

Under Fire

“We were under a lot of fire and we returned a lot of fire, but I think the hardest thing for me was when a lot of our men were wounded—putting them on the helicopters when they were so severely injured and crying for their family and wives and children was devastating.”

—Tomas Bunting, U.S. Army
4th Infantry Division, in Vietnam

◀ President Johnson meets a soldier in Vietnam.

American Involvement Grows

Objectives

- Describe how President Johnson widened the war in Vietnam.
- Explain how the war in Vietnam was different from any previous war in American history.
- Describe how the Vietnam War divided Americans at home.

Reading Skill

Ask Inferential Questions Inferential questions help you to infer, or figure out, the reasons behind individual actions or the actions of a nation. For example, asking questions such as “Why did people act in a particular way?” will help you understand how events happened and what motivated people’s behavior.

Key Terms

escalate
napalm
hawks

doves
conscientious
objector

Why It Matters Believing in the domino theory, President Lyndon Johnson feared that if Vietnam fell to communism, so would other countries. In order to prevent this, Johnson was willing to commit more U.S. soldiers to Vietnam. But as the fighting and dying in Vietnam intensified, a growing number of Americans protested against the war.

Section Focus Question: How did the demands of greater involvement in the Vietnam War divide the nation?

A Wider War

During his first months as President, Lyndon Johnson tried to continue the policies in Southeast Asia that Eisenhower and Kennedy had set in motion. But before long, he began to expand the U.S. commitment.

Growing American Involvement After the fall of Diem, the government of South Vietnam became increasingly unstable. Military coup followed military coup, with leaders managing to stay in power only a few months. As the ruling generals bickered among themselves, the South Vietnamese military rapidly lost ground to the Vietcong.

Like Eisenhower and Kennedy before him, President Johnson believed in the domino theory. He saw Vietnam as a test of the resolve of the United States to resist the spread of communism. “I am not going to lose Vietnam,” Johnson said.

Shortly after taking office, Johnson ordered an increase in economic aid and military advisers to the government and armed forces of South Vietnam. He also authorized a series of secret actions against North Vietnam. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union and China supported the Vietcong with arms and supplies.

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident An event in August of 1964 altered the U.S. role in Vietnam. Reports said North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of North Vietnam. Details were sketchy. Indeed, the second of two reported attacks may not have taken place at all.

President Johnson, however, was determined to act. He announced that U.S. forces would stage air strikes against North Vietnam. The next day, Johnson asked Congress for the authority to do whatever was needed to resolve, or settle, the conflict. Congress backed the President by passing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. It stated:

“... Congress approves and supports the determination of the President . . . to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”

—Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, approved by Congress August 7, 1964

President Johnson began to **escalate**, or step up, U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. He cited the resolution as his authority.

☒ **Checkpoint** Why was the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution important?

An Unconventional War

The Vietnam War was different from many wars the United States had fought before. Under the Constitution, only Congress can declare war. Although the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution gave the President the authority to use military force, it was not a declaration of war. Many Americans would later question the legality of this “undeclared war.”

A Massive Buildup Through the fall of 1964, President Johnson was involved in a campaign for reelection, and the United States took limited action in Vietnam. Johnson declared, “We are not about to send American boys . . . to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.” He won the election in a landslide.

Meanwhile, Johnson and his advisers had been working on plans for further actions in Vietnam. Early in 1965, the Vietcong attacked an American base at Pleiku (play KOO), in South Vietnam, killing eight Americans. Johnson responded by ordering a new series of air strikes against North Vietnam. A campaign of sustained U.S. bombing would continue for three years.

U.S. leaders soon realized the need to make plans for an increased commitment of U.S. troops. In March 1965, President Johnson ordered 3,500 marines to protect the American air base in Da Nang—the first American combat troops in Vietnam. Shortly after, he authorized the use of U.S. ground troops for offensive action. Within six weeks, 50,000 American combat troops had arrived in Vietnam; by the end of the year, 184,000 troops were there. In 1968, the figure would reach half a million.

Vocabulary Builder

authority (uh THAWR uh tee)

n. the right to give orders, make decisions, or take action

Bombing South Vietnam

U.S. air attacks aimed to kill soldiers and destroy cover.

Critical Thinking: Evaluate

Information Why was bombing of only limited value in a war against guerrillas?





Ask Inferential Questions

Read the text following the subheading "Search and Destroy." Ask an inferential question. You might focus on how American soldiers interacted with Vietnamese civilians.

Search and Destroy American entry into the ground war gave the South Vietnamese government forces a badly needed boost. At the same time, the political situation began to stabilize. A military leader named Nguyen Cao Ky seized power in June 1965 and crushed antigovernment protests by Vietnamese Buddhists. Although Ky's methods were far from democratic, they seemed to be effective in creating a stable government. South Vietnam's government was now able to concentrate on the war against the Vietcong.

The Americans who poured into Vietnam were well trained and equipped with the latest high-tech weapons. They used chemical weapons against the Vietcong. Airplanes dropped bombs containing **napalm**, a jellylike substance that burst into flames when dropped on villages or vegetation. They also sprayed the herbicide Agent Orange across the Vietnamese countryside. It destroyed crops and vegetation where the enemy might hide. Use of Agent Orange was controversial, with critics blaming it for birth defects, cancer, and other long-term health problems among both U.S. soldiers and Vietnamese. (In 1975, the United States declared that it would never again use herbicides in war unless an enemy did so first.)

The Vietcong dug in and kept fighting. They had some advantages of their own. Familiar with the swamps and jungles of Vietnam, the guerrillas employed hit-and-run attacks. Americans did not know what to expect in this jungle warfare, with no clearly defined battle lines. The situation was more confusing because Americans often could not distinguish between enemy and friend.

The Americans in Vietnam also used other new forms of warfare. Heavily armed helicopters carrying hundreds of American troops would locate an enemy stronghold. After heavy machine-gun fire

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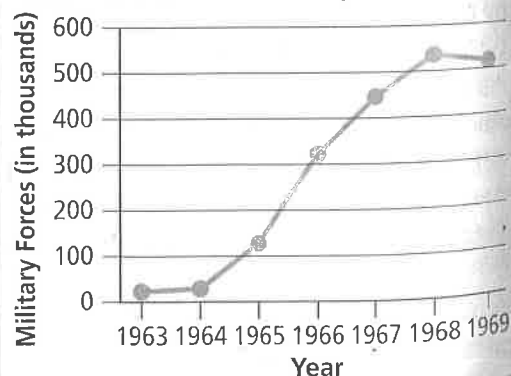
To learn more about events leading to the Vietnam War, view the video.

Soldiers in Vietnam In 1964, President Johnson promised not to send more troops to Vietnam. However, as U.S. involvement increased, Johnson gave in to the request for more troops.

Critical Thinking: Make Predictions How do you think Johnson's actions would affect him in the 1968 election?



U.S. Forces in Vietnam, 1963–1969



Source: U.S. Department of Defense, Military Personnel Historical Reports

raked the area, U.S. troops landed and fanned out, searching for Vietcong. The goal of these search-and-destroy missions was not to gain territory but to kill as many of the enemy as possible. American military leaders believed that if they could kill enough Vietcong, sooner or later the enemy would give up.

The Tet Offensive On January 31, 1968, the Vietnamese began celebrating Tet, their New Year holiday. Using the celebrations as cover, Vietcong and North Vietnamese soldiers launched attacks on every major city in South Vietnam. In Saigon, they broke through the walls of the American embassy and attacked the presidential palace. Another major assault occurred in the ancient capital of Hue (way). There, the Communists seized the former home of Vietnam's emperors.

Although caught by surprise, American and South Vietnamese forces responded quickly. For weeks, they battled to take back the areas under attack. The Communists fought hard, but in time they yielded to superior U.S. firepower. By February 25, the siege was over. As many as 40,000 North Vietnamese and Vietcong soldiers lost their lives in the fighting.

The Tet offensive set in motion a sequence of events that marked a major turning point of the Vietnam War. On the surface, Tet was a military victory for the United States. But, in fact, Tet dealt a major blow to the U.S. mission in Vietnam. Americans were shocked that enemy forces were capable of such an attack. After Tet, more and more Americans argued that the United States should get out of Vietnam. No matter how many troops the United States sent to Vietnam, they believed, it could never win the war. By now, President Johnson and many of his advisers were also convinced that the United States could not win the war. In addition, the President recognized that support at home for the war was waning.

✓ **Checkpoint** How did fighting the Vietnam War differ from fighting other wars?

A Nation Divided

As the war dragged on, Americans increasingly became divided. They split into two camps: hawks and doves. **Hawks** supported the war in Vietnam. However, many challenged President Johnson's policy of gradual escalation. They said the United States was fighting "with one hand tied behind its back." They wanted the government to mount an all-out military effort that would decisively defeat the Vietcong and North Vietnam. **Doves** believed the Vietnam War could not be won and was morally wrong.



Chinook helicopter picks up supplies

Vocabulary Builder

sequence (SEE kwehns) **n.** one thing occurring after another; series of events

Vietnam Divides the Nation

Demonstrators oppose the war and support resistance to the draft. ▼

Critics of the Vietnam War staged massive protest marches. Supporters of the war were no less eager to publicize their views.

Critical Thinking: Detect Points of View

Write a paragraph describing why a person might have joined a demonstration for or against the Vietnam War.

It was a time of deep divisions among Americans. These demonstrators strongly support the war. ▼



**DON'T DRAFT
OUR SONS
TO BOMB AND
DESTROY!**



**SUPPORT
OUR BOYS
IN
VIETNAM**

**NO
SURRENDER**

**BOMB
HANOI**

The doves urged withdrawal of U.S. troops. They organized a wide range of protests against the war, including sit-ins and marches.

The U.S. government had long used the draft to select men to serve in the military. During the Vietnam War, about 1.8 million men were drafted. As opposition to the war rose, so did resistance to the draft. Hundreds of young men burned their draft cards to show opposition to the war. Other young men sought recognition as **conscientious objectors**, people who refuse to participate in war because of a strong belief that war is wrong. Some 100,000 Americans fled to Canada to avoid the war.

In 1965 and after, antiwar protests spread across the nation. The antiwar movement included people from every walk of life. Students, college professors, businesspeople, religious leaders, entertainers, and others spoke out against the U.S. role in the war. At first, most antiwar protests were peaceful, using tactics such as petitions and mass marches. But as the war escalated, protesters adopted more dramatic techniques, such as sit-ins and public draft-card burnings. Violent confrontations with police became common.

Meanwhile, television brought the sights and sounds of battle into American living rooms. The graphic images shocked and sometimes sickened viewers. One theory is that the steady diet of blood and horror on TV helped turn Americans against the Vietnam War.

✓ **Checkpoint** How did doves protest against the war?

★ **Looking Back and Ahead** The commitment of U.S. troops to the Vietnam War in 1965 led to years of warfare. Opposition at home grew as the war dragged on. In the next section, you will read how South Vietnam came under Communist rule.

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Comprehension and Critical Thinking

1. **(a) Recall** What event led to the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution?
(b) Summarize How did President Johnson use the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution?
(c) Analyze Cause and Effect How did the war change after the resolution was passed?
2. **(a) Describe** What happened in Vietnam in 1968 during Tet, the Vietnamese New Year?
(b) Apply Information How did Americans react to those events?

Reading Skill

3. **Ask Inferential Questions** Read the text following the subheading "The Gulf of Tonkin Incident." Ask an inferential question. You might focus on why Johnson sought a congressional resolution even though information was sketchy.

Key Terms

- Read each sentence that follows. If the sentence is true, write YES. If the sentence is not true, write NO and explain why.
4. The United States used napalm in South Vietnam to destroy crops and vegetation.

5. Opponents of the Vietnam War adopted the name **hawks** to show that their cause was wise.

6. A **conscientious objector** is someone who supports war on religious grounds.

Writing

7. Write a paragraph about a peace march protesting the Vietnam War. Describe one of the following phases of the march: as it begins, as it becomes more active, or as it ends. Include details to make the reader aware of what is happening.

GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

Fighting a Jungle War

American troops faced new challenges in the swamps and jungles of Vietnam. Vietcong guerrillas often used the physical environment to attack—and then flee—American combat patrols. The Vietcong hid in thickets of underbrush to set up a surprise attack. After inflicting damage on unsuspecting American soldiers, the attackers would quickly retreat along hidden paths and tunnels.

American patrols often discovered hidden entrances to Vietcong tunnel systems. Here, soldiers stand guard as an American “tunnel rat” investigates one such entrance. ►



The Americans had to cut paths through dense jungle foliage in order to fight the Vietcong. Here, American soldiers plunge into a stream while on patrol. ▼



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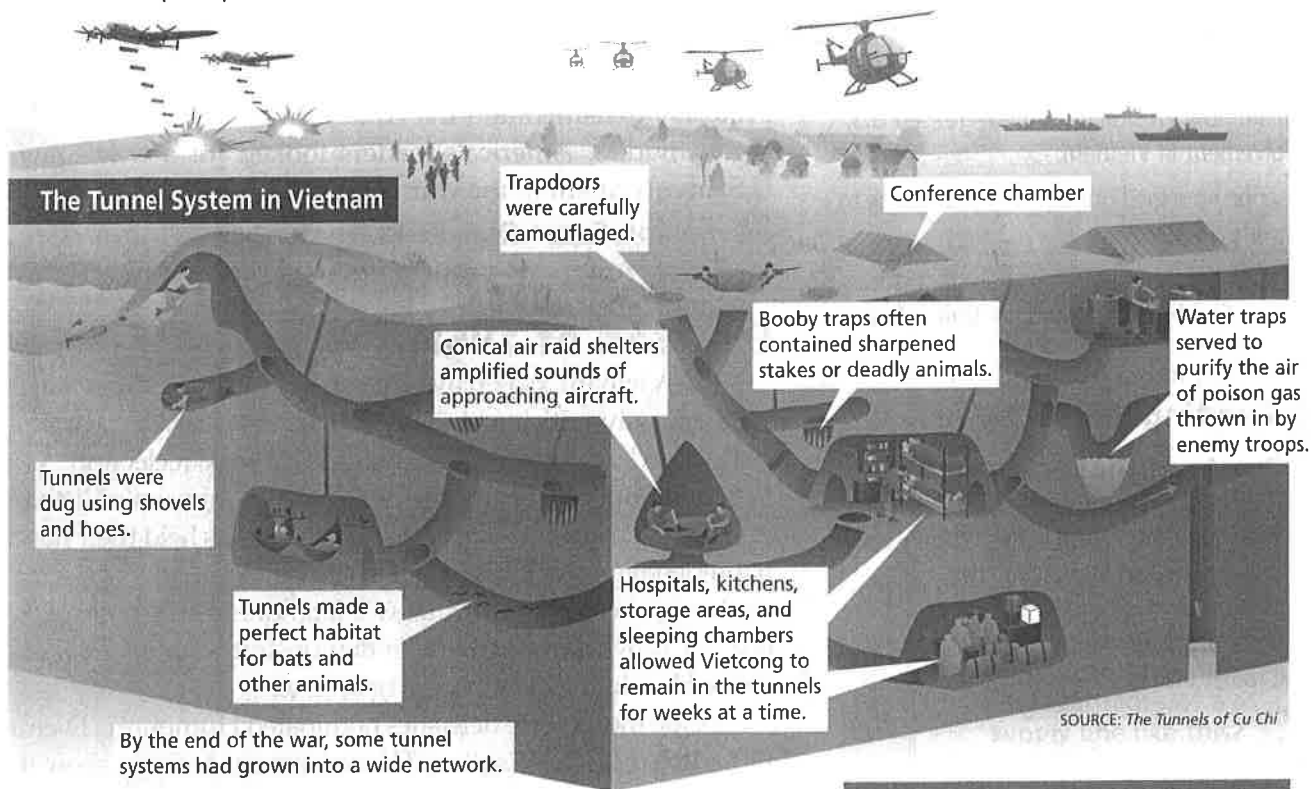
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Understand Effects: Search and Destroy

In previous wars, American soldiers fought along defined battle lines. U.S. military planners in Vietnam quickly realized that a jungle environment erased those lines. In order to combat Vietcong hit-and-run attacks, military planners ordered search-and-destroy missions.

- ▲ U.S. fighter planes dropped chemical explosives like napalm to destroy Vietcong positions. The fighter above dropped a bomb made of another chemical called phosphorus.



- ▲ Vietcong guerrillas dug large networks of tunnels throughout the countryside. They used the tunnels to hide their movements and to plan hit-and-run attacks on American soldiers.

Analyze GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

How did the Vietcong use the physical environment to wage war against American troops? Write a paragraph explaining how the geography of Vietnam affected the war.