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The Vietnam War Era (1961-1975)

The Vietnam War was, for the United States, a costly war due to the number of casualties, financial loss, and the division amongst Americans. Let's look at the reasons why the United States went to war, some of the controversies surrounding the war, social effects of the war, the communist influence for the Viet Minh and Viet Cong, and the psychological effects of the war on U.S. Soldiers and Marines.

Long before a declaration of war was announced, the United States' involvement in Vietnam can be traced back to the 1950s (Scott 6). American diplomats (who had been in South Vietnam since the 1950s) believed in the "Domino Theory." theory was that a communist victory in Vietnam would lead to multiple communist victories (The Vietnam War 2). The United States hoped that by defeating North Vietnam. this would contain communism and help win the Cold War. The U.S. Government had made promises and commitments starting in the Truman administration, (1945-1953 The U.S. subsidized the French in Indochina). The first real American combat troops began under Lyndon Johnson's administration (1963-1969) and concluded under the Nixon administration (1969-1974) (The Vietnam War 1). The Johnson administration knew war would not be approved without Congressional approval when the North Vietnamese attacked the USS Maddox and C. Turner Joy on the 2nd and 4th of August 1964. These attacks were what Johnson needed to get approval (there were a lot of conflicting

reports as to if these attacks had occurred). Authorization for retaliation was passed by Congress on August 7 and signed three days later (Coleman 3). The Tonkin Gulf Resolution gave the President a “blank check” to stop North Vietnamese Aggression and invasion of South Vietnam (The Vietnam War 4).

The Tonkin Gulf Resolution gave President Johnson the ability to use Military forces without declaring war (Stur 1). On March 2, 1965, the United States started a long-term bombing campaign on targets used by North Vietnamese (Coleman 4). This was known as Operation Rolling Thunder. There were more bombs dropped by the U.S. during the first year of operation rolling thunder than all the years of WW II. They also began bombing the Ho Chi Minh trail. The Ho Chi Minh trail was named after Ho Chi Minh. Ho was the leader of the North Vietnamese and the founder of the Viet Minh party. Ho also believed in Marxism/communism and employed the use of guerrilla tactics during combat. Ho turned North Vietnam into a communist dictatorship and formed guerilla fighters in South Vietnam known as Viet Cong (The Vietnam War 2). The Ho Chi Minh trail was the supply route of the North Vietnamese to the Viet Cong in the South. It ran from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia and throughout South Vietnam. By the time Johnson became President, Vietnam was bitterly divided over supporting Ho Chi Minh and his views (The Vietnam War 3). When Johnson went to Congress, there were only two members who opposed Johnson’s request, and most Americans supported it as well (The Vietnam War 1).

In March 1965, the first American combat troops came ashore at Danang, and the United States began a search and destroy mission. The use of defoliates like Agent Orange and Napalm was used to remove jungle cover. The bombings did little to slow

the Viet Cong as they burrowed underground, making a network of tunnels to aid in the flow of supplies and surprise attacks (The Vietnam War 4).

Vietnam was the first “television war.” By 1966, 93% of Americans owned a television. The news networks were able to show the horrific side of the war, unlike WWII, when morale stayed high as news crews were only able to be in noncombat areas and showed the happier side of the war. By the 1960’s the censorship the government had over the media had become lax. Camera crews were now on site, and journalists were able to give day by day updates (Kratz 1). The televising of the Vietnam War allowed Americans to form their own opinion of the progress of the war. Americans were able to see the dead and wounded soldiers almost daily and see what the body count was. They were also able to see images such as Vietnamese children fleeing Napalm, which brought the horrible side of war right into the living room of Americans. Americans were able to sympathize with the troops in Vietnam. This caused the public to turn against the war as people began to argue that it was unnecessary, and Americans were not dying for a just cause (Kratz 2). Television also helped to divide the nation as pro-war, who supported the U.S. soldiers and anti-war, those who believed we shouldn’t be there. Americans could now see the abuses of the military, for example, the My Lai massacre in 1968. My Lai was a tiny village comprised of several hundred women and children who were killed when American soldiers opened fire upon them. My Lai was used as an example of soldiers killing innocent people and sparked moral outrage in the U.S. This example, along with the Kent State massacre, helped ignite riots in cities and on university campuses (Kratz 2).

The cost of the Vietnam war was very controversial not only due to the financial costs but also the loss of life. By the end of 1967, there were 500,000 combat troops in Vietnam. When the war ended, there were over 58,000 killed, 350,000 maimed or wounded, and 2,000 captured (Hochgesang, Lawyer, Stevenson 1). What aided the Vietnam War in dividing the U.S. is it was an unconventional war. The inability to identify the enemy created havoc for the U.S. military. The Vietnamese would say hello during the day and would attack you as Viet Cong at night. The military couldn't kill indiscriminately as this could anger and turn the local population against them. The Viet Cong were very proficient at covering their tracks, so direct attacks "battles" were rare. Most attacks were at night or done in ambush-style. The Vietnamese also used booby traps as a way of slowing the US military. On average, during 1967, the Americans were dying at a rate of 100 per week (The Vietnam War 5).

On January 30, 1968, on the Buddhist holiday of TET, the Viet Cong troops numbering around 80,000 attacked almost every major city in South Vietnam along with surprise attacks on the American base in Danang and the American embassy in Saigon. In 1965, 15 percent of Americans opposed the war effort. Six weeks after the TET offensive in April of 1968, 42 percent of Americans opposed the war, and only 28 percent were satisfied in Johnson's handling of the war. The TET offensive proved that after years of intense bombing and billions of dollars spent, and the growing death toll, that the government belief that the war was almost over was a lie as Americans began to see there was no end in sight (The Vietnam War 6).

A long sustained war cannot occur without popular support, and Americans were growing tired of the casualties and financial cost. Military spending had taken funding

away from social programs such as welfare, housing, and urban development (The Vietnam War 7).

Although there was a growing antiwar movement, many Americans still supported the Vietnam effort. Most admitted that involvement in Vietnam was a mistake, but a military defeat could not happen. By the time Richard Nixon was inaugurated in 1969, the nation was divided over which course of action to take (The Vietnam War 8).

Almost 80 percent of ground troops came from the lower classes African, and Latino American males were assigned to more combat units than White Americans (The Vietnam War 7). The Vietnam war placed African Americans in the same units as white soldiers. This was to eliminate stereotypes that had plagued African Americans. The rise in anti-war sentiment and the black power movement also led to several riots in the U.S (Scott 17).

According to an intelligence memorandum of the CIA dated November 4, 1968, some of the factors that hindered the United States were the North Vietnamese were being aided by other Communists countries primarily from China and the USSR. Near mid-1965, the Viet Cong were fighting with old free world weapons. These were weapons left from the French-Indo China war and captured U.S. material that was provided to the French. Although several other Communist countries donated weapons to the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong in the South, the more intricate systems such as field and anti-aircraft artillery, SA-2 missile system, aircraft, radar system, Sam's (surface to air missile), and armored vehicles were supplied by the USSR (Intelligence Memorandum 1). China primarily supplied North Vietnam and the Viet

Cong with infantry weapons, mortars, and rockets. China also aided with radar and communication, and they helped by providing landing craft and torpedo boats (Intelligence Memorandum 9).

There was a general perception by the American public that at the beginning of the war the U.S. military should have been able to be in and out of Vietnam due to the size of the U.S. but the underestimation of the popularity of the Ho Chi Minh and the weapons and weapon systems supplied to the North Vietnamese, and Viet Cong which allowed them to fend off attacks on North Vietnam by the U.S. drastically slowed U.S. progress.

In the beginning from 1964-1968, the Vietnam War was a conventional war where the U.S. military could identify the enemy like WWI, WWII, and Korean wars. From 1968-1972 the Vietnamese use of Guerrilla warfare made it hard for soldiers to distinguish between who was good and who was bad. This led to severe racial hatred of all Vietnamese (Hochgesang, Lawyer, Stevenson 3).

The Vietnam war was the first war, where veterans upon returning were not viewed as heroes. Most were suspected of cruelty and wickedness and considered to be drug addicts. Marijuana, Heroin, and alcohol were so inexpensive and prevalent in Vietnam that a lot of the soldiers started using them to relieve the stress of what they had experienced on the battlefield. Upon returning home, some soldiers were refused employment due to the stigma of drug use in Vietnam and were considered drug addicts. Some veterans continued to use alcohol or drugs as they experienced difficulty adjusting to society. The public believed the perception of the soldiers as portrayed by the media. This further alienated soldiers because their family and friends didn’t know

what they had experienced or how they had changed. The public only knew what the media showed, and the media did a poor job relaying what the soldiers and Marines had endured (Hochgesang, Lawyer, Stevenson 4, 5).

With the lack of commitment, confusion, and controversy along with the increasing anti-war movement associated with the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, there became a lack of strong moral and political distraction to the war along with guerrilla warfare tactics used by North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. The soldiers were unable to control or predict the events that occurred around them. Another issue that plagued veterans was the use of the DEROS System (date of expected return from overseas). This system removed unit cohesiveness, and instead of soldiers returning as a unit returned individually and didn't receive a hero's welcome but instead felt isolated. So Vietnam became for each soldier and marine more individualized. Soldiers and Marines often felt hopeless and that nothing or nobody could be counted on (Hochgesang, Lawyer, Stevenson 5).

With all of the stigma surrounding Vietnam, it became the first war that veterans couldn't talk about with pride. There were more cases of PTSD than any other war. PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder) known during WWII and Korea as "Battle Fatigue," was more prevalent in Vietnam veterans than WWII and Korea because psychologists believe that the longboat rides home from Europe and Korea allowed soldiers to vent and reflect on their service. By the time they had returned, they had worked through some of their issues with their buddies. Vietnam veterans flew home by themselves, and that left them unable to vent as they were afraid to talk to their families for fear they wouldn't understand or that they would think less of them. The war in

Vietnam changed the veterans' sense of identity and beliefs of society. All of the social, moral, and psychological conflicts dealt with by veterans in battle had changed their lives (Hochgesang, Lawyer, Stevenson 5, 6).

In January 1973, President Nixon organized a ceasefire, and combat troops were withdrawn. Nixon called the agreement "peace with honor." The South Vietnamese army was unable to maintain control, and in April 1975, Saigon was captured by North Vietnamese. Laos and Cambodia soon followed as established communist nations (Years 2).

For the Vietnam veterans not receiving a hero's welcome, the public hatred directed toward them believing they committed cruel and wicked acts along with being considered a drug addict, and the government ignoring them, led to a lack of faith in political leaders and political process. There was hatred for peers who didn't serve, those who profited from the war, and most veterans hated politicians and government officials (Hochgesang, Lawyer, Stevenson 6, 7).

Vietnam started with public support but that soon collapsed, with public opinion being swayed by the media, the controversy involving the government, North Vietnam being aided by other communist countries, the use of guerrilla tactics, and the withdraw without a clear victory are all reasons why Vietnam was the most unpopular war in history. Unfortunately, due to the actions of some soldiers in Vietnam, most veterans were unjustly treated upon returning home, leaving them isolated and feeling ashamed of their service. Of all events that occurred, the mistreatment toward veterans by the American public was the worst thing they had to endure.

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