctuaries in the countryside. U.S. troops also pushed into Laos on January 22, 1969, in order to cut NLF-NVA supply lines through the Ho Chi Minh Trail – a network of trails and roads that wound through Laos and northern Cambodia. The 56-day offensive, Operation Dewey Canyon, captured weapons and supplies but did not significantly impede the flow of NLF-NVA arms and
soldiers to South Vietnam.

In another mission from May 10-20, 1969, U.S. and ARVN troops fought an intense, uphill battle (literally) for Hill 937, or “Hamburger Hill,” near the Laotian border. The U.S.-ARVN forces succeeded in taking the hill, with significant casualties, but since no territory in the countryside could be permanently retained without sizable forces present, the hill was quietly abandoned on June 5. Two weeks later, military intelligence reported that more than 1,000 North Vietnamese Army troops had moved back into the area. In Washington, Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts asked on the Senate floor, “How can we justify sending our boys against a hill a dozen times, finally taking it, and then withdrawing a week later?”[193]

On June 8, 1969, President Richard Nixon met with South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu at Midway Island in the Pacific and announced that 25,000 U.S. troops would be withdrawn by the end of August. Thus began the gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops, theoretically to be replaced by ARVN troops. Labeled “Vietnamization” by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, the policy sought to reverse the Americanization of the war, notwithstanding the fact that there was no possibility of the South Vietnamese winning the war on their own. The shift in policy may be attributed to domestic opposition to the war – a political reality – rather than to any military strategy for winning the war or even achieving a stalemate. According to Department of Defense statistics, U.S. troop levels fell from 539,000 in June 1969 to 415,000 in June 1970; 239,000 in June 1971; 47,000 in June 1972; and 21,500 in January 1973.[194]
Still, President Nixon did what he could to ensure that South Vietnam would survive as long as possible. On April 30, 1970, he ordered U.S. troops into Cambodia to destroy NLF-NVA sanctuaries as well as back up the rightist coup d’etat of General Lon Nol. Nixon’s public announcement of this expansion of the war set off nationwide protests on college campuses, including one at Kent State where members of the National Guard shot and killed four students. U.S. troops were withdrawn from Cambodia after two months, but the bombing of Cambodia continued for another three years.

Another invasion of Laos took place in February 1971, but this time it was conducted by 20,000 ARVN soldiers with U.S. troops mostly providing logistical support and long-range artillery from bases in South Vietnam. One indication of the growing reluctance of U.S. soldiers to die for the cause took place on March 20, when a group of soldiers rejected a direct order to advance against heavy fire in order to retrieve a damaged helicopter and armored vehicle. As one recalcitrant soldier explained, “the reason given wasn’t a very good one.” The squadron commander, Lt. Col. Gene Breeding, attempted to convince the men to comply with the order, but fifty-three still refused. Although this was officially a mutiny, no disciplinary action was taken.[195]

During the last years of the war, U.S. soldiers dubbed their infrequent trekks into the countryside “search and avoid” missions. Given the fact that the U.S. was pulling out of the war, such avoidance of conflict seemed eminently reasonable. As one young soldier put it, “The less we do, the better it is. Because, the more we do, the more we’ll end up in a firefight where someone gets hurt.”[196] Many soldiers turned to smoking marijuana, and some to heroin (“scag”), although the total number was later
exaggerated by the Nixon administration to justify the War on Drugs. On July 4, 1971, over one thousand GIs at Chu Lai held an antiwar rally which, according to one participant, evolved into the largest “pot party in the history of the army.” Leslie Whitfield, who served with the Third Battalion, Tenth Infantry, commented, “The heads [short for potheads] were critical of the war, looked down on lifers, condemned the military and wore peace symbols and beads with their uniforms.”

More frightening to the Army command was the increasing frequency of “fragging” superior officers who ordered GIs into hostile territory. According to the U.S. Army Center of Military History:

One of the more disturbing aspects of the unpopular war in Vietnam was the practice known as fragging. Disenchanted soldiers in Vietnam sometimes used fragmentation grenades, popularly known as frags, or other explosives to threaten or kill officers and NCOs they disliked. The full extent of the problem will never be known; but it increased sharply in 1969, 1970, and 1971, when the morale of the troops declined in step with the American role in the fighting. A total of 730 well-documented cases involving 83 deaths have come to light. There were doubtless others and probably some instances of fragging that were privately motivated acts of anger that had nothing to do with the war. Nonetheless, fragging was symptomatic of an Army in turmoil.

The “turmoil” in the Army included occasional mutinies (disobeying direct orders), consultations in the field between troops and officers (the military is not supposed to be a democracy), desertions, temporary absences without leave (AWOL), drug use, racial tensions, general resistance to military rules and authority, including dress codes, unauthorized peace advocacy (petitions, gatherings), numerous conscientious objection applications, and lackluster re-enlistment. Such problems were the subject of a revealing essay by Col. Robert D. Heinl, Jr., “The Collapse of the Armed Forces,” in the Armed Forces Journal (June 7, 1971). While the decline in fighting spirit was commonly described as a problem of “low morale,” at least some of it reflected a positive trend toward questioning the purpose and conduct of the war. Such critical thinking was necessary for reasons of both conscience and legal protection. Given the routine carnage employed in ground operations, soldiers had to be careful not to
commit war crimes, as defined in U.S. military codes and international law.

**Technological rampage: The air war**

U.S. leaders went into the Vietnam War confident that America’s overwhelming technical superiority would enable it to defeat the guerrilla insurgency in South Vietnam. Since its great victory in World War II, the U.S. had built up unprecedented naval and airpower capabilities that included an arsenal of bombers, guided missiles, perfected navigation and communication equipment, high-explosive anti-personnel weapons, and pilotless aircraft. Fitting with a tradition dating to the Indian wars and conquest of the Philippines, in which superior firepower was used to subdue a supposedly “savage” foe, America’s military strategy was outlined by General William DePuy, Chief of Staff of Operations for MACV: “more bombs, more shells, more napalm...till the other side cracks and gives up...We are going to stomp them to death.” General Westmoreland concurred, “We’ll just go on bleeding them until Hanoi wakes up to the fact that they have bled their country to the point of national disaster for generations. Then they will have to reassess their position.”[200]
Much of the stomping was done by aerial bombing. Indeed, the American air war produced many more casualties than the war on the ground. According to the military historian Michael Clodfelter:

The United States Air Force dropped in Indochina, from 1964 to August 15, 1973, a total of 6,162,000 tons of bombs and other ordnance. U.S. Navy and Marine Corps aircraft expended another 1,500,000 tons in Southeast Asia. This tonnage far exceeded that expended in World War II – 1,613,000 tons in the European Theater and 537,000 tons in the Pacific Theater.\(^{(201)}\)

American bombing missions were enabled by the U.S. global military base structure, which allowed airplanes to carry out missions from as far away as Guam, Okinawa, the Philippines, and Thailand, and by the construction of air-bases, landing fields, military compounds, roads, ports and energy depots in South Vietnam by two politically connected companies, Bechtel and Kellogg, Brown and Root.\(^{(202)}\) For the Pentagon, Vietnam served as a “remarkable technological opportunity,” in the words of General Maxwell Taylor, for showcasing new super-weapons developed by military scientists and engineers. Following the Soviets launching of Sputnik in 1958, the Eisenhower administration founded the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA),
whose mission was to recruit top scientific talent for developing cutting edge military technologies that would enable the U.S. to win the Cold War. In 1971, it was estimated that more than 240,000 technological and scientific workers were involved in war related production or research. Their output was considerable.

Among the advanced weapons used in Vietnam were B-52 bombers that could carry ten times the load of bombs as WWII models; AC-130 gunships, nicknamed “Puff the Magic Dragon,” capable of sensing ammonia in human sweat and urine, and firing 6,000 rounds per minute; Huey and Cobra attack helicopters with rapid-side fire capability; Raytheon and Hughes wire guided missiles with built-in path-correcting devices; swift boats equipped with twin .50 caliber machine guns; surface-to-surface rockets capable of operating at a range of over 100 miles; blockbuster bombs that could destroy enough jungle vegetation to create a “bald spot the size of a football field”; bombs laden with a proximity fuse with a 75-millisecond delay so they would detonate below the jungle canopy but above ground; camouflaged electronic sensors and land mines for use along the Ho Chi Minh trail; Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (drones) capable of conducting surveillance over North Vietnam and China; and computerized navigation, mapping and communications.
systems linked with space-based satellites.\footnote{204}

Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara embodied the Pentagon’s infatuation with high technology and a cold managerial ethos. McNamara authorized the construction of a billion-dollar electronic detection system, codenamed Practice Nine, designed to limit NVA infiltration to South Vietnam by ringing the Ho Chi Minh trail with ground sensors linked to a giant computer terminal in Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, for instant bomb targeting. Senator Barry Goldwater, Republican of Arizona, praised the electronic battlefield as one of “the greatest steps forward in warfare since gunpowder.” Senator William Proxmire, Democrat of Wisconsin, warned that it could “lead to the wiping out of whole villages with air dropped explosive devices designed to kill anyone who ventures into their neighborhood.”\footnote{205}

The NLF and NVA studied American weapons systems and attempted to evade or counter them by developing effective warning systems, spy networks, camouflage techniques, clever battlefield tactics, knowledge of the jungle terrain, and support from the local population. Although southern fighters were aided by the north, they had to rely on their own ingenuity to neutralize the advantages of
The 559 Engineering Corps maintained the Ho Chi Minh Trail

American weapons. Expert at navigating the waterways and moving supplies by boat, they built a network of underground tunnels where they could live for days and even perform medical surgeries. A cook by the name of Hoang Tram became a national hero for developing a stove that could cook meals without giving off tell-tale smoke.

Guerrillas manufactured homemade bombs and mines from unexploded American ordinance. They set up punji traps and camouflaged land-mines for GIs to step on while on patrol. To trick American ground sensors, which were prone to false alarm and inaccurate placement, they used decoys such as sending herds of cattle to simulate troop movement. NLF officers placed their radio huts at a distance from command posts, resulting in air strikes “blast[ing] a patch of jungle just because a transmitter had been heard there,” according to an NSA study. Tanks and other heavy equipment as well as rice supplies were shipped through an alternative route from the heavily bombed Ho Chi Minh trail, Cambodia’s Port of
Some of the most dedicated revolutionary fighters were women, following the example of the Trung sisters and Lady Trieu who had fought previous foreign invaders. Nguyen Thi Dinh led rebellions in Ben Tre province, while Ngo Thi Tuyen carried 95 kilograms of ammunition (twice her body weight) down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

On February 13, 1965, three weeks before the first landing of U.S. Marines at Danang, the Johnson administration launched Operation Rolling Thunder against North Vietnam, its goal being to cut off supply lines to the south and otherwise bludgeon Hanoi into submission. The CIA’s Saigon station predicted that the bombing would be ineffective in stopping the flow of supplies, but President Johnson thought it useful for increasing pressure on North Vietnamese leaders (to accept a permanent division of their country). The bombings were carried out by Boeing B-52s, each capable of carrying 30 tons of munitions, and F-105 Thunder-chiefs, capable of flying 1,400 miles per hour and equipped with light-weight air data computer systems. By the end of Operation Rolling Thunder in the fall of 1968, U.S. warplanes had flown more than 300,000 sorties and delivered 643,000 tons of bombs, destroying 65 percent of the North’s oil storage capacity, 59 percent of its power plants, 55 percent of its major bridges, 9,821 vehicles and 1,966 railroad cars. The Hanoi government’s rebuilding efforts were aided by China, which supplied trucks, gasoline, railway lines, and large quantities of grains and cloth. The Soviet Union provided anti-aircraft batteries, tanks, and MIG-17 fighter aircraft to defend against American warplanes.
National Security adviser McGeorge Bundy claimed in *Foreign Affairs* (January 1967) that the bombing of the North was “the most accurate and restrained in modern warfare.” Eyewitnesses, however, pointed to the bombing of hospitals, schools, Buddhist pagodas, agricultural cooperatives, administrative buildings, fishing boats, dikes, and a leper colony and sanitarium, resulting in the death of an estimated 52,000 to 180,000 civilians. Nam Dinh, Vietnam’s third largest city in North Vietnam, was “made to resemble the city of a vanished civilization,” according to *New York Times* reporter Harrison Salisbury, despite being a center for silk and textile production, not war-related production. In Vinh (population 72,000), the destruction was akin to the German city of Dresden in World War II. This included nearly all homes, thirty-one schools, the university, four hospitals, the main bookstore and cinema, two churches, an historic 18th century Buddhist
pagoda that served as the cultural center of the city, a museum of the revolution, and the 19th century imperial citadel.

Following raids in Dai Lai village in the rural Thai Binh province (southeast of Hanoi) in October 1967, French journalist Gerard Chaliand witnessed men and women weeping as they swept debris from the floors of destroyed homes and recounted how their neighbors had been burned alive by the fires. Bui Van Nguu, age forty-six, told Chaliand that he had been outdoors making brooms for the cooperative when a bomb exploded in his kitchen, burying his three children. The only thing left of them was mangled limbs, shreds of flesh, and the ear of his eldest daughter which was found in a garden seven yards away. Rescue teams in the village dug out many other children who had been buried alive, burned to shreds, or asphyxiated in the bombing massacre that was one of many in the war. A woman who had lost her parents and six siblings in the bombing of Phy Le told visiting peace activist David Dellinger to “ask your president Johnson if our straw huts were made of steel and concrete” (as LBJ claimed) and to ask him if “our Catholic church that was destroyed was a military target....Tell him that we will continue our life and struggle no matter what future bombings there will be because we know that without independence and freedom, nothing is worthwhile.”
U.S. rules prohibiting the intentional bombing of civilians seemed to have little effect on actual bombing practices. One reason is that some pilots simply ignored the rules. Pilot Randy Floyd attested that “virtually anywhere in North Vietnam was a free drop zone. We bombed the cattle because we were told that anything out there was North Vietnamese controlled and we figured that was part of the food supply.” Another reason is that pilots were unable to distinguish between civilian and military targets. Historian Jonathan Neale notes that “in most parts of North Vietnam, hospitals, schools and churches were the only brick or cement buildings of two stories or higher and pilots thought they were military barracks.” A third is that many bombs went astray, especially when dropped from high altitudes. According to one very experienced American pilot, “the odds of bombs hitting their targets are not high... a bewildering number of variables could affect its trajectory [including] unforeseen winds, inherent radar tracking inaccuracies... target location uncertainty, map errors, computer settling time, [pilot] reaction time on the pickle button, the rotation of the earth, and gravity.”
U.S. pilots also had to evade surface-to-air missiles and sometimes MiG-17s, which made precision bombing even less likely. North Vietnamese encryption specialists were often able to intercept American communications, resulting in foreknowledge of attacks. An estimated 900 U.S. warplanes were shot down or lost over North Vietnam during Operation Rolling Thunder. Luu Huy Chao, a North Vietnamese fighter pilot trained in China, personally shot down four U.S. aircraft with his twenty-year-old MiG-17, which flew half the speed of American F-105s but was more maneuverable. This earned him a meeting with Ho Chi Minh, who told him, “don’t be overconfident. You must be extra careful when you fight the Americans. They come from a very advanced country and their aircraft are much faster and more powerful. Even so we can deal with them if we keep up our spirit and never lose courage.”[215]

The Pentagon’s assessment of Rolling Thunder in September 1966, cited in the Pentagon Papers, concluded that “initial plans and assessments for the ROLLING THUNDER program clearly tended to overestimate the persuasive and disruptive effects of the U.S. air strikes and, correspondingly, to underestimate the tenacity and recuperative capabilities of the North Vietnamese.” Contrary to public rationales, “the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam (NVN) had had no
measurable direct effect on Hanoi’s ability to mount and support military operations in the South at the current level.” What the bombing did do was cause an estimated $86 million in damages to North Vietnam’s infrastructure and economy, thus diverting energy and resources to reconstruction; but this damage was offset by increased Soviet and Chinese aid “on the order of $250-400 million, of which about $100-150 million was economic.”[216]

A summary Pentagon report at the end of 1966 took stock of civilian casualties, estimating that about 80 percent of the 13,000 to 24,000 North Vietnamese killed by American bombs were civilians. The commanding generals discussed the issue of civilian casualties, not as a humanitarian crisis, but as a public relations problem, as any acknowledgement of civilian casualties would give North Vietnam a “propaganda” advantage and turn world opinion (more strongly) against the United States. The report also noted that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were eager to abolish all legal restraints on bombing. A final report on Operation Rolling Thunder issued in the fall of 1968 summarized its failure to achieve stated military and psychological objectives:

Twenty-seven months of US bombing of North Vietnam have had remarkably little effect on Hanoi’s over-all strategy in prosecuting the war, on its confident view of long-term Communist prospects, and on its political tactics regarding negotiations. The growing pressure of US air operations has not shaken the North Vietnamese leaders’ conviction that they can withstand the bombing and outlast the US and South Vietnam in a protracted war of attrition. Nor has it caused them to waver in
their belief that the outcome of this test of will and endurance will be determined primarily by the course of the conflict on the ground in the South, not by the air war in the North.\textsuperscript{[217]}

The resiliency of the Vietnamese people in the face of the crushing American attacks from the sky was interpreted by Townsend Hoopes, the Undersecretary of the Air Force, as an “Oriental indifference to death.” The Vietnamese, he wrote, “defy us by a readiness to struggle, suffer and die on a scale that seems to us beyond the bounds of humanity, exploiting our Christian values which make us reluctant to bear the burden of genocide.” Hoopes’ remarks fit within the “savage war” doctrine dating from the era of the Indian wars, which identifies the United States as the ethical party in war and justifies the commission of significant atrocities by claiming that America had been compelled to do so by an uncivilized enemy. One U.S. army officer, after observing a community outside Hanoi fill up a bomb crater with dirt and build new railroad tracks within twenty four hours, stated, “Caucasians cannot really imagine what ant labor can do,” in yet another

U.S. Navy pilot John McCain lies in a Hanoi hospital after his Skyhawk dive bomber was shot down on Oct. 26, 1967, on his 23rd mission. He remained a POW until the end of the war. Photo by Francois Chalais.
manifestation of the deep racism underlying the war.²¹⁸

On October 31, 1968, with the antiwar movement in full-swing and public opinion having turned against the war, President Johnson ended Operation Rolling Thunder, hoping to boost the presidential prospects of his vice president, Hubert Humphrey. Republican candidate Richard Nixon won the election and continued this official halt, while increasing the bombing of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. He nonetheless wanted DRV leaders in Hanoi to believe that he was ready to employ all means necessary to win the war, perhaps even nuclear weapons. According to Nixon’s Chief of Staff, H. R. Haldeman, Nixon had confided to him:

I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe I’ve reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We’ll just slip the word to them that, “for God’s sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about communism. We can’t restrain him when he’s angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button” and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace.²¹⁹
An NLF-NVA offensive in March 1972 led Nixon to renew the bombing of North Vietnam on April 10. Known as Operation Linebacker, B-52s and tactical aircraft dropped over 150,000 tons of bombs within a six-and-a-half-month period, ending October 23. The U.S. also mined North Vietnamese harbors and blockaded its coast. In December, with peace negotiations proceeding to a conclusion and few U.S. troops remaining in South Vietnam, Nixon initiated one last rampaging campaign, Linebacker II, designed “to inflict the utmost civilian distress” and wring last minute concessions from Hanoi. During the eleven-day onslaught, more than 36,000 tons of munitions rained down on North Vietnam, resulting in at least 2,200 civilians.
killed. Among the ruins were North Vietnam’s largest hospital, the Gia Lam Airport, Hanoi’s major bus and train stations, and over 2,000 homes. The North Vietnamese shot down fifteen B-52s, according to the U.S., or thirty-four, according to the DRV.\textsuperscript{[220]} The “Christmas bombing,” as it was called, was all for naught as nothing changed in the final peace agreement signed in Paris on January 27, 1973.

Bombs Away! “Saving” South Vietnam

While U.S. policymakers agonized over the decision to bomb the North out of fear of drawing in the Soviets or Chinese, there was no such constraint on bombing the South. The United States dropped almost twice the tonnage of bombs on its ally, South Vietnam, an area two-thirds the size of Great Britain, as it did on all countries in World War II. According to the
historian and former U.S. Air Force pilot, James P. Harrison, “Most of the bombs (about 4 million tons) and virtually all of the defoliants were dropped on our ally ... In South Vietnam over half of the forests and 9,000 or 15,000 hamlets were heavily damaged."[221]

The targets were supposed to be the Viet Cong, but the victims were more often civilians. Jack Langguth reported in the New York Times (June 5, 1965) on the saturation bombing of Quang Ngai: “Many Vietnamese - one estimate is as high as 500 - were killed by the strikes. The American contention is that they were Vietcong soldiers. But three out of four patients seeking treatment in a Vietnamese hospital afterward for burns from napalm ... were village women.” Charles Mohr reported in the same paper (September 5, 1965) the results of a mass bombing in the Mekong Delta: “In [one] delta province there is a woman who has both arms burned off by napalm and her eyelids so badly burned that she cannot close them... The woman had two of her children killed in the air strike that maimed her.” Mohr drew a moral conclusion for his American readers: “Few Americans appreciate what their nation is doing to South Vietnam with airpower ... this is strategic bombing in a friendly allied country ... innocent civilians are dying every day in South Vietnam.”[222]
Most of the American pilots who flew the bombers and warplanes were “anesthetized” to the violence and conditioned to think of the Vietnamese as mere “dinks” or “gooks.” Randy Floyd, who had flown 98 combat missions in a two-engine A-6 jet bomber, told a war crimes commission in Oslo that it was hard to explain how “depersonalized the war is for pilots. You never see any blood; you don’t hear any screams; you’re just operating a machine, and you’re doing an efficient job.” A junior officer stationed on Hancock Carrier told a reporter that “they would go on a mission and come back to white linen tablecloths. There was the attitude that those (Vietnamese) were less than people.... Each meal was punctuated with war stories from pilots whose bombing victims were referred to as ‘crispy critters.’”

On the receiving end of the bombs, Truong Nhu Tang wrote in A Vietcong Memoir about the “undiluted psychological terror” experienced by revolutionary fighters operating under the constant threat of B-52 attack. “From a kilometer away, the sonic roar of the B-52 explosions tore eardrums, leaving many of the jungle dwellers permanently deaf. From a kilometer, the shock waves knocked their victims senseless. Any hit within half a kilometer would collapse the walls of an unreinforced bunker, burying alive the people cowering inside.” The first few times he experienced
a B-52 attack, Truong felt as if he had been “caught in the apocalypse. The terror was complete. One lost control of bodily functions as the mind screamed incomprehensible orders to get out…. Sooner or later though . . . people just resigned themselves – fully prepared to ‘go and sit in the ancestors’ corner.’”[224]

Aerial bombardment was typically used in conjunction with ground operations in South Vietnam. One of the largest, Operation Cedar Falls, involving 30,000 U.S. and ARVN troops, took place in January 1967. The goal was to remove and relocate all 3,500 inhabitants in an NLF dominated area known as the “iron-triangle,” then eradicate all structures and defoliate the area so as to prevent its use by the NLF. Journalist Jonathan Schell was on hand to witness the latter operation. U.S. warplanes, he wrote, sent “their bombs on the deserted ruin, scorching again the burned foundations of the houses and pulverizing the heaps of rubble in the hopes of collapsing tunnels too deep and well-hidden for the bulldozers – having once destroyed it, we are now bent on annihilating every possible indication that the village had ever existed.”[225]
In Operation Speedy Express, which lasted from December 1968 to May 1969, the U.S. aimed to bring the rural population in the Mekong Delta under its control. The region was pounded with artillery, bombers, and helicopter gunships, followed by sweeps of U.S. forces. According to U.S. military figures, 6,500 tactical air strikes were carried in support of the operation, dropping 5,078 tons of bombs and 1,784 tons of napalm. Provincial hospitals overflowed with civilian casualties. The U.S. reported 10,889 enemy killed, as compared to 242 U.S. soldiers. Air Force Captain Brian Willson, newly arrived in Vietnam, had yet to be anesthetized to the violence when he was asked to assess bomb damage in five hamlets in Vinh Long Province in mid-April 1969. As he later wrote, “I estimated that we documented somewhere between seven and nine hundred murders of Vietnamese peasants, all due to low-flying fighter-bombers who could see exactly who and what they were bombing.” In one hamlet, he personally counted sixty-two bodies, mostly women and children “usually in their mothers’ arms or very close to them,” and old people. The official report, however, listed them all as “VC.”
In 1971, *Newsweek* reporter Kevin Buckley and a Vietnamese-speaking aid worker, Alexander Shimkin, investigated official records of Operation Speedy Express and conducted personal interviews in the region. The result was a 5,000-word exposé of a massive slaughter of an estimated 5,000 civilians by “indiscriminate” American firepower. Their intended theme for the story, “Was the My Lai massacre an isolated incident?” was rejected by *Newsweek* editors as too incendiary. “They wanted Buckley to focus on a single war crime, not the overarching American way of war,” according to Nick Turse. *Newsweek* published the story in June 1972, but with much of the incriminating personal witness missing and without drawing larger implications.\[227\]

The hardest hit area was the province of Quang Tri, just south of the Demilitarized Zone, where an estimated 3,489 villages were repeatedly bombed. In April 1972, the province was hit with the heaviest B-52 bombing of the entire war. Forty B-52s flattened a “box” two miles long and one-half mile wide. The capital city and the southeastern quadrant of Quang Tri were obliterated. Arthur Westing, an ecologist who had worked for the U.S. Forest Service, experienced combat in Korea, and made three previous trips to Indochina to study the war zones in Cambodia, reported after a 1973 visit to the Quang Tri province that he was “unprepared for the utter devastation that confronted us wherever we turned…. Never were we out of sight of an endless panorama of crater fields. As far as we could determine not a single permanent building,
urban or rural, remained intact; no private dwellings, no schools, no libraries, no churches or pagodas and no hospitals. Moreover, every last bridge and even culvert had been bombed to bits. The one rail line through the province was also obliterated.”

In some cases, bombing was used to force villagers to move into strategic hamlets or to cities where some social scientists believed they could be won over through modernizing reforms. “The Maoist inspired rural revolution is undercut by the American sponsored urban revolution,” wrote Samuel Huntington, a State Department adviser and Harvard professor, who had hoped to turn Saigon into a consumer-capitalist utopia. In reality, the American war created a country-wide dystopia in which millions of Vietnamese became refugees, disease epidemics spread, and cities became havens for prostitution, drug trafficking, and a black-market economy fed by stolen U.S. goods. “Saigon has become an American brothel,” said Senator J. William Fulbright in 1967. That same year, the astute French-American journalist Bernard Fall warned that southern Vietnam, as a “cultural and historical entity,” was threatened with “extinction… [as]…the countryside literally dies under the blows of the largest military machine ever unleashed on an area of this size.”
At the heart of America’s technological rampage was the dropping of an estimated 388,000 tons of napalm; over ten times the amount used in the Korean War. A 1967 *Ramparts Magazine* article by William F. Pepper captured the horrors of this “wonder weapon” and “its companion, white phosphorus, [which] liquidized young flesh and carve[d] it into grotesque forms. The little figures are afterward often scarcely human in appearance, and one cannot be confronted with the monstrous effects of the burning without being totally shaken.” Pepper, at least, was shaken by what he had seen, and he wanted to wake up the American people as to the reality of the war behind the benevolent American rhetoric of “saving”
South Vietnam. His article was reportedly read by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in February, whose images were unforgettable, said King. “I came to the conclusion that I could no longer remain silent about an issue that was destroying the soul of the nation.”[233]
The writer Martha Gellhorn, having personally witnessed the effects of the war, wrote an article about injured Vietnamese children for the Ladies’ Home Journal (January 1967). She made the connection between “loving our own children” and thinking of “children 10,000 miles away.” Gellhorn described her visit to the children’s ward at the Qui Nhon hospital where she met a seven-year-old boy badly burned by napalm and moaning in pain. The boy’s grandfather told her through an interpreter that “Vietcong guerrillas had passed through their hamlet in April, but were gone. Late in August, napalm bombs fell from the sky.” An American surgeon explained that almost all casualties in such village bombings were women, children, and old men, as the young men were away, fighting for either the Viet Cong or the ARVN. [222]

U.S. warplanes also dropped cluster bombs. Developed by elite military scientists in conjunction with 39 private companies such as American Electric of La Mirada, California, cluster bombs released hundreds of smaller bomblets, each one exploding into hundreds of razor-sharp shrapnel that could rip through bodies. These were antipersonnel weapons specifically designed to cripple and maim. The main casualties were again civilians. Doctors told David Dellinger that they had “trouble operating on
any patients wounded by [cluster] bombs because the steel is so small. Some of the bombs are timed and go off later [and thus] interfere with relief operations.” The mentality of those who designed such devices was epitomized by a laboratory worker at MIT who told a reporter that he didn't care if what he was designing “might one day be used to kill a million people,” as this was not his “responsibility. I’m given an interesting technical problem and I get enjoyment out of solving it.” Napalm inventor Dr. Louis Fieser of Harvard, claiming to have not foreseen that his creation would be used “against babies and Buddhists,” said it “wasn’t his business to deal with political or moral questions…. I was working on a technical problem that was considered pressing.” These comments exemplify a cult of technical rationality divorced from human concerns.

U.S. conduct clearly violated international laws, including the Hague Convention of 1907, which outlawed the bombing of undefended villages and the use of indiscriminate firepower and chemical weapons, and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949. Specific articles of the latter convention, summarized by the American Red Cross, include the following:

Articles 13, 32. Civilians are to be protected from murder, torture or brutality, and from discrimination on the basis of race, nationality, religion or political opinion.
Articles 33-34. Pillage, reprisals, indiscriminate destruction of property and the taking of hostages are prohibited.
Articles. 33, 49. Civilians are not to be subjected to collective punishment or deportation.

At the Winter Soldier hearings in Detroit in early 1971, sponsored by Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Eric Herter spoke of the devastating consequences of American style techno-war, where an “entire culture” was being decimated by “an automated electronic and mechanical death machine.” This killing was “one-sided, unseen and universal….Those of us who testify… have seen the mechanical monster, the mindless devastation, the agony of simple people caught in the firestorm of our technological rampage.”

The man at the helm of the “death machine” from June 1964 to June 1968, General
William C. Westmoreland, was callous in his attitude toward Vietnamese civilian deaths and saw technical advances in Vietnam as inaugurating a new way of war. He told an army lobby group in October 1969 that “on the battlefield of the future, enemy forces will be located, tracked and targeted almost instantaneously through the use of data links, computer assisted intelligence evaluation and automated fire control. With first round kill probabilities approaching certainty, and with surveillance devices that can continually track the enemy, the need for large forces to fix the opposition will be less important.”[239]

These comments convey the enthusiasm among military leaders for the kind of machine-driven war pioneered in Vietnam and later adopted in the Global War on Terror, both deeply rooted in American cultural fantasies that their all-powerful machines are being used for beneficial purposes. The results in Vietnam reminded the historian Larry Berman of Tacitus’s famous saying, “They make a desert and call it peace.”[240]

Bombing Laos and Cambodia [See linked article: “Associated wars in Laos and Cambodia”]
Between 1964 and 1973, the United States dropped roughly the same amount of lethal ordinance on Laos – 2.1 million tons of bombs – as it did on all countries combined during World War II. According to scholars Channapha Khamvongsa and Elaine Russell, “U.S. bombing left the tiny nation the most heavily bombed country per capita in the world and resulted in mostly civilian casualties.” U.S. military leaders claimed that the onslaught was necessary to impede the flow of NVA arms and reinforcements to South Vietnam, but the bombing was vastly disproportionate as well as indiscriminate. The bombings furthermore violated the neutrality of Laos and were conducted without the approval of Congress. “The secret war in Laos would eventually be exposed during U.S. Senate hearings in 1971,” note Khamvongsa and Russell, “but details did not become known until State Department memorandums were declassified years after the war ended.” The bombings left a lasting lethal legacy as approximately 78 million unexploded cluster bombs remained buried in the ground after the war, causing hundreds of deaths and casualties each year. [241]
As in Laos, the U.S. began to secretly bomb Cambodia in 1965 to order to impede the flow of arms to the NLF-NVA in South Vietnam. In March 1969, President Nixon significantly increased the aerial assaults under the codename MENU, while still keeping the raids secret from the American people, an amazing feat considering that 110,000 tons of bombs were dropped over a fourteen-month period. A Pentagon report, released in 1973, stated that Nixon’s national security adviser, “Henry A. Kissinger approved each of the 3,875 Cambodia bombing raids in 1969 and 1970 as well as the methods for keeping them out of the newspapers.” In March 1970, Cambodia fell into civil war after Defense Minister Lon Nol engineered a coup d’État. The U.S. backed the anticommunist Nol, sending U.S. forces into Cambodia in May and June. U.S. bombing continued until Congress passed legislation forcing the administration to end it in August 1973. All told, the U.S. dropped 2.7 million tons of bombs on Cambodia, an amount that exceeded the tonnage dropped on Laos. According to
the diplomatic historian Greg Grandin:

The bombing of Cambodia was illegal in its conception, deceitful in its implementation, and genocidal in its effect. It destroyed the fragile neutrality that Cambodia’s leaders had managed to maintain despite the war next door. It committed Washington to a program of escalation, including its 1970 invasion, which hastened the collapse of Cambodian society.\textsuperscript{242}

An inhuman fate: U.S. chemical warfare

The government of Vietnam called it “the largest chemical warfare campaign in the history of humankind.”\textsuperscript{243} The former president of the Vietnamese Red Cross and the vice-president of the Vietnam Victims of Agent Orange Association, Professor Nguyen Trong Nhan, described the main chemical, Agent Orange, as “a weapon of mass destruction” and declared its use in Vietnam “a massive violation of human rights of the civilian population.” Speaking in 2004, after witnessing a generation of birth defects and other abnormalities, he said, “The damage inflicted by Agent Orange is much worse than anybody thought at the end of the war.”\textsuperscript{244}
Between 1961 and 1971, the United States Air Force sprayed an estimated seventy-three million liters of chemical agents over central and south Vietnam. Of that volume, more than forty-five million liters consisted of Agent Orange, a mixture of herbicides containing a heavy concentration of dioxin, a long-lasting toxic chemical linked to birth defects, cancers, leukemia, and other debilitating diseases. The nickname was derived from the orange identification band painted on 208-litre storage drums. Other concentrated mixtures included Agent Blue, a quick-acting defoliant used to destroy crops, and Agent White, a long-enduring toxic mix used to destroy forests. In all, the U.S. sprayed these toxins on five million acres, about twelve percent of the land, with some areas hit repeatedly.

In the United States, the 1950s were dubbed an era of “better living through chemistry.” Agent Orange and its sister herbicides were developed by scientists at the army biological warfare laboratory at Ft. Detrick, Maryland, in conjunction with Dow Chemical and Monsanto scientists. In 1961, after completing experiments at Camp Drum, New York, President Kennedy authorized the use of these concentrated chemical agents in Vietnam. He did so against the advice of State Department officials such as Roger Hillsman who worried that the Americans would be perceived as “foreign imperialist barbarians.”
No official gave serious consideration to the debilitating and long-lasting effects of these toxins on human beings and the environment. The aerial spraying was carried out in Vietnam under the auspices of “Operation Ranch Hand,” which was officially designated a GVN program and employed nondescript U.S. cargo planes. Its objectives were to defoliate the dense vegetation of forests and jungles that provided cover for the enemy, and secondly to destroy local food supplies that might be used to feed NLF cadre. Agents Blue and Orange were also sprayed around the base perimeter of U.S. camps in order to increase visibility and deter enemy ambushes, thereby exposing U.S. troops to toxic agents near their quarters as well as in the field. The environment was regarded as an ally of the enemy and treated as such.

John Green, an American medic in the war, recalled walking through a defoliated zone sprayed with Agent Orange, where “everything was dead. The trees had literally grown to death because that’s how Agent Orange works – it accelerates growth in a plant’s cell until finally the plant or tree dies.” Agent Orange caused plants to wither and trees to explode, and left jungles stunted and bare. It killed domestic cattle, water buffalo and pigs, and caused birth defects in humans. Long before Agent Orange became an issue in the United States, hospitals in South Vietnam were reporting an upsurge in still-births and babies born with spina bifida and other deformities. Dr. Ton That Tung, who carried out pioneering studies on Agent
Orange, averred that, “in the abominable history of war, with the sole exception of nuclear weapons, never has such an inhuman fate ever before been reserved for the survivors.”

According to a 2003 health study, an estimated 3,181 villages in South Vietnam were directly sprayed with toxic chemicals, and another 1,430 were indirectly sprayed, exposing “at least 2.1 million but perhaps as many as 4.8 million people” to the herbicides. The defoliation of South Vietnam’s jungles and forestland resulted in rampant soil erosion, wildfires, floods, malaria and disease epidemics caused by rat infestations, among other serious ecological consequences, some of which still linger a half century later. The heavily defoliated A Luoi Valley once possessed a tropical forest rich in hardwoods and rare species of trees, full of elephants, tigers and monkeys, its rivers teeming with fish. In July 2009, American professor Fred Wilcox found it covered by wild weeds with poor fauna, having only 24 bird species and five mammal species, a fraction of what existed before the war.

The ravaging effects of America’s chemical warfare extended to Laos and Cambodia, where State Department scientists in June 1969 found significant damage to rubber and fruit trees after sprays drifted across the border. The military utility was considered to be limited because, while forcing the guerrilla fighters to extort food...
from villagers in some areas, there was “no indication the enemy has any major problem in resupplying food over the long run.”

Agent Blue

Agent Blue was the poison of choice used for crop destruction in South Vietnam. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, although a strong supporter of the war, correctly anticipated the counterproductive political effects of this program. “The way to win the war is to win the people,” he wrote in a memo to President Kennedy on August 23, 1962. “Crop destruction runs counter to this basic rule.” He further elaborated:

The problem of identifying fields on which the Viet Cong depend is hardly susceptible to solution so long as the Viet Cong and the people are co-mingled. The Government will gain the enmity of the people whose crops are destroyed and whose wives and children will either have to stay in place and suffer hunger or become homeless refugees living on the uncertain bounty of a not-too-efficient government.

As with “pacification” programs, Phoenix assassinations and interrogations, and search and destroy missions, the crop destruction program thoroughly alienated the rural population. As the great majority of villages were in NLF territory, any could be targeted for the destruction of their rice crop. U.S. and GVN agents furthermore told village residents that the chemicals being sprayed on their crops and surroundings were not harmful to humans. When NLF cadre went into the villages to explain the dangers of the chemicals, the U.S. and GVN undertook efforts to counter this “communist propaganda” by issuing leaflets that explained, “The only effect of defoliant is to kill trees and force leaves to whither, and normally does not cause harm to people, livestock, and land, or the drinking water of our compatriots.” The cartoon-filled leaflets concluded, “I now resolve never to listen to Viet Cong Propaganda.” The U.S. and GVN promised to compensate villagers who were inadvertently harmed, and there were in fact many applications. According to a Herbicide Policy Review coordinated by the U.S. Embassy in Saigon in 1968, $35 million was paid to 5,848 claimants, although much of the money never reached poor farmers.
One RAND Corporation study in 1968 reported “an almost total absence” of efforts by the U.S. and GVN to educate people about herbicide use “or to assist those who have been affected.” It noted that those who received compensatory claims were more likely to be wealthy landowners. One villager was quoted as saying “that even under the French nothing so awful has ever occurred.” Another RAND study explained that “crop destruction struck at the very heart of the rural South Vietnamese farmer’s existence, obliterating in one spray pass the product of many months of his family’s labor,” and that it “generated much hostility to the United States and its South Vietnamese allies,” thus confirming Rusk’s prediction. The Pentagon nevertheless continued the program, believing that it created an effective means of severing the rural population from the guerrillas.

Donald Kennedy, chairman of the department of biological sciences at Stanford University, introduced a 1971 study on the effects of the American chemical war in Vietnam with these words:

No one can conclude, after looking carefully at the impact of our military strategy in Southeast Asia, that we are fighting a war against an army. Instead, we are waging a war against a people and the land they live on. The enormity of our
attack upon the Vietnamese environment has, for me, changed entirely the logic
with which one evaluates the morality and even the efficiency of our operation
there.... The central question is now a simple one: How can we claim to be acting
on behalf of people when our action itself is prohibiting a future for them? 

Lingering effects

The phasing out of the American chemical war in Southeast Asia was the result of an
expanding ecological awareness as well as specific studies of chemical agents. The
insecticide DDT, which was widely used in American agriculture, was banned in 1972
after a ten-year movement that began with the publication of Rachel Carson’s
Silent Spring in 1962. In a similar way, reports of birth defects and other
deleterious effects of Agents Orange, Blue, and White in Vietnam led to scientific
studies that correlated these effects with toxic ingredients, particularly 2,4,5-T.
Scientific experiments produced malformations and stillbirths in mice.

In October 1969, the Pentagon restricted the use of Agent Orange to areas less
populated. Two months later, the American Association for the Advancement of
Science (AAAS) declared that recent research showing birth deformities in
experimental animals supported the conclusion that 2,4,5-T posed a probable health
threat to humans. The AAAS called on the Department of Defense to cease its use of
chemical agents in Vietnam. In April 1970, the Pentagon temporarily suspended the
use of Agent Orange but continued the use of Agents Blue and White. On February 12,
1971, MACV announced that herbicides would no longer be used for crop destruction
in Vietnam. The last U.S.-authorized helicopter herbicide operation was flown on
October 31, 1971.
Fred Wilcox, author of two in-depth studies on Agent Orange, *Waiting for an Army to Die* (1983) and *Scorched Earth* (2011), estimates that some three million Vietnamese, including 500,000 children, suffered from the effects of toxic chemicals in the aftermath of the war. Cam Nghia, in Quang Tri province, was transformed into a literal village of the damned. Film-maker Masako Sakata and her late husband, Vietnam veteran Greg Davis, found dioxin residues from Agent Orange to have caused terrible disabilities and deformities afflicting 158 children out of a population of 5,673 when they visited in 2003.[256]

When Vietnam veteran Ken Herrmann solicited letters about the effects of Agent Orange in 2004, respondents provided revealing personal accounts. Le Quang Chonh, a 54-year-old People’s Army veteran from Trinh Nga hamlet, wrote about how he suffered from poor eyesight, gastrectomy, gangrene and rheumatic limbs caused by Agent Orange and how his wife had given birth to “three monsters” followed by three disabled children. Tran Thi Lanh, from Thanh Hoa province, which he said was “mercilessly destroyed by chemical warfare during the American war,” noted that his two-year-old daughter could not speak or sit up and that her head was getting bigger while her muscles got smaller. She was one of the many disabled children whose fate was linked to the continued existence of dioxins from Agent Orange in the soil, water, and food.[257]
Wilcox’s first book, *Waiting for an Army to Die*, chronicles the effects of Agent Orange on American veterans. Many became sick or died from diseases that normally do not afflict young men, including rare cancers, while others reported that their children were born with birth defects similar to those seen in the offspring of female laboratory animals exposed to dioxin. The veterans considered themselves to have been guinea pigs in scientific experiments by their own government. They brought a class action lawsuit in 1980 against the government and Monsanto, which was settled out-of-court in 1984 for $180 million dollars.

On January 31, 2004, after the release of new scientific studies concluding Vietnam veterans were at increased risks of death from cancer and strokes, a victims’ rights group filed another lawsuit against Dow Chemical and Monsanto for liability in causing personal injury, claiming that the use of Agent Orange violated the 1907 Hague Convention on Land Warfare, the 1925 Geneva Protocol, and the 1949 Geneva Conventions. On March 10, 2005, Judge Jack B. Weinstein, who had presided over the 1984 U.S. veterans’ class-action lawsuit, dismissed the suit, ruling that Agent Orange was not considered a poison under international law at the time, and thus its use was not illegal and the companies producing it were not liable. Neither the companies that profited from making Agent Orange nor the policymakers who directed its use have been held accountable for the fate of its victims and the ecocide in Indochina.

**Peace negotiations**

The general rule of thumb in wars is that leaders desire peace only after their military objectives have been achieved. The objectives at odds in the Vietnam War, simply
put, were that Hanoi sought to reunite the country, in line with the Geneva Agreements of 1954, while the United States wanted a separate nation in the south ruled by an anti-communist government. The Saigon government under President Nguyen Van Thieu was even more adamant that a non-communist South Vietnam must be preserved. This became a problem when the Nixon administration changed course and reluctantly signed a peace agreement with Hanoi on January 27, 1973. That agreement called for the withdrawal of all foreign (U.S.) troops and for the restoration of election procedures abandoned nearly two decades earlier, toward reunification of the country. Thieu refused to abide by the terms of the treaty, thereby causing two more years of unnecessary bloodshed. Instead of ending under the peace agreement in 1973, the war ended with the surrender of South Vietnam in 1975.

Unlike Thieu, American presidents could not simply ignore public demands for an end to the war. Hence, they attempted to deflect and coopt such demands, and otherwise blame Hanoi for the failure of negotiations. President Johnson repeatedly proclaimed his earnest desire for peace while systematically expanding the war. Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, met with Johnson administration officials in early 1967 and called them on the ruse. “All you guys are committed to a military settlement,” he said. “You don’t want to negotiate; you’re not going to negotiate. You’re bombing that little piss-ant country up there, and you think you can blow them up.... It’s a bunch of crap about wanting to negotiate.”

The administration’s peace rhetoric was aimed at domestic and international audiences, not the Vietnamese. Indeed, UN Secretary-General U Thant worked tirelessly during the 1960s to broker a peace agreement based on the Geneva Agreements of 1954, but to no avail. The real difficulty for Johnson and company would be to explain to the American people why American blood had been shed in Vietnam at all. Having passed up ripe opportunities to resolve the burgeoning war in Vietnam in late 1963, following the Diem overthrow, and in late 1964, following his re-election as the “peace candidate,” President Johnson sabotaged another opportunity to negotiate an end to the war in late 1966. The Hanoi government was prepared to sit down with U.S. representatives in secret talks arranged by Poland, code-named
“Marigold,” when Johnson authorized bombing raids on the center of Hanoi for the first time on December 13 and 14. The North Vietnamese pulled out, the talks collapsed, and the war expanded. [262]

As the 1968 presidential election campaign geared up, President Johnson publicly offered to temporarily halt the bombing of North Vietnam as encouragement to Hanoi to begin peace negotiations. Hanoi accepted and peace talks opened in Paris on May 13, 1968. However, as neither side would back down from its core demands, the talks quickly ended. U.S. representatives offered to permanently halt the bombing of North Vietnam if Hanoi significantly reduced its support for the war in the south. The U.S., in effect, declared Hanoi’s interest in the south “outside interference,” equivalent to that of Washington. This equivalence was rejected by North Vietnamese representatives, who argued that the U.S. was trying to gain through negotiations what it could not gain on the battlefield – the right to maintain a separate state in the south. “The DRV always insisted,” writes Gareth Porter, “that its diplomatic stance reflect the moral distinction between the two sides, which was central to the meaning of their struggle: the Americans were aggressors – foreigners with no legitimate basis for their presence in Vietnam – while the DRV and the NLF were engaged in a fight for national independence and unity.” [263]

In late October, with Democratic Party presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey running behind in the polls, Johnson unilaterally halted the bombing of North Vietnam and called for the resumption of peace talks. The announcement immediately boosted Vice-President Humphrey’s poll numbers by six percentage points, just two points behind Republican candidate Richard Nixon, who
served as vice-president under Eisenhower. Nixon and Henry Kissinger secretly sabotaged the peace talks by convincing President Thieu – through intermediary Anna Chennault, chairwoman of the Republican Women for Nixon – to reject them in anticipation of getting a better deal from the Nixon administration. Hence on November 1, four days before the American election, Thieu publicly declared his implacable opposition to peace negotiations. Nixon narrowly won the presidential election, but the campaign rhetoric of both parties had signaled a shift in America’s approach to the war. Humphrey had promised to end the war without “humiliation of defeat,” while Nixon had promised to achieve “peace with honor.” Neither wanted to lose the war, but two-thirds of the American public polled had said they would vote for a candidate who would “de-Americanize” the war, according to a Gallup poll taken in early August 1964.

Nixon’s public pledge to bring “an honorable end to the war in Vietnam” entailed building up the South Vietnamese military, accelerating “pacification” programs,
intensifying the Phoenix program, and expanding the war into Cambodia, while at the same time gradually reducing U.S. troop levels. On July 30, 1969, in a speech at the Presidential Palace in Saigon during a quick visit to Vietnam, Nixon claimed he was doing everything possible to achieve a peaceful settlement. “I believe the record is clear as to which side has gone the extra mile in behalf of peace,” he said. “We have stopped the bombing of North Vietnam. We have withdrawn 25,000 American troops…. We have made ... a peace offer which is as generous as any ever made in the history of warfare.” In North Vietnam, meanwhile, Ho Chi Minh died on September 2, 1969, exactly twenty-five years after proclaiming Vietnamese independence. The previous May, his health failing, he wrote a Testament declaring, “Our compatriots in the North and in the South shall be reunited under the same roof,” and predicting the defeat of the Americans. North Vietnam was now led by Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, Deputy Prime Minister Vo Nguyen Giap, and Secretary of the Communist Party Le Duan.

In May 1971, with the war going badly for the U.S., Kissinger conveyed to Hanoi that the U.S. was prepared to set a specific date for the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops. This rekindled secret peace talks in Paris. The Saigon government, however, was not ready to give up the war, and the Nixon administration was not prepared to abandon Thieu. Hence the peace talks proceeded with difficulty, bogging down over numerous issues, including the shape of the negotiating table.

In August 1971, George Kahin, a leading American scholar on Southeast Asia, met with Hanoi officials to ascertain their views on negotiations. They told him that the key to
peace was to “permit reasonable free elections in South Vietnam – elections that would permit its inhabitants to replace Thieu,” thus allowing negotiations and eventual unification to proceed. Thieu, however, with the help of the CIA and the U.S. Embassy, rigged elections set for October 3. The main challenger was General Duong Van Minh, who, as Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker noted, “sees himself as the peace candidate and as such thinks he will be able to arrive at a settlement with north Viet-Nam and the VC.” The ambassador concluded that a “principle objective of United States policy in Viet-Nam over the next 10 months should be the reelection of President Thieu.” Aware that the elections were being rigged, all other candidates stepped down. Thieu ran alone, garnering 94.3 percent of the vote by his count.  

In the spring of 1972, the NLF and NVA launched a new offensive, driving the ARVN south and catalyzing desertions at the rate of 20,000 men per month. Nixon, feeling desperate, launched vindictive bombing raids on areas captured by the NLF-NVA, particularly the Quang Tri province, and a new round of massive bombing strikes against North Vietnam that included Hanoi and Haiphong. The war was nevertheless becoming more difficult for the U.S. to sustain due to the continuing withdrawal of U.S. troops, growing unrest within the U.S. military, and a massive domestic antiwar movement that was gaining representation in Congress (see Section IV).

In part to limit the damage from America’s impending loss in Vietnam, the Nixon administration undertook a dramatic new policy in early 1972, inaugurating détente with the great communist powers, China and the Soviet Union. New trade and arms control agreements were signed as part of a general relaxation of tensions. After twenty-five years of anti-communist propaganda and policies, it appeared that the U.S. could live with communist nations after all, that peaceful competition could replace militant confrontation and

Kissinger met with Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong to establish a new rapport with China
that mutual interests could be pursued. This seismic change in official U.S. attitudes toward communism was surprisingly well-received by the American public. Nixon and Kissinger essentially adopted the liberal program advocated by former Vice-president Henry A. Wallace in the late 1940s, and by many European leaders beginning in the mid-1950s. Had the détente policy been taken up a generation earlier, the American War in Vietnam would never have taken place.

The inauguration of détente in 1972 made the war in Vietnam more senseless than ever. The main reason for U.S. intervention in Vietnam, after all, was the fear that a communist-led government would become part of a monolithic communist bloc in opposition to the United States, a fear that stubbornly dismissed Ho Chi Minh’s appeals to the U.S. for friendship and the history of Vietnam’s antagonism toward China. By the mid-1960s, it was clear that there was no monolithic communist bloc, as the Soviet Union and China had become bitter rivals, even engaging in skirmishes on their common border in 1969. To some degree, this schism relieved American fears that the “loss” of Vietnam would result in falling dominoes and a communist takeover of Asia. Yet Washington was not ready to give up the war in Vietnam, having made it a test case of American credibility as a global power and invested much blood and treasure to secure South Vietnam. Unwilling to admit any errors in the past, Nixon promised to achieve “peace with honor” in the end.

He achieved neither. Instead, he encouraged Thieu’s intransigence and sought a “decent interval” between the departure of U.S. troops and the expected collapse of the Saigon government. According to National Security Archive scholars, “In private conversations Kissinger routinely used phrases such as ‘decent interval,’ ‘healthy interval,’ ‘reasonable interval,’ and ‘suitable interval’ as code for a war-exiting
scenario by which the period of time would be sufficiently long that when the fall of Saigon came – if it came – it would serve to mask the role that U.S. policy had played in South Vietnam’s collapse.” It was an incredibly cynical strategy designed to salvage American pride and save Nixon’s reputation (and election prospects) at the cost of sacrificing more Vietnamese lives.

The peace treaty and its aftermath

On October 8, 1972, North Vietnamese negotiators presented a nine-point draft proposal that basically reiterated the formula of the 1954 Geneva Agreements: the formation of a Joint Military Commission to supervise a general cease-fire; the departure of all foreign (U.S.) troops within a specified period (60 days); and the formation of a National Council of Concord and Reconciliation to arrange for democratic elections, after which reunification would take place. Kissinger accepted the draft but did not ask for Saigon’s approval. The prospect of peace helped Nixon win re-election in November, defeating a genuine peace candidate, Senator George McGovern of South Dakota.

In South Vietnam, meanwhile, Thieu presented Kissinger with sixty-nine objections to the proposed treaty. On November 14, Nixon sent a message to Thieu telling him not to worry about the details as the United States would meet any “aggression” by Hanoi with “swift and severe retaliatory action.” Thieu interpreted this as assurance that Nixon would find ways around the treaty to keep South Vietnam intact. Nixon gave a convincing demonstration of his solidarity with Thieu in authorizing the brutal, eleven-day “Christmas bombing” of North Vietnam, even as negotiations proceeded to a final settlement. The renewed warfare prompted the Democratic caucuses in the House and Senate to vote in early January 1973 for a cut-off of all funding for the war as soon as U.S. troop withdrawals were completed and repatriation of prisoners was arranged. This sent a clear signal to the administration that Congress would not wait indefinitely for the treaty to be signed.
On January 23, 1973, a treaty based on Hanoi’s nine-point draft was signed by representatives of the United States, the Hanoi government, the Provisional Revolutionary Government (formed in 1969 as the political arm of the NLF), and the foreign minister of South Vietnam. In a secret protocol with North Vietnam, the U.S. promised to “contribute to the postwar reconstruction of North Vietnam without any political conditions.” At the same time, Nixon promised Thieu that the United States would continue “full economic and military aid” and “respond with full force” should North Vietnam violate the agreements. [70]

What happened next has often been missed in popular American accounts. The Hanoi government and NLF did not proceed with the war, but rather pursued the formation of a Joint Military Commission to supervise the cease-fire, and the formation of a National Council in preparation for national elections. Thieu, on the other hand, repudiated his foreign minister’s signature on the treaty and reiterated his “Four No’s”: no recognition of the enemy, no neutralization of South Vietnam, no coalition government, no surrender of territory. The Nixon administration lent support to Thieu’s obstinacy by transferring one billion dollars’ worth of U.S. weapons and equipment to the South Vietnamese Army and Air Force. [271] According to George
Fully aware of the fragility of the agreements, Nixon and Kissinger used every available means to strengthen the Thieu government. In a secret meeting with Thieu at San Clemente in March, he [Nixon] reaffirmed his commitments and assured the South Vietnamese leader that “you can count on us.” Throughout the remainder of 1973, the administration employed various subterfuges to sustain its military aid at a high level without overtly violating the terms of the Paris accords. Instead of dismantling its bases, the United States transferred title to the South Vietnamese before the cease-fire went into effect. Supplies were designated “nonmilitary” and were rendered eligible for transfer. The military advisory group was replaced by a “civilian” team of some 9,000 men, many of them hastily discharged from military service and placed in the employ of the government of Vietnam.  

Secure in the knowledge that the U.S. would not abandon him, Thieu initiated a post-treaty offensive that sought, first to recapture territory lost to the NLF just before the truce, then to move into NLF areas and capture more territory. NLF-NVA troops defended their positions but did not initiate offensive actions except in one area near the Cambodian border, where the ARVN was transferring supplies to the Phnom Penh government.

President Nixon charged North Vietnam with treaty violations and threatened to militarily intervene, but his threat was undercut by the likelihood of a Congressional cut-off of funds. U.S. troops departed from Vietnam on schedule and North Vietnam released 591 American prisoners of war (POWs), in accordance with the treaty. The Nixon administration insisted that the DRV was holding more POWs, a claim that could be used to abrogate the treaty if needed. With the possibility of renewed U.S. intervention still lingering, Congress passed the Case-Church Amendment in late June
1973, prohibiting the expenditure of any funds for U.S. combat activities “in or over or from off the shores of North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia” after August 15, 1973. This law effectively ended the U.S. war in Vietnam as well as U.S. bombing in Cambodia.

Fighting in Vietnam nonetheless continued. In lieu of setting up unification elections, as stipulated in the Paris treaty, Thieu declared in November 1973 that the “Third Indochina War” had begun and went on the offensive. The NLF and NVA responded in kind, and with more success. Their final offensive to take Saigon was launched in March 1975. On April 2, Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, the Provisional Revolutionary Government representative who had signed the Paris treaty, offered to halt the NLF-NVA offensive if Thieu were replaced by a leader who would implement the terms of the Paris agreement. Thieu refused and lashed out against the NLF-NVA troops surrounding Saigon with every weapon at his command. The U.S. military, which came under the command of President Gerald Ford after Nixon was forced to resign on August 9, 1974 (due to the Watergate scandal), provided Thieu with monstrous 15,000-pound CBU-55 bombs originally intended to clear landing zones in the jungle.
On April 20, 1975, U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin asked Thieu to resign for the good of the country. Six days later, after berating the U.S. for not supporting him, Thieu left for Taiwan.
n on a
U.S.
transport
plane,
allegedly
with
gold
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from
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national
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suitcases.
On
the
morning of
April 30,
Thieu’s
successor,
Duong Van Minh,
order
ed a
general
cease
-fire, which
undoubtedly saved many lives. NLF-NVA tanks rolled down the main thoroughfares of Saigon and took control of the government. There was no blood bath.
Had the Nixon administration pressured Thieu to live up to the terms of the 1973 Paris accords, or perhaps approved the replacement of Thieu by someone who would, Vietnam would have been spared two more years of warfare. Moreover, South Vietnamese officials and military officers could have emigrated to the United States in orderly fashion instead of desperately clinging to the last American helicopters departing Saigon on the eve of the NLF-NVA takeover.

In the aftermath of the war, the country was renamed the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The new government imposed three-to-ten-year prison sentences on former South Vietnamese military officers and government workers, and generally sought to “re-educate” all southerners in the ways of socialism. Hundreds of thousands of southerners fled the country, many eventually settling in the United States, Australia, Canada, or France. Millions of others set about the task of reconciliation after so many years of warfare. The U.S. reneged on Nixon’s promise to provide reconstruction funds as the Vietnamese sought to rebuild their country and heal the division between north and south.

The U.S. and Vietnam established formal diplomatic relations in 1995. The first U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam was Pete Peterson, a U.S. Air Force pilot who spent over six years as a prisoner-of-war in North Vietnam after his plane was shot down. On September 10, 1997, he revisited An Doai, the village where he had been taken prisoner. He drank tea with Nguyen Viet Chop and Nguyen Danh Xinh, two men who
had captured him. “I return here,” said Peterson, “not to re-live what was probably the most unhappy day of my life, but to signify to the entire world that reconciliation is not only possible but absolutely the way to reach out.”

Costs of war

The American War in Vietnam was not an equal war. No Vietnamese soldiers came to America to kill the political faction they did not like. No American cities were bombed. The war was fought in Vietnam, and mostly in the south. The U.S. transported 2.6 million Americans more than 7,700 miles from its Pacific coast to fight in Vietnam, the elusive goal being to save the Vietnamese from “communist domination.”

The U.S. lost the war, but the NLF and Hanoi government can hardly be said to have won it. After initial euphoria, the Vietnamese came to terms with the war’s devastation. Ta Quang Thinh, a NVA nurse who was severely wounded in a B-52 bomb attack while on duty in the south, returned to the north in 1971. In an interview with Christian Appy many years later, he reflected:

When I got home, I think everybody, including myself, was sick of the war. We abhorred it. It was not only cruel, it was absurd. Foreigners came to our country from out of the blue and forced us to take up arms. Don’t you think that’s absurd? We just wanted to be prosperous and live like other people. Of course we had to fight to protect our country but we were really sick of the war. Deep down we didn’t like it. Casualties were enormous. And not just that – our savings,
our houses, our plants and animals, everything was wasted by that war.\textsuperscript{[276]}

In 1995, the Vietnamese government estimated NLF-NVA military casualties at 1.1 million killed and 600,000 wounded over the course of twenty-one years – the period of direct American intervention (1954-75). U.S. casualties, in contrast, were 58,200 killed (including 10,800 in non-hostile situations) and 305,000 wounded. For every American soldier who died in Vietnam, nineteen NLF/NVA soldiers died. At the end of the war, the NLF-NVA had 300,000 soldiers missing in action as compared 2,646 American MIAs.

The U.S. military estimated that between 200,000 and 250,000 South Vietnamese military personnel were killed, about four times the number of Americans killed. When all military forces are compared, the NLF-NVA suffered three to four times the number of military deaths as the U.S.- GVN. Other soldiers who lost their lives fighting on the American side hailed from South Korea (4,400), Australia (500), Thailand (350), and New Zealand (83); and on the North Vietnamese side, from China (1,100), the Soviet Union (16), and North Korea (14).\textsuperscript{[277]}

As for civilian casualties, a 1975 U.S. Senate subcommittee on refugees and war victims estimated the number of civilian deaths in South Vietnam at 415,000, and other casualties at over one million, out of a population of 17 million. Estimates of civilian deaths in North Vietnam due to U.S. aerial assaults range from 50,000 to 180,000. In 1995, the Vietnamese government placed the number of civilian casualties at two million in the south and two million in the north over the course of twenty-one years. “As is known,” wrote the Vietnamese diplomat and scholar Luu Doan Huynh, “the war brought to the Vietnamese people a great amount of suffering, far greater than for the American people, in terms of devastation, casualties, and so forth.”\textsuperscript{[278]}

The spillover war in Laos and Cambodia added many more casualties. According to author John Tirman, “These numbers are also hard to pin down, although by several scholarly estimates, Vietnamese military and civilian deaths ranged from 1.5 million to 3.8 million, with the U.S.-led campaign in Cambodia resulting in 600,000 to 800,000 deaths, and Laotian war mortality estimated at about 1 million.”\textsuperscript{[279]} These deaths are
directly attributable to U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia.

South Vietnam suffered in more ways. Some 1,200,000 people were forcibly relocated through “pacification” programs and five million became refugees between 1964 to 1975. The urban population swelled from 15 percent in 1964 to 40 percent in 1968, to 65 percent in 1974, undermining the social fabric of the country. Normally a rice exporter, South Vietnam had to import 725,000 tons of rice in 1967. Hunger and starvation were side effects of the war. The U.S. also conducted its chemical war in the south, spraying nineteen million gallons of toxins on five million acres, with some parts of North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia sprayed as well. The debilitating effects of this chemical war still linger.¹³⁸⁰

There were diplomatic costs as well. U.S. leaders flagrantly violated international laws prohibiting aggression, attacks on civilians, and the use of chemical weapons, thereby undermining worthy efforts to utilize international law to reduce global violence and increase respect for human rights. U.S. leaders also violated stated American principles by supporting authoritarianism and repression in South Vietnam. Whatever prestige remained from America’s role in defeating Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany in World War II, it was squandered in a vain attempt to replace France as the effective ruler of a client-state in South Vietnam.

Though failing in its 21-year effort to secure a non-communist client regime in southern Vietnam, U.S. leaders were “successful” in one sense. The devastation
wrought in Vietnam undermined a potentially successful socialist experiment, one that might have served as an alternative model for other Third World countries. Hence, for those committed to preserving and extending American hegemony, the devastation was acceptable. Their main problem in the aftermath of the war was how to carry out military interventions more effectively and without inciting domestic protests. [281]

IV. The American home front: Stopping the war

The development of a massive anti-Vietnam War movement was a surprise to many people. There had been no antiwar demonstrations during World War II and very little public protest during the Korean War. Why should the Vietnam War be any different? Few remembered the muted opposition to U.S. participation in World War I – muted because the Wilson administration had banned public protest under the Sedition and Espionage acts. Even fewer remembered the vibrant anti-imperialist campaign in response to the American war in the Philippines at the turn of the 20th century.

The anti-Vietnam War movement grew from a small contingent of critics to a broad section of the American public. According to the historian Melvin Small, “By 1969 there may have been as many as 17,000 national, regional, and local organizations that could be considered in the movement,” with about “six million [citizens] participating in its major events and twenty-five million on the sidelines sympathizing with them.” The antiwar movement gave voice to public opposition to the war and
lent support to Congressional opponents of it. The combination pressured the Johnson administration to halt its escalation in 1968, and the Nixon administration to gradually withdraw U.S. troops and sign a peace treaty in January 1973. [282]

It was a long, grueling struggle for those intent on stopping the war. Norma Becker, a school teacher, civil rights activist, and antiwar organizer in New York who was part of the antiwar movement from beginning to end, recalled her reaction to the last vengeful U.S. bombing mission of North Vietnam in December 1972: “I was just overwhelmed with this horror ... this utter, total, unbelievable horror that human beings could do this.... And these politicians, in their privileged comfort and safety ... just totally callous to the enormity of the human suffering that they were inflicting upon people.” [283]

Congress at all times had the power to stop the war. As it was, Congress passed only three significant pieces of legislation toward this end: the Cooper Amendment, enacted in December 1969, which prohibited U.S. combat troops from entering Laos or Thailand; the Cooper-Church Amendment, enacted in January 1971, which prohibited U.S. troops in Cambodia; and the Case-Church Amendment, approved in June 1973, which prohibited all U.S. military activity in Southeast Asia, including bombing, after August 15, 1973. The latter was largely an insurance policy, as U.S. combat troops had already been withdrawn. In the aftermath of the war, Congress added two more insurance policies: the War Powers Act, enacted over Nixon’s veto on November 7, 1973, which required any president to obtain Congressional approval within sixty days after initiating military action; and the Hughes–Ryan Act, enacted on December 30, 1974, which established new reporting requirements for the CIA. [284]

This meager list of “antiwar” legislation, however, does not tell the whole story. Various members of Congress challenged administration rationales and policies in floor speeches and committee hearings. Non-binding resolutions were passed, and

Protesting in Washington DC, Aug. 6 1965, Dave Dellinger, Staughton Lynd, and Bob Moses (L-R) were splashed with red paint by counter-protesters
even failed bills served as a warning against further escalation of the war. Peace advocates lobbied intensely for such measures and supported candidates who voiced their opposition to the war. Criticism of the war by the nation’s top lawmakers, in turn, lent credibility to the antiwar movement and helped deflect persistent administration efforts to discredit and marginalize it.

Public opinion shifted during the war. In the fall 1964 election, a majority of Americans voted for a presidential candidate who promised not to send “our boys” to Vietnam. Once combat troops were sent, however, the majority endorsed the war, in keeping with patriotic support for American troops abroad. A Gallup poll taken in June 1965 reported that 66% favored continued U.S. military involvement as opposed to 20% who favored withdrawal. Only one year later, support for the war had begun to wane. A Gallup poll taken in June 1966 reported 48% in favor of continued involvement and 35% in favor of withdrawal.

In February 1968, for the first time, a Gallup poll indicated a plurality of Americans believed that sending U.S. troops to Vietnam was a “mistake” (49% to 41%), even if a majority still favored winning the war. The following month, in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, 69% said they wanted a “phase-
out-plan” in which American troops would be replaced by South Vietnamese units (many still hoped that the war could be won without U.S. troops in Vietnam). By June 1971, with American deaths having surpassed 45,000, 72% of Americans favored setting a firm deadline for the withdrawal of all American troops from Vietnam. The following month, 65% agreed that U.S. withdrawal should continue “even if the government of South Vietnam collapsed”; only 20% disagreed. In the end, the costs of the war negated the very reason for
entering it - to “save” South Vietnam.

To the great disappointment of peace advocates, shifting public opinion did not result in an equivalent shift in the number of antiwar candidates elected to Congress. Reasons for this include the advantages of incumbency, the fact that neither major political party took a stand against the war, and, beginning in 1969, claims by the Nixon administration that it could be trusted to end the war through its gradual withdrawal scheme known as “Vietnamization.” Nixon’s piecemeal withdrawal, in fact, resulted in the deaths of over 21,000 American soldiers, their lives sacrificed in the name of “peace with honor.” As the historian Jeremi Suri writes, “Nixon, Ford, and Kissinger’s prolonging of the American intervention in Vietnam led to thousands of unnecessary deaths, deeper domestic conflict, and further damage to Washington’s international reputation.”

Had U.S. troops been withdrawn at the beginning of Nixon’s term, the political outcome would have been the same (a united Vietnam) and many Vietnamese and American lives would have been saved.

Consciousness raising

Efforts on the home front to stop the war in Vietnam were in large part an educational mission of “consciousness raising.” People first had to become convinced that the war was wrong, or at least not worth the cost, before voicing their opposition to the war, joining antiwar activities, or voting for antiwar candidates. This reflective process was facilitated in many ways, from friends talking to friends, to organized speaking engagements and demonstrations, to endless publications laying out reasons to oppose the war.
Reorienting American thinking about the war was an uphill climb. The generation that came of age during the Vietnam War was raised on heroic World War II stories, pumped full of national pride, and indoctrinated to believe in the benevolence of American foreign policies. Still, the purported “threat” of a communist-led government in a small country halfway around the world did not elicit the same fighting spirit as defending the nation in the aftermath of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. This was true for the general population as
well – the necessity of the war was not obvious. Hence, the administration had to work assiduously to persuade the public that developments in Vietnam did indeed pose a dire threat to the security of the United States as well as to the survival of the so-called Free World.

The administration’s case for war rested on three conceptual frameworks, each one more deeply rooted and therefore more difficult to uproot. They concerned (1) the origins and nature of the war, (2) Cold War ideology, and (3) American national identity. Unless effectively challenged, these frameworks gave the administration a decided advantage in the public debate over the war.

The origins and nature of the war. U.S. leaders claimed that the U.S. intervened in Southeast Asia in order to protect a legitimate government (South Vietnam) from communist aggression and subversion. This rationale was believable only if the actual history of Vietnam was ignored, including U.S. support for French imperialism followed by sabotage of the 1954 Geneva Agreements. Revealing the true history of Vietnam not only undercut the administration’s rationale for intervention, but also provided a way out – a return to the Geneva peace formula (which did not allow for a permanent separation of Vietnam). U.S. leaders, having committed the U.S. to the survival of
South Vietnam, argued that it was immoral for the U.S. to “abandon” its ally, but, in truth, the U.S. had no right to establish a client-state in the first place. Consciousness-raising thus required some measure of education on Vietnamese history and perspectives.

Cold War ideology. U.S. leaders justified intervention in Vietnam as part of a larger mission to protect the “Free World” from totalitarian communism. Widely believed, this Manichean ideology ignored blatant contradictions between stated principles and actual deeds, including the denial of self-determination in Vietnam. Challenging Cold War ideology was no small task, as it required wide knowledge of international affairs, risked diverting attention from Vietnam, and was guaranteed to incur the wrath of Cold Warriors. Yet how could peace advocates convince the public that the Vietnam War was wrong and unnecessary if the majority believed that Ho Chi Minh’s efforts to establish a unified, independent nation was part of a communist plot to take over the world? Critics of the war rightly raised the possibility that Vietnam could become “another Yugoslavia,” a communist-led country with which the U.S. had good relations, but the Cold Warriors cast this aside. Toward the end of the war, ironically, President Nixon helped the educational process along by inaugurating détente with the Soviet Union and China, largely nullifying the great fear of communism that gave rise to U.S. intervention in Vietnam. America could live with communist nations after all!

American national identity. At the core of U.S. foreign policies was a “broad faith that the United States is a unique force for good in the world,” in the words of the historian Christian Appy. According to this conceptual framework, which remains vital today, America’s inherently benevolent character entitles it to lead the world, intervene in other countries at will, and build up its military forces without limit; while other countries attempting the same are deemed threats to peace. The historical roots of this identity run deep, encompassing the conquest of the West under a self-serving belief in “manifest destiny,” neo-imperial control over the Caribbean and Central America in the early 20th century in the name of upholding civilization, and the pursuit of global hegemony after World War II in the name of “defending freedom.” Wars have served to harden national stereotypes, transforming us-versus-them rivalries into good-versus-evil crusades. Americans who fully embraced this “noble cause” identity during the Vietnam War did not want to hear about their nation’s atrocities, aggression, deceit, or disregard for international law. Their typical response to those
who raised such issues was to attack the messenger as “unpatriotic.” The antidote to this national military identity complex lay in some combination of recognizing the true effects of U.S. policies, re-examining American history, and judging all nations by the same ethical standards.

Martin Luther King’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. held back from speaking out against the Vietnam War for almost two years, as Lyndon Johnson was a friend of the civil rights movement, having signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. By the spring of 1967, he could remain silent no longer as “my conscience leaves me no other choice,” as he put it. He offered a clear exposition of his views in a sermon-like speech entitled “Beyond Vietnam” at the Riverside Church in New York on April 4, 1967, sponsored by the Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam.

King devoted a large part of his speech to reviewing the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. He recounted how the U.S. turned its back on Ho Chi Minh, supported “France in its reconquest of her former colony,” undermined the Geneva accords of 1954, and implanted in the south “one of the most vicious modern dictators, our chosen man, Premier Diem.” Having established this factual history, still unknown to many Americans at the time, he called on Americans to atone for their government’s misdeeds as a prelude to changing course.

The world now demands a maturity of America that we may not be able to achieve. It demands that we admit we have been wrong from the beginning of our adventure in Vietnam, that we have been detrimental to the life of the Vietnamese
people. The situation is one in which we must be ready to turn sharply from our present ways. In order to atone for our sins and errors in Vietnam, we should take the initiative in bringing a halt to this tragic war.

King suggested “five concrete things that our government should do to begin the long and difficult process of extricating ourselves from this nightmarish conflict.” These included ending all bombing in North and South Vietnam; declaring a unilateral ceasefire; curtailing the U.S. military buildup in Thailand and interference in Laos; accepting the National Liberation Front in negotiations; and setting “a date that we will remove all foreign troops from Vietnam in accordance with the 1954 Geneva Agreement.”

Returning to the stipulations of the Geneva Agreements was the key to peace, but doing so required a recognition that the Cold War paradigm was fundamentally flawed and that the United States had grievously erred and must change its policies, if not its character. This was a tough agenda for the antiwar movement to take up, requiring a commitment “beyond Vietnam” to challenging Cold War myths and American delusions of grandeur.

King’s speech touched a raw nerve in the national identity complex. The editors of Life magazine described his speech as “demagogic slander that sounded like a script from Radio Hanoi.” The Washington Post criticized his historical references as “sheer inventions of unsupported fantasy.” He was denounced in most major newspapers and also criticized by many of his civil rights colleagues for undermining their positive relationship with President Johnson. FBI director Hoover wrote to President Johnson after the speech, “Based on King’s recent activities and public utterances, it is clear that he is an instrument in the hands of subversive forces seeking to undermine our nation.”
Having spoken from his conscience, King was labeled an enemy of the state by his government, and derided as a dupe of the communists by the press. He was not alone in this. Both the Johnson and Nixon administrations besmirched antiwar activism as support for the communist cause, if not actually being controlled by communists. Using an expansive definition of “subversion,” they employed the FBI and CIA to conduct surveillance and sabotage of antiwar groups, including King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). As for the mainstream media, its denunciations of antiwar activism decreased over time as more Americans joined the antiwar movement and the costs of the war increased.

Winning hearts and minds

Consciousness-raising remained an important underpinning of antiwar activism throughout the war. An increasing number of critically-minded books and articles became available with which American citizens could re-examine the administration’s case for war. One of the first popular studies was *The Vietnam Reader: Articles and Documents on American Foreign Policy and the Viet-Nam Crisis* (1965), edited by Marcus Raskin and Bernard Fall, which provided the requisite historical background for
understanding American involvement in Vietnam. The editors eschewed the amoral analysis of power so common in international studies and declared that the “use of power” must be assessed within a “context of law and morality.”

Senator J. William Fulbright, in *The Arrogance of Power* (1966), explained the Vietnam War in large part as a product of American hubris, “an exaggerated sense of power and an imaginary sense of mission.” He recognized the value of critics in correcting the nation’s course. “Criticism is more than a right,” he asserted; “it is an act of patriotism, a higher form of patriotism, I believe, than the familiar rituals of national adulation.”

Author Mary McCarthy, in *Vietnam* (January 1967), reported from Saigon on the American invasion and occupation of South Vietnam, including the daily bombing of the countryside and systematic burning of villages. She ridiculed President Johnson’s statement that he “had a mournful obligation to go on with the war unless and until somebody finds him an honorable exit from it,” arguing, “There is no honorable exit from a shameful course of action.” The only “escape,” she asserted, was unilateral withdrawal.

Senator Ernest Gruening and Herbert Beaser, in *Vietnam Folly* (1968), offered a detailed history of U.S. policy in Vietnam, explaining how the “‘dirty little war’ in Vietnam has now escalated into a ‘dirty BIG war,’” involving hundreds of thousands of United States fighting men – with the end nowhere in sight.” Dedicating their book to American soldiers, the authors stated their conviction that “if more of the American people became aware of the basic miscalculations which have brought the United States, step by step, to its present dilemma, the greater would be the number opposing its present course.”
Noam Chomsky, professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the son of an émigré Hebrew scholar, addressed the issue of the moral responsibility of intellectuals in a special supplement in the *New York Review of Books* in February 1967. Based on a thorough examination of U.S. policy in Vietnam, he judged that it was genocidal in conduct and imperialist in intent. Like other intellectuals on the left, he viewed U.S. involvement in Vietnam as neither an aberration nor a simple mistake but rather as part
of a larger design
to extend
American
hegemony.
Chomsky
examined the role
of the intellectuals
in World War II,
particularly those
in Germany and
Japan who failed
to speak out
against the
atrocities
committed by
their respective
governments.
Considering the
relative freedom
of Western
societies, he
argued that
academics and
intellectuals had a
responsibility to
“seek the truth
hidden behind the
veil of distortion
and
misrepresentation,
ideology and
class interest,
through which the
events of current
history are
presented to
Taking up Chomsky’s challenge, American scholars with expertise in Southeast Asia joined together to form the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars in 1968. They approved a statement of purpose that began, “We first came together in opposition to the brutal aggression of the United States in Vietnam and to the complicity or silence of our profession with regard to that policy.” The Vietnam War sparked moral re-evaluation in other academic fields as well, particularly history. Whitewashed accounts of the American past were challenged in a New Indian History, a New Left school of diplomatic history, and peace movement research, encouraged by a newly established Peace History Society.

Among the historical rediscoveries was the American war in the Philippines (1899-1902), which was eerily similar to the war in Vietnam. Both wars involved U.S. interventions in Asia. Both were caused by U.S. denial of the people’s right of self-determination. Both involved leaders – Emilio Aguinaldo and Ho Chi Minh, respectively – who had been allies of the U.S. before the U.S. turned against them. Both entailed vicious counterinsurgency operations in which the U.S. rounded up civilians into internment camps. Both were riven with atrocities committed by U.S. forces. And both sparked widespread protests in the United States. Conventional histories centered on the “rise of American power” paid little heed to these aspects of the U.S.-Filipino War, resulting in few warning signs for the Vietnam War.

Notwithstanding the growing number of critical assessments of the Vietnam War, the administration retained certain advantages in the public debate. The Pro-war rally in Washington, April 8, 1970 (photo by Tom Norpell)
The president had access to the “bully pulpit” and could direct the press to follow his leads and leaks. To some degree, the administration could manipulate developments on the ground and bury evidence of U.S. misdeeds; and in cases of indisputable proof of misdeeds such as the My Lai massacre, declare them exceptions to the rule of good conduct. With ample institutional resources at its disposal, the administration could reinforce salient Cold War and nationalistic
themes to frame the debate to its advantage, employing euphemisms such as “protecting freedom” and “saving Vietnam” to obfuscate actual policies and results. It could and did organize covert propaganda campaigns at home. Critics of the war were disparaged as disloyal and dupes of communists, and accurate and truthful historical accounts of the origins and nature of the Vietnam War were dismissed by simply noting that the “enemy” had presented
similar accounts.

The latter point applies to King’s critique of the Vietnam War, which was dismissed out of hand because it corresponded to the Vietnamese view of their own history. Critiques of American “imperialism” were similarly rejected by Washington policymakers and the mainstream media, as this term was commonly used by leaders of the Soviet Union and Third World nations to describe U.S. interventionist policies. The idea that the “enemy” could be right in certain cases was difficult for many Americans to accept.

Revealing and countering the hidden ideological frameworks that prevented an honest appraisal of developments in Vietnam was the mental part of the “winning hearts and minds” challenge for the antiwar movement. The “heart” part involved extending empathy and understanding beyond national boundaries, recognizing the dignity of people in Southeast Asia and not being insensitive to their suffering. Beyond highlighting the loss of American lives in Vietnam, antiwar activists attempted to make the public aware of the massive slaughter taking place in Southeast Asia at the hands of the U.S. and its allies, and also to break through the nonchalant acceptance of this slaughter as the inevitable byproduct of war. Exposure of the brutal reality of the war could lead, in turn, to questions as to why it was being fought.

Creating the antiwar movement

Criticism of imperious U.S. policies in Vietnam began long before U.S. troops were deployed. During the 1950s, insightful critiques were proffered by investigative journalists Bernard Fall and I. F. Stone, political scientist Hans Morgenthau, economist John Kenneth Galbraith, and peace leaders A. J. Muste and Sidney Lens, to name a few; and in publications such as *I. F. Stone’s Weekly, The Christian Century, The New Republic, The Nation, Dissent, Monthly Review, and Liberation*. In the November 1952 issue of *The Christian Century*, for example, the editors castigated the U.S. for supporting French imperialism in Vietnam and ominously warned, “American boys are not dying in Indo-China – yet. But American policy is getting into a deeper and deeper morass there.” In the June 1954 issue of *Monthly Review*, following the defeat of
the French, Marxist scholars Paul Sweezy and Leo Huberman issued another warning:

The American people, by and large, are against colonialism and aggression, and believe in the right of every country to manage its own affairs free from outside interference. Rarely have these simple principles been so clearly and grossly violated as in the present United States policy towards Indochina.... Are we going to take the position that anti-Communism justifies anything, including colonialism, interference in the affairs of other countries and aggression? That way, let us be perfectly clear about it, lies war and more war leading ultimately to full-scale disaster. [999]

Activist peace organizations in the early 1960s were mainly concerned with stopping the nuclear arms race and open-air nuclear testing. Their interest in Vietnam increased in proportion to U.S. involvement. In May 1962, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) denounced the Strategic Hamlet program as “a clear violation of human rights” and “a conscious departure from the moral values supposedly being defended in the Cold War.” Early in 1963, leaders of the Women Strike for Peace (WSP) declared they had a “special responsibility” to educate Americans about “the dangers and horror” of the expanding war in Vietnam. The religious-pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) supported Buddhist peace efforts in Vietnam. In October 1963, the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) opened a Vietnam Information Center in

Popular folk singers, Peter, Paul, and Mary, spread the antiwar message
Also that month, small protests were organized in various cities in response to a month-long tour by the South Vietnamese President Diem’s sister-in-law, Madame Nhu.

On July 3, 1964, prior to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, pacifist leader A. J. Muste announced a “Declaration of Conscience,” a vehicle for individuals to pledge their “conscientious refusal to cooperate” with the war underway, and to use nonviolent means “to stop the flow of American soldiers and munitions to Vietnam.” One week later, the liberal peace organization, SANE (National Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy), delivered an 86-word petition to Washington officials, signed by 5,000 college educators, urging President Johnson to work for the “neutralization” of North and South Vietnam. At the SANE press conference on July 10, Professor Morgenthau of the University of Chicago remarked that it was “not impossible” to visualize “a kind of Titoist Vietnam,” a country that would be independent of Cold War blocs. The petition called for an end to the “terror” and “continuing loss of American and Vietnamese lives,” and stated that neutralization “would be preferable to deeper involvement or irresponsible pullout.”

Other groups to the left of SANE did not regard an immediate “pullout” as irresponsible. The pacifist-leftist War Resisters League (WRL), for example, called for the immediate withdrawal of U.S. “advisers” and for an end to U.S. aid to South Vietnam. According to the historian Charles DeBenedetti, “The demand for unilateral U.S. military withdrawal set off a sharp debate which established a dividing line between radical and liberal critics of U.S. policy for the next five years.”

The difference between the radical and liberal goal boils down to whether the U.S. “mistake” in Vietnam occurred in 1954, when the U.S. established an illegitimate state in the south, or in 1965, when the U.S. began sending combat troops. Embracing the latter view, liberal groups put forth peace proposals that called for de-escalating the conflict without suggesting that the U.S. “abandon” South Vietnam, which some speculated would lead to a communist “bloodbath” in the south. The liberal peace proposals offered an alternative to escalation, to be sure, but they failed to address
the underlying problem that had catalyzed the war in the first place; namely, the abrogation of the 1954 Geneva Agreements. The “radical” goal of immediate withdrawal was congruent with the Geneva Accords of 1954, which did not allow for a permanent division of the country or for foreign intervention. The limitations of the liberal approach became apparent in 1969, when President Nixon adopted (or coopted) the de-escalation strategy, calling for the gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops in a “responsible” manner. At that point, liberal peace groups reassessed their goals and joined the “radicals” in advocating “Get Out Now!”

Movement dynamics and conflicts

The national organizations that led the antiwar movement were a diverse lot. They approached the war from different philosophical orientations, emphasized different organizing strategies, and initially pursued different goals, as noted above. There was no central leadership, designated spokespersons, or overarching common strategy. Instead, there were networks and coalitions that cooperated on different projects, including mass demonstrations. Tom Hayden, a leader of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), described the movement as “deeply fragmented and rarely unified,” which may have overstated the case but was indicative of the struggle to find common ground at the national level. [104]
The strength of the movement lay in its grassroots authenticity, creativity, and overall tenacity. People joined local peace organizations, committees, and study groups, exchanged information and opinions, wrote to legislators and newspaper editors, arranged educational programs, placed ads in newspapers, set up draft counseling centers, worked in election campaigns, lobbied legislators, boycotted products of Dow Chemical (maker of napalm), organized vigils, protests, guerrilla theater, and prayer services, engaged in civil disobedience actions, and boarded buses for national demonstrations. What could not be done at the local level was to create a sense of movement identity and momentum. In lieu of national leadership, coordinated national demonstrations served this function. Organized by a succession
of coalitions, mass
demonstrations of 100,000
or more people were held
semi-annually from the
spring of 1967 through the
spring of 1971.

The three main philosophical orientations undergirding antiwar activism were pacifist, liberal, and leftist-socialist. These were not mutually exclusive and individuals and groups were free to blend them as they wished or mix in other philosophical views, including religious beliefs, conservative “realism” (strategic cost-benefit analysis), feminism, and personal self-interest (survival for draft-age men). There was no ideological litmus test for participating in the antiwar movement, although particular groups maintained their own requirements.

Pacifists generally abhorred the dehumanization of war, promoted conflict resolution and reconciliation, encouraged individual conscientious objection to war, and supported nonviolent social change for justice in the manner of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Many pacifist and pacifist-leaning groups had long experience in organizing campaigns (founding dates noted): FOR (1915), American Friends Service Committee (AFSC, 1917), WILPF (1919), WRL (1923), Congress on Racial Equality (CORE, 1942), and Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors (CCCO, 1948). Abraham Johannes (A.J.) Muste, a practical pacifist with experience in labor and civil rights movements, played a unifying role in the antiwar movement until his death in February 1967. Some pacifist groups, such as WILPF, leaned toward the liberal wing of the movement while others, such as WRL, pulled to the left. WRL International issued a statement in August 1968 declaring its intent to work with “our brothers and sisters in the various liberation movements” to “bring an end to colonialism and imperialism … but without yielding up our belief that the foundation of the future must be laid in the present, that a society without violence must begin with revolutionists who will not use violence.”[305]

The liberal wing of the antiwar movement, represented by groups such as SANE, WSP, Student Peace Union, and Americans for Democratic Action, supported détente, diplomacy, and demilitarization of the Cold War, paying particular attention to the
nuclear arms race. Liberal peace groups worked to build a broad-based movement, gain positive media attention, and influence members of Congress – all essential elements of movement-building. At the same time, they tended to narrow their vision and political goals to what was feasible within the American context, which fell short of what was needed to achieve peace in the international context. The unwillingness of liberal peace groups to support U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam not only divided the antiwar movement but also constituted a missed opportunity to combine domestic peace efforts with international diplomatic efforts led by UN Secretary-General U Thant, which were based on the Geneva formula. According to the historian Milton Katz:

Peace liberals in SANE can certainly be criticized by what at times seemed an obsessive concern with respectability and for excluding specific groups from coalition activity, both of which contributed to the fracture in the antiwar movement. And although they continued for so long calling for negotiations to end the war, feeling it was politically expedience and a face-saving device for the United States, they should have realized America really had no moral right to negotiate anything except, perhaps, as David McReynolds [of WRL] said in an exchange with Michael Harrington, “the routes our troops will take getting to the ports of embarkation.”

Leftist-socialists classically challenged economic inequality and imperialism. Some leftist critiques were on target, illuminating underlying systems of injustice, while others evinced ideological dogmatism, attached themselves to authoritarian communist states, or indulged in revolutionary romanticism. SDS, founded in 1960, sought to distance itself from the dogmatic Old Left by emphasizing democratic practices within and supporting democratic socialism without. This was also the position of the 60-year-old Socialist Party, but the latter appeared too sedate for the young leftists. SDS gained a large following on college campuses, making it one of the two most important leftist groups in the antiwar movement. The other was the Trotskyite Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which supported anti-imperialist revolutions abroad by organizing nonviolent demonstrations in the United States. Leftist groups with marginal roles in the antiwar movement included the Communist Party USA, the Progressive Labor Party (which broke off from the Communist Party in 1962), and the Black Panther Party. The left was plagued by sectarian disputes, bitter rivalries, and
impractical strategies that undermined its anti-imperialist message. In 1969, the SDS national office fractured into splinter groups, although local chapters continued to organize against the war. Beyond ending the war, some on the left called for “revolution” in the United States, which was accompanied by increased militancy in the late 1960s. SDS national secretary Greg Calvert transitioned from promoting “nonviolent revolution” to calling for general “revolution,” which he later regretted:

Because I regard the rise of revolutionary rhetoric as one of the most disastrous things that happened in the movement of the sixties, I regard whatever I did around raising the rhetoric as a real mistake.... I think that it was a mistake to use the word revolution to characterize [our movement for radical change], that it conjured up people’s most romantic and irresponsible selves.... What I’m sorry for is that at points like in that national secretary’s report I used language that I think I hadn’t thought through the implications of.”

The main organizational strategies of the antiwar movement involved education, political action, demonstrations (mobilization), and draft and GI resistance. National organizations differed in their strategic priorities. Liberal groups and some pacifist groups, such as FCNL, took the lead in lobbying, while SDS and SWP eschewed both lobbying and election work. Socialist Party chairperson Michael Harrington, however, was a strong advocate of political action, even arguing that the peace movement’s resources would be better spent on influencing Congress than on organizing mass demonstrations.

Liberal, leftist, and pacifist groups all supported mass demonstrations, but differences arose as to the degree of confrontation. Demonstration organizers decided early on to separate civil disobedience actions, such as sit-ins and the burning of draft cards, from main events. Disorder and violence nevertheless erupted in a number of demonstrations due to an untoward mix of rowdy individuals, leftist militants, aggressive counter-demonstrators, government agent provocateurs, and repressive policing. The Johnson and Nixon administrations, for their part, welcomed unruly behavior as it
undermined the movement’s public image and allowed them to claim the moral high ground – standing up for law, order, and decency – even as they unleashed wholesale violence in Vietnam.

The impetus to militant confrontation within the antiwar movement derived from an unwillingness to accept business-as-usual at home while the government pursued a murderous war in Vietnam, plucking young people from their normal lives to fight it. Although commonly identified with leftist groups, some groups on the left, notably SWP, steered clear of confrontational actions. Some radical pacifists, on the other hand, particularly Liberation co-editor David Dellinger, were fervent advocates of assertive-yet-nonviolent civil disobedience.

Militant actions initiated by antiwar groups included occupying university buildings, breaking into draft board offices and destroying files, and engaging in sit-down strikes designed to block entry to the Pentagon or to tie up traffic in cities. Organizers attempted to prevent violence at demonstrations and trained “peacekeepers” for this purpose. More severe destruction of property – the burning of Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC)
buildings on campuses, the vandalizing of draft board offices, and raucous street violence – was usually the work of clandestine groups or individuals who remained anonymous. Out in left field was the Weathermen Underground, one of the radical splinters from the SDS breakup, whose bombing spree beginning in 1970 was disavowed by antiwar groups. Mark Rudd, an SDS activist at Columbia University who became a founding member of the Weathermen, then a fugitive for seven years, renounced the violent strategy in hindsight, writing, “Over the last forty years I’ve thought intensely about the choices which I and my comrades made,
coming to the
practical conclusion
that only nonviolent
mass political action
can be successful in
this country.”

Another point of contention among antiwar groups was whether to embrace other issues and movements. While all groups recognized connections between peace and justice issues, devoting organizational resources to any issue besides the Vietnam War was another matter. Which issues, how many, and which should receive priority? Norma Becker argued for a multi-issue agenda, saying, “It just didn’t make any sense as Americans to be fighting against the injustice and oppression being experienced by people 6,000 miles away while not responding to the sufferings and injustice being experienced by people next door.” SWP leader Fred Halstead, on the other hand, maintained that taking on other issues would divert needed energy and resources from the antiwar movement. SWP’s organizational practices posed another problem. SWP activists put in many hours organizing national demonstrations but also used the movement to build up its own membership. According to WRL leader David McReynolds, SWP leaders “clearly put the recruiting of members above the issue of ending the war.”

All in all, despite “our mad, outrageous diversity,” as Hayden put it, the antiwar movement pressed forward.

Teach-ins and protests, 1965
The first campus teach-in on Vietnam took place at the University of Michigan on March 24-25, 1965, the same month that U.S. troops landed in Danang. Over 3,000 people showed up on the Ann Arbor campus for lectures and discussions that ran through the night. The purpose, as one flyer put it, was to focus attention “on this war, its consequences, and ways to stop it.” The educational venue quickly spread to other campuses. Within one week, thirty-five more had been held; and by the end of the year, 120 had taken place. Some were organized locally, others by the Universities Committee on Problems of War and Peace, a three-year old group based at Wayne State University. For Doug Dowd, a Cornell University professor, lifelong leftist, and activist organizer, the teach-ins were an exhilarating experience. He had gone through the Red Scare period when “you couldn’t get anybody to say anything about the Korean War....
Everybody was scared.”[314]
The teach-ins aimed to both educate people on the issues and inspire greater confidence in questioning political authorities and foreign policy experts.

The largest teach-in took place on the University of California Berkeley campus on May 21-22, a 36-hour marathon that drew 10,000 people. The cast of speakers included I. F. Stone, pediatrician-turned-activist Dr. Benjamin Spock, novelist Norman Mailer, Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas, Sen. Ernest Gruening, Berkeley Free Speech Movement leader Mario Savio, Marxist historian Issac Deutscher, SDS president Paul Potter, comedian Dick Gregory, civil rights leader Robert Parris Moses, Yale historian Staughton Lynd, nonviolent activist Dave Dellinger, Ramparts Magazine publisher Edward Keating, psychologist and peace activist Isadore Zifferstein, the only woman speaker, and a dozen others. British philosopher and pacifist Bertrand Russell also sent a taped message.[315]

The administration responded to the surge of antiwar teach-ins by dispatching four-person “truth squads” to participate in debates on campuses. Among the debaters were defense analyst Daniel Ellsberg and former Kennedy presidential adviser Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., both of whom would later turn against the war. At the time, Schlesinger advocated sending more troops to South Vietnam while cutting back bombing of North Vietnam to promote negotiations. Two decades later, in an interview with sociologist Tom Wells, Schlesinger called his recommendation for additional troops “a mistake I regret” and said his position was “quite rightly” attacked at the teach-in. The “truth squads” made little headway in convincing their audiences of the righteousness of the Vietnam cause. Jack Valenti, special assistant to the president, told Johnson in April, “We simply aren’t doing our propaganda job right in this country.” In June, the White House pulled out of the debates, returning to more reliable one-way means of communication. To promote its views, the White House established a new coordinating committee for domestic propaganda, revived the moribund American Friends of Vietnam, and helped organize a new pro-war group, the Committee for an Effective and Durable Peace in Asia, headed by influential former
officials. All this was done in secret so as to make it appear that the war had popular support.\[336\]

SDS is credited with organizing the first “mass” demonstration against the war, a march in Washington that drew 20,000 people on April 17, 1965 (there were smaller demonstrations beforehand). The marchers circled the White House and proceeded to the Washington monument where they heard folk songs by Joan Baez, Judy Collins, and Phil Ochs, and speeches by I. F. Stone, Robert Parris Moses, Senator Gruening, Paul Potter, and others. Entirely peaceful, they sang the civil rights anthem, “We Shall Overcome.” Potter presented a memorable commentary:

Most of us grew up thinking that the United States was a strong but humble nation, that involved itself in world affairs only reluctantly, that respected the integrity of other nations and other systems, and that engaged in wars only as a last resort.... But in recent years ... the development of a more aggressive, activist foreign policy have done much to force many of us to rethink attitudes that were deep and basic sentiments about our country. The incredible war in Vietnam has provided the razor, the terrifying sharp cutting edge that has finally severed the last vestige of illusion that morality and democracy are the guiding principles of American foreign policy ... The further we explore the reality of what this country is doing and planning in Vietnam the more we are driven toward the conclusion of Senator Morse that the United States may well be the greatest threat to peace in the world today. That is a terrible and bitter insight for people who grew up as we did - and our revulsion at that insight, our refusal to accept it as inevitable or necessary, is one of the reasons that so many people have come here today.\[317\]

In the aftermath of this successful demonstration, SDS national leaders decided not to
pursue antiwar organizing at the national level, a decision that SDS national secretary Paul Booth later called “a colossal blunder.”[318] The SWP stepped into the breach and formed a new coalition in August, the National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam. Planning began for a major event in mid-October, the “International Days of Protest.” SANE and other liberal groups declined to participate and initiated plans for a separate demonstration six weeks later. Not wanting to exclude the left entirely, SANE invited 30-year-old SDS president Carl Oglesby to speak. Most people who attended these demonstrations were not too concerned which groups sponsored them, but the dueling demonstrations attested to the difficulty of national coordination.[319]

The “International Days of Protest” on October 15-16, 1965, drew more than 100,000 people in demonstrations in eighty American cities and several European capitals. In New York, 22-year-old David Miller ceremoniously burned his draft card on Friday. The following day, 20,000 people paraded to the United Nations Plaza. The protests aroused considerable ire around the country, as many regarded antiwar protests during wartime a taboo. “Hostility reverberated through the press and politics of the nation,” notes DeBenedetti. Life magazine derided the protesters as “chronic show-offs” who failed to understand that “the destiny of the U.S. is at stake.” The editors of the Mississippi Daily News warned more ominously, “This is the time for police brutality, if
there ever was one.” Democratic Governor Pat Brown of California declared that the demonstrations “give aid and comfort to Hanoi.” City officials in New York helped organize a pro-war parade on October 30, which drew 20,000 people.[220]

The SANE “March on Washington” on November 27, 1965, drew a smaller crowd and fared no better in the press. Among the 25,000 demonstrators who marched were a few who carried “Viet Cong” flags, in defiance of requests by sponsors. At one point, a counter-demonstrator grabbed a Viet Cong flag, causing a minor scuffle. That scuffle along with a photo of the flag became front-page news in the Chicago Tribune the following day. The counter-protester who started the fight was given three paragraphs to explain his views, while the three main speakers, Coretta Scott King, Norman Thomas, and Dr. Benjamin Spock, were collectively awarded one half-sentence. The article also noted, without criticism, that counter-protesters “hurled epithets at the marchers, calling them ‘Communists’ and ‘traitors.’”[221]

Such news coverage posed a problem for the antiwar movement in terms of conveying its message to a wider public. The mainstream media was generally critical of antiwar demonstrations during the first years of the war and any particular element – radical speakers, Viet Cong flags, long-haired men, countercultural paraphernalia, and perceived disruptive behavior (including civil disobedience sit-ins) – served as a catalyst to discredit the demonstrators and the antiwar movement. Yet the mainstream media also indirectly aided the antiwar movement at times by exposing the brutality of the war. In December 1965, for example, New York Times correspondent Harrison Salisbury chronicled the damage to civilian areas in North Vietnam by the U.S. bombing campaign. Activist groups also produced their own information, especially newsletters and pamphlets (in the pre-internet age), and could count on liberal-left publications such as The Nation to convey their views to a broader audience. The Nation editors wrote on October 4, 1965: “If we [Americans] are different from, say, the Germans in World War II, now is the time to make the difference manifest. If we fail to do so, we will be judged by history as they have been
Demonstrations, despite difficulties, were of great value to the antiwar movement. They fostered camaraderie, stimulated learning, encouraged activism, made a public statement, and gave people a sense of being part of something important and larger than themselves. They also fostered hope that the wheels of democracy would turn in favor of the protesters, that citizen advocacy would compel a recalcitrant Congress to put an end to the war. That hope was the source of much frustration as neither protest in the streets nor lobbying on Capitol Hill seemed to affect the administration’s relentless escalation of the war for three years running.

At the extreme, four Americans immolated themselves in protest in 1965. The first, on March 26, was Alice Herz, an 82-year-old peace activist in Detroit. She left behind a note denouncing President Johnson’s efforts “to wipe out smaller nations.” According to the historian Mary Hershberger, “Self-immolation horrified American activists, but it was a traditional form of resistance among Buddhists, and when Herz chose this form of protest, it touched the Vietnamese deeply. North Vietnam’s newspapers carried accounts of her action” and noted that “some Americans might be on their side.”

On November 2, 1965, Norman R. Morrison, a 32-year-old Quaker, walked to the
entrance of the Pentagon, one hundred yards from Robert S. McNamara’s office window, doused himself with kerosene, and set himself on fire. His widow said that Morrison had “given his life to express his concern over the great loss of human life and human suffering caused by the war in Vietnam.” McNamara later wrote, “Morrison’s death was a tragedy not only for his family but also for me and the country. It was an outcry against the killing that was destroying the lives of so many Vietnamese and American youth.” The Vietnamese were again extremely moved by Morrison’s sacrifice. Streets were named after him, a postage stamp was printed with his image, and poems were written in his memory. In all, nine Americans immolated themselves in protest during the war.[324]

Politics and protests, 1966-1967

The first major Congressional challenge to the administration took place in early 1966. Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, held televised committee hearings watched by an estimated 22 million Americans. Senators grilled Secretary of State Dean Rusk and General Maxwell Taylor on the administration’s war plans, policies, and rationales. Among those who testified was the respected foreign policy analyst George Kennan, who questioned the necessity of the war. “The first point I would like to make,” he said, “is that if we were not already involved as we are today in Vietnam, I would know of no reason why we should wish to become so involved, and I could think of several reasons why we should not wish to.” Kennan expressed the view that, rather than buttressing American credibility, the war had already damaged America’s
international prestige.

By the end of the hearings, Fulbright’s office had received 10,000 letters from citizens which ran 17-to-one in favor of his committee’s critical questioning. President Johnson was furious. He told Under Secretary of State Alexis Johnson, “They’re out to destroy Rusk and destroy our position.” Johnson ordered FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to investigate whether “Fulbright and other Senators were receiving information from Communists.” This allegation provided legal cover for the administration to conduct surveillance of Fulbright and wiretap his telephone.\[325\]

In early 1967, Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon and Senator Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania offered a “sense-of-the-Congress” resolution that opposed the use of authorized funds for “military operations in or over North Vietnam or to increase the number of United States military personnel in South Vietnam above 500,000.” This non-binding resolution was endorsed by a 72-19 vote on February 28, signaling that the Senate would not indefinitely approve the president’s expansion of the war.

Public opposition to the war was registered in massive demonstrations on April 15, 1967. The Spring Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam drew crowds of at least 125,000 in New York City and 50,000 in San Francisco. “Participants included blacks

Against a backdrop of the United Nations headquarters in New York, Dr. King spoke at the huge antiwar rally, April 15, 1967 (John Littlewood, Christian Science Monitor)
and whites, hippies and church members, children and grandparents, military veterans and Vietcong sympathizers – even a bridal party,” writes DeBenedetti. “In New York a group of Native Americans carried signs that appealed: ‘Americans – Do Not Do to the Vietnamese What You Did to Us.’” The featured speaker at the United Nations Plaza in New York was Martin Luther King, who called for an end to the bombing of North Vietnam: “Let us save our national honor – stop the bombing!” Sidney Peck, an organizer of the event, described
the demonstrations as "successful beyond all expectations."
The only arrests were of five disorderly counter-demonstrators.
The press was less critical than in previous years but still disdainful. The editors of the *New York Times* described the protesters' call for unilateral U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam as "romantic posturing."
Nine days after the demonstration, General William Westmoreland spoke at an Associated Press luncheon in New York City and expressed “dismay” at the “recent unpatriotic acts here at home.” He claimed that the demonstrations gave “hope” and “support” to the Vietnamese communists. He also took the opportunity to urge a more aggressive strategy in Vietnam, saying that the time had come for “putting maximum pressure on the enemy anywhere and
everywhere we can…. In effect, we are fighting a war of attrition, and the only alternative is a war of annihilation.”

The following day, April 25, Senator George McGovern challenged the general on both accounts. It is not “American dissent which is causing the Vietnamese to continue the war,” he said, but American military intervention. The war, he charged, “represents the most tragic diplomatic and moral failure in our national experience.” It is “devastating an impoverished little state and ravishing the people whose freedom we would protect. In the process, we are sacrificing many of our bravest young men, wasting valuable resources and threatening the peace of the world.”

The Johnson administration attempted to curtail the growing antiwar movement through a combination of negative propaganda, covert support for pro-war groups, and covert operations against antiwar groups. Secretary of State Dean Rusk went on “Meet the Press” the day after the demonstration to falsely claim that it had been organized by the “communist apparatus.” The invisible hand of the federal government helped organize a “Support Our Boys in Vietnam” parade down Fifth Avenue on May 13.
The administration’s other invisible hand used the FBI to conduct surveillance and sabotage of antiwar groups, including SDS, SANE, WRL, WSP, CORE, and various mobilization committees. FBI headquarters ordered its agents to expose, disrupt, and neutralize selected targets: “Show them as scurrilous and depraved.... Send articles to newspapers showing their depravity.... Use narcotics and free sex for entrapment. Have members arrested on marijuana charges. Exploit hostilities between various persons.... Use misinformation to confuse and disrupt. Get records of their bank accounts.” In mid-1967, FCNL warned that government infiltration posed a “serious threat” to the antiwar movement as well as to American civil liberties in general.\[^{328}\]

In August 1967, the administration upped the ante by launching Operation Chaos, a domestic covert operation that DeBenedetti describes as “the CIA’s most massive intrusion into domestic American politics, a seven-year campaign that monitored (and sometimes disrupted) over 1,000 organizations and 200,000 individuals while claiming a priority status equal to that of the Agency’s spying on the Soviet Union.” In the name of searching for foreign subversion, CIA agents infiltrated activist organizations to learn of their plans, operations, leaders, and levers they might pull to disrupt them. With a staff of fifty-two, no stone was left unturned. The CIA nonetheless reported to the president in mid-November 1967 that it had found “no significant evidence that would prove Communist control or direction of the U.S. peace movement or its leaders.” Still, “the administration continued to denigrate the antiwar movement as communist-inspired,” according to DeBenedetti. The main purpose of the exercise was to define the movement “as an alien, subversive force” in the public mind.\[^{329}\] Just as Vietnamese resistance fighters were labeled an alien, subversive force in their own land, so American protesters were deemed a subversive force in the United States.

Growing support for the antiwar movement combined with increasing frustration led some activists to urge more militancy. “In 1967 and 1968,” writes Small, “some
radicals and would-be revolutionaries had changed their rhetoric and tactics from peaceful protest to civil and uncivil disobedience, and even to revolution.” The impetus toward confrontation found a vehicle in the fall 1967 demonstration planned by the National Mobilization Committee, also known as the “Mobe.” The plan called for a mass rally followed by a civil disobedience “sit-in” at the entrance to the Pentagon. Coordinators David Dellinger and Jerry Rubin were especially enthused with the latter action, encouraging activists to take that extra step. They promoted the event under the slogan, “From Protest to Resistance.”

At a press conference on August 28, Dellinger boldly promised to “shut down the Pentagon.... We will fill the hallways and block the entrances.... This confrontation will be massive, continuing, flexible, and surprising.” Mobe committee member Abbie Hoffman added, “There is nothing to explain about the war in Vietnam. Those days are over. The time has come for resistance.” Other movement leaders, particularly pacifists, were not pleased with this turn. Dellinger’s co-editors at Liberation magazine, David McReynolds and Charles Bloomstein, quit the editorial board, charging that Dellinger had moved toward the acceptance of violence “as a legitimate, even radical, alternative in the struggle against oppression.” Sensing trouble, SANE, WILPF, and AFSC declined to support the planned events. SWP remained on the sidelines in the
On October 21, 1967, between 50,000 and 100,000 citizens gathered at the Lincoln memorial. According to the Washington Post, “the crowd that had gathered was in a football-afternoon mood as it lined the banks of the Reflecting Pool. There were hippies and housewives, veterans and aging pacifists, but the overwhelming majority were college or high-school aged students. They came with banners unfurled from Harvard, Radcliffe, Southern Illinois University, the University of Georgia, and many other campuses.” In mid-afternoon, the main body of demonstrators marched to the Pentagon behind a
huge banner
proclaiming “Support
Our GIs, Bring Them
Home Now!” Before
they arrived,
according to the Post,
an “earlier foray of
several hundred
[protesters] pushed
against military police
lines and a rope
barrier. Some of
them were carrying
North Vietnamese
flags. After a brief
scuffle, they were
shoved back with
night sticks. They
identified themselves
as members of the
U.S. Committee to Aid
the National
Liberation Front, a
New York group.”
More altercations
took place when the
main body arrived at
the Pentagon
entrance:

In the most serious incident, 20 to 30 demonstrators slipped through lines of U.S.
marshals and military policeman and into a small vestibule inside the office of the
Pentagon’s Mall entrance. Once inside they encountered heavily armed troops.
The troops, carrying rifles with sheathed bayonets, used gun butts to force some
outside and carried others out bodily. Blood was spotted on the floor. Outside,
the big crowd surged forward and began throwing what they had at hand – picket signs, magazines, leaflets, sticks and at least one rock which crashed through a Pentagon press room window…. Throughout the afternoon there were sporadic encounters between small groups and the troops. Several demonstrators were clubbed when they pressed too close to troop lines or refused to move out of forbidden sectors.

In all, 681 protesters were arrested and 47 were hospitalized over a two-day period. No weapons were confiscated, indicating the intent to commit aggressive civil disobedience rather than violence. The press highlighted the mayhem and Hoffman’s absurd claim that the protesters would “levitate” the Pentagon by chanting, while ignoring speeches at the rally by Benjamin Spock, Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, and others. The peaceful side of the protest was captured by French photojournalist Marc Riboud, who snapped a photo of Jan Rose Kasmir, age 17, offering a flower to soldiers while standing just inches from their bayoneted rifles. “She was just talking, trying to catch the eye of the soldiers,” recalled Riboud. “I had the feeling the soldiers were more afraid of her than she was of the bayonets.”

The photo of Kasmir became a symbol of the new hippie counterculture, which gained national prominence in the 1967 San Francisco “summer of love.” Hippies henceforth
became a mainstay at antiwar gatherings, adding new protest songs that buoyed the movement. Disdainful of social conventions and the “establishment,” the pot-smoking culture was nonviolent at heart. Its ubiquitous peace symbol, adopted from the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, became the movement’s logo as well. Harking back to communitarian and nature movements in American history, the hippies not only opposed the Vietnam War but also sought alternatives to what the historian William A. Williams called “empire as a way of life,” which included more communal living arrangements and ecological practices and less reliance on technology. In the documentary film, “Berkeley in the 1960s,” Jentri Anders notes that “on at least some level, those of us in the hippie movement understood that ours was a culture that was destroying the world.” Their peace-oriented values reflected a genuine sensitivity towards the destructive aspects of the American way of life, which the Vietnam War in all its horrors had exposed.

Movement building
The antiwar movement was a never-ending fount of new organizations and projects. From 1965 to 1967, new organizations included Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam, Veterans for Peace in Vietnam, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Another Mother for Peace, RESIST, and American Writers and Artists Against the War. Among the new projects were the National Voters Peace Pledge Campaign, organized by SANE, “Vietnam Summer,” a community organizing project led by Martin Luther King and Benjamin Spock, and “Negotiations Now,” a petition drive led by prominent liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

Schlesinger’s journey from war supporter to moderate dove was prompted in part by his four children turning against the war. Three were in college during the 1960s and one in VISTA, a government service program. “All of them were opposed to the war,” Schlesinger recalled. “They were all sort of active, but not fanatic in their participation in antiwar protests and so on.” The “generation gap” between those who came of age during World War II and those who came of age during the Vietnam War was also evident in the McNamara family. Craig McNamara did not discuss the war with his famous father, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, but after entering Stanford University in 1969, he began to participate in peace movement activities. Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor had two sons who were antiwar organizers. During protest
weekends in Washington, they brought their antiwar friends with them to spend the night at the Resor household. Senior Pentagon official Paul Nitze saw three of his four grown children join a “March on the Pentagon” in October 1967, even as he was placed in charge of protecting the building.

Antiwar fervor personally affected President Johnson as well. James Reston of the New York Times reflected that the president was compelled to “sneak ... around the country from one air base to another” in order to “dodge all these people meeting him wherever he arrived and shouting, ‘Hey, hey, LBJ, how many boys have you killed today?’” White House Counsel Harry McPherson recalled that such slogans were in constant view of the White House as picketers paraded outside the fence. Johnson nevertheless continued to send more American “boys” to Vietnam (the average age was 19).

Religious-based opposition added gravitas to the growing antiwar movement. In October 1965, Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam (CALCAV) was formed under the leadership of Reverend Richard Neuhaus, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, and Father Daniel Berrigan. The group initially called for a halt to the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam and for a negotiated settlement, much like SANE. On January 31, 1967, with Martin Luther King as chairperson, CALCAV organized an “Education-Action Mobilization” in which some 2,400 clerics from across the United States gathered in front of the White House and silently paced back and forth in a “vigil for peace.” By mid-1967, the organization had seventy-eight chapters and a membership mailing list of 12,000. CALCAV encouraged religious leaders to speak out against the war, and it played a major role in lobbying efforts. King, having made his stand in his “Beyond Vietnam” speech, became one of the most prominent spokespersons for the antiwar movement during the last year of his life. In February 1968, prior to the My Lai massacre, CALCAV released a report, In the Name of America, which accused the U.S. of committing war crimes and violating international law. This report followed the International War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm in May 1967, organized by Bertrand Russell, and preceded the “Winter Soldier Hearings,” organized by Vietnam Veterans Against the War in early 1971.
One of the first Vietnam veterans to speak out against the war was Master Sargent Donald Duncan, who resigned from the Army in September 1965, after ten years of service. He appeared on the cover of Ramparts magazine (February 1966), dressed in full uniform with green beret, his story punctuated with accounts of atrocities he had witnessed. “The whole thing was a lie,” he wrote. “We weren’t preserving freedom in South Vietnam. There was no freedom to preserve.”

Duncan’s article undoubtedly made an impression on GIs wrestling with moral issues of the war, but much of the public was still inclined toward a romantic view of the war at this time. Just a month later, “The Ballad of the Green Berets” was released, becoming an overnight pop song hit. This patriotic paean to American courage and bravery, which said nothing about the nature of the mission in Vietnam, sold over one million copies in 1966, topping the charts.

In January 1966, a group of mostly World War II and Korean War veterans met in Chicago and founded Veterans for Peace in Vietnam. The group placed an ad in the New York Times prior to the Spring Mobilization in New York City on April 15, 1967, encouraging Vietnam veterans to march with them. One vet who responded was 24-year-old Jan Barry, who completed his service in Vietnam in 1964. He and others marched under a banner “Vietnam Veterans Against the War.” On June 1, 1967, Barry and five other Vietnam vets met again in New York to formally establish the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). That fall, they placed an ad in the New York Times that read: “We are veterans of the Vietnam war. We believe that this ‘conflict’ in which our country is now engaged is wrong, unjustifiable and contrary to the principle of self-determination on which this nation was founded.” The ad listed the names of
sixty-five veterans of the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines. Upon seeing the ad, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara telephoned the FBI and demanded an immediate investigation into the background of each signer. Undaunted, VVAW organizers continued to recruit other Vietnam vets. They organized local chapters and facilitated the development of veteran support services, “including group therapy and drug counseling, that predated similar Veterans Administration programs by nine years,” according to the historian Andrew E. Hunt.  

Many African American civil rights organizations were reluctant to formally associate with the antiwar movement, as President Johnson was seen as an ally in their cause. The exceptions were SCLC, CORE, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). At an SCLC meeting in July 1965, Martin Luther King made clear his view that the “war in Vietnam must be stopped,” but the organization did not come out against the war publicly until early 1967. Rev. James Bevel was subsequently hired as the director of the Spring Mobilization Committee that planned the April 15th event. CORE leader James Farmer told delegates to the CORE national convention in July 1965 that it was “impossible for the government to mount a decisive war against poverty and bigotry in the United States while it is pouring billions down the drain in a war against people in Vietnam.” At the next convention in July 1966, the organization adopted two resolutions, one calling for withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam and the other charging that the draft system placed a “heavy discriminatory burden on minority groups and the poor.”

SNCC jumped into the antiwar movement rather suddenly following the murder of Sammy Younge Jr., a 21-year-old Navy veteran who was shot and killed when he attempted to use a whites-only restroom at a gas station in Macon County, Alabama, on January 3, 1966. Three days later, SNCC issued a manifesto that decried the “hypocrisy” of fighting for freedom abroad while denying it to African Americans at home: “We are in sympathy with, and support, the men in
this country who are unwilling to respond
to a military draft which would compel
them to contribute their lives to United
States aggression in Vietnam in the name
of the ‘freedom’ we find so false in this
country.” The Georgia House of
Representatives responded by refusing to
seat newly elected Julian Bond, SNCC’s
communications director. Seventy-five
house members filed a petition charging
that Bond’s opposition to the war “gave
aid and comfort to the enemies of the
United States and Georgia, violated the
Selective Service laws, and tended to
bring discredit and disrespect on the
House.”[341] The issue eventually reached
the Supreme Court which ruled
unanimously in favor of Bond.

On the left, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Black Panther Party for Self-
Defense in Oakland, California, in October 1966. Chapters were subsequently
established in dozens of other cities in conjunction with the rising black power
movement. Black Panther leaders connected racism at home to imperialism abroad.
Eldridge Cleaver issued a manifesto in September 1968, declaring, “The black man’s
interest lies in seeing a free and independent Vietnam, a strong Vietnam which is not
the puppet of international white supremacy.” A year later, Bobby Seale appealed to
black soldiers in the U.S. armed forces to come home “as Revolutionaries to
Overthrow the Ruling Class.”[342]
Drawing more women into the antiwar movement was a goal of WILPF, WSP, and Another Mother for Peace (AMP). All facilitated grassroots lobbying. WSP, founded in 1961, also set up local draft information and counseling centers, attracting “blue-collar workers, school dropouts, and working-class apprentices, both white and African American,” according to the historian Amy Swerdlow; and it organized many protests. “Some people take their children to churches,” said WSP co-founder Dagmar Wilson. “We take ours to marches.” In mid-February 1967, two weeks after CALCAV’s “Education-Action Mobilization,” WSP mobilized some 2,500 well-dressed women to parade in front of the Pentagon with signs that read, “Mothers Say Stop the War in Vietnam” and “Drop Rusk and McNamara, Not the Bomb.” In 1970, WSP members in New York helped elect another co-founder, Bella Abzug, to the House of Representatives. Two hundred and thirty-five WSP members worked in the Abzug headquarters during the campaign. [343]
Another Mother for Peace began in the living room of Lorraine Schneider in Beverly Hills, California, in March 1967. “There were only fifteen women that spring,” Schneider recalled. Four years later, the group’s membership numbered 215,000. Schneider, an expert printmaker, created the group’s famous sunflower design and logo, “War is not healthy for children and other living things.” AMP’s stated mission was “to educate women to take an active role in eliminating war as a means of solving disputes between nations, people and ideologies.” The group’s methods were entirely conventional: producing and distributing “homework” for study, selling posters, bumper stickers, note cards, and gold medallions with the group’s logo, encouraging letter-writing campaigns, and supporting peace candidates running for Congress. AMP’s first action on Mother’s Day 1967 was to distribute postcards to be sent to all members of Congress and the President. Congress received some 200,000 cards that year, which read:

For my Mother’s Day gift this year,
A new wave of feminism arose in U.S. society in the late 1960s, raising issues of gender equity in antiwar groups as well as in the rest of society. Among the groups wrestling with the issue was SDS, whose founding Port Huron Statement (1962) said nothing about the oppression of women in its critique of social ills. Some feminists linked imperialism to patriarchy, defining both as a “colonial relationship.” A group of young women in the Women’s Anti-Imperialism Collective, based in Washington, DC, challenged more conventional members of Women Strike for Peace. According to Swerdlow, “The young women were openly critical and disdainful of the older WSPers, whom they scorned as politically and culturally regressive and totally lacking in feminist consciousness.” As both groups sought to establish relationships with the North Vietnam Women’s Union, they each sent their own representatives to meet with the group.\footnote{\text{[345]}}

Campus unrest
The sheer size of the “baby boom” generation – those born in the late 1940s and early 1950s – made youthful protests against the war a spectacle. During the 1960s, the number of 18-to-24-year-olds enrolled in college jumped from 3.6 to 8.0 million, or from 24% to 36% of this youthful population. The number and size of colleges and universities grew accordingly. Most college students, like the general population, supported the war at the outset. In the spring of 1967, two years into the war, a Gallup poll found that 49% identified as “hawks” (pro-war) and 35%, as “doves” (antiwar). Two and a half years later, however, the proportions had more than reversed, with only 20% identifying as “hawks” and 69%, as “doves.” This was more dovish than the general population in the fall of 1969, which registered 31% “hawks” and 55% “doves.”

College campuses were centers of much agitation during the war years, not all of it due to protests against the Vietnam War. Other issues included “free speech,” civil rights, women’s rights, “black power,” feminism, vague calls for revolutionary transformation (Che Guevara T-shirts were popular), and educational issues concerning curriculum relevance and participatory classroom methodology. The war was nonetheless central to most demonstrations, which increased in number, size, and vitriol as it went on. Most protests were peaceful. Melvin Small estimates that about ten percent of the nation’s 2,500 universities and colleges “experienced violent disturbances during the war,” including 71 during the fall 1967 semester and 221 during the winter-spring 1968 semester. One of the most confrontational demonstrations took place at Columbia University in April 1968, when antiwar protesters occupied three buildings for seven days. After mediation attempts failed, President Grayson Kirk summoned the New York police who forcefully removed the protesters and arrested more than 700. Outraged at both the administration and police, thousands of students and faculty went on strike, effectively shutting down the
university for the rest of the semester. According to the historian Jeffrey Kimball, such actions had the effect of heightening “a general perception of national malaise and crisis that made ending the war even more urgent.”

Many protests combined opposition to the war with some tangible concern such as university cooperation with the Selective Service System, military and CIA recruiters on campus, the presence of ROTC, or contracts with the Pentagon or Dow Chemical (the Pentagon distributed about $1 billion annually to universities for research projects). The draft, or conscription, made the war impossible to ignore.

In May 1966, students at the University of Chicago conducted a two-day protest against the school's practice of providing the Selective Service System with student grades by which deferments could be determined. One Iowa co-ed recalled picketing the local draft board because she was “not going to support a government that goes around killing its students.... Being at the draft board was a time for me to say, ‘No. This has to stop.’” Enrollment in ROTC, the main source for junior officers, dropped by two-thirds between 1968 and 1972-73, from 218,000 to 72,500 registrants. Attacks on ROTC buildings reached a high point in the 1969-70 academic year, with “323 assaults, resulting in $155,000 worth of government property loss and $1.25 million damage to colleges,” according to David Cortright. “Thirty ROTC buildings were fire bombed in the spring term [1970] alone.”

Campus visits by administration officials were predictable catalysts for protests. In
1966, “scores of students and faculty at Amherst College and New York University walked out of their graduation ceremonies in June in protest against the honorary degree awarded to former National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy,” notes Small. “In 1970, Richard Nixon was angered to discover that he could not attend his own daughter Julie’s graduation at Smith College because of the disruption he would cause by appearing in Northampton, Massachusetts.”[351]

Following the publication of William Pepper’s “The Children of Vietnam” in the January 1967 issue of *Ramparts Magazine* – a revealing exposé of the effects of napalm with accompanying photographs – many student groups initiated actions against Dow Chemical, maker of napalm. By the company’s own count, there were 221 major anti-Dow demonstrations on U.S. campuses between 1967 and 1970. Sit-ins, pickets, and blockades were employed to demand that Dow recruiters be banned from campuses and that universities end all association with the company. Students carried signs decrying Dow for “Making Money Burning Babies” and urging, “Dow Shall Not Kill.”

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, students organized a series of sit-ins at Dow recruitment offices on campus. At the second sit-in in October 1967, administrators called the police, which led to a violent confrontation in which 75 protesters and 10 police officers were injured. Dow was temporarily banned from campus. At Harvard University that same month, students sat in at Conant laboratory (named to honor President James Conant, a former director of the National Defense Research Committee) to protest Dow recruiters on campus. A Dow recruiter was locked in an
office for seven hours.\[352\]

At Stanford University, on April 9, 1969, some 400 students occupied the Stanford Research Institute, a Bechtel Corporation funded high technology scientific research organization connected to the Defense Department and its affiliated Applied Electronics Laboratory, effectively shutting it down. Almost one-half of the institute’s support in 1968 came from the Department of Defense, including $6.2 million directly related to Southeast Asia, according to its critics. The protesters demanded an end to all classified war research, including research into Air Force reconnaissance and surveillance systems and chemical and biological warfare. Student radicals later stormed the university’s computational center which ran stimulation programs used by helicopter and gunship pilots. English professor H. Bruce Franklin was fired for having urged students to “shut down the machinery of war.” The protestors had caused $800 worth of damage.\[333\]

Draft resistance and the GI movement

Between 1964 and 1973, the U.S. military drafted 2.2 million American men, ages 18-25. About one-third served in Southeast Asia and the remainder in Western
Europe, Japan, and elsewhere. Those who refused to be inducted into the military faced up to five years in prison. According to official figures, “There were more than 300,000 deserters and draft evaders in total, in which 209,517 men illegally resisted the draft while some 100,000 deserted. Among them, around 30,000 immigrated to Canada during 1966-72.” Many found other ways around the draft. Of 27 million men who were eligible for military service during the war years, about 15.4 million were granted deferments, mostly for education. Others intentionally flunked physical exams, often with the help of sympathetic doctors.\textsuperscript{[354]}

One alternative to military induction was to apply for conscientious objector (C.O.) status, which, if granted, allowed the person to perform alternative service in hospitals or similar venues for two years. The Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors and local peace groups advised young men on how to apply. At the beginning of the war, the Selective Service law required C.O. applicants to be part of an organized religious tradition, but two Supreme Court rulings, \textit{Seeger v. United States} (1965) and \textit{Welsh v. United States} (1971), loosened restrictions to allow for anyone with a sincere moral objection to killing another human being to be considered for C.O. status. Applications for C.O. status reached a peak in 1971, with 186,000 applying and 61,000 granted the status.\textsuperscript{[355]}

The most famous person to refuse induction was boxing champion Muhammad Ali. When informed in March 1966 that the Selective Service System had reclassified him as 1-A, making him subject to conscription, he declared he would seek C.O. status as a black Muslim. “Man, I ain’t got no quarrel with them Vietcong. They never called me a nigger,” he famously said. He reiterated the point when refusing induction in

Muhammad Ali (right) points to a newspaper headline on a Vietnam protest, March 28, 1966
April 1967. “My conscience won’t let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people, or some poor hungry people in the mud for big powerful America,” he said. “And shoot them for what? They never called me nigger, they never lynched me, they didn’t put no dogs on me, they didn’t rob me of my nationality, rape and kill my mother and father.... Shoot them for what?” Muhammad Ali was sentenced to five years in prison, but he remained free on appeal. After much legal wrangling, the Supreme Court granted him C.O. status in June 1971 (Clay v. United States). [356]

The burning of draft cards became a ritual at major demonstrations but during the first years of the war it proved a risky venture. On March 31, 1966, four young men burned their draft cards on the steps of the South Boston District Courthouse only to be severely beaten by a mob of 75. According to the historian Michael S. Foley, “Three government agents who had infiltrated the crowd to witness the card burning (two from the FBI and one from the army’s Criminal Investigation Division) were knocked down as they attempted to guide the pacifists up the stairs away from the mob and into the building. Their actions may have saved some of the victim’s lives.” One of the four, John Philips, had his nose broken. [357]
In the fall of 1967, organized draft resistance gained momentum with the formation of a new national organization, RESIST, followed by the publication of “A Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority,” which appeared in The New York Review of Books (October 12), signed by hundreds of the nation’s foremost public intellectuals. A “Stop the Draft Week” was organized in mid-October in which at least 1,100 young men turned in or burned their draft cards in thirty cities, although some burned copies to avoid legal penalties.

The Call advised young American men to resist the draft based on national and international legal principles. The war in Vietnam, it charged, violated the American Constitution, as Congress had never declared war; the United Nations Charter, “which specifically obligates the United States to refrain from force or the threat of force in international relations”; the Geneva Accords of 1954, “which our government pledged to support but has since subverted”; and the Geneva Conventions of 1949, which require human treatment of civilians and prisoners of war. Regarding the latter, the Call noted the U.S. destruction of food sources, “the burning and bulldozing of entire
villages,” and the “interning of civilian non-combatants in concentration camps ... all actions of the kind which the United States and the other victorious powers of World War II declared to be crimes against humanity” in the Nuremberg Trials. Five of the authors, Dr. Benjamin Spock, Marcus Raskin, Mitchell Goodman, Michael Ferber, and Rev. William Sloane Coffin, were indicted by the government and four were convicted, but their convictions were overturned on appeal.\[358\]

The Call was revised in early 1969 by two graduate theology students, David Hawk and Sam Brown, and distributed to campuses in the form of a “Declaration of Conscience.” The document described the war as “immoral and unjust” and expressed the intention of the signers to “refuse induction” and to aid others in doing likewise. It was signed by 253 student body presidents and student newspaper editors and presented to President Nixon in April 1969.\[359\]

The growing militancy in the antiwar movement in 1967 and 1968 was directed in part at local draft boards offices. These “became the target of an increasing number of violent attacks – what amounted to a small-scale guerrilla war,” writes David Cortright. “By September 1969, sixty-five of the nation’s four thousand local boards had been attacked or harassed, including eleven incidents of burning or mutilation of records.” On October 27, 1967, Catholic priest
Philip Berrigan, Protestant minister James L. Mengel, and two others entered a local Selective Service board office in Baltimore and poured blood over draft files while reading from the Bible. In their written statement, they explained that their action was meant to protest “the pitiful waste of American and Vietnamese blood in Indochina.” In May 1968, nine people led by Philip and Daniel Berrigan broke into the draft board at Catonsville, Maryland and burned selective service records with homemade napalm.

Other raids, often led by clerics, destroyed draft records in Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Chicago, Akron, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, New York, and Buffalo. Sentences were initially harsh, but in 1972, in a surprising turn, Judge John Curtin vacated the sentences handed down to the “Buffalo Five,” three men and two women who had broken into Buffalo’s Old Post Office building in August 1971 for the purpose of destroying draft files. Judge Curtin told the defendants, “Your love of country is above that of most other citizens. If others had the same sense of morality, the war would have been over a long time ago.”

Open dissent on U.S. military bases slowly emerged. The first public act of defiance came on June 30, 1966, when three privates issued a public statement declaring their refusal to ship out to Vietnam on the grounds that the war was “immoral, illegal, and unjust.” The “Fort Hood Three” were court-martialed in September and sentenced to three to five year prison terms. In October, Army doctor Howard Levy refused to train Green Beret medics at Fort Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina, asserting that Special Forces units were responsible for war crimes in Vietnam.

In July 1967, two African American Marines, William Harvey and George Daniels, called a meeting “to question why black men should fight a white man’s war in Vietnam,” according to Cortright, who was one of the leaders of the GI movement. “When Harvey, Daniels, and twelve other Marines requested captain’s mast to discuss the matter with the commander, the two were arrested and charged with insubordination and promoting disloyalty. They were found guilty in November and sentenced to six and ten years, respectively.”[381]
Such harsh penalties undoubtedly dissuaded many GIs from directly challenging military authority, but other ways were found to debate and protest the war. With the support of local peace groups, coffee houses sprang up near military bases where GIs could freely exchange ideas. GIs began publishing off-base newspapers, one of the first being Vietnam GI in late 1967. More newspapers followed. Cortright counts a total of 259 over the course of the war, although many lasted only a few issues due to personnel relocation. In December 1967, the American Servicemen’s Union (ASU) was founded by socialist Andy Stapp, who purposely entered the Army in order to organize among soldiers. ASU developed chapters in bases at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and Fort Benning, Georgia, and offered legal assistance to servicemen in support of GI rights. An increasing number of GIs also applied for C.O. status while in the service. Even if denied, their applications backed up the military courts and sometimes delayed deployment orders. At the Oakland Army Base, a primary embarkation point for Vietnam, the Pacific Counseling Service aided GIs in filling out C.O. applications, resulting in 1,200 soldiers successfully delaying their deployment orders by March 1, 1970.[362]

Transnational diplomacy

Transnational connections between the antiwar movement and North Vietnam sought to undermine a common practice in war - the dehumanization of the “enemy.” More than 200 American activists traveled to North Vietnam over the course of the war. They met with North Vietnamese officials at international peace conferences around the world, held private interviews in Paris, and mutually organized trips to Hanoi to quench a shared “thirst for information.” Many U.S. activists reported their findings in the mainstream and underground American press. Through eyewitness accounts of what was happening on the ground, they strengthened their ability to counter official U.S. statements and promoted empathy for the Vietnamese as victims of an unjust
war. The first to travel to Hanoi were Mary Clarke and Lorraine Gordon, WSP members, who made the trip in May 1965. They arranged a meeting with representatives of the Vietnamese Women’s Union (VWU) in Jakarta, Indonesia, in July, attended by ten U.S. woman activists and nine Vietnamese women. WSP founder Dagmar Wilson declared that the purpose of the conference was to achieve “freedom from dependence on the judgments of the Viet Nam experts.” For many activists, this desire for firsthand knowledge propelled their actions.

The visits often proved enlightening. David Dellinger, arriving in Hanoi in October 1966, recalled that his hosts “would talk about what they’d been doing for hundreds of years, trying to gain their independence and fight off imperialists.” This longer historical view of invasion and colonization in Vietnam reshaped the outlook on the war that many activists held. Some, like Chicana Elizabeth Martinez, elaborated on the similarities between the U.S. government’s treatment of Mexican Americans and the Vietnamese, while others noted the determination of the Vietnamese to win, given their long fight for independence. Notable antiwar activists who traveled to North Vietnam include Herbert Aptheker, Joan Baez, Daniel Berrigan, Elaine Brown, Noam Chomsky, Ramsey Clark, Eldridge...
Cleaver, William Sloane Coffin, Rennie Davis, Barbara Deming, Doug Dowd, Richard Fernandez, Jane Fonda, Tom Hayden, Staughton Lynd, Mary McCarthy, A. J. Muste, Diane Nash, Grace Paley, Susan Sontag, and Howard Zinn. Fonda’s visit in particular raised the ire of war supporters, who anointed her “Hanoi Jane.”

Hanoi officials coordinated many of these visits through the Committee for Solidarity with the American People (Viet-My) and the VWU. Visiting groups were accompanied by a translator, doctor, photographer, and military personnel in and around Hanoi, indicating the significance of these visits for the Vietnamese. The Viet-My and VWU arranged meetings with government officials, including Ho Chi Minh and Premier Pham Van Dong, chauffeured groups to areas of the countryside that had been bombed, took them to “evacuated” factories, and toured bombed schools and hospitals. According to the historian Jessica Frazier, “The Vietnamese made clear that they invited [Americans] to North Viet Nam to provide evidence that the U.S. military knowingly and indiscriminately killed civilians.”

For some, mitigating the devastation caused by the American War took precedence.
In the autumn of 1966, the American Friends Service Committee, having already established a medical clinic in South Vietnam, applied for permission to send humanitarian aid to North Vietnam. The U.S. government refused on the grounds that there was no assurance that the aid would reach only civilians. In response, a smaller Quaker Action Group formed to funnel aid through Canadian Friends who were already assisting American draft resisters and deserters. In February 1967, the group chartered a sailing vessel loaded with medical supplies, particularly penicillin, and sailed it into Haiphong harbor in North Vietnam. When the vessel returned, the U.S. government confiscated the crew's passports. The Quaker Action Group nonetheless continued to illegally provide medical aid after permission was again denied. Its leaders issued a statement in 1968, explaining, “Sometimes our service has been among those other men call enemies, sometimes with those others call friends. They are all Children of God.” Not until near the end of the war did large amounts of medical aid from American civilians enter North Vietnam. During the so-called Christmas bombings in 1972, the largest hospital in North Vietnam, Bach Mai, endured extensive damage. In response, the Vietnamese, with the help of a U.S.-based organization, Medical Aid for Indochina, successfully solicited funds to rebuild the hospital, despite the illegality of sending aid to North Vietnam. The U.S. ban on aid continued even after the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement in January 1973.[366]

Another pressing concern for activists was the prisoner of war issue, made more prominent by the Nixon administration. Over the years, as a gesture of good will, the Hanoi government had released a number of captured U.S. airmen to antiwar visitors, three to Berrigan and Zinn in January 1968, three to AFSC representatives in August 1968, three to Paley and Davis in August 1969. But this practice backfired after the 1969 release when the former POWs testified to a Congressional Committee that they had been tortured while in captivity. This testimony created a new face of the Vietnamese enemy as cruel captors. To counter this narrative, in January 1970, Dave Dellinger and activist Cora Weiss formed the Committee of Liaison with Families of Servicemen Detained in North Vietnam, a sister organization to Hanoi’s Viet-My. They eventually received from the Hanoi government updated lists of all American POWs in North Vietnam, informing American families of their husband’s or son’s status. Group representatives traveled to Hanoi on a monthly basis to deliver and retrieve prisoner mail. The Nixon administration, however, trivialized these efforts and claimed Hanoi had not provided Washington with a complete list of POWs. In February 1971, President Nixon announced that American troops must remain in South Vietnam in
order to pressure Hanoi “to release the prisoners,” implying that Hanoi was untrustworthy and would keep POWs after the end of the war. As the historian Michael J. Allen writes, “This Catch-22 was a formula for endless war.”

As a way to show that Hanoi wanted reconciliation above all else, Cora Weiss and the Viet-My coordinated one last prisoner release in September 1972. This time, Hanoi stipulated that prisoners must return to the United States via commercial airline; hence they would be able to hold a press conference upon their return before being debriefed by the U.S. military. Hanoi and Weiss made it clear that any intervention on the part of the U.S. government could imperil the future release of additional POWs before the end of the war. Anticipating U.S. interference, they announced a false itinerary of their return trip to the United States. As expected, the U.S. military met the plane that the three POWs were supposed to be on in Laos with the intent of forcing the three men to fly the rest of the way back to the United States via military aircraft. All the while the POWs were actually escorted by Weiss on another day via a different route. Weiss wrote a press release stating that the intervention was evidence of Nixon’s disregard for POWs’ safe return and his attempt to conceal the truth from the American people.

Hanoi officials also sent their greetings to the American peace movement, occasionally read at rallies, sincerely wishing peace advocates success in their efforts to bring the war to a close. They often pointed out the contradiction between stated American principles of supporting self-determination and the egregious U.S. policy of denying this to Vietnam; and praised Americans who protested the war as standing up for true American principles. American activists likewise saw themselves as promoting freedom, democracy, and independence. Both faulted the U.S. government for denying the Vietnamese the right to choose their own form of government.

Shifting political momentum, 1968
By early 1968, Senator Fulbright had learned of the administration’s duplicity in the Gulf of Tonkin incident through his Pentagon contacts. In a committee hearing on February 20, he closely questioned Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, pointing to evidence that the Johnson administration had provoked the incident in order to use it as a pretext for initiating well-prepared war plans. “I feel very guilty for not having enough sense at the time to have raised the questions and asked for evidence,” said Fulbright. “I regret it more than anything I have ever done in my life, that I was the vehicle which took that resolution to the floor and defended it in complete reliance upon information which, to say the very least, is somewhat dubious at this time.” McNamara called the accusation “monstrous.”

The administration’s “credibility gap” widened in the wake of the Tet Offensive. On February 27, the trusted news anchor, Walter Cronkite, told nine million Americans that the United States should negotiate an end to the stalemated war. New York Times columnist James Reston asked, “What is the end that justifies this slaughter?”

In early March, Congress received word of the Pentagon’s request for 206,000 additional troops. Newsweek correspondent Samuel Shaffer wrote that it “brought Congress as close to mutiny as I have ever seen it.” Fulbright demanded a Congressional vote on the matter, in effect challenging the president’s authority to unilaterally expand the war. Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana, an expert on Southeast Asia, declared, “We are in the wrong place, and we are fighting the wrong kind of war; and those of us who try to say that if we do not fight there, we will be forced back to Hawaii or California ought to think and think again.” Senator Clifford Case of New Jersey questioned the conduct of the war, asking rhetorically, “if our success in South Vietnam can only be accomplished by the destruction of South Vietnam,” must the United States inexorably “pursue this course?”

With the Senate balking, majority public opinion leaning toward withdrawal, the antiwar movement growing, and his own advisers cautioning against further expansion, Johnson reluctantly denied 90 percent of the Pentagon’s request. Thus began the transition from gradual escalation to the gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops.
By the spring of 1968, the patriotic ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effect was wearing thin and recognition of the war’s mounting costs was sinking in. On April 27, the Mobe sponsored another major demonstration, this one relatively peaceful. About 100,000 people congregated in New York to hear Coretta Scott King, Mayor John Lindsay, and other speakers. Another 20,000 gathered in San Francisco. A group of forty active-duty GIs were given the honored place at the head of the demonstration in San Francisco.

The rising tide of opposition to the Vietnam War prompted two senators to make their bid for the presidency in 1968. Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota expressed his views on the war in a speech in Chicago on December 2, 1967. The war, he said, was “of questionable legality and questionable constitutionality ... diplomatically indefensible ...[and] morally wrong.”\textsuperscript{[371]} A flood of youthful volunteers soon arrived in New Hampshire to work for McCarthy in the first state primary – so many that some called it “the children’s crusade.”
The “hawks” came out in force. Johnson’s supporters paid for an ad accusing McCarthy of “surrendering” to the enemy and warned that “the communists in Vietnam are watching the New Hampshire primary…. They are hoping for a divided America.” Governor John King suggested that a McCarthy victory would spark “dancing in the streets of Hanoi.” Freshman Democratic Senator Thomas McIntyre of New Hampshire labeled McCarthy a friend of “draft-dodgers and deserters.” McCarthy was not intimidated. Speaking in Manchester, he called attention to the fact that the “Democratic Party in 1964 promised ‘no wider war.’ Yet the war is getting wider every month.” On March 12, 1968, McCarthy won 42 percent of the vote in the New Hampshire Democratic primary as compared to Johnson’s 49 percent, a very respectable showing (Johnson did not campaign and was a write-in candidate).

Four days later, sensing Johnson’s vulnerability, Senator Robert Kennedy of New York announced his candidacy. Kennedy’s charisma and family name, coupled with Johnson bowing out of the race on March 31, sparked predictions of Kennedy’s sure victory in November and drew thousands of volunteers to his campaign. Although his original peace plan was unlikely to work – it called for the withdrawal of both U.S. and North Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam, a proposition that Hanoi had repeatedly rejected – it nonetheless moved the domestic debate further toward disengagement. Kennedy’s assassination in Los Angeles on June 5, two months after Martin Luther King’s murder, was another great blow to peace activists. So, too, was the selection of
Vice President Hubert Humphrey as the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate in 1968.

Both Humphrey and Republican candidate Richard Nixon promised to end the war on “honorable” terms, which meant not losing the war and not “losing Vietnam.” I. F. Stone wrote in late October that the real goal of this strategy was “to reduce the level of conflict to a point the American people will tolerate for a long pull without giving up the basic aim of restoring a South Vietnam under American control.” He was right. Both Humphrey and Nixon refused to support any coalition government in South Vietnam that included NLF representatives, which was the first step to a genuine peace settlement.

The most remembered demonstration of the year took place at the Democratic National Convention from August 25 through 30. The “Battle of Chicago,” as it was called, involved some 10,000 antiwar demonstrators and 11,000 police officers. The main organizers of the protest were David Dellinger, Renee Davis, and Tom Hayden. Also involved was Jerry Rubin and the newly formed Yippies, who called for a “festival of life” outside the convention in contrast to the “party of death” that had betrayed the nation by nominating the pro-war Humphrey. The Mobe, expecting problems, decided not to sponsor the demonstration. Hayden predicted violence but declared that the demonstrators would not start it. Mayor Richard Daley instructed his police officers to keep order at all costs. According to Melvin Small:
addition, intelligence agents had penetrated their cadres; for example, Jerry Rubin’s bodyguard was an undercover Chicago policeman. Some of the government plants acted as agents provocateurs, spurring on the demonstrators to take violent or illegal actions. A minority of the demonstrators did not need the direction of agents to provoke and even attack the police. All the same, in several pitched battles seen on television around the world, the police appeared to be the aggressors. “The Whole World is Watching” was...
the chant, as protesters were clubbed and dragged into paddy wagons in what a government investigative commission later labeled a “police riot.” . . .

The melees resulted in 668 arrests. The rest of the battle figures included: one person shot dead, 425 treated for injuries at the movement clinics, 200 treated on the spot, 400 needing treatment for tear-gas inhalation, and 101 treated in hospitals. On the other side, twenty-four car windshields were broken, seventeen police cars were dented or otherwise damaged, 192 of the 11,000 police personnel involved needed hospital treatment; only ten claimed that they were kicked by demonstrators, six said they were hit, and four said they were assaulted by crowds of protesters.

Inside the Convention Hall, Connecticut Senator Abraham Ribicoff declared, “With George McGovern we wouldn’t have Gestapo tactics on the streets of Chicago.” Daly responded with an anti-Semitic slur, epitomizing the vicious political infighting and backlash caused by the Vietnam War. Dozens of journalists were roughed up both inside and outside the convention, prompting Newsweek to headline its story, “Beat the Press.” “On the last day
of the convention,” notes Small, “after allegedly seeing objects being thrown from delegates’ hotel rooms, the police broke into McCarthy’s headquarters and beat up scores of innocent campaign workers who were ‘keeping clean for Gene.’”[374]

The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, chaired by Milton Eisenhower, interviewed more than 1,400 witnesses to the events and studied FBI reports and films of the confrontations. Its report, released on December 1, 1968, characterized the convention violence as a “police riot,” albeit on the part of a minority of police officers, and recommended prosecution of those officers. The police officers were not prosecuted, but seven movement organizers – Abbie Hoffman, Rennie Davis, John Froines, David Dellinger, Lee Weiner, Tom Hayden, and Bobby Seale – were indicted by the U.S. Justice Department on March 29, 1969, on charges of conspiracy and traveling across state lines to “incite a riot.” Five were convicted of the latter charge, but their convictions were overturned on appeal.

Rubin and Hoffman went on to challenge the status quo with media-savvy events, such as wearing a rented American Revolutionary War uniform at a hearing of the House Un-American Activities Committee and dropping dollar bills on the New York Stock Exchange at Wall Street, attracting a youthful constituency.[375]

Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon, meanwhile, rode the theme of law and order into the White House and continued to play it up during his presidency. “We find old standards violated, old values discarded, old precepts ignored,” said Nixon in
June 1969. “We have the power to strike back, if needed, and to prevail. The nation has survived other attempts at insurrection, we can survive this.”

The antiwar movement in the Nixon years

In January 1969, leaders of pacifist and liberal organizations met in New York to rebuild the movement and refurbish its image. A temporary coalition was formed, the National Action Group, and plans were initiated for a spring mobilization on Easter weekend, April 5-6, under the slogan “Resistance and Renewal.” The planning group consisted of Stewart Meacham of AFSC, David McReynolds of WRL, Richard Fernandez of CALCAV, Rev. James Bevel of SCLC, Tudja Crowder of SANE, Katherine Camp of WILPF, Paul Lauter of RESIST, Ron and Trudi Young and Jim and Linda Forest of FOR, and Brad Lyttle of the New England Committee for Nonviolent Action, and others.

The spring mobilization succeeded in rallying more than 150,000 people in forty cities, including 50,000 in New York, 40,000 in San Francisco, 30,000 in Chicago, and lesser numbers in Los Angeles, Atlanta, Austin, and elsewhere. In Philadelphia, an interfaith group conducted a 17-hour Good Friday vigil in front of a local draft board, reading the names of 33,000 American soldiers killed in Vietnam. Remarkably peaceful, the demonstrations attracted meager media attention. The New York Times accompanied a report on the demonstrations with an article next to it headlined, “Nixon Has Begun Program to End War in Vietnam.”

In fact, Nixon waited until June 8th to announce the first withdrawal of 25,000 GIs, which amounted to less than five percent of the 540,000 troops stationed in Vietnam. Nixon knew that the withdrawal of U.S. troops would reduce U.S. leverage in negotiations, but he was obliged to appease public opinion at home. His duplicitous strategy toward the peace movement was to steal its thunder by gradually withdrawing U.S. troops while at the same time denouncing the movement for urging withdrawal. Sam Brown commented, “It seemed that he was going to get out of Vietnam as slowly as possible, while
Nixon also expanded covert operations against the antiwar movement. Although the CIA reported in June 1969, for the third time in three years, that it had found no evidence of significant communist involvement in the movement, White House officials directed the agency to expand its investigations under the most “liberally construed” interpretation of “communist.” Richard Ober, head of the CIA’s Operation Chaos, henceforth ordered thirty agents to infiltrate antiwar organizations. Nixon also boosted the FBI’s COINTELPRO program, “eventually employing two thousand agents who infiltrated, provoked disturbances, and began a massive program of ‘disinformation,’ a euphemism for spreading lies,” according to the historian Terry H. Anderson.

On June 9, 1969, one day after Nixon’s announcement of troop withdrawals, eight members of Congress declared their intention to introduce legislation calling for an immediate cease-fire in Vietnam and the withdrawal of 100,000 troops. This was a clear signal to liberal peace groups to revise their political goals. SANE and WSP had already made the shift toward calling for an end to the war now or at least as soon as possible. During the next few months, AFSC, WILPF, Americans for Democratic Action, and Business Executives Move for a Vietnam Peace also adopted this goal, demanding “that the United States terminate its support for the Thieu regime and withdraw unilaterally from military action in Vietnam,” according to DeBenedetti. SANE, FOR, and CALCAV furthermore organized a new project, the Interfaith Committee to Set the Date, which called for the withdrawal of all U.S. troops by July 4, 1971. Henceforth, the challenge was to convince the public that a quick withdrawal was more honorable than the administration’s slow-motion plan.
Life magazine added urgency to the idea of withdrawal by publishing in its June 27 (1969) issue portrait photos of all 242 Americans killed in Vietnam during the previous week. “It is not the intention of this article to speak for the dead,” wrote the editors. “Yet in a time when the numbers of Americans killed in this war — 36,000 — though far less than the Vietnamese losses, have exceeded the dead in the Korean War, when the nation continues week after week to be numbed by a three-digit statistic which is translated to direct anguish in hundreds of homes all over the country, we must pause to look into the faces. More than we must know how many, we must know who.”

By mid-1969, a core group of “doves” had coalesced in the Senate. Over the next three years, they repeatedly offered legislation to cut off funding for the war and were repeatedly blocked. The McGovern-Hatfield amendment, for example, introduced on September 1, 1970, called for the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops by December 31, 1971; the measure was defeated in a floor vote, 55-39. President Nixon argued that a timetable for withdrawal had already been worked out with the Saigon government and thus there was no need for Congressional legislation. In June 1971, the Senate approved, 57-42, an amendment by Senator Mansfield to withdraw all U.S. troops from Indochina nine months after passage, but the House, after a month-long debate, altered the amendment to say “at the earliest practicable date,” which essentially left the matter to President Nixon. The House remained the more hawkish legislative body throughout the war. In 1972, House members rejected three different bills to cut off funding for the war, all by the large margins: 244-152 (June 27), 229-177 (August 10), and 208-160 (September 14).

Moratoriums and the New Mobilization, fall 1969

Following the Easter 1969 demonstrations, two national initiatives for the fall were
conceived by two different groups. Sam Brown and David Hawk, both McCarthy campaign workers, promoted the idea of a monthly series of “moratoriums,” or nationwide general strikes, beginning on Wednesday, October 15, 1969. The strikes from work would be complemented by protest activities organized locally, with a major demonstration in Washington. The initial plan was to hold moratoriums one day in October, two days in November, three days in December, and so forth, which proved to be overambitious. Brown, Hawk, and David Mixner, another McCarthy organizer, formed the Vietnam Moratorium Committee (VMC) and recruited veteran peace organizers such as Richard Fernandez of CALC for the steering committee. The second initiative arose from the Cleveland Area Peace Action Council, a group strongly influenced by the SWP. The idea was to continue the momentum of previous spring and fall mobilizations with another set of mass demonstrations in Washington and San Francisco on Saturday, November 15. This organizing committee adopted the name “New Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam,” or “New Mobe.”

What was remarkable about these two initiatives was that the sponsoring groups cooperated in promoting each other's events. New Mobe leaders Sidney Peck and Ron Young helped organize local Moratorium committees where none existed. “We went all over the country giving speeches together, pushing the Moratorium and the Mobe,” said Doug Dowd, another New Mobe field organizer. Before endorsing the Mobe, the VMC obtained an agreement from New Mobe leaders that the Mobe's language and actions would be nonviolent. The two groups also agreed on a list of speakers for the rallies. The New Mobe carried out its pledge in full, training 4,000 peacekeepers to prevent any militant individuals or agent provocateurs from disrupting the peace marches. [384]
The VMC raised funds, reached out to every other possible constituency, and generally presented the Moratorium as a legitimate redress of citizen grievances. By October, VMC had 31 full-time staff persons and 7,500 field organizers working to make the event a success. CIA operatives who infiltrated the Moratorium’s headquarters in Washington warned their superiors that the Moratorium was gaining wide support and that “prominent people regarded as loyal Americans have instilled the day with respectability and even patriotism.” These statements were correct. Among the Moratorium’s endorsers were nine members of Congress and the faculty at Harvard, which voted of 391-16 in favor of
As many as two million people in over two hundred cities and towns participated in Moratorium activities. Participants ranged from at least 15 combat soldiers in Vietnam wearing black armbands, to 100,000 listening on the Boston Common to South Dakota senator George McGovern and setting a record for the largest political crowd in the city’s history, to 250,000 in New York who attended rallies in Bryant Park and on Wall Street. Many Broadway shows canceled their matinees that afternoon and Republican Mayor John Lindsay ordered flags to be flown at half-mast on municipal buildings. As many as 90 percent of high school students in New York failed to show up for class that Wednesday. Turnouts were impressive as well in Chicago, Washington, Minneapolis, Salt Lake City, and Pittsburgh, where the city council endorsed the demonstration. Even more impressive were the dignified silent vigils and prayer meetings.
Scattered violence in Washington and some other cities did not detract from the Moratorium’s mainstream image. Only one week before the Moratorium, the Weathermen had engaged in a fit of property destruction in Chicago as part of its “Days of Rage.” The press did not confuse this politically incoherent violence with the Moratorium. Indeed, the Moratorium’s middle-class demeanor, breadth of support, and notable endorsements favorably impressed the media. *Life* magazine described the Moratorium as, “without parallel, the largest expression of public dissent ever seen in the country.” *Time* magazine editorialized, “Nixon cannot escape the effects of the antiwar movement.” *Newsweek* headlined its story, “Nixon in Trouble.” Sam Brown sought to gain political leverage from the event (like the civil rights movement had done following its mass demonstration in Washington in August 1963) by arguing that it signified a common call for “withdrawal from Vietnam no later than December 1st of next year,” but
Congress was not so moved. The pro-war counteroffensive was not long in coming. Hawkish groups organized “Honor America” parades and produced bumper stickers that declared, “America, Love It Or Leave It.” President Nixon claimed to speak for the “silent majority” in a televised address to the nation on November 3. Immediate withdrawal, he said, would lead to wholesale communist massacres in South Vietnam and cause a “collapse of confidence” in America’s ability to protect the Free World. Why his policy of gradual withdrawal would not lead to these same outcomes was not explained. Having adopted the peace movement’s de-escalation approach, Nixon went on to blame the peace movement for undermining the war effort: “North Vietnam cannot humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.” The unspoken implication was that Nixon intended to win the war, despite gradually withdrawing troops, and that the antiwar movement was inhibiting more forceful measures. A Gallup poll taken just after the speech found that 77% of Americans supported the president’s policies in Vietnam, but what policies did they support? Nixon led the public to believe that the U.S. could preserve South Vietnam without the use of U.S. troops. The “Vietnamization” strategy was essentially designed to win the propaganda battle at home, not win the war in Vietnam.

The Moratorium did, in fact, inhibit more forceful measures by the administration. Although protesters had no knowledge of Nixon’s secret plan to escalate the war, code-named Operation Duck Hook, they succeeded in disrupting it. In July 1969, Nixon issued an ultimatum to Ho Chi Minh, warning that North Vietnam must either accept Washington’s negotiating conditions, meaning a permanent division of Vietnam, or face an unspecified escalation of the war. A top-secret study laid out the options: massive bombing of Hanoi, Haiphong, and other key areas of North Vietnam; a ground invasion of North Vietnam; the mining of harbors and rivers; and more. Ho Chi Minh personally responded in a letter dated August 25, one week before he died. If the United States wanted a “just peace,” he wrote, then it “must cease the war of aggression and withdraw their troops from South Vietnam,” and respect the right of the Vietnamese people to govern themselves without “foreign influence.” On October 2, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger sent a memo to Nixon calling for military action. “To achieve its full effect on Hanoi’s thinking, the action must be brutal,” he wrote. The deadline for Hanoi’s response was November 1, a date set between the
Moratorium and New Mobe protests. Following the massive protest of the Moratorium, Nixon let the deadline pass without action. He later reminisced in his memoirs that the protest had “destroyed whatever small possibility may still have existed to end the war,” meaning his intention to win the war by overwhelming force.

Also unbeknown to the American people, Nixon had ordered nuclear-armed B-52s into the air in a “show of force” to the Soviet Union. Codenamed Giant Lance, the intent was to persuade Soviet leaders to convince their ally in Hanoi to give in to U.S. demands. On October 27, the Strategic Air Command launched 18 B-52 bombers loaded with thermonuclear weapons from bases on the West Coast. They crossed Alaska, were refueled in midair, then flew over the polar icecap near the Soviet Union for eighteen hours. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird thought the operation futile and reckless as the Soviet Union might have mistaken this airborne alert for an actual attack or an accident might have happened. According to Daniel Ellsberg, “People didn’t understand the Joint Chiefs were pressing throughout this period for a bigger war, and Nixon was threatening and planning a bigger war.... Without the Moratorium, there would have been an escalation, possibly the use of nuclear weapons in November 1969.”

The second moratorium on November 13-14 garnered less nationwide participation but still made waves. A creative “March Against Death” was held in Washington in which 40,000 people marched single file across the Arlington Memorial Bridge, 1,200 per hour, each one carrying a placard bearing the name of an American soldier killed in Vietnam or the name of a destroyed Vietnamese village. Drummers beat a slow cadence and candles were lit as the march proceeded into the night. As each protester passed the White House, he or she paused to say the name of a dead American soldier. “It was a terribly emotional experience,” said Sam Brown.
The November Moratorium flowed seamlessly into the New Mobilization demonstrations on November 15. Between 250,000 and 500,000 gathered in Washington and between 100,000 and 300,00 in San Francisco. The lower estimate for Washington was made by Police Chief Jerry V. Wilson who had been advised by administration officials to “low-ball” the numbers. Attendance might have been larger had not FBI agents threatened bus companies with legal action if they transported demonstrators to Washington. Norma Becker recalled that “thousands were stranded” in New York City.

Demonstrators in Washington, led by a contingent of over 200 GIs, marched peacefully up Pennsylvania Avenue to the Washington Monument, occasionally breaking into a chorus of “Give Peace a Chance.” “It was a wonderful, wonderful day,” VMC leader David Hawk remembered. Musical performers included folk singers Pete Seeger, Arlo Guthrie, and Peter, Paul, and Mary. Speakers included Senator George McGovern, Senator Charles Goodell (Republican of New York), and entertainer Dick Gregory, among others. In San Francisco, Ralph Abernathy and Senator Wayne Morse spoke and the cast of the hit musical “Hair” performed “Let the Sun Shine.”
Trouble began in Washington only at the end of the rally when rowdies broke windows and threw bottles at police, an example of civil disorder rather than nonviolent civil disobedience. The police responded with tear gas that drove the crowd into the downtown area, where “marauding bands of youth trashed businesses and cars,” according to Tom Wells. The efforts of the march organizers to prevent violence during
the main rally and march nevertheless paid off, as the press clearly distinguished between the rowdies and the peaceful protesters. The New York Times titled its front-page article, “250,000 War Protesters Stage Peaceful Rally in Washington; Militants Stir Clashes Later.” The report noted, “The predominant event of the day was that of a great and peaceful army of dissent moving through the city.”

The media also recognized the Nixon administration’s smear campaign in the aftermath of the demonstration. The Washington Post editorialized, “The effort by this administration to characterize the weekend demonstration as (a) small, (b) violent, and (c) treacherous will not succeed because it is demonstrably untrue.”
administration’s claim that military and police forces had prevented major violence, it added, was “sheer balderdash.” The disruptive violence at the end of the November 15th rally was put in perspective by revelations of the My Lai massacre that month. The first report by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh came out on November 12. The New York Times picked up the story and published an article on November 17 entitled, “Vietnamese Say G.I.’s Slew 567 in Town.” Three days later, the Cleveland Plain Dealer published graphic photos of the massacre provided by Army photographer Ronald Haeberle. Time and Life magazines published articles during the next two weeks. According to William Watts, an aide to Henry Kissinger, what upset President Nixon was not the atrocities committed in Vietnam, but their potential effect in sparking more antiwar protests. Nixon ordered his aides to find out “who is backing” the soldier who revealed the massacre to the press (Ron Ridenhour, a GI who served in the 11th Infantry Brigade). “It’s those dirty rotten Jews from New York who are behind it,” he repeated to his deputy assistant Alexander Butterfield. [394]

While the Nixon administration called on Americans to blindly “support the troops” without questioning the war, more GIs were coming to view the peace movement as being on the right track. One young private in Vietnam told New York Times correspondent R. Drummond Ayers in the summer of 1969, “I just work hard at surviving so I can go home and protest all the killing.” Hal Wingo of Life magazine interviewed nearly one hundred GIs in combat zones and found “unexpected cheers” and “open and outspoken sympathy” for the Moratorium demonstrations that fall. On November 9, a full-page ad appeared in the New York Times, signed by 1,366 active-duty servicemen, including 189 soldiers in Vietnam, calling for an end

Joe McDonald of “Country Joe and the Fish” at Woodstock, Aug. 1969 (Bear Family Records)
The Woodstock festival in upstate New York in August 1969 reinforced the cultural turn against the Vietnam War. Joe McDonald, who enlisted in the U.S. Navy at the age of 17, returned to Berkeley, California, to start the rock band, Country Joe and the Fish. He composed the rousing antiwar song “The I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag” that was performed at the Woodstock festival. Its sardonic lyrics and upbeat melody would make it an anthem of the antiwar movement (refrain):

And it's one, two, three,
What are we fighting for?
Don't ask me, I don't give a damn,
Next stop is Vietnam;
And it's five, six, seven,
Open up the pearly gates,
Well there ain't no time to wonder why,
Whooppee! we're all gonna die.

Taking stock

Taking stock at the end of 1969, activists might have been encouraged by the successes of the antiwar movement. The Moratorium and New Mobilization were the largest antiwar protests in American history up to that time. Participation in antiwar activities had become “normalized” on college campuses. More Vietnam veterans and active duty GIs were connecting with the antiwar movement. The media on the whole was less hostile to the movement and more critical of the administration. Nixon's
secret war plans had been aborted (some suspected this); and U.S. troops were at least being withdrawn rather than added (troop levels declined from 537,000 at the beginning of 1969 to 474,000 at the end of it). Although beset with problems, the antiwar movement was making progress. According to Melvin Small:

Beginning as a tiny cloud on the horizon in 1965, the antiwar movement had grown impressively to a point at which its arguments had been adopted by many people who would never have participated in a demonstration or signed a petition. In a complicated symbiotic relationship, antiwar activists affected and were affected by prominent figures in Congress, the media, and the intellectual world who confronted the president with an articulate, sizable, and increasingly influential group of citizens whose proposals for withdrawal from Vietnam began to appear more credible than those of the president who could only promise more of the same. [396]

Public opinion polls at the end of 1969 indicated that half of Americans viewed the war as “morally indefensible,” 60% said that it was a “mistake,” and 80% said they were “fed up and tired” of the war. Moreover, more Americans were coming to view the “mistake” in Vietnam as part of a larger pattern of American “imperialism.” According to two polls taken by the Yankelovich organization, the “proportion strongly agreeing with the statement ‘the war in Vietnam is pure imperialism’ increased from 16 percent in the spring of 1969 to 41 percent in [April] 1970, just before the Cambodian events. Those strongly disagreeing dropped from 44 to 21 percent.” The embrace of a larger anti-imperialist critique posed a broad challenge to U.S. interventionist policies, later named the “Vietnam Syndrome.” [397]
Yet there was much frustration and a let-down in the antiwar movement at the end of the year. Activists had thrown their best punches and the administration was still standing. The war continued and most Americans accepted Nixon’s gradual withdrawal policy as the best way to exit. With endless funds at its disposal, the administration’s propaganda apparatus never ceased. The antiwar movement, in contrast, operated on a shoestring budget and volunteer energy. Many activists were exhausted from organizing the recent demonstrations, if not from five years of activism. The way forward was not clear. In December, the VMC gave up its idea of holding monthly moratoriums, as this proved beyond the capacity of both organizers and supporters. Had the movement been more united and strategic, consolidating its resources, it might have sustained once-a-month moratoriums, building a wider base of support across the U.S. As it was, the VMC disbanded in April 1970. The New Mobe followed suit in July, replaced by three competing coalitions.

Disarray at the top, however, did not prevent local and national organizations from continuing their efforts. New blood and new projects continued to reinvigorate the movement. In March 1970, AFSC and CALCAV sponsored civil disobedience actions at draft boards in Manhattan in which 182 people were arrested for nonviolently blocking the entrance to four offices. Nationwide demonstrations took place on April 15, sponsored by the disintegrating VMC, New Mobe, and Student Mobilization Committee, a SWP-dominated group. The events drew 75,000 in Boston, 40,000 in New York, 25,000 in Chicago, and 20,000 in San Francisco. Disorders accompanied some of these demonstrations. According to Small, “militants broke up the New York demonstration and rioters caused damage to stores around Harvard and in Berkeley, and those actions dominated the headlines on April 16, much to the administration’s pleasure.” Sam Brown described the militancy as “macho nonsense.”

Cambodia and Kent State, 1970
On April 20, 1970 President Nixon pledged to withdraw another 150,000 troops from Vietnam over the next year. The pledge was designed to appease the majority of Americans who now wanted out of the war. Ten days later, however, Nixon announced a bold expansion of the war – a U.S. invasion into Cambodia. As “North Vietnam has increased its military aggression … particularly in Cambodia,” said Nixon in a televised address, the U.S. was obliged “to clean out major enemy sanctuaries on the Cambodian-Vietnam border.” This was necessary, he continued, in order to “protect our men who are in Vietnam and to guarantee the continued success of our withdrawal and Vietnamization program.” Nixon ended his address with an appeal to the foundations of U.S. foreign policy: “If, when the chips are down, the world’s most powerful nation, the United States of America, acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world.”

Anticipating criticism, the White House had taken preemptive steps to counter it by distributing “background material on Cambodia” to newspaper editors, placing pro-Nixon ads in more than forty newspapers through a front group, preparing announcements that private polls showed “heavy” public support for the invasion, and
consulting with pro-war groups. It was not enough. Many Americans were shocked by the news. “I had thought we were on the road to withdrawal from a war unrelated to our own vital interests and national security,” said Senator Charles Percy, Republican of Illinois. “Now I am astonished and appalled to find that it has been widened into another country without congressional approval.”

Protests arose spontaneously in cities and on campuses. Most were peaceful, but at Kent State University in Ohio, militants burned down the ROTC building, which prompted the governor to call out the National Guard. On May 4, nervous guardsmen, who claimed to be in danger, fired over sixty times into the crowd, killing four students and wounding nine. The closest two students were 60 feet away from the guardsmen; eight were more than a football field away; yet the guardsmen’s claim of self-defense held up in court. The administration’s initial response was utterly insensitive: “This
should remind us all once again that when dissent turns to violence, it invites tragedy,” stated a White House press release. That evening, Vice President Spiro Agnew called the killings “predictable” and went on to incoherently condemn “traitors and thieves and perverts and irrational and illogical people in our midst.” J. Edgar Hoover fed the administration’s callousness by informing officials that one of the female victims had been “sleeping around” and was “nothing more than a whore.”
The killing and wounding of students at Kent State ignited an explosion of unrest on campuses across the nation. “The overflow of emotion seemed barely containable,” wrote the Washington Post editors on May 6. “The nation was witnessing what amounted to a virtual general and uncoordinated strike by its college youth.” Protests were held on more than 1,300 campuses during the month of May, with many moderate and conservative students participating for the first time. Among them was Craig McNamara, who joined other students at Stanford University in a rampage of window-breaking. “I remember the rage setting in on me, and the frustration that we all felt because we couldn’t stop the war.”
he reflected. “What was in my mind ... was rage, pure rage.” The governors of 16 states activated National Guard units to curb rioting. Campus unrest forced the shutdown of 536 universities and colleges, 51 for the remainder of the semester. [003]

New Mobe and SWP organizers called for a demonstration in Washington on May 9. With only a week’s notice, 100,000 people showed up on the Ellipse behind the White House in a nationally televised rally. Several hundred federal employees waved banners outside office windows, one proclaiming, “We Have Found the Enemy and He Is Us!” Nine members of Congress joined Dr. Benjamin Spock on the
platform. The rally was peaceful except for about 1,000 protesters who went off-route to engage in vandalism and block traffic in the street. Police wearing steel helmets and gas masks forcefully removed them. Rallies were also held in other cities, drawing 60,000 in Chicago, 50,000 in Minneapolis, 20,000 in Austin, and 12,000 in San Diego.\[^{404}\]

Rank-and-file union workers participated in some of the protests. Some labor organizations also issued statements. The General Executive Board of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America called the Kent state killings “a tragic product of an Administration in Washington which has made escalation of war abroad and repression at home its most distinguishing characteristics.” On May 7, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees called for U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.

The following day in Manhattan, however, some 300 “helmeted workmen, some armed with lead pipes and crowbars, ranged freely through the financial district for almost three hours, attacking protesters and those who sought to help the injured,” according to the Wall Street Journal. “One construction worker, who said his life would be in danger if he was identified, claimed the attack was organized by shop stewards with the support of some contractors. He said one contractor offered his men cash bonuses to join the fray.” The violence was worse than any mayhem initiated by antiwar demonstrators, as it was directed at persons rather than property. “We came
here to express our sympathy for those killed at Kent State and they attacked us with lead pipes wrapped in American flags,’ said Drew Lynch, a 19-year-old employee of the city’s Human Resources Administration, who came away with a black eye and a split lip.” According to the *Journal* report:

At Trinity Church, where volunteer doctors and medical students treated about 60 victims in a makeshift hospital at the head of Wall Street, the vicar, the Rev. Donald Woodward, locked the gates to prevent worker mobs from entering. The surly crowd ripped down a Red Cross banner and tried to remove the Episcopal Church flag…. Later the workers stormed City Hall several blocks to the north, overwhelming police and forcing officials to raise to full-staff the American flag. It had been ordered to half-staff by Mayor John Lindsay in memory of the four slain Kent State University students. Still later, the workers invaded nearby Pace College, again attacking students.[405]

The White House offered no criticism of the rampaging workers and no sympathy for the injured antiwar protesters. Instead it sought to overwrite the image of pro-war thuggery with a sanitized patriotic march twelve days later. Officially sponsored by the Building and Construction Trades Council, the march was billed as a demonstration of “love of country and respect for the country’s flag.” According to one union member, “The word was passed around to all the men on the jobs the day before. It was not voluntary. You had to go.” Some 100,000 people marched in New York City on May 20 amid signs that read “We Love Our Police, Flag and Country” and “Lindsay for Mayor of Hanoi.” The demonstration left the impression that the Nixon administration had at least one significant constituency backing his war policy. According to the historian Penny Lewis, however, this was not the case. After surveying opinion polls from the era, she concludes that “working-class people were never more likely than their middle-class counterparts to support the war, and in many instances, they were more likely to oppose it.”[406]

In the Southwest, Chicano/a Movement organizers took up the antiwar cause, impelled in part by a disproportionate number of Chicanos being drafted into the military. On August 29, 1970, some 30,000 Chicanos and Chicanas took to the streets in East Los Angeles to protest discrimination and the Vietnam War. The event was organized by
the National Chicano Antiwar Moratorium, led by Rosalio Muñoz. “Put together as a peaceful protest,” writes the historian Mario T. García, “the moratorium was brutally and violently attacked by police forces.” The Los Angeles Police Department “stormed the rally with billy clubs and tear-gas rifles. They attacked a peaceful demonstration, injuring some, arresting many, and killing three Chicanos.” One of those killed was Ruben Salazar, news director of KMEX, the only Spanish-language television station in Los Angeles, who was hit in the head with a tear gas projectile.

Within the administration, three of Kissinger’s closest aides, Roger Morris, Anthony Lake, and William Watts, resigned in response to the Cambodian invasion. Laurence Lynn, senior staff member on the National Security Council, resigned after the Kent State killings. Pentagon analyst Daniel Ellsberg, having become convinced that the war was immoral as well as futile, proceeded with copying the Pentagon Papers, a 7,000-page classified study of U.S. involvement in Vietnam from 1940 to 1968, which he would later leak to the New York Times, exposing administration deceptions over the course of four presidencies.

In Congress, antiwar senators introduced the Cooper-Church amendment, which sought to ban U.S. ground forces and advisers in Cambodia after July 1, 1970, less than two months away. The administration’s allies in Congress managed to delay passage of the amendment until January 1971, after U.S. troops had been withdrawn. The protests and legislation nonetheless had an effect on U.S. policymaking. “The enormous uproar at home was profoundly unnerving,” wrote Kissinger in his memoir. “The panicky decision to set a June 30 deadline for the removal of our forces from Cambodia was one concrete result of public pressures.”
Public and Congressional pressure not only insured that the U.S. invasion of Cambodia would be brief, but also that the administration would continue its staged withdrawal of troops, irrespective of whether the U.S. was winning or losing on the battlefield. Troop levels declined from 474,000 at the beginning of 1970 to 336,000 at the end of the year; then to 158,000 at the end of 1971; and to 24,000 at the end of 1972. 

The last years of the war

By 1971, the political formula for ending the war had been established. U.S. troops would be withdrawn in stages, in deference to public demand, while the administration would do what it could to help South Vietnam survive without U.S. troops. President Nixon refused to acknowledge the likelihood that continued troop withdrawal would lead to the demise of South Vietnam, whether by treaty or by war. He used every rhetorical sleight-of-hand to present the American exit as “honorable.” The antiwar movement’s political agenda at this point was to ensure that the administration did not backslide and to push up the timetable for withdrawal, which the House of Representatives refused to do.

The antiwar movement continued to thrive in 1971. GI and veteran antiwar activities were on the upswing; there were more civil disobedience actions at draft boards; and another set of mass demonstrations took place in the spring. The following year was marked by fewer activities, in conjunction with the de-escalation of American involvement in the war, the exceptions being a vigorous anti-bombing campaign and electoral work. Most peace organizations experienced declines in membership in 1972, and national coalitions went their separate ways.
“The GI movement in the Army reached its peak during the spring of 1971,” writes David Cortright. On May 15, Armed Forces Day, protests against the war were successfully carried out at nineteen bases across the U.S. Two weeks later, on Memorial Day, a group of GIs at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington joined the VVAW in sponsoring an antiwar service at an on-post chapel. Approximately 200 soldiers joined in the ceremony. Vets and civilian supporters aided counseling and legal services, the *GI Press Service*, “Free the Army” tours with actors Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland, and numerous off-base projects, committees, and coffee houses, all aimed at encouraging opposition to the war by those assigned to fight it.¹¹⁰

Veterans courageously addressed the issue of atrocities. From January 31-February 2, 1971, VVAW held a three-day “Winter Soldier Investigation” in Detroit, in which over 100 veterans and sixteen civilians described in detail American atrocities in Vietnam. The VVAW proceedings were entered into the *Congressional Record* by Senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon, who was elected in 1966 on an antiwar platform. Soon after, Rep. Ron Dellums of Oakland, California, elected in 1970 on an antiwar platform, requested a formal Congressional investigation into American atrocities in Vietnam. House leaders declined. Undaunted, Dellums set up an exhibit in an annex to his office that featured four large posters depicting American atrocities. The posters were provided by the Citizens Commission of Inquiry on U.S. War Crimes in Vietnam.
On April 25, Dellums commenced four days of unofficial hearings in the Cannon Caucus room, taking testimony from Vietnam vets. One vet, Danny Notley, stunned the audience of some 200 people when he described a massacre at Truong Khanh on April 18, 1969, in which members of his unit had gunned down at least thirty unarmed and unresisting villagers, mostly women and children. His testimony received wide coverage in the media. The New York Times corroborated his testimony by interviewing five Vietnamese women who told of Americans killing 60 people in two groups then burning the village. The focus of the hearings was not on assigning individual guilt but on examining “war crimes as a policy.”[11]

On the Senate side of Capitol Hill, Senator McGovern similarly pressed for formal hearings on American war crimes, but to no avail. Senator Fulbright, however, invited Lt. John Kerry to speak to his committee on behalf of the VVAW. Kerry, who later became a senator, presidential candidate (2004), and secretary of state, testified on April 22, 1971:

We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them. We saw America lose her sense of morality as she accepted very coolly a My Lai and refused to give up the image of American soldiers who hand out chocolate bars and chewing gum. We learned the meaning of free fire zones, shooting anything that moves, and we watched while America placed a cheapness on the lives of Orientals. We watched the U.S. falsification of
body counts, in fact the glorification of body counts.... Each day ... someone has to give up his life so that the United States doesn't have to admit something that the entire world already knows, so that we can't say that we have made a mistake. Someone has to die so that President Nixon won't be, and these are his words, “the first President to lose a war.” We are asking Americans to think about that because how do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake? [412]

Kerry’s presence in Washington that spring was part of the VVAW’s Operation Dewey Canyon III, a five-day “invasion” of the capital in which some 2,000 VVAW members and friends lobbied members of Congress and engaged in various symbolic acts of protest. In the climactic event on Friday, April 23, over 600 veterans threw their combat medals and ribbons over a make-shift fence and onto the Capitol lawn. Most made a brief comment about their reasons for returning their awards and some dedicated their peace witness to fallen comrades. VVAW’s membership increased from about 10,000 to 20,000 over the course of 1971.

The White House, fearful of the effect of the veterans’ protest on both the public and GIs, orchestrated a smear campaign against the VVAW and John Kerry. “They went into high gear after Dewey Canyon III,” said VVAW leader Jan Barry. “It was full court press.... We started hearing reports of people being harassed on their jobs.” Barry himself lost his job as a researcher with CBS news. The White House developed a confidential “Plan to Counteract Viet Nam Veterans Against the War” and formed a committee led by Charles Colson to implement it. The committee concocted letters-to-the-editor demanding that newspapers expose Kerry as a “fraud,” prepared
slanderous articles for publication, and created an illusory “Vietnam Veterans for a Just Peace” to counteract the VVAW.\endnote{413}

Immediately following Dewey Canyon III, on Saturday, April 24, antiwar organizers pulled off “what may have been the largest single rally in the history of the antiwar movement,” according to Melvin Small. “At least 300,000 and perhaps as many as 500,000 showed up that day to march from the Ellipse down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol where organizers had obtained permission to use the Capitol steps for a rally, the first time that such permission had been granted.”\endnote{414} Some 30 members of Congress were on hand to offer their support for the rally, its purpose captured in the slogan “Vietnam, Out Now.” The huge protest was nonetheless treated rather perfunctorily in the press, as demonstrations had become routine and the central political question regarding U.S. policy in Vietnam appeared to have been settled.

Confrontational activities followed nine days later. On Monday, May 3, the leftist May Day Tribe and the radical pacifist People’s Coalition for Peace and Justice staged a nonviolent sit-down in the streets of Washington, designed to shut the city down.
Municipal and federal authorities were prepared. By noon, 7,000 people had been arrested in the largest mass arrest in American history. The administration viewed it as a win for its side. Colson concluded, “This has really turned out to be a major plus for us.” Regardless, public opinion on the war was not about to change. The Washington Post reported on the same day, “Tide of Public Opinion Turns Decisively Against the War.”[415]

Adding fuel to the antiwar fire was the first release of the Pentagon Papers in the New York Times on June 13, 1971. The administration attempted to prevent their publication, claiming that they harmed national security, but the Supreme Court rejected this argument and ruled on June 30 to allow their publication. The documents, written by the Pentagon’s own historians, showed a consistent pattern of administration deception, most importantly in regard to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, an intentional U.S. provocation that was part of a secret plan (Operation 34-A) to expand the war. In introducing the papers into the Congressional Record in August, Senator Mike Gravel of Alaska said that only a person who “has failed to read the Pentagon Papers” could still believe in “our good intentions” or that the U.S. was fighting for “freedom and liberty in Southeast Asia.” The U.S. “created an artificial client state in South Vietnam, lamented its unpopularity among its own people, eventually encouraged the overthrow of that government, and then supported a series of military dictators…. The elaborate secrecy precautions, the carefully contrived subterfuges, the precisely orchestrated press leaks, were intended not to deceive ‘the other side,’ but to keep the American public in the dark.”[416]
In November 1971, activists from CALC and FOR launched “Project Daily Death Toll” to dramatize the continuing bloodshed in Vietnam. Every afternoon during the month, a contingent of protesters from different cities laid down on the sidewalk in front of the White House, some wearing conical, wide-brimmed Vietnamese hats and the names of dead Vietnamese. Don Luce, former director of the International Volunteer Services, organized the Indochina Mobile Education Project, designed to draw attention to “the culture, history and everyday life of the Indochinese.” The 37-year-old agriculturalist drove a van from town to town, setting up a photographic exhibit, showing films, and speaking to audiences across America.

The renewal of massive U.S. bombing of North Vietnam in the spring of 1972 catalyzed the formation of a Campaign to End the Air War. CALC organized hundreds of people to lobby Congress and sponsored a radio program that ran six days a week on 300 stations. Folk singer Joan Baez was in Hanoi during the last, 11-day massive bombing campaign in December 1972. She had come to deliver Christmas mail to American prisoners of war. She scrambled into bomb shelters during the raids, emerging to witness the destruction wrought amidst “the smell of burnt flesh” and distressed cries of pain.\[127\]
In the 1972 presidential race, the Democratic Party nominated a true peace candidate, Senator George McGovern. Nixon found every possible means to discredit him. “We stand for peace and honor versus peace with surrender,” he told audiences. “We stand for a strong America versus a weak America. We stand for no amnesty for draft dodgers and deserters.” Nixon knew, of course, that the U.S. was losing the war, but he spoke to American national pride which wanted to believe otherwise. Defense Secretary Melvin Laird described McGovern’s program as “unconditional surrender” and depreciated the senator as a “spokesperson for the enemy.” Such was the disrespect shown to the former Air Force pilot who flew 35 combat missions over Italy during World War II and received numerous medals of honor. McGovern lost the popular vote, 37.5% to 60.7%, in the second biggest landslide in American history.

On the day of Nixon’s second inauguration, January 20, 1973, 20,000 protesters gathered along the route. One man held a sign that read, “Nixon’s secret plan killed my son and 25,300 GIs in Vietnam.”

V. Lessons and legacies of the war

The War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) welcomes annually some 500,000 visitors, including many Americans. Formerly called the War Crimes Museum, the courtyard displays captured or abandoned U.S. military aircraft, helicopters, tanks, and artillery. Among the exhibits is the “Requiem,” a collection of 330 framed pictures taken by 134 photographers from 11 nations who were killed in the war. New York Times war correspondent, Donatella Lorch, visiting in 2014, wrote, “The Vietnam War in these pictures is intensely human and real. It slammed me, left me breathless, jolted me into remembering how much suffering war entails. I cried.”
Another American visitor that year, Corey Adwar, reported on the museum for Business Insider magazine.

“Museum curators make concerted efforts to educate foreigners, especially Americans, about the war,” he wrote, “but based on a certain government-sanctioned Vietnamese
interpretation of events.” Although skeptical of this point-of-view, Adwar noted the value of the education.

“Americans have told me that they do not have a lot of information about Vietnam in the United States. They didn’t even know that Vietnam was fighting for independence.
nce and that the involvement of their country was not necessary! When they come here and see for themselves the war crimes committed by U.S. troops, they feel ashamed.

According to the historian Kendrick Oliver, “the museum continues to confront its visitors with evidence of the suffering inflicted upon the Vietnamese people by the armed forces of the United States and its ‘puppet’ ally in Saigon. The objective of the museum, its own leaflet declares, is not to incite hatred, but to allow lessons to be learnt from history: “Human beings will not tolerate such a disaster happening again, neither in Vietnam nor
The museum curators no doubt hope that Americans in particular will take note of this lesson of “never again.” As Tran Van Tra, former North Vietnamese commander, explains:

The Vietnamese people had to suffer from callous injustice and ruthless terror during the war, just because they wanted to have an independent free and unified country. Young men from the United States and other allied countries did not shed their blood in the interest of their own people; indeed, they died fighting against a people that held no enmity whatsoever for their country.

For humanity, war is immoral. The war waged against the Vietnamese people was even more immoral because it did not serve the interest of either of the two belligerents; its only aim was to impose the domination of one nation over another, impose the ideology (way of thinking and way of life) of one group on another. Many opportunities arose for putting a reasonable end to the war, in the interest of peace and honor for all sides, but they were not taken advantage of.\[423\]
The idea that the aim of the United States was to impose its will on the Vietnamese people has never been accepted by U.S. officials – before, during, or after the war. At a news conference on March 24, 1977, President Jimmy Carter was asked if he felt “any moral obligation to help rebuild that country.” Carter replied, “Well, the destruction was mutual. You know, we went to Vietnam without any desire to capture territory or to impose American will on other people. We went there to defend the freedom of the South Vietnamese. And I don’t feel that we ought to apologize or to castigate ourselves or to assume the status of culpability.” To say that the “suffering was mutual” here
disregards the fact that the war was entirely fought in Southeast Asia, not in the United States, and that the casualties and suffering were nowhere near comparable.

Ronald Reagan, as a presidential candidate speaking to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Chicago on August 18, 1980, was more adamant in asserting American righteousness, twisting history into conformity:

For too long, we have lived with the “Vietnam Syndrome.” Much of that syndrome has been created by the North Vietnamese aggressors who now threaten the peaceful people of Thailand. Over and over they told us for nearly 10 years that we were the aggressors bent on imperialistic conquests.... It is time we recognized that ours was, in truth, a noble cause. A small country newly free from colonial rule sought our help in establishing self-rule and the means of self-defense against a totalitarian neighbor bent on conquest. We dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful, and we have been shabby in our treatment of those who returned.... There is a lesson for all of us in Vietnam. If we are forced to fight, we must have the means and the determination to prevail or we will not have what it takes to secure the peace. And while we are at it, let us tell those who fought in that war that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win.\[425]
inept Washington politicians, the “liberal” media, and the peace movement. These films were part of a larger reactionary movement designed to restore America’s noble self-image, assuage guilt, and drown out the outrage felt by other Americans convinced that the administration had lied its way into an unnecessary war. Stories were spread that antiwar activists had spit on returning vets and that American POWs were being held in Vietnam, making America appear the victim rather than the aggressor in the war. The “lesson” for the hawkish crowd was that the U.S. should have, and could have, won the war.

Sociologist Jerry Lembcke researched the “spitting myth” in depth and found sparse evidence and no photographs of veterans being spat upon. Evidence of peace movement support for GIs, on the other hand, is substantial, from setting up coffee houses, to providing legal aid and counseling, to giving antiwar GIs and vets a prominent place in antiwar marches.

The POW allegation gained official backing in 1991, when Congress passed a law ordering that a black POW/MIA (prisoners-of-war/missing-in-action) flag be flown over every federal building in the country. At the bottom of the flag is written “YOU ARE NOT FORGOTTEN.” The law declared the flag “a symbol of our Nation’s concern and commitment to resolving as fully as possible the fates of Americans still prisoner, missing, and unaccounted for in Southeast Asia.” There were, in fact, no American POWs being held captive by the former enemy, only 2,500 Americans still missing from the war. The latter number may be compared to some 75,000 MIAs from World War II and 8,000 from the Korean War. The POW allegation should have been laid to rest following a Senate investigative report, dated January 13, 1993, which concluded that there was “no compelling evidence that proves that any American remains alive in captivity in Southeast Asia.” Yet the allegation continued and the POW/MIA flags continued to fly. According to Christian Appy, “The myth of abandoned POWs reinforced the powerful 1980s idea that the Vietnam War
was an American tragedy that victimized our troops, our pride, and our national identity. The destruction of Vietnam was supplant by American suffering."[429]

A typology of lessons

The idea that the Vietnam War was a “noble cause” was, in fact, the operating philosophy of U.S. administrations throughout the war, often phrased in terms of “saving” Vietnam or “defending the Free World.” In the aftermath of the war, the idea was reflexively interpreted as a “lesson” that the U.S. should not be restrained in asserting its military might since America’s intentions are, by definition, protective and righteous. This is the lesson that Cold War hawks and their successors wanted the American public to retain, as it allows policymakers to pursue their global interests without democratic “interference.”

Military analysts at the Pentagon were fine with restoring the myth of American righteousness but they also sought to learn something from the Vietnam War, which meant incorporating some modest lessons of the “Vietnam Syndrome.” As their goal was never to lose another war, they were receptive to real politik arguments related to conditions by which victory might be achieved in future wars. The outcome was the Weinberger Doctrine, named for U.S. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who presented it in November 1984. The thrust of this doctrine is that the U.S. must avoid future “quagmires” through careful assessment of political and military conditions coupled with more rigorous planning aimed at achieving military objectives with minimum U.S. casualties. Military analysts thus sought to learn from the Vietnam War but within the narrow parameters of military strategy.
For much of the American public, the main lesson of the Vietnam War was to avoid risky military interventions and lengthy occupations. It was understood the getting into wars is easier than getting out of them. Many also recognized the Pentagon’s mistaken “threat perception,” wherein Ho Chi Minh’s leadership in Vietnam was depicted as a threat to U.S. national security. A sharper strain of the “Vietnam Syndrome” took aim at the contradictions and abuses of U.S. foreign policy more broadly applied: the hypocrisy of U.S. support for authoritarian regimes around the world, the propensity to intervene in other countries through proxy forces, the quest for Pax Americana, and the lavishing of taxpayer funds on the military to the detriment of human needs.

Yet a deeper level of criticism focused on underlying systems and beliefs that arguably propelled the U.S. into Vietnam. The Vietnam War was a “mistake,” to be sure, but not an exception to the rule of imperious American conduct abroad. From this vantage point, the lesson of Vietnam was that the institutional and ideological underpinnings of U.S. foreign policy must be named, challenged, and transformed. Critics have identified militant nationalism and lack of international law, global
capitalism, the military-industrial complex, the “imperial presidency,” macho-male military culture, and American exceptionalism as systematic contributors to militarism and interventionism. Martin Luther King, in his April 1967 “Beyond Vietnam” speech, identified “the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism,” and declared that the “war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality, we will find ourselves organizing ‘clergy and laymen concerned’ committees for the next generation.”[430] The historian Christian Appy has argued that the first step is to reconsider American exceptionalism:

If the legacy of the Vietnam War is to offer any guidance, we need to complete the moral and political reckoning it awakened. And if our nation’s future is to be less militarized, our empire of foreign military bases scaled back, and our pattern of endless military interventions ended, a necessary first step is to reject – fully and finally – the stubborn insistence that our nation has been a unique and unrivaled force for good in the world. Only an honest accounting of our history will allow us to chart a new path in the world. The past is always speaking to us, if we only listen.[431]

In terms of policymaking, U.S. war planners and hawkish right have never stopped working to undo the “Vietnam Syndrome” and restore the cherished myth of American righteousness. The Reagan administration punched a hole in the “Vietnam Syndrome” in October 1983 with a surprise invasion of the tiny island of Grenada – a sure victory. The administration was nevertheless inhibited from sending combat troops to El Salvador and Nicaragua, utilizing proxy forces instead. The first Bush administration conducted another, more lethal surprise invasion, this time of Panama in December 1989. Although the United Nations General Assembly declared it a “flagrant violation of international law,” there was no negative political repercussion at home.

A big push came in March 1991, when the U.S. handily defeated the Iraqi army in a six-week war, ostensibly to uphold international law. President George H. W. Bush proclaimed that the “ghosts of Vietnam had been laid to rest beneath the sands of the Arabian desert.” In the 21st century, the American “War on Terror” has further eviscerated the “Vietnam Syndrome.” According to Appy, “The attacks of 9/11 [2001] decisively destroyed the cautionary lessons of the Vietnam War, at least among the
tiny group of people who formulated American foreign policy. George W. Bush subsequently launched a ‘Global War on Terror’ premised on the idea that the United States was an exemplar of all that was good in the world fighting against all that was evil.”

Public antipathy to interventionism has revived to some degree during the lengthy and ongoing occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, but it remains rather subdued due to three developments. The War on Terror has replaced the Cold War as a carte blanche ideological justification for U.S. interventionism; advanced weaponry such as armed drones is increasingly being used in lieu of U.S. troops, thus minimizing U.S. casualties; and a domestic campaign to “support our troops” has sapped much of the public debate over military adventurism. According to retired Lt. Col. William K. Astore (US Air Force), the “support our troops” mantra is a “substitute for thought,” a way of inducing “acquiescence when it comes to American-style war.”

Pentagon Commemoration

In 2008, Congress passed a law instructing the Pentagon to initiate a 13-year commemoration of the Vietnam War, beginning on Memorial Day, May 28, 2012, and concluding on Veterans Day, November 11, 2025. Congress set forth five objectives: (1) to “thank and honor veterans of the war”; (2) to “highlight the service of the Armed Forces during the Vietnam War”; (3) to “pay tribute to the contributions made on the home front by the people of the United States”; (4) to “highlight the advances in technology, science, and medicine related to military research conducted during the Vietnam War”; and (5) “to recognize the contributions and sacrifices made by the allies of the United States.”

Critics of the war might offer a different set of goals: (1) beyond thanking veterans, to discuss whether the war itself was necessary or honorable; (2) in regard to the Armed Forces, to examine the debilitating effects of U.S. aerial assaults, ground operations, and counterinsurgency doctrine, especially on civilians; (3) on the home front, to recognize the contributions of those who opposed the war as patriotic and honorable; (4) with respect to science and technology, to examine the environmental and human devastation wrought by high-tech weaponry and poisons such as Agent Orange, and to reassess the slavish dependence on statistical benchmarks that obscured the
inhumanity of the war; and (5) to recognize that America’s most important allies did not support the war and that the United Nations and other nations strongly advised against it. Such goals would likely produce sobering lessons that would strengthen efforts to prevent future wars.

The inauguration of the Pentagon’s 50th Anniversary Commemoration of the Vietnam War inspired Veterans for Peace to launch a counter campaign called “Full Disclosure.” In “An Open Letter to the American People,” the veterans declared their intention to “truly examine what happened during those tragic and tumultuous Viet Nam years.” Army vets Doug Rawlings and Tarak Kauff characterized official justifications for the Vietnam War as a tissue of lies. “The little lies that gather together to form the Big Lie are put together by design. The intent is to justify not only this war but also future wars. We can’t let that happen.” The war they fought in, they write, was “one of unbridled aggression, one of soul-sinking depravity, one so deeply ingrained into our psyches that 50 years later we wake in cold sweat. It was not a battle fought for freedom and democracy and not one that we are proud of.”

In 2015, Rawlings began the “Letters to The Wall” project, encouraging anyone directly impacted by the war – as a soldier, conscientious objector, antiwar activist, or
as a loved one of any of these - to write their personal story. On Memorial Day 2015, the first batch of 132 letters and 32 postcards were laid at the foot of the Vietnam Memorial Wall, all copied beforehand for publication on the Vets for Peace website. The National Park Service collects these letters left at The Wall and may feature some in its forthcoming educational center.\footnote{436}

In an article titled “The Battlefield of Memory,” published in The Nation (April 15, 2015), Jon Wiener suggests, tongue-in-cheek, that the Pentagon would do better by the veterans if it said to them: “We’re sorry you were sent to fight in an unjust and futile war; we’re sorry you were lied to; we’re sorry you lost comrades, and years of your own lives, and that you suffered the aftereffects for many more years; we’re sorry the VA [Veterans Administration] has done such a terrible job of taking care of you. On the other hand, we might say ‘thank you’ to the people who worked to end the war – and ask them to tell us about their experiences.”\footnote{437}

In the interest of truth and reconciliation, it would be fitting for the United States to officially apologize to the Vietnamese people – and Laotians and Cambodians – for the unnecessary war and to offer more assistance in clearing unexploded ordnance and caring for children and adults deformed by Agent Orange. It would be a sign of maturity, not weakness, for the nation to acknowledge its errors.

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**Endnotes**


[8] The historian Henry Steele Commager expressed a similar view in an article in the *New York Review of Books*, October 1972. Comparing the U.S. war in Vietnam to the Confederacy’s war to preserve slavery and Germany’s war of aggression in World War II, he wrote, “Why do we find it so hard to accept this elementary lesson of history, that some wars are so deeply immoral that they must be lost, that the war in Vietnam is one of these wars, and that those who resist it are the truest patriots.” Cited in Neil Jumonville, *Henry Steele Commager: Midcentury Liberalism and the History of the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 177. Of course, the peace movement’s quest was to prevent the war and stop the war, irrespective of American victory or defeat.


[12] Ho Chi Minh, “The Path Which Led Me to Leninism,” (1960), reprinted in Gettleman, et al., eds., *Vietnam and America*, p. 22. Lenin’s thesis was preceded by British Fabian socialist writer John A. Hobson’s *Imperialism: A Study* (1902). Hobson hoped to persuade the British public that the “glory” of the empire was actually a burden on the British people. More generally, the idea of socialism as an alternative to capitalism was very much part of European politics in the early 20th century, evident in the growth of the British Labor Party, the German Social Democratic party, and French socialist and communist parties.


[20] Ho Chi Minh, “Vietnam Declaration of Independence (September 2, 1945),” in Gettleman, et al., eds., Vietnam and America, p. 26. Henry Prunier had been part of the OSS “Deer Team” that worked with Ho Chi Minh in July 1945. He arrived in Hanoi with a small group of Americans just after the Declaration was read. They were welcomed by Ho at the Governor’s Palace and given small gifts. Ho encouraged them “to come back and see him any time,” according to a later interview with Christian Appy. He continued: “At one point someone asked him directly if he was a Communist and he said, ‘Yes, I’m a Communist, but there’s no reason why we can’t be friends, why we can’t live together.’” Appy, Patriots, p. 40.


[23] The agreement stipulated that 3,000 troops would be removed each year beginning in 1947; also that a referendum would be held in Cohnchina, which had previously been a full-fledged French colony rather than a protectorate like Annam and Tonkin, would be part of a reunified Vietnam. See Gareth Porter, A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam, and the Paris Agreement (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1975), p. 3.


[26] Quoted in Hy V. Luong, Tradition, Revolution, and Market Economy in a North


[35] Howard Jones, Crucible of Power: A History of American Foreign Relations from 1897 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2001, p. 292. An earlier version of the “domino theory” was written into National Security Council memorandum 64, adopted February 27, 1950, which stated that “the threat of Communist aggression against Indochina is only one phase of anticipated communist plans to seize all of Southeast Asia.”


Defense Vietnam Task Force”, the Pentagon Papers bound into 47 volumes and contained 3,000 pages of narrative and 4,000 pages of supporting documents, all classified as secret. The government attempted to block their release, but the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 6-3 that the government had failed to prove harm to national security, and that publication of the papers was justified under the First Amendment’s protection of freedom of the press.


[51] Porter, A Peace Denied, p. 38; and Dwight D. Eisenhower, Mandate for Change: The


[56] Joseph A. Buttinger, Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled, (New York: Praeger, 1967), Vol. 2, pp. 976-77. Buttinger was born in Bavaria and became a leader in the anti-Nazi movement in Austria. He fled to Paris in 1938, then immigrated to the United States, where he helped found the International Rescue Committee and the Friends of Vietnam. He became a friend and supporter of Ngo Dinh Diem, but became disillusioned with Diem’s repressive policies and denounced him. A self-taught expert on Southeast Asia, Buttinger’s writings were sought out as the U.S. became more involved in Vietnam. His two-volume study, Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled, was hailed by the New York Times as “the most thorough, informative and, over all, the most impressive book on Vietnam yet published in America.”


[77] Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 29.


[86] Logevall, Choosing War, p. 3.


[88] Logevall, Choosing War, p. xx. Thirty-seven years prior to Logevall’s account, Gareth Porter, in A Peace Denied, pp. 18-20, documented this development, noting that in September 1963, Diem and Nhu had reached a definitive agreement with the North through the Polish intermediary Mieczyslaw Maneli and that negotiations were to be completed in New Dehli in November, thus adding further motive for the U.S.-approved assassinations.

[89] Ibid., pp. 40-41.


[91] Ibid.

[92] Logevall, Choosing War, p. 38.

[93] Robert Mann, in A Grand Delusion: America’s Descent into Vietnam (New York: Basic Books, 2001), expresses a similar view, writing “that millions of deaths might have been averted had the American people and their leaders opened their eyes to the delusions leading them progressively deeper into the morass of Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s – a national crusade undertaken to defeat an enemy that had once been our ally and that had originally wanted nothing more than independence from brutal colonial rule. From beginning to end, America’s political, military, and diplomatic leaders deluded themselves, accepting a series of myths and illusions about Vietnam that
exacerbated and deepened the ultimate catastrophe.” (p. 2)

[94] Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 77.

[95] Ibid., pp. 89, 80.

[96] Ibid., p. 91.

[97] Ibid., p. 108.


[99] Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 121.

[100] Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 124, 150.


[135] Herring, America’s Longest War, p. 155.


FitzGerald, Fire in the Lake, p. 161.


Ibid., pp. 508-18.

See Jeremy Kuzmarov, Modernizing Repression: Police Training and Nation Building in the American Century (Massachusetts, 2012).


James P. Sterba, “The Controversial Operation Phoenix: How It Roots Out Vietcong Suspects,” New York Times, February 18, 1970; and Mark Moyar, Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam (Lincoln: University of Nebraska press, 1997), p. 236. In spite of the Phoenix Program’s notoriety, it has several defenders, including Mark Moyar and Dale Andrade. Both of these historians argue that critics have misrepresented the program and that Phoenix seriously impacted
the VCI in the countryside.


December 22, 2016.


[171] Heonik Kwon, After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2006), p. 31; and Turse, Kill Anything That Moves, especially chapters 1-5.


[178] Young, The Vietnam Wars, p. 220; John Paul Vann, letter to Roger Darling, May 14,


[188] The Peers Inquiry report, Dept. of the Army, March 14, 1970, notes “a number of Vietnamese sources alleged that on 16 March 1968 approximately 80-90 noncombatants, including women and children, were killed by US soldiers in My Hoi subhamlet of Co Luy Hamlet, a coastal area of Son My village shown on US maps as ‘My Khe’” (page 7-1). Yet no serious investigation took place and no charges were filed. See the full report at https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/RDAR-Vol-I.pdf. In 2001, Nick Turse, a graduate student researching post-traumatic stress disorder among Vietnam veterans, came upon the secret records of the Pentagon’s Vietnam War Crimes Working Group and later published his account of the records in *Kill Anything That Moves* (2013).


[202] These corporations had bankrolled President Johnson’s political career and “billed the government for so much concrete,” a congressional audit concluded, “they could have put a concrete skin eight feet deep over the entire country of Vietnam.” Sally


[210] Cited in Appy, American Reckoning, p. 162.


[213] Neale, A People’s History of the Vietnam War; and Wilfred G. Burchett, Vietnam North (New York: International Publishers, 1966), p. 13. In an all-too typical incident, American bombers destroyed a leprosorium in Quinh Lap in April 1967, causing 120 deaths and over 1,000 wounded. When some of the lepers fled to nearby caves, the caves were mercilessly bombed through the month of June, killing well over a dozen more.


[217] Ibid.


[228] Nick Turse, Kill Anything That Moves, p. 81.


[234] Quoted in Stuart W. Leslie, The Cold War and American Science: The Military-


[236] See Greiner, War Without Fronts; Deborah Nelson, The War Behind Me: Vietnam Veterans Confront the Truth About U.S. War Crimes (New York: Public Affairs, 2009); and Duffet, ed., Against the Crime of Silence, which includes testimony by international legal experts at the Stockholm (Sweden) War Crimes Trials sponsored by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation in 1968. Russell, the 94-year-old philosopher who convened the hearings and whose antiwar activism extended back to World War I, wrote in the introduction: “war crimes are the actions of powers whose arrogance leads them to believe that they are above the law. Might they argue is right.” (Duffet, p. 4).


[239] Cockburn, Kill Chain, p. 23.


[252] Ibid., pp. 65, 67.


[256] Masako Sakata, *Agent Orange: A Personal Requiem* (2003); Wilcox, *Scorched Earth*. Sakata’s film is a tribute to her husband, a *Time Magazine* photo-journalist with whom she travelled to Vietnam while Davis was himself dying of liver cancer caused likely by his exposure to the herbicide.


[266] Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, p. 636; and Text of Ho Chi Minh’s will, as it was released in 1969, is reprinted in Gettleman, et al., *Vietnam and America*, pp. 440-41.


[268] “Nixon, Kissinger, and the ‘Decent Interval’,,” Miller Center (White House audio recording),


[281] Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance*


[288] “Manifest destiny” was an informal doctrine that combined religious, political, and racial ideas into a righteous justification for American territorial expansion. The Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine of 1904 was the American equivalent of the French and British “civilizing missions,” applied to the Americas. The Truman Doctrine of 1947 established the basic ideological framework of the Cold War, intellectually dividing the world into communist totalitarians and freedom-loving peoples, which tragically failed to acknowledge British and French imperial domination in Asia and Africa.


[299] Quoted in Franklin, Vietnam and Other American Fantasies, p. 52.


Social Activism Sound Recording Project: Anti-Vietnam War protests in the San Francisco bay Area & Beyond” (which has recordings of many of the speeches), http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificviet.html#ucbteachin.


[319] SANE’s difficulties with the left included (1) opposition to immediate U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam; (2) the inclusion of other issues and the implication that the whole of American society had to be overturned before the war could be ended; (3) the possibility of militant leftists causing disorder and violence at the demonstration; (4) the left’s antipathy to political action, which some leftists labeled “class collaboration”; and (5) an unwillingness to be associated with the despised Communist Party, mainly for image reasons, despite the fact that the latter did not espouse revolutionary rhetoric (which is why the Progressive Labor Party broke off from it). See Katz, “Peace Liberals and Vietnam.”


[321] “White House Picketed by 12,000 in Protest of Viet Nam Policy,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 28, 1965. The headline on page two noted that 25,000 had attended the march, according to police estimates.


[328] DeBenedetti, An American Ordeal, p. 177. The specific FBI instructions noted here were issued in July 1968 but may be assumed to apply to earlier operations. See “Operation MHCHAOS,” https://targetedindividualscanada.com/tag/operation-chaos; and U.S. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), Intelligence Activities and the Rights of Americans (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 26, 1976), https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/94755_II.pdf. The latter study examined efforts of the FBI, CIA, NSA, and other security agencies to “disrupt and discredit the activities of groups and individuals deemed a threat to the social order” (p. 1).


[375] See Jonah Raskin, *For the Hell of It: The Life and Times of Abbie Hoffman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Hoffman’s sensational tactics were later used by the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement, which helped change the conversation in America about wealth and inequality.


[382] Senate “doves” included George McGovern (D-South Dakota), Frank Church (D-
Idaho), Eugene McCarthy (D-Minnesota), John Sherman Cooper (R-Kentucky), Mark Hatfield (R-Oregon), Clifford Case (R-New Jersey), Gaylord Nelson (D-Wisconsin), Edward Kennedy (D-Massachusetts), Edmund Muskie (D-Maine), Alan Cranston (D-California), Al Gore Sr. (D-Tennessee), Joseph Clark (D-Pennsylvania), Harold Hughes (D-Iowa), Charles Goodell (R-New York), and Stephen Young (D-Ohio), with moderate support from Mike Mansfield (D-Montana), J. William Fulbright (D-Arkansas), and George Aiken (R-Vermont). The two foremost critics of the war in earlier years, Wayne Morse (D-Oregon) and Ernest Gruening (D-Alaska), were defeated in the November 1968 Congressional elections. Goodell was defeated in 1970.


[391] DeBenedetti, An American Ordeal, pp. 261-64; and “Marchers in Bay Area Protest Vietnam Wa, Corsair (Santa Monica City College), November 19, 1969, California Digital


[399] Robert B. Semple, Jr., “Nixon To Pull Out 150,000 From Vietnam In a Year; Says Hanoi Blocks Peace,” *New York Times*, April 21, 1970.


[403] Wells, *The War Within*, pp. 425, 110. While the Kent State killings gained major media attention, the killing of two and wounding of twelve black students by police
officers at Jackson State University received comparatively little attention. This violence was not part of Vietnam War protests. The President’s Commission on Campus Unrest blamed the violence on an “unreasonable, unjustified overreaction” by the police officers.


[413] Small, Antiwarriors, pp. 139-42; and Wells, The War Within, pp. 514, 490-91.

[414] Small, Antiwarriors, pp. 139, 142-43.


[426] See Appy, American Reckoning, pp. 246-48; and Franklin, Vietnam and Other American Fantasies, pp. 48-49.


Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Beyond Vietnam” speech.


Letters can be read on the VFP website: http://vietnamfulldisclosure.org/index.php/2017-letters-wall. As of Memorial Day 2017, 300 letters and 32 postcards had been collected.

Quoted in Rick Cohen, “Rejecting the Pentagon’s Revisionist History,” Full Disclosure publication, Vets for Peace.
About the authors

This essay is the collective work of Roger Peace, John Marciano, and Jeremy Kuzmarov, with contributions by Howie Machtinger, Anne Meisenzahl, Brian D’Haeseleer, Tom Clark, and Jessica Frazier. We honor the spirit of Marilyn Young, who gave her encouragement to the project before passing on February 19, 2017. Dr. Roger Peace is the website coordinator, former community college instructor, and author of *A Call to Conscience: The Anti-Contra War Campaign* (2012). John Marciano is Professor Emeritus at the State University of New York at Cortland and author of *The American War in Vietnam: Crime or Commemoration?* (2016); and, with William L. Griffen, *Teaching the Vietnam War* (1979). Dr. Jeremy Kuzmarov teaches history at the University of Tulsa and is the author of *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs* (2009) and *Modernizing Repression: Police Training and Nation Building in the American Century* (2012).

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