Chapter 24

The Vietnam War
(1954–1975)
Chapter 24: The Vietnam War (1954–1975)

Section 1: War Unfolds

Section 2: Fighting the War

Section 3: Political Divisions

Section 4: The End of the War
The War Unfolds

Chapter 24, Section 1

• What events led to the war between North Vietnam and South Vietnam?
• What were the Vietnam policies of President Kennedy and Robert McNamara?
• How did President Johnson change the course of the war?
• According to President Eisenhower’s domino theory, if one Southeast Asian nation fell to communism, others would soon follow.

• Ho Chi Minh, a pro-Communist leader in Vietnam, led a group called the Vietminh against French control of his nation before, during, and after World War II.

• After the Vietminh successfully defeated the French in 1954, a peace agreement called the Geneva Accords divided Vietnam into Communist North Vietnam and anti-Communist South Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh led North Vietnam, while Ngo Dinh Diem led South Vietnam.

• The United States began providing economic aid to the French in Vietnam in 1950. In 1960, President Eisenhower sent hundreds of military advisors to help South Vietnam’s struggle against the North.
Kennedy’s Vietnam Policy

Chapter 24, Section 1

Diem’s Downfall
• During the early 1960s, Ngo Dinh Diem’s policies lost him the support of his people.
• Realizing that the struggle against communism could not be won under Diem’s rule, President Kennedy told South Vietnamese military leaders that the United States would not object to Diem’s overthrow.
• In November 1963, military leaders seized control of South Vietnam and assassinated Diem.

McNamara’s Role
• Robert McNamara, President Kennedy’s Secretary of Defense, was influential in shaping American policy toward Vietnam.
• McNamara used his strong business background to cut costs while modernizing the armed forces.
• In the coming years, McNamara would push for direct American involvement in Vietnam.
• Shortly after Diem’s assassination in November 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated, and Vice President Johnson assumed the presidency.

• In South Vietnam, the military leaders who had taken over the government were unsuccessful and unpopular. As a result, Communist guerrillas in South Vietnam, known as the Viet Cong, made gains in both territory and loyalty. The Viet Cong’s political wing was known as the National Liberation Front.
In August 1964, Johnson announced that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. However, some people doubted that this incident had happened and believed it was only an excuse for further U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed by Congress in 1964, regarded peace and security in Southeast Asia as vital to American national interest, and it gave the President additional powers to assist any Southeast Asian country “requesting assistance in defense of its freedoms.”

Under the resolution, the President had authority to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” The resolution, therefore, changed the balance of power between Congress and the President.
At the time of the Geneva Accords, who were the leaders of Vietnam?

(A) Ngo Dinh Diem in North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh in South Vietnam
(B) Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam
(C) Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam, the Viet Cong in South Vietnam
(D) military leaders in North Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam

Which of the following did the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution provide?

(A) an example of the domino effect
(B) a military coup in South Vietnam
(C) an end to French occupation of Vietnam
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**Fighting the War**

Chapter 24, Section 2

- How did battlefield conditions in Vietnam affect American soldiers?
- How would you describe the course of the war between 1965 and 1968?
- Why was the Tet Offensive a turning point in the war?
American Troops
- Had superior weapons
- Were unprepared for heat, terrain, or guerrilla tactics
- Lacked support of most South Vietnamese
- Most never saw the enemy but constantly faced the possibility of sudden danger.

Viet Cong Troops
- Fought as guerrillas; avoided head-on clashes
- Were familiar with terrain; had support of many South Vietnamese
- Built and hid in elaborate underground tunnels
Some Weapons Used in the Vietnam War

- **Land Mines** — Land mines, which can be set off by the pressure of a footstep, are explosive devices planted in the ground. Viet Cong landmines killed and wounded both American GIs and Vietnamese civilians.

- **Saturation Bombing** — American B-52 bomber planes dropped thousands of tons of explosives, resulting in saturation bombing of North Vietnam.

- **Fragmentation Bombs** — Fragmentation bombs, dropped by Americans over both North and South Vietnam, threw pieces of their thick metal casings in all directions when they exploded. In South Vietnam, fragmentation bombs killed and maimed countless civilians.

- **Agent Orange** — American pilots dropped an herbicide called Agent Orange over Vietnamese jungles, killing vegetation and exposing Viet Cong hiding places. Agent Orange was later discovered to cause health problems in livestock and humans.

- **Napalm** — Another chemical weapon used in Vietnam, napalm, was a jellylike substance which, when dropped from planes splattered, and burned uncontrollably.
Intensifying the War

Chapter 24, Section 2

• After the election of 1964, President Johnson began a gradual escalation, or expansion of the war. The number of American soldiers stationed in Vietnam rose from about 25,000 at the beginning of 1965 to nearly 536,000 by the end of 1968.

• Originally, American soldiers had been sent to advise the South Vietnamese; now their task was to prop up a failing South Vietnamese government led by Nguyen Cao Ky.

• Despite the large buildup of American troops, between 1965 and 1967 the war was at a stalemate.

• Within the United States, debate raged between hawks, those who supported the war, and doves, those who did not.
The Ho Chi Minh Trail

- North Vietnamese troops and supplies entered South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a route that passed through Laos and Cambodia.
On January 30, 1960, the Viet Cong and North Vietnam launched a major offensive. This series of attacks was called the **Tet Offensive** since it occurred during Tet, the Vietnamese New Year.

During and after the Tet Offensive, both sides were guilty of brutal atrocities. Communists slaughtered anyone they labeled an enemy; Americans massacred hundreds of civilians at My Lai, a small village in South Vietnam. A helicopter crew that stopped the massacre was later rewarded, and the officer who had ordered it was imprisoned.

Because Americans now knew that the Viet Cong could launch massive attacks, and because no end to the war was in sight, the Tet Offensive proved to be a major psychological victory for the Viet Cong and a turning point in the war.
Fighting the War—Assessment

Which of the following proved to be an advantage for the Viet Cong?

(A) Familiarity with Vietnam’s weather and terrain
(B) Possession of Agent Orange
(C) American military support
(D) Superior weapons technology

What made the Tet Offensive a turning point in the war?

(A) It took place in South Vietnam.
(B) It resulted in massive casualties.
(C) It made Americans question their involvement in Vietnam.
(D) It was unusually brutal.

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• What role did students play in the protest movements of the 1960s?
• Why did President Johnson decide not to seek reelection?
• How did the Vietnam War affect the election of 1968?
Student Activism in the 1960s

• **Generation Gap** — Young Americans in the 1960s had many opportunities unknown to previous generations; many also questioned the values of their parents. These factors contributed to a wider *generation gap* between college-aged youths and their parents.

• **Students for a Democratic Society and the New Left** — Organized in 1960, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had a major impact on the *New Left*, a political movement that advocated radical changes to deal with problems such as poverty and racism.

• **The Free Speech Movement** — Student protests for free speech at the University of California at Berkeley inspired similar movements elsewhere, including challenges to social restrictions on campuses.

• **The Teach-in Movement** — Begun at the University of Michigan in March 1965, *teach-ins*, or special sessions at which issues concerning the war could be discussed, soon became a popular means of expressing antiwar sentiment.

• **Continued Protests** — Hundreds of demonstrations continued at colleges and universities around the country. One of the most dramatic, at Columbia University in New York City, linked the issues of civil rights and the war.
To increase the available fighting force, the United States invoked the Selective Service Act of 1951, drafting young men between the ages of 18 and 26 into the armed forces.

Most of those who refused to be drafted in the early 1960s were conscientious objectors, people who opposed fighting on moral or religious grounds.

As the Vietnam War progressed, the draft-resistance movement grew, with many young men burning their draft cards or fleeing the country to avoid the draft.

At first, college students could receive a deferment, or postponement of their call to serve. Deferments were eliminated in 1971 in response to complaints that they were unfair to those who could not afford college.
• Continuing protests and an increasing number of casualties steadily decreased popular support for Johnson’s handling of the war.
• After the Tet Offensive, Johnson rarely left the White House for fear of angry protesters.
• Two other Democratic contenders, antiwar candidate Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy, brother of John Kennedy and a senator from New York, campaigned against Johnson for the party’s nomination.
• On March 31, 1968, Johnson announced in a nationally televised speech that he would not seek another term as President.
The Election of 1968

Chapter 24, Section 3

The Democratic Convention

- At the time of the Democratic Convention in Chicago, Eugene McCarthy was thought too far out of the mainstream, and Robert Kennedy had been assassinated.
- During the convention, police attacked protesters, with much of the violence taking place in front of television cameras.
- Vice President Hubert Humphrey won the Democratic nomination, but the party had been further torn apart by the convention’s events.

The Nation Chooses Nixon

- Richard M. Nixon received the Republican Party’s nomination for President.
- Nixon soon took the lead in national polls, allowing his running mate Spiro Agnew to make harsh accusations, while Nixon stayed “above the fray.”
- Independent candidate George C. Wallace drew many votes. Additionally, many disillusioned Democrats did not vote.
- In a close race, Nixon won the presidency in the 1968 election.
The 1960s was an unsettling period for mainstream Americans, a group sometimes referred to as Middle America. Many turned to the Republican Party for stability, voting for Republican candidates such as Nixon.

Many Americans were disillusioned by Johnson’s handling of the Vietnam War. Although Johnson stopped the bombing of North Vietnam before the election, Hubert Humphrey’s candidacy was hurt by his defense of the President’s Vietnam policies.
Why were deferments for college students eliminated in 1971?
(A) A larger fighting force was needed.
(B) They were viewed as unfair to those who could not afford college.
(C) College students were more likely to burn their draft cards.
(D) They were driving young men out of the country.

Which of these best describe Middle America?
(A) Students who protested campus social restrictions
(B) Democrats who supported Hubert Humphrey
(C) Mainstream Americans
(D) Young men drafted into the war

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Political Divisions—Assessment

Chapter 24, Section 3

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The End of the War

Chapter 24, Section 4

- How did President Nixon’s policies lead to American withdrawal from Vietnam?
- Why did President Nixon lead a campaign promising to restore law and order?
- What happened in Vietnam after the withdrawal of American forces?
- What was the legacy of the Vietnam War?
Nixon’s Vietnam Policy

Toward the end of his term as President, Johnson had called for peace negotiations to end the Vietnam War. However, the resulting Paris peace talks, which began in May 1968, failed to produce an agreement.

President Nixon campaigned on the claim that he had a secret plan to end the war. In June 1969, he began the policy of Vietnamization, replacing American troops in Vietnam with South Vietnamese soldiers.

Although Nixon wanted to end the war, he did not want to lose it. He therefore launched secret bombing raids and expanded the war to Cambodia, hoping to destroy Viet Cong camps there.

Nixon hoped his Cambodian attacks would help America in peace negotiations. Instead, the attacks resulted in both civil war in Cambodia and more antiwar protests in the United States.
Nixon Calls for Law and Order

The Silent Majority
• Nixon had campaigned promising a return to law and order. As President, he strengthened this position, discouraging protest against the war.
• In a 1969 speech, Nixon appealed to those who, he felt, quietly supported his policies. He referred to this group of Americans as “the silent majority.”

Kent State and Jackson State
• When student antiwar protesters at Kent State University in Ohio reacted angrily to Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia, Nixon ordered the National Guard to Kent State. After students threw rocks at the guardsmen, the troops opened fire, killing and wounding both protesters and bystanders.
• The violence at Kent State, and a similar incident at Jackson State in Mississippi, horrified Americans.

- The United States would withdraw all its forces from South Vietnam within 60 days.
- All prisoners of war would be released.
- All parties to the agreement would end military activities in Laos and Cambodia.
- The 17th parallel would continue to divide North and South Vietnam until the country could be reunited.
South Vietnam Falls

- After American forces had withdrawn, North Vietnam attacked strategic cities in South Vietnam, ending with its capital, Saigon.
- Following a last-minute evacuation of both American soldiers and Vietnamese refugees, South Vietnam surrendered in April 1975, and Vietnam became unified under a Communist government.

Southeast Asia After the War

- In April 1975, Cambodia fell to the Khmer Rouge, a Communist force led by Pol Pot. The Khmer Rouge killed a quarter of the Cambodian population, claiming they were “tainted” with Western ways.
- Vietnam’s new leaders forced hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees, Cambodia, and newly Communist Laos fled their home countries.
With a cost of at least $150 billion, and hundreds of thousands of American soldiers killed or wounded, the Vietnam War was the longest and least successful war in American history.

Thousands of American soldiers who did not return home after the war were listed as POWs (prisoners of war) or MIAs (missing in action). Many remain unaccounted for today.

In Vietnam, millions were dead or wounded, many of them civilians. The war also heavily damaged the landscape of Vietnam.

In 1994, the United States lifted its trade embargo against Vietnam; in 1995, full diplomatic relations were restored.
Designed by 21-year old Maya Ying Lin and completed in 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial stands near the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. It consists of a long wall of black granite, listing the names of every American who died in the Vietnam War. Since its completion, visitors have added to the memorial by leaving personal tokens at the wall in memory of their loved ones.
Which of these options best describes Vietnamization?

(A) American attacks on Viet Cong camps in Cambodia
(B) The takeover of Saigon by North Vietnam
(C) Nixon’s policy of replacing American troops with South Vietnamese soldiers
(D) The redivision of Vietnam at the 17th parallel

Why did many Southeast Asians flee their countries after the Vietnam War?

(A) To make up for American POWs
(B) To aid in student protests
(C) To escape new and sometimes brutal Communist governments
(D) To contribute to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

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The End of the War—Assessment

Chapter 24, Section 4

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